

## 'In the zone': Hyperfocus and ADHD

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**Guest:** Brandon Ashinoff

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**Intro VO:** Welcome to the [Ideas Lab \(http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/\)](http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/) Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.

**Sam:** So we're here today with Brandon Ashinoff who's a Doctoral Researcher in the School of Psychology, here at the University of Birmingham. Hello Brandon?

Brandon: Hi.

**Sam:** So Brandon, your research looks at hyperfocus of the brain, with a specific interest of hyperfocus within people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. First off, can you just explain about what ADHD is?

Brandon: ADHD is a disorder which presents with a series of different types of symptoms. They tend to fall into three categories: the first category would be inattentive symptoms which are things along the lines of not listening when spoken to, having difficulty maintaining focus on a task and becoming bored with a task after only a few minutes. The second category would be hyperactive symptoms which would be things like being constantly in motion, having difficulty doing quiet tasks or activities, and the third one would be impulsive tasks, which would be being very impatient, interrupting conversations and having difficulty waiting for things that you want to do. People with ADHD have a variety of combinations of these different types of symptoms, so there's no one set type of ADHD. In fact they tend to group them in two or three different categories; one being ADHD inattentive type, which is mostly symptoms that fall into the inattentive category; ADHD hyperactive type, which are people who have symptoms that mostly fall into the hyperactive category and the impulsive category; and ADHD combined type which are people who have symptoms that fall into all of those categories in a large mix of them.

**Sam:** Right, so it's quite a confusing condition initially to diagnose.

Brandon: Yeah, absolutely. There's a lot of subjectivity also that goes into a diagnosis. Just to give you an example, you can imagine something like having difficulty maintaining focus on a task but how do you decide when someone's having difficulty doing that? So let's say you're a teacher in a school and you have to decide if Billy can't focus on a particular task, how do you measure that? Is it how many times he looks up from his desk over the course of five minutes, and if that's the case, is looking up five times over the course of five minutes enough to say he's having trouble? Would it be twenty times? Are there other ways that you can figure that out? It's hard to actually diagnose and so a lot of it comes down to the subjective decision of either the teacher or the parent or the doctor who's kind of determining the, doing the assessment.

**Sam:** So if there was one defining rule of identifying someone with ADHD, what would you say?

Brandon: I would say that generally, to say that someone has a particular symptom of ADHD, their behaviour that's related to that symptom would have to actually interfere with their life in some way. It would have to make it so that they don't do their homework or aren't paying attention during the work day or things along those lines. Something that would actually cause a real problem in their life.

**Sam:** So your research looks at hyperfocus. Surely you're talking about something here which is a lack of focus. How does hyperfocus come into ADHD?

Brandon: Well this is an interesting paradox that you find with people with ADHD. So something that you might often hear people say – doctors, teachers and parents – would be something along the lines of 'I was trying to get my son's attention and I said their name fifteen times and they didn't hear me, they didn't respond, they were too busy playing a video game or watching television'. Now this seems strange because if you're very distractible, if you can't focus, anything should grab your attention. You say their name, they should turn and pay attention, even for a moment, and yet these kids don't seem to respond at all. This is sort of what hyperfocus is. Hyperfocus is a state of intense concentration where you lose track of time, you really enjoy what you're doing and you seem to be better at that than whatever it is you're doing. Now if you're playing a video game, you're really good at playing that video game. If you're playing a sport you get really good at playing that sport, that sort of thing. This is weird in the context of ADHD because it's actually too much attention. You're focused so intently on something, no other information gets into your brain essentially.

**Sam:** And can people without ADHD have this hyperfocus?

Brandon: Absolutely. You see this in normal populations all the time, you know, anybody has had this experience where they just get so focused in on something that they're just not paying attention to anything else. So you might have an experience where you say that you're really in the zone on something. That's essentially hyperfocus.

**Sam:** Is it that people with ADHD have this more commonly? How does one distinguish whether it's ADHD or whether someone's just really in the zone all the time?

