WILDER METHOD JOURNAL

Is It Me, or Is It My ADHD?

On personal responsibility, the brain we have, and the structure we need to live differently.

AN EXPLORATION OF
ADHD, ATTENTION, STRUCTURE & REAL CHANGE

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BY BILL WILDER, LCMHC

WILDER METHOD JOURNAL / FEATURE ESSAY

The Question I Keep Coming Back To

For much of my career, I have taught people to change their story: move from victim to victor, stop surrendering every choice to fear, and face what seems impossible. But I am confronting an uncomfortable question. What happens when the story of victory asks my brain to deliver something it cannot consistently deliver without help? What if the very philosophy that taught me courage also contributed to my shame?

I've spent much of my life telling people that they have choices. That they don't have to remain victims of their circumstances. That they can confront what frightens them, take responsibility, and begin writing a different story.

I've believed that deeply. I've built much of my work around it.

And lately I've found myself asking a question that makes me uncomfortable: What if I've been asking myself to make choices that my brain isn't always equipped to carry out in the way I expect?

I was diagnosed with ADHD in high school. I've known that for more than 30 years. But I'm only now beginning to appreciate the difference between knowing I have it and understanding what it asks of me.

I can focus intensely on something I love. I can work long hours, take a big risk, dream up a project, and find the energy to make it happen. Then I can struggle to answer a simple email, organize a schedule, slow down before a decision, or finish the mundane work that follows the exciting part.

For years, I interpreted that contradiction as a character problem. If I could accomplish the difficult things, surely I should be able to accomplish the ordinary ones.

So I pushed harder. And when pushing harder didn't work, I felt ashamed.

Now I'm wondering whether the question isn't just What's wrong with me? but What am I expecting my brain to do without the support it needs?

I recognize the pattern in ordinary weeks. A new idea catches fire, and suddenly I can picture the entire project. I start sketching it, researching it, making plans. The energy feels like evidence that I have room for one more thing. Then Tuesday arrives: appointments, emails, administrative tasks, people who need me, and the unfinished work I already promised to do. The new idea still feels urgent; the routine work feels strangely difficult. I have not run out of ambition. I have run out of uncommitted attention.

The Story That Directs the Brain

There is a tension here that goes straight to the heart of my work. One of the foundational ideas behind the Wilder Method is that the story we tell ourselves shapes the choices we make. I have spent years inviting people to move from a story of being a victim to one of becoming a victor—not because circumstances magically disappear, but because the meaning we assign to them can change how we respond.

When I see myself as helpless, I may become more guarded, avoidant, or resigned. When I see myself as someone who can respond with courage, I may find more room to act. Our stories do not control the nervous system like a switch, but they can influence what we notice, how threatened we feel, and which actions seem possible.

That is part of what I have tried to teach through cold-water immersion. The water is uncomfortable. The impulse is to recoil. Yet in a carefully chosen, safe challenge, there is an opportunity to notice the story forming in the moment: I cannot handle this—or I can slow down, breathe, and choose my response. Cold immersion is not an established treatment for ADHD, and it is not appropriate for everyone. For me, it has been an experiential metaphor for meeting discomfort with agency.

But now I have to ask a harder question. What happens when the story of being a victor asks more of a person than their actual capacity allows?

The One-Cylinder Engine

I've started describing this to myself with a metaphor. Imagine that living well requires a two-cylinder engine.

One cylinder is the drive to move: imagination, ambition, curiosity, urgency, the desire to experience life. That part of me has never been in short supply.

The other cylinder is the capacity to manage the movement: planning, sequencing, pausing, prioritizing, regulating emotions, resisting impulses, and following through when the excitement is gone.

Those functions are part of what psychologists call executive functioning. And for many people with ADHD, they can be inconsistent or more effortful than they appear from the outside.

To be clear, a person with ADHD does not literally have half an engine or half a brain. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in attention and self-regulation, not a simple missing brain part. The cylinders are just a way of describing the unevenness I've experienced.

Here's the part that landed hard for me: I've often planned my life as though the second cylinder would reliably appear whenever I needed it.

> **“I kept building a life for the brain I thought I had—not the one I needed to support.”**

I would say yes to the opportunity, commit to the project, trust myself to handle the details, and assume that motivation would carry me across the finish line.

