

How ADHD has given me the drive to become a top filmmaker

By ROGER GRAEF - [More by this author »](#) Last updated at 21:25pm on 10th September 2007

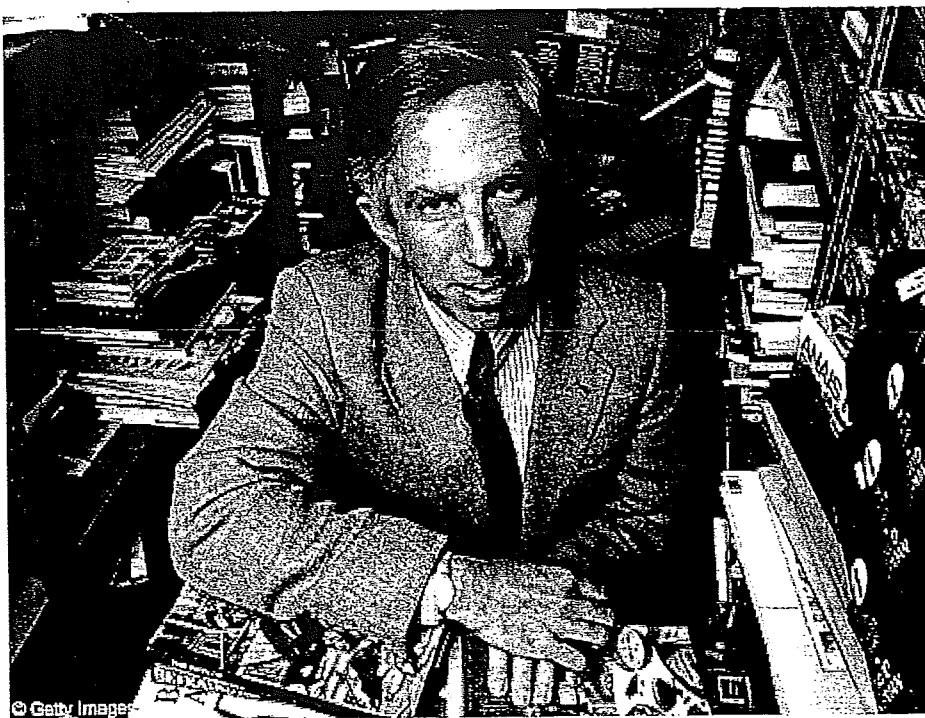
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Criminologist and broadcaster Roger Graef has an extraordinary work rate. Last year alone he produced 13 films. The secret of his success? He attributes it to a mild case of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Here, he argues that we should make more of ADHD's positive aspects. . .

Now well past pensionable age, it's very late in the day for me to be coming out.

But I have had a revelation recently that made sense of a great many unexplained things in my life.

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Seeing the positive: Roger Graef attributes his boundless energy to having ADHD

It happened at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival, overflowing with screenings, panels and meetings with commissioning editors from all over the world. So I was busy.

I was late arriving at a "speed-dating" session between 25 film-makers and 25 charities wanting to raise their profile.

We each had two minutes to meet, greet and assess their activity for possible films. By the end of the first four brief encounters, I had four ideas for films - in eight minutes.

Even for me, that was fast. I was buzzing, exhilarated.

As I sat down with the next group, my mind was in 16 different places, planning the four films, thinking of the two I was already promoting there and scanning the room to see what else was going on.

I was high on the excitement of so many ideas in such a short time.

That fifth date was with ADDISS, a charity that works with children and adults with ADHD and related learning difficulties.

A policeman was explaining his interest in young offenders, many of whom suffer from ADHD.

Fragments of what he was saying began to penetrate my brain: about their restlessness, impatience and tendency to become easily distracted.

In a flash of clarity, I realised that description also fitted me. Could I have ADHD?

In the last 30 seconds, I agreed to meet again, offered to be a patron of the charity and to give the keynote speech to its annual general meeting - about what ADHD has meant to me.

Not bad for a two-minute meeting.

Far from hanging an unwelcome label round my neck, that encounter was a relief.

It was like finding the box with a picture for a jigsaw puzzle I'd been working on all my life.

ADHD symptoms such as fidgeting, a short attention span, forgetting things, interrupting, not dealing with details, procrastinating and many other human failings were part and parcel of my life.

So far, so ordinary: few of us like reading the small print, and who doesn't lose their keys? But according to the definition of ADHD, if you have at least six of a list of symptoms for more than three months, then you may well have the condition.

They combine to form an exaggerated version of normal behaviour, speeded up.

I realised I had 12 out of the 20 ADHD symptoms.

Some of my worst habits are typically ADHD.