Brandon: Well, if it's a symptom of ADHD, it usually presents with a host of other symptoms that are also related to ADHD. So it wouldn't be seen just in isolation, which is what would make you think that this is actually related to ADHD rather than something else. However, one of the problems we have right now is that we don't know what makes hyperfocus different in people with ADHD and people who don't have ADHD.

**Sam:** So hyperfocus seems like quite a desirable state. Are there any sort of known ways to induce it?

Brandon: The short answer is we don't know. There seems to be some evidence that there may be ways of inducing hyperfocus. Right now what seems to be the case is that you need to be in a situation in which you're being given unambiguous feedback, you really need to know if you're doing well or poorly at the thing that you're doing, you need to have some level of interest in it or possibly get some level of enjoyment out of it. If you're bored and completely unhappy with what you're doing, you're probably not going to go into a hyperfocus state. And finally you need to be doing a task that's both not too hard and not too easy. It has to be challenging but it still has to be something that you can actually do. And this might sound familiar to you, thinking about playing sports and playing video games and things along those lines. These are the types of situations in which people generally enter a hyperfocus state. Unfortunately, the reason I can't say this for sure is because the research really hasn't been done yet. That's actually what my research right now is trying to focus on, is trying to figure out can you actually experimentally manipulate going into a hyperfocus state or not? It's really hard to do, it's really hard to test and that's probably one of the reasons there's not very much research on hyperfocus in the first place, just because it's hard to do.

**Sam:** So it sounds like there's space for a recipe that you can identify with the right circumstances in which you might go into hyperfocus but there's not a specific way that you can just click into it I guess.

Brandon: Exactly, yeah. And I mean hyperfocus in itself is not a guaranteed thing to happen, right? I'm sure there are times where you're really interested in something or you're doing something that's a little bit challenging, you maybe have other things on your mind and you won't go into a hyperfocus state, it's just something that's very difficult to predict and we're just now starting to learn what we need to know to actually start figuring out when someone would go into a hyperfocus state and knowing that will give us the ability to actually start doing research on it so we can look and see, well they're in a hyperfocus state now, how do they perform on certain tasks versus when they're not in hyperfocus?

**Sam: So how does hyperfocus actually affect the brain? Is there any danger to it?**

Brandon: Well, to be honest we don't know. There's only one published paper that has even tried to experimentally look at hyperfocus and that was by Ronny Sklar and it came out last year and it was a Master's thesis. You know, we really have very little information about it and that's one of the things I want to start to figure out. As I mentioned before, the reason that this is difficult is because figuring out if somebody's in a hyperfocus state is hard. You can't get a person to break out of hyperfocus to tell you they're in hyperfocus because if they do, they're not in hyperfocus anymore and that breaks your whole experiment. So it's a tough thing to figure out and that's what we're trying to do at the moment. One possibility is that while you're in hyperfocus you have more efficient processing of different types of information. So for example you could imagine that if you're playing soccer you might have faster, more efficient processing of information related to hand/eye coordination. The same thing with a video game. If you're playing a video game you might have faster processing or more efficient processing of information that's related to visual perception. Things that are important to the task that you're doing. Another possibility is that you don't actually have faster processing. You're not actually necessarily better at the task that you're doing, you're not faster, you don't actually do any better, you just think that you're better, you just have this experience that makes you feel like you've done really really well, that maybe the good experiences are sort of magnified and the bad experience are minimised and you come out of it going 'I did great' when in reality you did exactly the same. And that's going to be something that's really really important for us to figure out, if for no other reason than knowing how beneficial hyperfocus states really can be.

**Sam: Fantastic. Well I look forward to hearing the results of that one when you finally reach the conclusion. So, Brandon Ashinoff, thank you very much for joining us today.**

Brandon: Thank you.

**Outro VO:** *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website: [www.ideaslabuk.com](http://www.ideaslabuk.com) (<http://www.ideaslabuk.com>). There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer and producer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Sam Walter.*

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