Sometimes it did. Sometimes it didn't. And when it didn't, I often responded by demanding more of myself rather than changing the plan.

That assumption can create a particular kind of blindness. You keep building a life for the brain you think you have instead of the one you actually need to support.

The Difference Between an Explanation and an Excuse

This is where I feel the tension most strongly.

I've always been skeptical of diagnoses. In my training, I was drawn more to family systems, protective patterns, and the stories people carry than to categories written into diagnostic manuals. Part of me looked at those labels as subjective constructions: descriptions assembled by professionals, revised over time, and sometimes applied too casually. I remember thinking, I'm bigger than a diagnosis. I still believe that. I am not interested in reducing a whole person to a checklist or an arbitrary label.

But something has begun to change my story. It isn't that I've suddenly become devoted to diagnostic categories. It's that I've started paying closer attention to the research on the brain behind ADHD. Edward Hallowell and John Ratey's Driven to Distraction helped me recognize the lived experience of ADHD. And brain-imaging studies have given me another reason to take the condition seriously as a neurodevelopmental difference, not merely a name for behaviors someone dislikes.

In a large international MRI study of more than 3,200 people, researchers found small average differences in the volumes of several brain regions in the ADHD group, particularly among children. Later work has reported subtle group differences in cortical measurements. These findings do not mean that every person with ADHD has a smaller brain, and an MRI cannot diagnose ADHD in an individual. But they challenge my old assumption that everyone starts with precisely the same neurological conditions for attention and self-regulation.

That nuance matters. ADHD is not a fixed ceiling on what a person can accomplish. It can change how consistently someone can access their abilities under different conditions. The more useful question may be: Under what conditions can I reliably access my capabilities? If I ignore that question and interpret every difficulty as a character flaw, the fallout can be broken commitments, frustration, and shame.

So yes, I am bigger than my diagnosis. But being bigger than a diagnosis doesn't mean I can afford to ignore what it may explain. A good evaluation isn't a verdict on my identity. It is a more accurate starting point for deciding what I can change, what I need to support, and what responsibility should actually look like. My choices still have consequences. They affect people I love, my finances, my health, my work, and the promises I make.

But I also don't want to keep treating every struggle as proof that I lack discipline or integrity.

Both extremes miss something important.

ADHD doesn't make my decisions for me. It can, however, influence the processes that help me pause, weigh consequences, regulate attention, and carry out an intention consistently. Those influences are real, even though they don't determine every outcome.

I can take responsibility for a decision while also recognizing that I may need different supports to make a better one next time.

> **“A diagnosis isn’t a permission slip.**
> **It’s information I can finally use.”**

Understanding a limitation is not the same as surrendering to it. It tells me where responsibility needs to become more practical.

If I know I'm vulnerable to overcommitting, responsibility might mean not agreeing to something in the moment. If I know administrative tasks repeatedly pile up, responsibility might mean building a system or getting help before they become a crisis.

Why Insight Wasn’t Enough

I have spent roughly 25 years as a therapist and close to two decades doing my own personal work. My training was rooted in family systems theory, and I've studied Internal Family Systems, which explores the protective roles that different parts of us can develop.

That work has mattered to me. It has helped me understand the ways I respond to fear, conflict, shame, and relationships. It has given me language for things I couldn't previously name.

But I can see how my training also shaped the questions I asked myself. What is this behavior protecting? What happened earlier in life that made this pattern necessary? What emotional wound needs attention?

Those questions can be valuable. Yet there were times when I understood a pattern, even understood it beautifully, and still repeated it.

I have sometimes called myself an anti-therapist therapist. I was impatient with the idea that another conversation or another revelation would necessarily change how someone lived. I wanted something experiential, practical, something that moved people from talking about life to actually living it.

Now I wonder whether part of that rebellion was personal. Maybe I had been looking for a kind of change that insight alone could not reliably produce.

> **“Sometimes the next breakthrough isn’t a deeper explanation. It’s a different Tuesday morning.”**

I don't think the answer is to abandon therapy or stop exploring the past. I think the answer is to stop asking one kind of understanding to do every kind of work.

A calendar that reflects reality. A difficult phone call made before it becomes urgent. A boundary honored even when an exciting opportunity appears. A task completed without waiting to feel inspired.

