

My First Years: Birth to Age Four

I, Benjamin Heinrich Polis, was born at Sandringham Hospital, Melbourne, Australia, on August 7, 1981. On this day the angels sang out loud, "What have we done?" My life had just started, but my parents' lives changed forever. I was a healthy-looking baby with no obvious physical or mental problems. My parents were pleased that I was normal. It is what all parents hope for in their newborn child. But they were in for a rude shock! My hidden handicap would not be discovered until many years later. Looking back on my early years, my parents have told me there were a number of things in my behavior that appeared to be unusual. Of course I do not remember much, so this information has been recounted by parents and family members.

My mother told me she was not able to breast-feed me in a room with other people in it. Any movement or object in the room distracted me. I stopped feeding and gazed around the room, searching for some other source of entertainment. She

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overcame this by always removing me to another room. It was the first of many times throughout my life that I was separated or banned from a group. Thinking back, it was probably the first time my parents experienced my short attention span and how easily distracted I was, the classic or common signs of ADD/ADHD. I still have these symptoms and probably will for the rest of my life, but now I understand the problem and I can control my behavior.

I can imagine the first time I started to walk, loving the freedom and thinking, Let's bust out of this place! Well, that's just what I did all the time. For me, no room was a barrier, just another challenge. I always found some ingenious way to bust out and explore this new and exciting world. My mother talks about frequently losing me, searching high and low until she found me, until the next time when she had to start the search again. My father recalls coming home from work to find my mother vacuuming the backyard. I had opened a beanbag and covered the entire yard with white polystyrene balls. Hey, I wanted a white Christmas! (Christmas is in the middle of summer in Australia, so I haven't had one yet.)

Ash Wednesday 1983

Ash Wednesday is the name given to a day in Australian history when bushfires raged across the two southern states of Victoria and South Australia. Many people died and hundreds of houses were destroyed. Every summer during bushfire season in Australia, people think back to that Ash Wednesday.

It was one of the scariest days in my parents' lives. My father remembers looking at the Melbourne horizon and seeing a ring

of fire and smoke. It was the first time I was affected by asthma. My parents were in a state of panic because their two-year-old child had begun gasping for breath. Dad rushed me to Frankston Hospital. It was eerie. The streets were deserted since people stayed at home during the bushfires. The air conditioner in the car was sucking in the smoke while I sucked and gasped for life-giving air. I ended up spending a couple of weeks in hospital; it would be the first of many such trips.

The reason I am referring to my experience with asthma is that it taught me we all have our limitations, but we can work around them. And that's exactly what I have done with my ADHD.

Two or three times a year I was rushed to hospital, where I had to stay anywhere from one to three weeks with nurses watching me all the time. My asthma became worse as I got older. When I was about ten, I was rushed from Frankston Hospital to the Royal Children's Hospital in an ambulance, accompanied by a specialist doctor and nurse. I was in intensive care for days with a collapsed lung. My parents were not told at first about the collapsed lung.

I remember one day very clearly. The specialist pulled his chair close to me and said, "If you don't start to look after yourself and take your daily asthma medication, you will be dead in two years." Believe me, from that day on I have taken my asthma medication. I believe the reason that my parents were not told of the severity of my condition was because the doctors were trying to look after not just me but my parents as well. I remember so many incidents when I would call out to my parents in the middle of the night and tell them that I wanted or needed to go to the hospital. I hated going to the hospital but always knew it was the best place for me. Without the excellent care of the

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staff at both Frankston and the Royal Children's hospitals, I would be dead. So I would like to thank them for all they have done for me and other sick children.

One problem arose time and time again. When I became better I could not sit still, a well-recognized symptom of ADD/ADHD. The doctors said, "Ben should be able to go home in a couple of days." I got so excited and worked myself up so much that I did more harm than good. I ripped the intravenous line out of my vein, jumped out of bed, ran to the cafeteria to buy a Coke and some candy, then ran through the wards and back to my bed. This made me sick again, often worse than before. Then I was told that I could not go home yet. Confused and angry, I cried, staged a whopper of a temper tantrum, threw my pillows and food at the nurses, ripped up my medical charts, and so on.

My parents were upset by my bad behavior but could do nothing to help me. Their little boy wanted to go home but they couldn't take him, because he most probably would die. What a terrible position for my parents, or any parents, to be in! My father often smuggled in a McDonald's burger to cheer me up.

