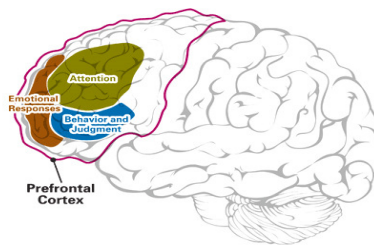


## The Intersection Model for Explaining ADHD to Clients

When I first meet with clients, they have either been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) when they were younger, placed on medication, and either found benefit from the medication, hated the side effects and discontinued it, and/or felt they “didn’t need the medication anymore” once they finished schooling; or have recently been diagnosed with ADHD as an adult. No matter what path they’ve taken to get to me, most, if not all, have a limited understanding of ADHD and how the brain is working to produce the symptoms they’re experiencing. I believe it is important for an individual to have a conceptual framework from which to work that explains what ADHD is, and how it impacts the brain functions behind the various symptoms and difficulties experienced. The Intersection Model provides an initial framework from which to work, and creates a consistent metaphor that can be used throughout their coaching experience. The following is the explanation a Coach may use in order to explain ADHD and associated brain functions:

### **The Prefrontal Cortex**



This front part of the brain is called the Prefrontal Cortex. It acts as an intersection through which all these things run through: attention, behavior and judgment, and emotional responses, for every person. There is no ‘deficit’ in the brain, all the parts are there, and I could be the smartest, most motivated student ever, but if the teacher says ‘this species of dog...’ and I think ‘what’s my dog doing?’, I just got distracted.

### **Attention/Distractibility**

In the ADHD brain, there are no traffic lights or stop signs on the intersection, so the fastest car, or strongest message gets through first. So, if I’m in the kitchen cleaning up, and find something that has to go upstairs, and when I take it towards the stairs, but get distracted by the unfolded laundry in the living room as I pass by it.... I may think ‘oh yeah! I forgot to finish this,’ and jump to that task, completely forgetting about the thing I was going to bring upstairs... Stronger message, jump to task, completely forgetting about the first task. This is why people with ADHD get distracted, because the stronger message, or faster car, cuts off the slower car, or weaker message/message from 5 minutes ago, and gets through the intersection. This can happen mid-conversation, one word can trigger an entire stream of consciousness, which can lead a person with ADHD down a different road than the individual they’re having the conversation with. Or, the person with ADHD, knowing that they’re easily side-tracked, hear one word or idea that they

want to respond to, and try to remember it by repeating it in their mind, or some other tactic, in order to continue to keep that idea/word in their focus so they don't forget. However, by doing that, they miss the rest of what the person is saying, and their response often doesn't fit with what the other person was trying to get across.

### **Time Management**

Judgement runs through that part of the brain, and *time* is judgment – that'll only take me five minutes to finish, that's a judgment call – I'll be there in a half hour, that's a judgment call. So there's an inability to *see* time, to *feel* it. A person with ADHD either 'freaks out' about it, like "don't talk to me, I have all these things to do and no time to do it!" when really they have four things to do, and eight hours to do them. Or, they procrastinate because "that's going to take FOREVER," when if they would just get started, the task may take 10 minutes.

### **Emotional Regulation**

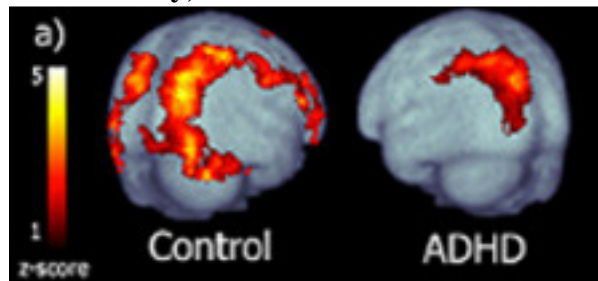
Emotions run through the intersection, and that can often look like a sudden or quick mood change, like "I won the lottery 10 minutes ago... YAY!!! ... But now, my sink is overflowing... OH MY GOD WHY DOES THIS ALWAYS HAPPEN TO ME?!?!?" The individual with ADHD can impulsively become angry, sad, or excited in reaction to their initial impression of a situation, which can look as if they are experiencing a shift in mood, but in actuality it is a lack of incorporation of all aspects of one's experience. Impulsive anger, impulsive sadness, impulsive worry... Feelings that seem to come from nowhere, when really it is a quick reaction to what just happened. In addition, self-injurious behaviors in teenagers, and strong self-criticism as adults, are common to females with ADHD due to the tendency to internalize strong emotions until they overwhelm the capacity to cope. This results in a propensity for expressing emotions more intensely than may be justified for a given situation.