First, Learn What You Are Dealing With

Before I build another system, I need to understand what I am trying to support. For someone who recognizes these patterns, a sensible starting point is an ADHD screening, followed by a professional evaluation when symptoms and history warrant it. Screening is not a diagnosis, but it can open the right conversation.

I have found Edward Hallowell and John Ratey’s book Driven to Distraction helpful as a way to recognize experiences that previously felt disconnected. Recognizing yourself in a book can be illuminating; it cannot, by itself, tell you whether you have ADHD. Anxiety, sleep problems, trauma, and other conditions can produce overlapping difficulties.

For me, education has been a way to turn down the volume of shame. I can stop treating every lapse as a referendum on my character and begin asking what conditions help me function. That is not a way around responsibility. It is the beginning of a more informed kind of responsibility.

> **“Your brain can’t help itself. So you have to help it.”**

Audit the Attention You Actually Have

If I want to live differently, I have to stop budgeting only my money and start auditing my time, attention, and energy. What did I intend to do this week? What did I actually do? Which projects gave me energy? Which commitments drained it? What pulled me off course—and how long did it take to return?

This requires more than a vague promise to be mindful. I need to know where my hours go, what I say yes to, how often I switch tasks, and how much capacity remains for the people and obligations I say matter most. Then I need to plan from that evidence, not from the version of myself who feels capable of everything on a particularly exciting morning.

Protect the Doorways to Your Attention

The harder realization is that my attention is not neutral territory. Certain stories, feeds, ideas, and environments reliably stir up urgency or possibility. Social media can hand me a dozen new ambitions before breakfast. A compelling new project can feel more important than the ordinary commitments already waiting for me.

So I need boundaries that are specific enough to work: fewer active projects; scheduled windows for messages and social platforms; devices out of reach when I need to concentrate; a pause before committing; and a short list of priorities visible when the next exciting thing appears. I may need to cut off certain sources of stimulation for a season, not because they are bad, but because I know what they do to me.

But protecting attention is not only subtraction. It is also choosing the right inputs. I can deliberately return to a few stories, scenes, and archetypal characters that remind me of the kind of person I want to be—steady, courageous, grounded, and able to finish what matters. A brief film clip or a meaningful image can serve as a personal cue, not a treatment for ADHD or a substitute for doing the work.

> **“I don’t need more possibilities competing for my attention. I need fewer, better signals pointing me toward what matters.”**

Building the Second Cylinder

So what does it mean to build a second cylinder outside myself?

For me, it means accepting that certain abilities need scaffolding. Not because I'm incapable of growth, but because my best intentions are not always a dependable system.

It means putting the important things where I can see them. Choosing fewer priorities. Building routines that don't depend on my mood. Automating what can be automated. Creating accountability. Letting other people help. Giving myself a pause between an exciting idea and a commitment.

It means using logic and reason when enthusiasm is loud. Asking what a decision will cost in time, money, attention, and strain on the relationships I value.

And it means learning to do some hard, ordinary things when I would rather chase something new.

There's a difference between the discomfort of a meaningful challenge and the unnecessary chaos of ignoring my limits. I'm still learning to tell them apart.

> **“Structure may be the thing that allows my strengths to become sustainable.”**

None of this is a universal treatment plan. ADHD can benefit from evidence-based treatment, including medication and skills-based approaches when appropriate. But in my own life, I am realizing that external structure isn't a consolation prize for people who lack willpower.

I've spent years celebrating courage, freedom, and adventure. I'm beginning to see that a well-kept calendar, a clear boundary, or a thoughtfully declined opportunity can be acts of courage, too.

Free Will, Determinism, and a More Honest Victory

This brings me back to an old philosophical debate: How much of what we do is determined by our biology and circumstances, and how much can we change through choice? I have lived much of my life on the side of will, courage, and responsibility. I believe choices matter. I have seen people change when they stop telling themselves that nothing can be done.

But ADHD has complicated my certainty. Differences in attention regulation and executive functioning can make some choices harder to initiate, organize, inhibit, or sustain. That does not mean brain chemistry predetermines every decision, or that people with ADHD have no agency. It means agency operates within real conditions, and those conditions deserve to be understood.