The Children's Hospital was twenty-five miles from home and with the long hours they were working to establish their own real-estate business, it was hard for my parents to see me, but they did. I was scared, confused, and bored sitting in a hospital bed with tubes in my veins and asthma medication pumped into me every ten minutes. I hated being in the hospital. Then one day my father told me, "Grow up. This is the best place for you. You are lucky you don't have diabetes and need insulin shots four times a day." I guess this was the first time I looked at myself in a positive new light. I thought to myself, Hey, you're sick but you're luckier than a lot of other kids. I transferred this positive thought

process to how I thought about my ADD/ADHD later in life, especially during my teen years. After I finally accepted that I had ADD/ADHD, and needed to work around it and use it to my advantage, my life became a lot easier.

The first house I grew up in was on a long, busy road. I climbed anything to escape, then ran like the wind down the road, my mother in hot pursuit. If she was watching our front yard too closely, then I ran out the back door, over the fence, into the neighbor's house through their doggie door, and out through their front door—free again!

As I got older and stronger my climbing abilities became greater and I became more daring. I could always climb fences, but now I even climbed over the roof to escape. I could climb anything and would jump from any height. This is characteristic of ADD/ADHD children. They act impulsively, not thinking, even for a brief moment, of the consequences of their actions. Remarkably, I have never broken any bones, but it is interesting to note that ADD/ADHD children are found to have more broken bone injuries than the norm. My advice to parents is to get a good medical plan. You will need it.

My greatest climbing achievement was when I was about three. My mother loved to sew, and she dragged me to every fabric store in Melbourne. Hour after hour she would flick through pattern books and study fabrics while I ran amok. I hated those stores; I still hate them and refuse to go into them, even today. However, I always found a way to amuse myself. I usually climbed over the large rolls and bolts of material. My mother laughs as she tells me that she loved it when I got lost. She

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deliberately lost me sometimes so she would get some peace and quiet shopping, then she would find me when she was finished.

But one particular day was very different. I climbed on the outside of the escalator all the way to the top, shuffling my feet along a small shelf. The only problem was, I could not get down. This time I do remember telling myself that I was not going to jump. Five meters below me was a hard concrete floor. My mother (still looking at those stupid patterns) was found and she went into a state of panic. From all over the store, people gathered to look at me with fear and amazement, probably thinking, How did that kid get up there? They stopped the escalator and someone brought me down. That was the first and last time I climbed an escalator. But harder and higher structures were soon on the drawing board.

Around age four, my behavior became more destructive and erratic. My grandparents took me to the Royal Melbourne Zoo for a picnic. I ran off to explore. Both grandparents were not worried because I was still in sight and safe. Well, let me rephrase that. I was safe, but the people having nice quiet picnics were not. It was a lovely, sunny day. I had found liquid gold at the end of the rainbow: the main faucet to the extensive watering system for the lawns. With a couple of twists the sprinklers opened up and the entire picnic area was sprayed with water. I ran off, leaving a path of destruction in my wake. It took many minutes before the staff turned off the sprinkler system, but it was too late, everyone's picnic had been flooded. After that, my grandparents hardly ever took me anywhere. I don't know why.

On our long road lived an old, scruffy, brownish red dog. Hour after hour this dog lay across the concrete footpath basking in the hot sun. I hated that dog. Mum and Dad had given me my

first bike and I loved it. It gave me freedom and an even faster escape than my little legs. I have fond memories of this bike. I remember every little detail about it. It was bright yellow with a long black seat, in a classic sixties' chopper style. My dad and I had added a couple of minor improvements—noisy plastic beads on the spokes plus a big red flag on a fiberglass pole for my safety. But I believe Dad put this on for other people's safety, not mine—Here I come, get out of my way!

Anyway, back to the dog. I rode all day up and down the footpath in front of our house. On our neighbor's driveway was a ramp made from the curve in the gutter. I rode like a bat out of hell up the road and then made a quick turn onto the ramp to get some airtime. The only problem was that this dog was usually sunbathing on my landing strip. I constantly had to swerve to miss both him and the tree next to him. I crashed many times but always got straight back on my bike and did it all over again.

The dog was my archenemy, but not for long. This day was going to be very different! It was either the dog or me. I made a plan that at the time I thought was foolproof. How wrong I was!

The plan went something like this. I rode all the way to the end of the street, some hundred meters in length. I turned my great yellow bike around and started to ride as fast as my four-year-old legs would let me. I was instantly transformed into that famous motorcycle stunt rider, the great Evel Knievel. The plan was that the dog would be so scared it would quickly move when it saw me coming right for it. Up the ramp I went, faster and higher than ever before. The dog lazily opened one eye and saw me coming, but just lay there, until the great yellow bike and I landed right on him, crushing his ribs. The dog had to be put down, though I suspect some people would say it would have been more fitting for me to be put down.

