

Reassembling a Life: Discovering ADHD

How a troubled mom who perked up her marriage and reconnected with joy after getting help for her ADD.

by Maureen Connolly

Luann Kole has faced many challenges in her 45 years, including alcohol addiction, an abusive husband, financial trouble, divorce, and single parenthood. But nothing was tougher, she says, than living for four decades with undiagnosed attention deficit disorder (ADD / ADHD).

Kole finally received a diagnosis a year and a half ago, after a bout with depression. Daily doses of Concerta and the antidepressant Lexapro helped, but the mother of two from Cohasset, Minnesota, still felt that life wasn't all it should be. Last September, when she came across an ad for Jennifer Koretsky's three-month, phone-in coaching program, Kole eagerly signed up for it.

How have things gone for Kole, a self-proclaimed perfectionist who could never finish anything she set out to do? She and her coach describe the changes in her life, big and small:

Luann Kole: I've been sober for seven years, after drinking heavily for 13 years. (I used to put amaretto in my morning coffee, whiskey in my lunchtime soft drink, and then drink wine at dinner.) Two weeks ago I gave up cigarettes, after 30 years as a two-pack-a-day smoker. Giving up alcohol and tobacco was very hard, but not as hard as living day-to-day with ADD.

Before I went on medication and started with Jennifer's coaching sessions, every small problem seemed insurmountable. I'd start my daily chores but stop before finishing them. I'd pick up a book, read for five minutes, then put it down. I couldn't stay focused. Then, when I failed to complete my morning chores, I got really cranky.

One day it occurred to me that I was a victim of "if only" thinking. If only I could get my house organized and my to-do list done, life would be perfect. I spent so much time obsessing over what

I needed to do, I couldn't do anything. That's when I decided to see a psychologist, and was diagnosed.

Jennifer Koretsky, Luann's ADD Coach: When I met Luann, she was filled with self-doubt. She knew how to improve her day-to-day living, but didn't trust herself to do it. Once she realized she couldn't have perfection, she moved on to something else. When that didn't work out either, she felt overwhelmed. Next came the guilt, which sapped her resolve and energy. It was a vicious cycle.



Luann: I liked the idea of group coaching. Group therapy had helped me overcome my addictions, and I had a hunch it would help my ADD-related problems. I was right.

Jennifer: Each group coaching session starts with a brief check-in, so we can all say hello and update each other on any progress. Next, I describe a particular skill, explain why it is a challenge for ADDers, and offer practical strategies for cultivating the skill.

I ask the group to open their workbooks and do an exercise or two related to the skill under discussion. Then I take questions and comments. I give specific advice to anyone who seems unsure about how to develop the skill, and the whole group benefits from listening in. The goal is to be as positive and as supportive as possible. Everyone in need of a boost gets it from me *and* the other group members. Luann was great at this - extremely supportive and encouraging of other members.

Luann: Talking to people who understood me but didn't judge me - and hearing how they handled their own problems - helped me set my priorities. And Jennifer helped me realize that it's impossible for any person to do everything perfectly.

Learning to delegate was the first step toward getting organized and feeling better. I have a 21-year-old daughter from my first marriage. For the past 14 years, I've been married to a wonderful man named John. Four years ago John and I adopted a little girl, Madeline, when she was just two days old. Like most moms, I spend a lot of time cooking, cleaning, and organizing. But hard as I tried, I never quite got the hang of doing those things well. So I spent my days feeling overwhelmed and resentful.

Part of the problem was that I never asked John to help with child care and chores. Now when I need his help, I'm not afraid to ask for it. Now John gives Maddie her evening bath. He also feeds our three cats and cockatiel, and unloads the dishwasher each morning. That's a chore I always dreaded.

I've even given Maddie responsibility. Somehow it had never occurred to me that a 4-year-old could dress herself. But Maddie can - and that saves me 30 minutes every morning. She may come to breakfast looking like a peacock, but she's proud of dressing herself.

Jennifer: People with ADD often struggle needlessly because they haven't learned how to plan their days. That was certainly the case with Luann. Her days were busy, but she never set aside time to plot out exactly what she needed to do. She just charged blindly ahead. Now Luann sets aside 15 minutes every morning to identify her goals for the day - and plan how to accomplish them.

Luann: I've learned that ADD is a lot like alcohol addiction: Both are lifelong conditions. The temptation to drink will always be there, and ADD doesn't go away because you take a pill or get therapy.

Jennifer showed me how taking better care of myself could help me manage despite ADD. Now I meditate and do yoga. I eat better. I've become more spiritual. Belief in a higher power has given me greater confidence. And now that I've finally stopped smoking - something I could never have done before being treated for ADD - I really enjoy exercising. I'm going to learn to golf and to ski.

My marriage to John was always good, and it's gotten even better since I went through coaching. My husband and I talk a lot more now, and there's

greater intimacy. Looking back, I think I was so busy berating myself that I had neither the time nor the energy to enjoy marriage. You know what they say: If you don't love yourself, you can't love anyone else. That was certainly true for me.

I've also seen an improvement in my relationship with Maddie. John had to work late recently, so Maddie and I threw a girls-only party. We cooked fish sticks and French fries and ate picnic-style on my bed. We made butterflies out of paper scraps, watched DVDs, and played Candyland about a hundred times. The old Luann would have been bored silly by the whole thing, not to mention annoyed by the fish-stick crumbs on the bed. But the new, improved Luann keeps that night as a favorite memory.

I can't believe that it took so long to figure out my life. But I don't regret being diagnosed so late. I couldn't have dealt with ADD a decade or two ago. Now I see my diagnosis as a gift. I don't worry about everything, at least not all at once. I take one day at a time.

My life is not perfect. Before I started with coaching, I almost started drinking again. It scares me to think about that. And I'm still not as close as I'd like to be with my older daughter, who was scarred by having an alcoholic mom. But if I keep growing and reaching out to her, and to other people, I know my life will get even better.

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