

The Racing Mind

By Richard Cooper

Do you often find your mind flooded with so many thoughts about so many things that you become overwhelmed? Does your mind race off to visualize the first step of a series of directions that is being given to you, so that you do not pay attention to the rest of the steps? These are two of the many questions I ask individuals about their behavior when I screen for learning and attention differences. Although everyone may on occasion experience these behaviors, the person who frequently experiences these, and a number of similar behaviors, probably has a racing mind.

The racing mind is the term I prefer to use to describe the phenomenon often referred to as Attention Deficit Disorder. Why use a different term? Although the behaviors associated with attention problems cause significant difficulty for those who have a serious attention problem, others have milder symptoms and less difficulty. There are varying degrees of attention problems, and if we reserve the term ADD for the most serious problems, then we can treat other degrees of attention problems differently. But the same thought patterns that disable a person with a serious attention problem, to a lesser degree, can interfere with a person's ability to function in many areas of life including school, work and social interactions. The concept of the racing mind can help a person to better understand their own thoughts and behaviors as being different rather than seeing themselves as having a deficit and a disorder which the term ADD states.

The term racing mind is not inherently negative. By using it instead of ADD, the individual is able to focus on some of the positive aspects of this phenomenon. While the word "deficit" emphasizes the negative, the term "racing mind" emphasizes the

positive. This term implies different not defective. This positive perspective can make a significant difference in the person's self-image.

I use an analogy of a raging river to help people understand the racing mind. Imagine a river beginning as a trickle high in the mountains, increasing volume as it flows down the mountains through the valleys, across the plain to the sea. When this river swells because of heavy rain, the water rages down the mountains, towards the sea causing much destruction and chaos. However, if this same river has a number of hydroelectric dams, the raging waters cannot only be controlled but also produce productive energy.

There are positive aspects to the racing mind. It can enable individuals to be quick witted and, although it can be overdone by becoming the class clown, it provides the person with a skill which some use to their advantage. Some people have a high energy level that allows them, or drives them, to work, play and live faster and harder than others. Some are risk takers, willing to go beyond what others believe to be safe or prudent. Many entrepreneurs fit into this category. And, although there is a high rate of failure for individuals who strike out on their own, there is much to be said for those who break through barriers to go beyond. Hard work and tenacity can result in high productivity. I find many people who are very good problem solvers because they can race ahead to consider a myriad of possibilities. When combined with creativity, which often accompanies the racing mind, people can be the masters of flexibility and substitutions. The ultimate toolmaker is the person who can find ways to accomplish tasks with whatever is available. Quick thinkers with quick movements enable many with the racing mind to be excellent athletes; even the sports extremists like those who ski off cliffs, sky dive off bridges. Being very observant is the positive side of being distractible, and in many environments, individuals with racing minds excel. Their high energy levels and quick thinking often enables them to work on several projects simultaneously

These positive characteristics are the opposites of many negative aspects of the racing mind. Now look at the negative aspects of the racing mind along with techniques to reduce the negative and build on the positive.

Not everything about the racing mind is positive. There are negative aspects to the racing mind that can limit a person's productivity, cause errors and confusion and reduce a person's self-confidence. If a person is attentive to too many things, it reduces the ability to focus on tasks at hand. This distractibility manifests itself in many ways. Here is a partial list of the negative aspects of the racing mind:

-- The tendency to listen to more than one conversation at a time, which usually results in, reduced information, confusion and difficulty with social interaction.

-- The person with a racing mind often has a tendency to race ahead when receiving multiple directions. When the first instruction is given, the person's thoughts race off to visualize or plan that step and consequently does not process the other steps of the directions which are being given.

-- Another observed phenomenon is triggering. The person's thoughts race ahead overshooting the correct response to a stimulus. Errors such as the reading of synonyms, saying the wrong word when speaking and simple math mistakes are frequent problems for individuals with the racing mind.

-- Being too quick can have its negative aspects. This quickness can result in jumping over sequences, going to extremes, doing too much, too fast for too long.

