

Foraging for Information

by Jeff Copper, MBA, PCC, PCAC



IN VERY SIMPLE TERMS, we do what we do for pleasure. That statement makes sense; otherwise, why would we do things that are boring, unpleasant, or uncomfortable if they don't make us feel good? The question is, though, what makes us feel good? In a simplified view of the infinitely complex brain, the answer is dopamine.

Dopamine is the reward neurotransmitter in the brain. It is called the “feel good” neurotransmitter because it helps control the brain's pleasure center. Dopamine plays a very important role in our survival because it motivates our behavior to seek pleasure. We are drawn to things that release dopamine, which is what drives us to procreate, to forage for food, or to seek things that elevate our mood. In daily terminology we talk about passions, interests, or other things that ignite our brains. In simple terms, we are talking about our individual dopamine blueprint.

Thought leaders like Russell Barkley, PhD, have been advocating that ADHD is an executive functioning disorder with self-regulation as a major factor. I like looking at ADHD as a dopamine addiction that manifests as an issue of self-regulation. When we feel a dopamine attraction, we pay attention to it; we're drawn to it. In the absence of dopamine, there is no reward in focusing on it. This explains why teens with ADHD can play computer games for hours. The issue is not that they are absorbed in the game, but rather that they cannot disengage their attention.

Addicted to learning?

The inspiration to write this article came from a comment on a video I had posted on Attention Talk Video on the topic. The viewer wrote: “After high school I considered becoming a professional student, gaming the system to cover my expenses while taking classes and even earning degrees with no end game and no intention of building a career.”

With the explosion of information on the internet, I find many individuals with ADHD seem to have a learning addiction. They may go online and get lost in time or purpose just foraging for information, click after click, trying to satisfy the “need” to learn. It's the same principle as foraging for food to satisfy hunger. When foraging for information, learning is the quest and everything else fades in importance. Why do we forage? Because of the pleasure it brings in the quest.

In a sense, the lure of dopamine often blinds us. We are unaware of the obvious; it hypnotizes our thinking brain via rationalizations. Let me illustrate. Learning and executing are functionally different. Learning can be exciting or adventurous; it's about hope and possibilities. Execution is often repetitive and boring. The absence of dopamine (reward) makes it difficult for those with ADHD to sustain focus.

In many cases, I've found that some individuals with ADHD who have multiple degrees or certifications continue to pursue course after course in pursuit of a more productive future. They find themselves gaining knowledge but moving

on to the next exciting class or topic without using the knowledge they have gained already.

In a sense, they are professional learners but do not realize it. Rather than forage for a job where they are paid to learn, they forage without pausing to consider whether a job is simply the repetitive execution of old learnings. Over the years, I have coached several individuals who pursued studies to learn bookkeeping, nursing, programming, or some other occupation. In the end, they found they were bored in the job and ultimately returned to forage for more information in pursuit of a different degree for a new vocation, only to repeat the pattern.

Passion or problem?

Being a passionate learner is a good thing, but it can get in the way of life if not monitored or managed intentionally. In failing to witness the struggle to regulate their attention in the presence of something new to learn, they can't resist foraging for information when left to their own devices. There is little they can do to manage what might be impairing their life.

In contrast, acknowledging the issue empowers them to focus their learning in a productive way. I am reminded of a lawyer I coached who had ADHD and who acknowledged he was passionate about learning. He became a trial lawyer for medical malpractice cases. He said it was a perfect career for him. He had gone to law school to learn to become a lawyer. Now he says he is getting his medical degree one case at a time because he needs to learn the medicine behind each case to be effective in litigation.

As a coach, I have learned that you can't do anything about anything if you are not aware of it. And so, I would encourage those who are “professional” learners to pause before starting the next degree or certification and ask, *Is this really going to manifest in a career? If I get a job in this field, will it require constant learning? Am I rationalizing the situation to satisfy my learning curve?*

I have no attachment to your choice, of course, but I hope you'll become self-aware and make a conscious effort to self-regulate and disengage from unnecessarily foraging for information. 🗣️

Jeff Copper, MBA, PCC, PCAC, is an ADHD coach, founder of DIG Coaching Practice, and the host of Attention Talk Radio and Attention Talk Video. He coaches his clients to help them realize their potential in business and personally. Having learned to manage attention and deal with his own challenges, Copper developed his anatomy of attention construct to help his clients control their attention and move past barriers. He holds an MBA from the University of Tampa, professional designations from ICF and PAAC, and certifications from ADD Coach Academy and Coaches Training Institute. Copper serves on the editorial advisory board of Attention magazine.