

# ADHD and Competitiveness

By Judi Jerome, LICSW, LADC



The women in my Mah Jongg group look at me every week and say, "it's only a game". One of them laughed and told me that "I remind her of her husband when he plays games, very intense"; he has ADHD. The last time I played Monopoly with my Goddaughter Jessica, she looked at me quizzically and said, "geez Aunt Judi, it's only a game". I played trivial pursuit with my neighbors a few months ago and they looked at me and said, "Don't worry about missing the answers, it's only a game". When I played boggle with my best friend last year she told me to "chill out because it's only a game". The last time I played scrabble with a relative she told me that "this was only a game and it was supposed to be fun"; she wasn't having any. Last night I was sitting alone at my computer playing a game. When I yelled at the computer game and accused it of cheating, I sat back and thought to myself, "you're loosing it Jude, it's only a game". I began to wonder if I was attacking others like I attacked the computer game.

Are we seeing a pattern here? Is it only me? I truly don't think so. I started asking others with AD/HD what their experience with competitiveness was and I heard a lot of interesting tales. Feeling a step behind in so many areas of ones life often leads to a strong desire to excel at what one is good at. So, they do their darndest to make sure that they win at the sports and games that they choose to compete in. Sometimes a gentle reminder that we are supposed to be having fun is not heard or understood. ADDers need to be hit over the head with information. "It's only a game" just isn't direct enough. "Hey, relax and stop being so serious"; "Hey, you don't have to jump all over me this is not the Olympics"; "Hey, your intense interpretation of the rules is killing the fun"; "Hey, don't be so competitive", are just a few comments that would have a bit more clarity and impact.

I asked a local soccer star with ADHD what she thought the connection was and she related the following:

*"Compared to my peers, my level of competitiveness is very high. I'm driven by this constant flow of energy and total desire to achieve my goal and perform to my optimal ability. Mainly my desires come from my inability to be satisfied, so I always strive for more. When it comes to academics I feel like I have the disadvantage over my peers, however when it comes to sports I feel the opposite. As a goalkeeper I feel as if I can slow down the shot in my mind and make that split second decision. My energy is extreme and impulsive. As the coach talks my body is fidgeting - my feet are craving for the soccer ball. The energy and hyperfocus can drive me through any obstacle that I encounter. My goal is to reach the top, which is only 29,029 ft high [Mt. Everest]." Lindsay Volk, Vermont*

School subjects, work projects, music or drama tryouts and getting ones article on the front page of the high school/college newspaper are also areas of competition that seem to get ADDers juices flowing. They always assumed that everyone else on the planet wanted to win. After all, isn't that why they are playing? Apparently many others are more selective at what they chose to feel intense competition towards.

The research seems to believe that at the core of competition is self-esteem. *Grab it where and when you can*, [self esteem] seems to be a popular sentiment for a value that leads to an unpopular set of behavior traits. Self esteem doesn't just come from

winning even though it certainly helps it grow. Self esteem comes from feeling good about what we are doing, feeling, thinking and saying about ourselves. If no one wants to play with us because we are 'out for blood' every time we play a board game, it negatively effects ones self esteem. Playing for fun and therefore having people want to continue to play with us is winning; the opposite could be lonely!

### **COACHING TIP**

People often forget to breathe, smile, and enjoy the process of whatever it is they are engaged in. Competition can lead to holding one's breath and therefore tightening up one's muscles. Being aware of breathing in and breathing out - mindfulness, keeps us focused *and* much more aware of what we do and say. This of course makes us feel in charge of ourselves and more confident in what we are doing. Next time you play a game with friends or family, keep a half smile on your face and breathe in from your abdomen and out from your nose. This also gives you the advantage of talking less which gives you the grace of listening more.

### **CONFESSION**

I hate to lose. Waiting for just one more tile in Mah Jongg takes all of the patience that I can muster. Win or lose, I tend to go over the winning scenario more than once after the game is over. I want to continue to be invited to play with my friends and I truly enjoy the feeling of being relaxed. Next Friday morning I will write a big R on my hand to remind me to relax during our weekly game. Laughter is as exhilarating as winning! Mindfulness matters.



*Judi has been in private practice since 1990 working with a variety of issues, and specializing in teens and adults with AD/HD and co-morbid disorders, life cycle transitions, and substance abuse. Judi enjoys coaching teens and adults with AD/HD in all genres of life. She believes that each individual has potential within to achieve success beyond the current limits that problems such as time management, disorganization, morning madness and late night hyper-focusing*

*may be imposing on their lives. Judi coaches people toward accomplishing their dreams as well as their goals.*

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