

ADD: THE REAL KENNEDY CURSE?

by Wade M. Nye

With the publication of his latest biography, *An Unfinished Life*, and the hoopla surrounding confessions of his former playmate intern, JFK has been propelled back into the news. This attractive, talented family has HAD more than its share of tragedies.

Some have a near mystical interpretation of these heartbreaking incidents, explaining them as the Kennedy curse. One English newspaper broke the news of JFK Junior's last tragic flight, with the headline, "The curse of the Kennedys strikes again." In London, the Sunday Mirror made do with a one-word headline: "Cursed."

In best selling book, *The Kennedy Curse*, Edward Klein's explanation is that the Kennedy's were on a fatal collision course with reality because they felt immune to normal laws with near divine protection from the consequences of their actions.¹ Richard Reeves, the noted Kennedy historian says that while he used to doubt that the gods punished those to whom they had first given everything, he now believes it to be true.

Others debunk the notion of a curse, calling it a coincidence, bad luck, or undue media attention on a high profile family with 87 members, most of whom never experienced terrible tragedies.

Yet, look at the facts. We have assassinations, two notorious car accidents, a war related death, three plane crashes, death by drug overdose, a bizarre, skiing accident, rape charges, cocaine and alcohol addiction, and countless incidents of sexual adventurism, beginning with Joe Senior's torrid affair with silent film star, Gloria Swanson.

Read the history of this gifted, hyperactive family and you will find countless examples of inattentiveness, impulsiveness and high-risk behaviors. This leads to the question: do these behaviors have some genetic explanation? Is there any hereditary disorder characterized by hyperactivity, inattentiveness, impulsivity, and high-risk conduct?

Most informed psychiatrists or therapists would answer, yes: Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder: ADD or AD/HD

In fact the specific causes of many of these tragedies can be attributed to simple human errors in judgment. A president who rejects the protection of a bubble top (his wife's choice), for an open-top motorcade in a city full of Kennedy-haters, has not, in retrospect, made a judicious choice. An amateur pilot, who insists on flying over unfamiliar waters, against advice to do so, can't be called the victim of a freak accident. Michael Kennedy's fatal collision with a tree occurred while playing a game of football on skis. The events surrounding Ted Kennedy's drive off the bridge at Chappaquiddick, killing aide, Mary Jo Kopechne, is another example of risky, impulsive behavior. And remember, Robert Kennedy's eldest son, Joe? He had a similar mishap in 1978, leaving a passenger paralyzed.

¹ *The Kennedy Curse*, Edward Klein, St. Martin's Press, 2003. Pg. 23

The evidence is clear. Individuals with ADD have more accidents than the rest of the population because they are more inattentive, impulsive and crave high- stimulation.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), individuals diagnosed with ADD are characterized by impulsivity, inattention and hyperactivity. Among many other symptoms, they make careless mistakes, are easily distracted, act as if driven by a motor and are easily bored by routine tasks. ADD guru psychiatrists, Drs. Ned Hallowell and John Ratey, find that many adults with ADD seek intense stimulation through high-risk behavior. “He—and it is usually a he—may seek high stimulation through . . . risky means such as gambling, having dangerous romantic liaisons, making very risky business deals, (and) putting himself in physical danger.” These individuals, while feeling stressed by a calm and relaxing pace, may feel relaxed in hubbubs of risky, even very dangerous situations.”²

Another ADD expert, Thom Hartmann explains it this way: according to recent brain research, the sensory receptors in the thalamus area of the ADD brain may record stimuli at a relatively low intensity. This means their brains don’t register sensations at the same level as others. “The volume is turned down low,” is how Hartmann explains it. Therefore, ADD’ers feel driven by a need to raise the intensity level of sensory input by pursuing highly stimulating activities. Hartman calls this tendency “the need for aliveness.”³

Without treatment, individuals with AD/HD may suffer failure in school and work, the collapse of relationships, and substance abuse. Yet they can be very successful in life and there is evidence to suggest that ADD individuals make good leaders, airline pilots, and entrepreneurs: They are great in emergencies, come up with creative solutions to tough problems, and love to be out in front, doing risky, exciting jobs.⁴ Studies show that ADD makes up about five percent of the population. Yet one ADD expert says 30 per cent of all emergency workers, including policeman, fireman, and ER staff, have it. .

Do the Kennedy’s fit this mold? Bored and restless, their history is filled with living on the edge. And consider that the first volume of Nigel Hamilton’s biography of Jack Kennedy is titled, *JFK, Reckless Youth*.

Joe Kennedy, Jack’s older brother, who also displayed ADD behaviors, served as a pilot in World War II. He disregarded countless warnings to cut back on flying so many dangerous missions. Yet he signed up for the dubious operation to destroy Nazi V-3 “super gun” installations near Pas de Calais, Belgium. In a *kamikaze*-strategy, rejected by the Army Air-Corps as too dangerous, he flew a war-weary B-24, loaded with explosives. The idea was to crash dive into the installation after parachuting out of the plane. Kennedy’s plane blew up in an explosion that caused structural damage to 59 houses several thousand feet below. No piece of the B-24, Joe Jr., or his co pilot was ever found.

Bored with deskwork in naval intelligence and operations, JFK volunteered to captain a PT torpedo boat. Many experts believe these unproven boats, with plywood

² *Driven to Distraction*, Edward M. Hallowell, M.D. and John J. Ratey, M.D., Touchstone, 1994, page 179

³ *ADHD, Help for Your Family at Home, School and Work*, Underwood Books, 2000 pp 38-47.