### **Behavior/Impulsivity**

Adults with ADHD demonstrate poor impulse control in 'adult-form,' such as self-medicating despite possible consequences to areas of life, spending too much money on unnecessary items, succumb to quick gratification instead of working steadily toward bigger, more sustaining awards, fail to change a strategy even after it's been shown ineffective, and/or rush through tasks, making errors in haste. These impulsive acts are likely to be more subtle, yet still impart a cumulative effect. Individuals may also demonstrate an inflexible mindset, or perceive only one solution to a problem, which can lead to negative feedback from the world around them, including interpersonal difficulties, job or school troubles, and/or legal entanglements, and have a profoundly demoralizing and isolating effect. In response, the individual with ADHD develops a mindset based on faulty information and focus on the negatives, which exacerbates the situation. For example, thoughts like 'nothing is getting better so it's pointless to try anything further,' externalizing blame for circumstances, and/or 'they're not going to like me anyway, so why try to be friends' can lead someone to avoid the situations that are perceived to inevitably lead to failure.

So, if I'm on my way out the door to go to work, and I see 'oh! I still have 15 minutes left, I can just do this one thing' and then I'm late to work. The next time I encounter this situation: If I don't have ADHD, I think "Oh, I have 15 minutes, but I can't do this thing because last time it made me late to work," and I go to work. If I do have ADHD, I think "Oh! I have 15 minutes, I can just do this one thing!" And then I'm late for work... Over and over again. It's doing the same thing over and over again, and not expecting the response at all. Not expecting a different response, just no response at all; or no recollection of previous experiences and the outcomes to inform oneself on how to act in the current situation.

### Really, Whatever is in FOCUS



*See how all the parts are working together in the neurotypical brain (non-ADHD)? Then see the image to the right. Notice that the brain affected by ADHD shows excessive slow brainwave activity (theta and alpha ranges) compared to non-ADHD activity.*

*What this means is that there is slow brainwave activity in the cortex areas of the brain, which indicates a lack of executive control.*

### How this looks as we grow up...

As we grow up, ADHD symptoms change and become more of an internal experience. You can't be an adult who "climbs excessively on things," otherwise you might have a different sort of problem... By middle school, or even younger nowadays, if you're the kid who is running around, hyperactive, impulsive, and getting into trouble, then you're also the really intense kid



who has no friends...

Woah, intense kid... Calm down...

### Anxiety

So, that social pressure forces hyperactivity to become an internal restlessness, which looks a lot like anxiety. The current thought regarding individuals with undiagnosed/untreated ADHD is that they tend to overcompensate for their difficulties with an anxiety-like response, such as racing thoughts, sleep difficulties, nervousness, and excessive worry. This might look like this:

*I always get yelled at for not locking my door, and after just leaving for work, I think ‘did I lock the door? Ugh, I can’t remember, I’m not getting yelled at today, I gotta go back...’ Now I start heading to work again... ‘Did the garage door close? I don’t remember seeing it close... what if I kicked something, it tripped the sensor, then it’s going to be open, someone’s going to see no cars are there, they’re going to come in and take all my stuff, and when they leave, they’re going to let the cats out, OH MY GOD I’M GOING TO LOSE THEM FOREVER!!! I gotta go back.... Now I’m late, what am I going to tell my boss? Worry thought worry thought worry thought WORST OUTCOME POSSIBLE!!!!”*

This sounds like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), but it isn’t. According to experts on ADHD, “people with ADHD may engage in some behaviors that look a little OCD but actually are quite different. For example, people with ADHD may also check the stove [like individuals diagnosed with OCD], but there is more of a seed of truth to their doubts- there have indeed been times when they left the stove on, so it’s good judgment to be sure that it’s off this time. For people with ADHD, the checking helps prevent problems because they know that their attention and memory can be blinky” (Tuckman, p. 97).

### **Other Symptoms/Behaviors**

#### *Difficulty with tasks of Working Memory*

-difficulty following a to-do list that’s not written down. If you go to the store for paper towel, and come back with everything, but forgot the paper towel, that’s really frustrating because that’s why you went to the store.