- The racing mind causes tangential thinking which is the mind triggering to other ideas in a conversation or as a person tries to write. For example, a person may begin talking about one topic, but an idea triggers another thought which takes the conversation into another direction. After a few triggered ideas that take the person's thoughts far a field, no one knows what the person is talking about.

- Skipping words as one writes, skipping steps in sequences, and skipping information in conversations are other negative results of the racing mind. When a person jumps over these things, he or she is often not even aware that they were omitted.

- Impulsive behavior is one of the negatives aspects of the racing mind that not only causes many difficulties because of mistakes but also it interferes with social interaction. One of these is interrupting. Many adults who frequently interrupt others report that they see it as the lesser of two evils. If they do not interrupt, they will forget because their mind will race on to something else. In order to avoid forgetting, they interrupt. Others just can't tolerate waiting so they act or say something as soon as the thought enters their mind.

- Many exhibit a need for immediate gratification. They want gratification now, quickly and they are off racing, looking for more gratification.

- The opposite of observant is distractible and whereas it is very good to be observant in some situations, in others being too observant (distractible) means that you are unable to effectively focus on the tasks at hand.

-- Although taking risks can be the trade mark of an entrepreneur (which many individuals with a racing mind are) taking too many risks or impossible ones often result in failure and some times personal injury.

-- For some the racing mind results in a high energy level that, again in the right context, gives the person the advantage while in other situations is negative. If a person can't sit or stay still, he or she has difficulty in school, church and other places where others are calm and focused.

-- The racing mind is easily excitable, especially able to envision the end result or product. However, it is common to find a person with a racing mind who does not complete tasks, takes on too many tasks, starts too many projects, often not completing them. This same ability drives the person to collect too many things. Their mind races off to all the possible uses of such things.

The racing mind can be a gift or a curse depending on whether the person can control it to be productive or whether it controls the person and causes chaos. The first step in learning how to control the racing mind is to develop self-awareness. The better a person knows himself or herself the better he or she will be able to channel or control the racing mind. Learning to appreciate ones differences puts one in the right state of mind. There are many techniques that can empower a person with a racing mind to channel it to produce the energy and productivity that enable a person to succeed. Here is a partial list of techniques for controlling the racing mind.

-- If a person with a racing mind can control the environment, then there is a better chance that things can be structured and planned. For example, clients who visit my office find that I have chosen the corner office that has no windows and is located far from the other activities going on in our facility. This choice of

environment reduces my observations (or distractions) so that I can focus my attention on the person I am working with.

-- Structure is very important and frequently necessary for individuals with a racing mind. Frequently, those who lack internal structure resist external structure (that imposed on them by others) and frequently spend much time and energy trying to evade or unravel the structure. Accepting the fact that one needs structure and requesting help in establishing that structure can often make the difference between success and failure.

-- Because the racing mind can create many errors, individuals need to understand when they are likely to make errors (stress, anxiety, pressure and fatigue accelerate the racing mind) and learn to check work often. One technique for achieving frequent checks is small looping tasks. Tasks are broken into small segments including a method for checking for accuracy. The person should loop back and check that each step was completed when the whole task is finished.

-- If a person can learn to stop and think before he or she acts, some impulsive behavior and many errors can be eliminated. This is not easily accomplished, it is not enough to say you are going to stop and think, the person must practice and often needs the help of others to learn this new behavior.

-- Many people with racing minds have difficulty relaxing. They often seem to be wired and have difficulty using visualization and relaxing tapes. Learning to visualize, looking ahead, enables the person with the racing mind to use it to their advantage rather than using it to deal with the consequences of errors and misdirected energy. Don't resign yourself to the idea that you have no control or that your case is hopeless.

-- Individuals who have difficulty controlling their racing mind may need to learn to use external controls, such as reminders from other people or memory clues. An example of such a memory clue helped one person who was consistently leaving her things behind. She learned to stop and look around when she came to a door. This became habit and she forgot very few things thereafter.

Published by: Learning disAbilities Resources, P.O. Box 716, Bryn Mawr, PA
19010 **610-446-6126** or visit us on our website: www.learningdifferences.com