

The Art of Juggling

How to manage family and career when you *and* your child have AD/HD

BY SANDY MAYNARD



Shortly after her son Kevin, age 7, was diagnosed with AD/HD, about a year ago, Kathy found out that she had it too. An energetic and talented decorator, Kathy worked from home, subcontracting part-time for an interior design firm.

Although medication increased her focus, and therapy helped control her emotions, she was overwhelmed with parenting an AD/HD child, running a household, and finding time for her passion—decorating. Plus, she hoped to grow her design work into a full-time business. Clearly, things had to change.

Put your oxygen mask on first

We decided that, if Kathy didn't address her own AD/HD first, her attempts to help her son would be fruitless. To be as effi-

cient and supportive as possible in the worlds of work and parenting, Kathy needed to get a handle on her condition.

It wasn't easy. Chaos ruled even on slow days. Throw a dental appointment or—heaven forbid—a birthday party into the mix, and Kathy had real “excitement” brewing. Yet she had good reason to work at home—to be there when her children needed her. Kathy's therapist referred her to me for a management adjustment.

Kathy needed to learn to work smarter,

not harder. We identified the sources of Kathy's biggest challenges, and devised baby-step solutions to overcome them:

Time management

Kathy confessed that she occasionally missed business appointments, and that she tended to do what she felt like doing rather than what she needed to do.

PROBLEM: Kathy depended on her own memory, rather than her daily planner, to structure her day.

SOLUTION: She set an alarm for 8 A.M., noon, and 3 P.M.—the three critical transition points in her day. She agreed to check her planner each time the alarm went off, even if she had memorized her appointment times. We wanted to form the habit

ment times. We wanted to form the habit of using her planner to write down and check off items and other tasks on a daily to-do list.

RESULT: Because she completed her tasks from an ordered list, she accomplished what needed to be done. In addition, she got to all of her business appointments from then on.

Even with the three o'clock alarm in place, she still found herself dreading this time, because it meant she had to stop working and pick up the kids from school. It was then that she often lost objects, like the keys and her cell phone, as well as the details of the project she was working on.

PROBLEM: Kathy needed a system for remaining organized through transitions.

SOLUTION: When moving from one activity to another, Kathy repeated these three steps: 1) pat down; 2) look around; 3) think about. "Pat down" to make sure you have your keys, purse, notebook, and anything else you need. "Look around" to make sure you don't leave anything, like a coat or umbrella, behind. "Think about" has two parts: "What was I just doing?" and "What am I going to do next?"

HELPFUL HINTS: Kathy placed a wire basket on her desk to hold her keys, phone, and other important items. She also set a timer to go off 20 minutes before the 3 P.M. alarm. The timer told her that it was time to stop working and to make notes of where she left off so she'd know where to begin after dinner or the next day.

RESULT: She was rarely late picking up her kids, and she moved from family to work and back again without a hitch.

Meal management

"I hate grocery shopping," says Kathy. "It takes up my whole day, I spend a fortune buying a ton of stuff I don't need, and, when I get home, I realize I forgot the milk or toilet paper, and have to go back."

PROBLEM: Kathy needed a game plan for getting to the store, buying everything that she needed, and not coming home with unnecessary items.

SOLUTION: She placed a grocery list on the fridge. All items to buy, including toiletries and medication, had to be on the list by Friday—errand day. Her husband picked up anything they needed before then. She chose a supermarket with a pharmacy and a dry-cleaning store nearby to streamline her chores. If an item wasn't on the list, she didn't buy it. "Stick to the list... stick to the list," she repeated to herself.

WHAT ALSO WORKED: Kathy stopped clipping coupons. This task, she discovered, took more time than the savings justified and gave her too many choices.

RESULT: Kathy made fewer trips to the grocery store and stopped making superfluous purchases.

The logistics of planning a full week of meals for her family had Kathy pulling out her hair. She would either scan her overflowing cupboards and freezer, embark on too ambitious a dish, and delay dinner until late in the evening, or put off planning until it was too late, and the family would eat pizza five nights in a row.

PROBLEM: Kathy needed to limit her creativity to her design work and keep meal-times simple.

SOLUTION: She chose five family-approved meals that are nutritious and easy to cook. When making the shopping list, she made sure to restock any ingredients needed for the meals. Here was a typical week:

Monday: Husband's night to cook—nothing to worry about.

Tuesday: Make one of the standby meals. Prepare (thaw, peel, chop, etc.) ingredients in advance to make the evening preparation less hectic.

Wednesday: Fall back on an easy meal, such as leftovers, scrambled eggs, grilled cheese sandwiches, or frozen entrees.

Thursday: See Tuesday.

Friday: Take-out or go out—no cooking.

Saturday and Sunday: Time to try new recipes, exotic dishes, or labor-intensive family favorites, such as lasagna. Decide on which meals and make list of ingredients to buy before the Friday shopping

expedition to the supermarket.

RESULT: Kathy spent less time in the kitchen, and her family ate homecooked meals more often and at a reasonable hour.

Mom management

As soon as Kathy clocked out for the day, she started in on housework. There was so much to do that she never had a time out, but she still felt like she was getting things only half-done. The constant wear was taking a toll emotionally.

PROBLEM: Kathy needed to reduce her workload and make time for herself.

SOLUTION: She could afford to outsource the tasks she least liked to do by hiring a bookkeeper and a cleaning service, and by recruiting her husband to cut the lawn.

WHAT ALSO WORKED: In her new-found personal time, Kathy saw her therapist regularly. That first year, she exceeded the number of visits covered by her health care plan, but she feels that it was money well spent to get herself back on track.

RESULT: She became more productive at her job. She also found time and support for herself, things that any working mom with AD/HD desperately needs.

Most important to Kathy's survival and sanity was her sense of humor. We found that one of my suggestions—parking her grocery cart at the end of the aisle and fetching what she needed by hand—failed. When she unpacked her groceries, Kathy puzzled over four ripe avocados and a bunch of grapes that she didn't remember selecting. When she realized what had happened, she called me, and we had a good laugh. Either she had put her items in someone else's cart and sped off to the next aisle with it, or, "Maybe the avocado lady has AD/HD too, and was trying the same tactic," said Kathy. "She put her stuff in my cart while I was down the aisle. Then, when she got home and realized she was missing her grapes and avocados, she thought, 'Bummer! I did it again. I put my stuff in someone else's basket.'"

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