#### *Inconsistencies in Performance*

-difficulty regulating emotion, motivation, and performance. Everybody can do things that are important to them, that are interesting, and that they’re good at – everyone can do those things, no matter what those things are. The difficulties are going to be with things that are boring, frustrating, and not important. The additional problem is that those things change.

If school is really important to me, and I’m spending all my time in the library studying, on track to get a 4.0. Just have one more exam left, but I studied, so I should be fine. Right before I walk into the exam, I get into a fight with my best friend... And I get a C on the exam. That’s REALLY frustrating because I studied! I tried! But the fight took importance, was a faster car – ‘You could do this yesterday, why can’t you do this today??’ is REALLY FRUSTRATING for the individual with ADHD.

#### *Depression/Low Self-Esteem*

In addition to variable moods, individuals can be insatiable, or have difficulty feeling happy or satisfied, in general. If you keep reacting to the ‘sinks overflowing’ experiences (from the example above) of your day, and don’t realize that those things are just daily stressors – you’ve handled things like this before, you’re going to handle things like this again, it will be difficult to feel happy or satisfied. This is because negative messages are stronger than positive messages, it means something in our experience is bad, we don’t like it, we want it to go away...

In the ADHD brain, negative messages completely CUT OFF positive messages. So, it's difficult to think 'well, at least I have my health...' and pull that thought out of your brain during stressful times. Depending on how stressful one's day is, you can jump from negative experience to negative experience, and have difficulty feeling happy.

### *Difficulty Taking the Perspective of Another Person*

'I know what you meant when you said that, and nothing you can say or do will convince me otherwise!'

An example: my husband has ADHD, and every Tuesday night, I come home and ask if the garbage is done, because we pull it out on Wednesday morning. Every Tuesday night, he gets defensive – 'I did this, and that, and this... what do you expect?' Before I realized what was going on, and what the stronger message was going through the intersection, this used to be a fight, because someone is yelling at me right when I walk in the door!! However, he was diagnosed with ADHD in grade school, so he's always heard 'you can do this, why can't you do that...' 'sit down' 'be quiet'... his nickname in high school was 'Slacker'. Now, I still come home and ask if the garbage is done – I can change my tone of voice, jump up and down, even remind him that we have this fight each week... Doesn't matter – he's still defensive. I have to ask him: "Do you think I'm criticizing you for not taking out the garbage?" "YEAH" "Nope! Just wondering if it's done, because otherwise I'll go do it." "Oh! Ok! How's your day?" And we've lived together for 11 years, and this happens once per week. BUT, if I didn't ask that second question, we're not talking about the same thing. I'm wondering if the garbage is done, and he's thinking "What a b\*\$#@!" or that I'm criticizing him. From all the negative messages a child with ADHD receives throughout his/her life, 20,000 more criticisms by 6<sup>th</sup> grade than their non-ADHD counterparts, the stronger message is that I'm criticizing him, when all the other information points to the fact that I am not. Stronger message, respond to it.

### **Ways to Cope!!!**

The ways to cope with ADHD involve organization – you may feel that this is ironic, because organization is something that the ADHD brain doesn't naturally do...



Let's say you have to clean up a room full of clutter, you have to clean it up. Everything you're looking at has to run through the prefrontal cortex intersection, because that's what the prefrontal cortex does... Everything that someone with ADHD is looking at is saying "I'm the most important thing! Start here first!!!" Well, that's a) not logical... Not everything can be the most important thing; and b) it's not possible to start everywhere first. So...

### A TRAFFIC JAM OCCURS!!!



And you think “I don’t know what to do first, so I’m not going to do anything at all!!”

And this can happen with everything....

Emotions --- I feel something, but I don’t know what exactly, and I don’t know why....

#### TRAFFIC JAM

Social Situations – I’m talking to someone, and I know what I’m going to say next... And... Oh!

My friend Lisa is here!... My shirt is kinda itchy... Oh my gosh! What did this person just say...

She’s going to think I’m weird...