Imagine telling someone who cannot walk that the only acceptable story of victory is one in which they walk. You have not empowered them. You have defined success in a way that makes their actual strengths, adaptations, and possibilities invisible. I wonder how often I have done a quieter version of that to myself.

> **“The story of victory has to fit the person who is living it.”**

There are two stories I want to resist. One says that my diagnosis or circumstances explain everything and leave me powerless. The other says that I can accomplish anything through sufficient belief and effort—and that every failure is therefore my fault. The first can invite resignation. The second can become a factory for shame.

And shame is not a small consequence. For me, it has sometimes been the fuel that keeps the cycle running: I imagine an extraordinary future, overcommit, fall short, judge myself, and then reach for an even more extraordinary future to escape the feeling. At other times the shame looks less dramatic. I withdraw. I avoid. I stop moving.

Not every bout of low mood, avoidance, or expansive ambition comes from shame; people are more complicated than that. But I know enough about my own patterns to take shame seriously. A story that repeatedly humiliates the person living inside it is not a healthy story of victory.

Rewrite the Story, Then Build the Support

So perhaps the next step is not to tell myself a bigger story. It is to use what I have learned about my brain, habits, obligations, and resources. Education and appropriate treatment can inform the plan; then the plan has to show up in actual decisions, commitments, and routines.

Then I can write a story of victory that is demanding but realistic. My victory may not be doing ten things at once. It may be doing two things well. It may be saying no before enthusiasm makes a promise that my calendar cannot keep. It may be closing the social feed, keeping a commitment, finishing a difficult task, or asking for help without turning the request into a verdict on my worth.

The story has to be reinforced by the environment. A meaningful film scene or archetypal image can remind me to act with steadiness and courage. But it is a cue, not a cure. The test is what I do after the clip ends.

> **“My brain can’t always regulate itself the way I wish it would. So I have to help it.”**

This is the version of the victor story I am learning to believe: not that I am limitless, but that I can take responsibility for understanding my limits and building the supports that make meaningful choice possible. That does not diminish my will. It gives my will somewhere solid to stand.

Freedom Isn’t the Absence of Limits

This is the part that has been hardest for me to accept.

My mind can imagine almost anything. My heart often wants to say yes. But the life I've built has actual limits. I have a finite number of hours. I have responsibilities. I have relationships, a home, a practice, and people I love.

At 48, I'm less interested in proving that I can do everything and more interested in protecting what matters most.

That doesn't mean I want to become less ambitious. It means I want to stop allowing ambition to make promises my everyday life can't keep.

I've spent years encouraging people to move from victimhood toward agency. I still believe in that message. But I think I understand it differently now.

Agency isn't pretending there are no constraints. It's seeing the constraints clearly enough to choose wisely within them—and changing what can be changed.

Maybe I don't need to win an argument with my brain. Maybe I need to learn how to work with it.

And maybe the greatest expression of personal responsibility isn't another vow to try harder. Maybe it's finally building a life in which trying harder isn't the only strategy I have.

I'm not finished figuring this out. But the next chapter needs to look different in ordinary, observable ways: saying no before I overpromise, closing the app that pulls me away, protecting time for administrative work, and keeping the commitments I have already made. It means choosing relationships, health, and a sustainable practice over another exhilarating possibility that costs more than I can give.

I once thought freedom meant having no limits. Now I wonder whether freedom begins when I understand the conditions under which I can actually follow through. The goal is not a smaller life. It is a life I can live faithfully, with less shame, more room for choice, and strengths that can last.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This first-person essay describes one person’s experience of ADHD and uses the “two-cylinder engine” as a metaphor, not a scientific description of brain anatomy. ADHD symptoms and effective supports vary among

individuals; professional assessment and evidence-based care are important when symptoms interfere with daily life.

RESEARCH NOTE

The MRI findings described above refer to group averages, not individual diagnostic markers: Hoogman et al., The Lancet Psychiatry (2017), doi:10.1016/S2215-0366(17)30049-4; Hoogman et al., American Journal of Psychiatry (2019), doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2019.18091033. Driven to Distraction (Edward M. Hallowell and John J. Ratey) is cited here as a clinical and personal learning resource, not as the original source of those imaging results.