"Often has trouble organising activities" - I can never decline invitations, even when it means rushing from one occasion to another, and another, and like the White Rabbit in Alice In Wonderland, arriving to announce: 'Hello, I must be going.'

"May feel very restless . . . often on the go" - I run up escalators in Tube stations even when I'm not in a hurry. I can't wait more than seven minutes for a train; I'll even take a longer route just to keep moving.

But that's not the whole story.

The received view of ADHD is that it's only bad.

For younger, more severely affected sufferers, it's a sentence for which the punishment is being labelled a problem child and being dosed with the medication Ritalin, the use of which is increasing in Britain.

But my experience is different.

It's been a gift - albeit with unpleasant side-effects, especially for others. No one ever talks about the good side of ADHD.

I can easily do at least three things at once: listen to a debate on the radio, write and take phone calls, all on different subjects.

I need very little sleep and yet have loads of energy.

I give talks without notes and finish exactly on time. I get the point quickly, and usually see possibilities where others see problems.

Looking back using this new lens, I can see that for all the chaos throughout my life and career, I have also been very productive - thanks to ADHD.

By the age of 26, I had directed 26 plays, two operas and two TV dramas.

Then I switched to being a documentary film-maker and have made more than 130 films and studio dramas as director, producer, series producer and now executive producer.

Last year I executive-produced 13 films, and am responsible for nine so far this year.

In my 50s, I also became a writer - three books and hundreds of articles so far.

One book I wrote at night from 11pm to 3am, then slept for a few hours before going to work running a series for Channel 4. It drove everyone mad.

I give several talks a month and am on countless boards and committees. I can't say no.

But at a time when most people my age have retired, I've never been busier.

Having such energy is partly driven by curiosity, and a commitment to be a productive member of the community.

But the scale and kaleidoscopic pattern of my life needs more of an explanation. ADHD provides it. It's compulsive.

The signs were there early on. "Bright and positive but interrupts and is far too restless in class," read school report after report.

"Doesn't take enough care with homework."

But I was fortunate.

My case was mild enough to allow me to do most tasks at the last minute - even if it meant taking short cuts and leaving projects unfinished.

If I make all this sound like fun, that's because it is, much of the time.

Doing last-minute radio or TV interviews is an adrenaline rush, like writing articles to deadline.

But it is also maddening.

I feel over-excited much of the time.

It's like having a motor that drives me on, rather than me making a series of individual choices. And these days I do get tired by the weekend.

My frenetic habits also infuriate others.

Arriving in my office or home after someone else has tidied it, I can create chaos simply by emptying my pockets of the business cards and notes of things to do that have built up within a day or two.

Yet I seldom go back to ensure I do anything with them, because I am already on to the next phase of doing, meeting, engaging.

I'm also always late - not because I procrastinate, but because I am too engaged with whatever I'm doing.

It's insulting to others and I am trying to change that habit.

ADHD also explains some of my driven personal life.

In my youth, I was very romantic and restless with women.

I was engaged five times and went through many more relationships looking for the Perfect Woman.

My mind raced so far ahead of our burgeoning friendships that I'd end them before giving them a chance.

My first marriage was hard: my wife wanted a stable, predictable life - the opposite of my style.

But, fortunately, I found and married my Perfect Woman 24 years ago.

My gift/condition has kept me young, and with enough work - as well as three visits a week to the gym, long walks at the weekend and occasional meditation - I have come to terms with some of ADHD's more destructive features.

I now treasure it as an engine for ideas, enthusiasm and curiosity.

I've rarely been bored, and don't stay depressed for long. Too boring.

So I hope the parents and teachers of children with these problems, and those who have suffered from ADHD, will see beyond its drawbacks to a future of excitement and creativity if sufferers are given the chance to learn how to use their energy positively.

I now look at speed freaks such as Robin Williams, Sammy Davis Jr and Ben Elton through this lens and admire what they have done with their restlessness.

But for parents with seriously uncontrollable kids, this must seem out of reach. Ritalin seems the only answer.

And it *is* for some.

When I spoke at the ADDISS conference, a Harvard professor and world-class medical expert bought me tea

afterwards and told me he'd been on Ritalin since 1981 and it helped him concentrate.

Yet for an ITV documentary called *Breaking The Cycle*, I filmed the work of the Marlborough Day Centre in Swindon which deals with three to five-year-olds who were so restless they had been banished from infant school.

In 19 years, staff there used Ritalin just once.

The rest of their success has been achieved by positive discipline and tight, clearly structured time, rewarding good behaviour in detail and ignoring bad.

It's a long journey.

But don't give up too soon.

That's what we do, and we need help to stick with it.

• *ROGER GRAEF is the executive producer of This World: Inside A Shariah Court, which will be on BBC2 at 9pm next Tuesday.*