#### TRAFFIC JAM

### Medication and the Intersection Model

The stimulant medication for ADHD effectively puts traffic lights on the intersection for the time that the medication is effective. Stimulant medication is like needing glasses: making what’s already there work how it’s supposed to. Take off your glasses, your eyes aren’t working how they’re supposed to. Same thing with the medication: take it that day, your brain becomes a regulated intersection. Don’t take it the next day, your brain is not a regulated intersection. Individuals who take the medication, and have found the best dose and frequency for them, say that it’s like they don’t have to ‘white-knuckle it through life anymore’. They’re no longer reacting to whatever is in their focus, and are able to think about their past experiences, future consequences, and/or are able to hold information in their mind and remember it. It’s not going to be perfect, but it’s at least half-way there. Medication plus therapy and/or coaching can help you not only understand your brain and how the intersection model comes into play in your everyday experiences, but also help you develop strategies to cope more effectively with your experience. The goal of ADHD treatment is to accentuate the positives of ADHD, while minimizing the impact of the more negative symptoms.

### Other ways the Intersection Model can be used

Take the above example of the traffic jam when confronted with a room full of clutter. Knowing that you’re experiencing a traffic jam can help you develop strategies for overcoming this frozen feeling! You could be more specific in your steps and say “I’m going to pick up my dirty clothes

and put them in the hamper, and then I'm going to organize my papers." Parents can help their children become more self-sufficient by helping them develop these same steps to tasks. By being more specific in your directives, and completing a task step-by-step until it's done, will help you stop avoiding the task that's causing the traffic jam when thought of as a single, general thing (i.e. Clean your room). But you have to understand what's behind the frozen traffic-jam feeling in order to know how to overcome it.

Understanding the Intersection Model can also be helpful with remembering more and forgetting less. Have you ever started a planner, only to stop using it? Have you ever walked into a room, only to have no idea what you went in there for? Have you ever forgotten to do the very thing your significant other has been reminding you to do for weeks? I'm sure you have, because most ADHD'ers do! Knowing that you're reacting to whatever is in your focus can help you to set up reminders for yourself so whatever it is you're trying to remember remains in your focus, or can easily be called up. Making sure your planner is sitting out, in plain sight, preferably in the area where you eat breakfast so you can use it to plan your day in the morning would be helpful. Writing reminders on your hand, or carrying an item that reminds you of what you needed in the room will help you recall what you went in there for. Repeating what you need to get from the room to yourself until you arrive in the room will help keep the item in focus. If you're cleaning one room and find something that belongs in another room, understanding how the Intersection Model works, and knowing that your focus is easily pulled away can help you develop strategies to finish what you start. Instead of putting that item away, seeing something that needs to be done in that room, and completely abandoning your original cleaning task, setting that item in the doorway, instead of putting it back in the room it belongs in, will help you finish that room before going to the next. Once you're done with the first room, you'll have to step over the item, reminding you to put it away. Having a visible white board where your significant other can write reminders down in bright colors can help keep that task in focus. Every time you walk by this board, you'll see the task and be reminded to do it. When you're done, wipe it off. Or, if you're not home when the task is given, set an alarm to go off on your phone for when you are likely to be home and either write it on the board, or actually do the task, when it goes off. This will help lessen the frustration that comes with both nagging and being nagged! Everybody wins, and the task gets done!

The Intersection Model can also be useful in providing significant others, teachers, co-workers, friends, and family an explanation that easy to understand as to why ADHD'ers do what they do! A significant other can understand that their ADHD-partner interrupts because the idea is in their focus, and if they don't share it, they will forget it. The non-ADHD-partner can either allow the ADHD'er to interrupt, knowing they will remember what they want to say easier than the ADHD'er, or allow the ADHD'er time to write down their idea to be shared with the non-ADHD-partner is done with their story. Instead of taking it personally, the non-ADHD-partner can understand what's happening in the ADHD'er's brain, and move past the issue without hurt feelings. Teachers can help ADHD students by only putting a certain number of questions on a page, or covering up parts of textbooks while the ADHD'er is reading in order to prevent the

overwhelm that comes from seeing too many words on a page at once. They can put bright visible reminders on students' desks that remind the students to raise their hand, check for homework on the board, and/or anything else the ADHD student is likely to forget. Understanding that the student's focus is easily pulled away from whatever they need to remember or do in the moment will help the teacher realize that it's not a motivation problem, but a problem with what's in the student's focus in the moment instead.

Because everyone leads their own unique life, everyone's ADHD will affect them differently. Consulting the literature will be important for you and anyone in your life to understand how your ADHD affects your own functioning, and how various 'traffic jams' can lead to behaviors such as avoidance, procrastination, becoming overwhelmed, and/or anxiety, etc... Using this intersection metaphor can be a useful tool in conceptualizing ADHD symptoms, and understanding them within the context of what is happening in his or her brain that causes these various actions and symptoms.

#### References

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