

Obsessed with a Cure: Why Risk Champions Should Think Differently



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Last week I came across a [TEDx](#) talk by a student at Carnegie Mellon University on the topic of living with and managing ADHD. My ADD brain went “OH” and clicked “play.” Not only was the student, Stephen Tonti, funny and engaging, but his experiences and opinions on ADHD really resonated with me. I was diagnosed with ADD when I was in the third grade. In his talk, Stephen says that although ADHD is commonly treated as a disorder, it is better understood as a different way of thinking. Viewed as a disorder, the focus of much research to date has been on finding a cure.

As is true in the fields of mental health, psychology and medicine, misconceptions abound in risk management. A common sentiment expressed by nonprofit leaders is the desire to rid their organizations of risk. Well-intentioned nonprofit leaders want to find a cure for the risks they face! And although some consultants will simply tell the client what she thinks the client wants to hear, at the Center we try to take a more disciplined approach. We encourage our consulting clients and Affiliate Members to get comfortable with risk and to embrace risk-taking as essential to mission fulfillment. We encourage the risk champions we work with to dig deep to find ways to adapt to risk and learn from the surprises and twists and turns that are inevitable in the life of a nonprofit. Instead of focusing on the ultimate fix, we need to focus on making the best possible decisions in a world that is and always will be, risky.

Here are a few tips from someone who, thanks to ADD, thinks a bit differently:

1. **Don't obsess over one item, or risk, too long.** Many people assume that people with ADHD or ADD are incapable of focusing on any one thing at a particular time, but instead either find their focus drawn in a thousand different directions or find their focus easily broken by simple distractions. But, as Stephen Tonti points out, when something really grabs a person with ADD or ADHD's attention, we become completely obsessed. If I start reading a book or story I like, I literally cannot stop, even if it means sacrificing meals and sleep. Risk champions in nonprofits too often exhibit this same behavior. They identify what they believe is the greatest risk facing the nonprofit and proceed to obsess over it. One problem with obsessing is that it will wear you down and out. Another problem is that it will distract you from the less dramatic, but perhaps more likely risks about to land in your lap.
2. **Remember that being a little ADD can be a good thing.** One of the benefits of being ADD is that it leads to a life of experimentation. My experience completely reflects this, as my career goals have changed at least a dozen times, and I each time found myself fully invested in my new goals and aspirations. And because I changed majors several time in college, I wound up taking a broader array of

courses than I ever would have had I stuck with my original plan. This has helped me a great deal in my work at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center as I work with leaders who come from incredibly diverse educational and professional backgrounds. A life of experimentation is a good thing for risk champions, too. Keep in mind that no one can all sides of your organization or every panel on the colorful, always moving “beach ball” that is your mission. To see the big picture you need to commit to seeing and understanding the small slices of organizational life and the view from many different vantage points. If you never venture out of your office you’re limited by the view from that single vantage point. And even if you do wander out and about and experiment, don’t forget that talking to colleagues throughout the organization—to hear their point of view—is absolutely key to getting the richest understanding of risk.

3. **Stop looking for a cure.** Few weeks go by when the Center isn’t asked to provide a risk assessment checklist, policy, framework, risk management information system, or “tool” that will solve the risks facing a particular nonprofit. But the truth is there isn’t a cure for risk, other than one that requires the dismantling of your mission! So instead of looking for a cure that doesn’t exist, focus your energy and good intentions on become more risk aware. What does that mean? It refers to the intentional commitment to learn as much as you can about the changing world in which your nonprofit operates. It also means making a sincere commitment to recruit leaders throughout your agency to help create the clearest possible vision of your risk landscape along with practical steps you will take to be prepared for the inevitable surprises of organizational life.

Stephen Tonti’s Tedx Talk is available at: [ADHD as a Difference in Cognition, Not a Disorder](#)

For information about the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, visit [www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) or call 703.777.3504.