Thinking and talking about this now is very painful for me. I have no idea why I did it and I am not proud of it. The only explanation I can give is that my impulsiveness once again got the better of me. I could blame it on my ADD/ADHD, but I never have and never will use my ADD/ADHD as an excuse for my actions. Today, I understand that this is the way I am and I can now control my actions. When I was younger, it was nearly impossible. My mother recalls buying flowers for the dog's owner. Over the years, my mother and the flower-shop lady had a very good relationship. My mother said, "I kept her in business." Time after time she bought flowers for people and apologized for the things I had done. It was even more embarrassing for her when she had to give people flowers more than once.

Preschool

At preschool, my parents first experienced the constant embarrassment of having me as their child. Every day my mother picked me up and every day she was bombarded with stories from both the teacher and the parents of the other children. "Ben did this!" and "Ben did that!" Mum hated picking me up; the emotional strain was often too much to handle. This is a regular problem for parents of ADD/ADHD children. They love their child, but it can be so tiring to continually defend him against accusations from others. Sometimes the parents' love turns into frustration, then to anger. Asking—or yelling—at the child "Why did you do that?" will achieve nothing. I did not know my behavior was unacceptable and neither will your child.

I too hated going to preschool because I was always in trouble. I was often confused and suffered from low self-esteem, be-

cause I did not know what I was doing wrong. In my mind I was acting normally—my idea of normal, not other people’s opinion of normal. I often sat by the entrance, crying uncontrollably while I waited for my mother. I always knew when she was coming to save me because I could smell her distinctive perfume.

The preschool soon got sick of me (like many other schools later in my life) and I pretty much stopped going. When I asked my mother about going to preschool, she laughed and said, “You hardly went there!” I stopped due to an incident with a mentally disabled child. The boy was autistic and tried to strangle people for no reason. Thinking about that now, I guess he did have a reason—we just didn’t know what it was. One day this boy strangled and bit me. So I did what any ADD/ADHD child would do: I strangled him back and bit him harder than he had bitten me. I got into so much trouble I refused to go back, and I am sure they were pleased with that. Often a child suffering from ADD/ADHD is labeled bad or uncontrollable and the parents are blamed. All I can say to parents is, keep loving your child. Things will get better as the child grows older and learns to control his behavior and actions.

Family Therapy

Around this time I started seeing child and family psychiatrists. Mum and Dad called them the “family doctors” to nicen it up a bit. I now realize they were embarrassed and trying to hide the fact that their child needed psychiatric help. The whole family went along: Gaye, my mother; Henry, my father; Adelaide, my sister; and me. We all sat around a big room and talked about our problems. I hated talking about our problems because it was

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always something to do with me. I felt as though they should have just said, "Hey, Ben, you're the problem," and tattooed it on my forehead. The doctors talked to every family member individually, then talked about our problems again, trying to find a solution. We went every Friday to our "family doctor," month after month, year after year.

"What is wrong with him?" my parents asked. The most common answer was: "Nothing, it's just bad parenting techniques; basically you're just bad parents. You'd better come back next Friday so we can talk about this in more detail."

Looking back, I guess it was not the doctors' fault and definitely not my parents'. Our problem was ADD/ADHD, which was not as widely recognized or diagnosed then as it is today. They couldn't help me because they didn't understand the problem. Then there were no support groups or books to help parents understand. It was not until I was twelve that I was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and received some useful medical help. My parents often felt helpless, not knowing why their son was so upset about everything and everyone. My mother recalls crying herself to sleep on many nights wondering, What can I do? Maybe we are bad parents as the doctors told us. We struggled on as a family, fighting, yelling at each other, and basically just not working as a "normal" family unit.

Family therapy does work; however, it requires a positive effort on the part of everyone involved. Otherwise it can just end up in a slinging match between family members. I believe parents must take a positive role in these meetings. Instead of just talking about all the bad things that happened they must talk up the

positive ones. My father was very hotheaded in these meetings and often left the doctor's office screaming. As he walked out, he threw me fifty bucks and told me to get a taxicab home. I was only ten. It is very hard for the ADD/ADHD child, because it seems to him that the whole world is against him. This is how I felt. For this reason I believe parents must make a concerted effort to be positive in family counseling sessions.