⁴ Op Cit. PP 215-230

hulls, lacked the speed and armaments to be true weapons of war. During a dangerous, and some say foolhardy mission in the Pacific, his PT 109 was the only U.S. Navy ship to be rammed by an enemy destroyer. He and some of his crew survived with incredible luck, rescued by Melanesians in a canoe. Later, captaining another PT boat, Jack devised his own *kamikaze* mission, which was rejected by his commanding officer as too dangerous.

Moreover, experts agree that AD/HD individuals are at increased risk for addictions such as alcohol and drug abuse, problems readily verifiable in the Kennedy family tree. But there is another addiction, not studied, which is more evident in the Kennedy's addiction to sex. John Kennedy admitted to a British diplomat, "I can't go for more than three days without a woman."

An acquaintance of mine, who attends meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous, reported to me that many in attendance admit to an ADD diagnosis. JFK's high-risk sexual exploits are often compared to Bill Clinton, another president who exhibits ADD traits. Walking in the footsteps of his promiscuous father, Kennedy, while president, had risky sexual liaisons with Marilyn Monroe and others, including a woman associated with the mob. Most incredible, just after Pearl Harbor, he began sleeping with a Nazi sympathizer, accused of spying for Hitler.

But is there hard evidence that the Kennedy's possessed the ADD gene? Edward Klein, a confidant of Jackie Kennedy Onassis, reports that John Jr., in fact had attention deficit disorder (sic). There are many indications of this. A paradox often observed in ADD individuals that perplexes others is, that while showing remarkable talent in specific areas, they are disorganized, chronically lose things, poor managers of time, and make careless mistakes. Jackie reported to Klein that her son was "absentminded, always late, constantly misplacing his wallet and credit cards... and was accident prone."⁵

In a letter he wrote to his father, young Jack Kennedy admitted "I may not be able to remember material things such as tickets, gloves and so on, ...but the last time we had an exam on Ivanhoe, I got a ninety eight." Later, as president, his staff were baffled by his near photographic memory for correspondence, conversations and facts, but an almost total absent-mindedness about where he mislaid speeches, books and clothing.

At his posh prep school, Kennedy had a reputation for being a brilliant but mediocre student. One evaluation stated he "lacks stability and the power of concentration to do a really effective job." One teacher, a strict disciplinarian, assigned to keep Kennedy's nose to the grindstone, confessed failure in the end, complaining, "He is casual and disorderly in almost all of his organization projects, studies at the last minute, keeps appointments late, has a little sense of material things and can seldom locate his possessions."⁶ His French teacher lamented, "he has a tendency to carelessness, tardy, refuses to conform. His papers are chaotic and he invariably forgets books, pencil or paper."⁷ I could find no better words to describe my ADD clients.

⁵ Op Cit. P 10

⁶ *John Kennedy: A Political Profile*, James M. Burns, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. N.Y., 1961, page. 24.

⁷ *JFK, Reckless Youth*, Nigel Hamilton, Random House, 1992, p.95

Of course, John F. Kennedy lived long before there was a diagnosis for ADD. Today, research has shown that individuals with ADD respond very favorably to psycho stimulants such as Ritalin and Adderal. These drugs are amphetamines, controlled substances, which, on the street are termed speed. Remarkably, JFK had his own physician, Dr. Max Jacobson, who prescribed amphetamines to John Kennedy, long before anyone had heard of ADD or Ritalin.

Jacobson, called “Dr. Feel Good” by his critics, because he prescribed amphetamines to certain other of his patients, was later prosecuted by the FDA and the AMA for doing this. Family and friends criticized Jack for taking these drugs.

“I don’t care if it’s horse piss,!” Kennedy told them of Dr. Jacobson’s injections. “It works!”

Which is what hundreds of thousands of other ADD sufferers have discovered. Practitioners have noticed that amphetamines, while speeding up the non-ADD brain, actually work the opposite on ADD brains, often slowing them down helping them to be less impulsive, inattentive and hyperactive. Many FDA approved studies on the subject show that these medications are neither harmful nor addictive to ADD children and adults.

What do we conclude then? Should we pity the Kennedys or blame them? The truth is, this ADD interpretation of the Kennedy curse is neither an indictment nor a pass. Rather, it is an explanation. At the same time, the theory raises many interesting questions, some of them historical. For example, was JFK taking the amphetamine prescribed by his doctor during the Cuban missile crisis? And if so, did it actually help him to be less impulsive and have better control over his mental processes? And what about John John? As we have seen from Klein’s testimony, he had been diagnosed as having attention deficit disorder. Yet many individuals, especially men, have difficulty accepting their diagnosis, choosing denial and refusing to consider medication. Was that the case with young John and if so, could a psycho-stimulant, such as Adderal or Ritalin, have helped him delay his impulsive decision to make that final flight, thereby saving three lives?

Is that to say ADD prescriptions are a cure all? Experts agree they are not. While the psycho-stimulants, and other medications, such as Strattera and Wellbutrin, are helpful in coping with ADD symptoms, there are treatments equally, if not more important. First is complete acceptance of the diagnosis. Second is education. Most authorities agree that ADD coaching is very beneficial. These treatments help the ADD individual re-define himself in relation to the rest of the world, and find strategies to cope. While developing a new self-image and learning these strategies, ADD’ers may integrate into their personality, life-changing strategies and skills, leading to recovery and even healing of the ADD condition.