

# What is AD/HD?

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is due to less neurochemical activity in the frontal lobes of the brain (specifically the left hemisphere). This part of the brain is like the mental “stop button”.

- Impulsivity – this is due to the mental stop button not being as effective. Usually, the frontal lobe tells your brain to stop and not act on impulses whether it be to not say something, not do something, or not lose focus. For example, someone with AD/HD might blurt out something impulsively like “wow, that’s an ugly dress” or do something impulsive like go get the phone while in the middle of a conversation with someone or lose focus by not inhibiting the impulse to look at email while trying to pay bills online.
- Attention – problems with attention are due to the inability to inhibit (stop) the impulse to pay attention to everything, rather than focusing attention on one single thing. For example, the frontal lobe helps you continue focusing on what you’re reading, rather than also focusing on the sound of a the tv in the other room or the phone ringing or the bus passing by outside. With AD/HD, its not that the person with AD/HD can’t pay attention, its that they can’t use selective attention. They focus on the reading, rather than the other sounds or shiny things around. Rather, the person is paying attention to everything all at once.
- Hyperactivity – it is a human’s natural state to be hyperactive, until the frontal lobe develops the ability to inhibit the impulses to continuously move. That is why three year olds have a hard time sitting still. The frontal lobe is the last part of the brain to develop, so this is why preschoolers have a hard time not being hyperactive and the reason that adults with AD/HD usually don’t show much hyperactivity. The frontal lobe continues to develop until age 25-35 (theories differ on when brain development completes) and people with AD/HD tend to be 30% behind (on average) other people their age in their ability to inhibit impulses, focus attention, control hyperactivity, plan and organize, and start and stop.
- Starting (Procrastination) and Stopping (Hyperfocus) – the frontal lobe also controls the initiation of behavior as well as the ability to switch tasks and stop. The higher levels of stimulation engage the frontal lobe, so if the person with AD/HD is trying to start doing something boring (e.g., taxes, homework, filing), then they will have a hard time engaging since its not stimulating. When we procrastinate, it increases anxiety, which increases the stimulation in the frontal lobe, which then helps us to get started on the boring activity. This also occurs when someone with AD/HD doesn’t finish problems. Often, someone with AD/HD may impulsively start a project they’re interested with (increased activity in the frontal lobe), but then when they’re half way through and the details are boring (crossing the ts and dotting the is), the activity in the frontal lobe

decreases, and the person with AD/HD may have a harder time completing the task than others. Finally, when the activity is very pleasurable (e.g., playing video games, surfing the web), then they may experience hyperfocus, which is caused by the frontal lobe being so engaged, that the person loses track of time and may have a hard time stopping the activity. This can also happen when doing a chore like cleaning one's room, then getting interested in organizing old photos, hyperfocusing on this and losing time, then realizing in the one hour you had to clean your room, you spent 50 minutes organizing photos.

- Organization and Planning – the frontal lobe also slows us down enough to plan, organize and manage time. Many people with AD/HD lose items, are late, forget to do tasks that are important, pay bills late, etc. This inability to organize and plan often leaves people with AD/HD feeling like they are constantly juggling what needs to be done, causes a lot of anxiety and frustration, and may end up with just completely trying to avoid organization period.

Medication often helps with the inhibition of impulses, but unfortunately, it doesn't help with the organization and planning, although it does slow things down enough to allow one to begin to develop these executive functioning skills.

# Tips for Dealing with Distractions

1 – **Set an amount of time to focus on your work.** Whether it be reading, writing a report, working on a project, or whatever, decide how much time it will take, how much time you can sit and focus, and then set a timer or look at the clock to help you stay focused. For example, if you have a report to write that you know will take you 1 hour, but you know that you can only focus for 20 min increments, then set the timer for 20 min, then work. When you have the impulse to get something to eat, go to the bathroom, make a phone call, etc, then put it off until the 20 min are up. After those 20 min, then you can take a short break (5 or 10 min). Make sure you set the timer because you can easily have a 5 min break turn into 2 hours of unproductive time.

2 – **Use a notepad to write down those important distractions** – say you're trying to work on your report and you have set out to focus for 20 min and then all of a sudden 5 min into it you remember that you have to change the dinner reservation for tomorrow or you'll be charged. Write that down on your notepad and deal with that on during your break time or until after your work is done. Many times we feel that we have to do it now while we think about it since we'll forget it, so that's why the notepad is helpful. Also, the quick phone call to the restaurant can turn into a search for the number online, checking email, making something to eat while making the phone call, then playing video games on the phone. Something that will take "just one minute" can completely derail you. All of the time taken to switch from focusing on something to doing something else, then getting back into the groove to focus is one of the things that cause us to take so long to complete items that require focus and persistence. So, while you're trying to focus, when something pops up like "oh, I should email Jan for her birthday", then write it down and come back to it. Remember, everything does not have to be done immediately.

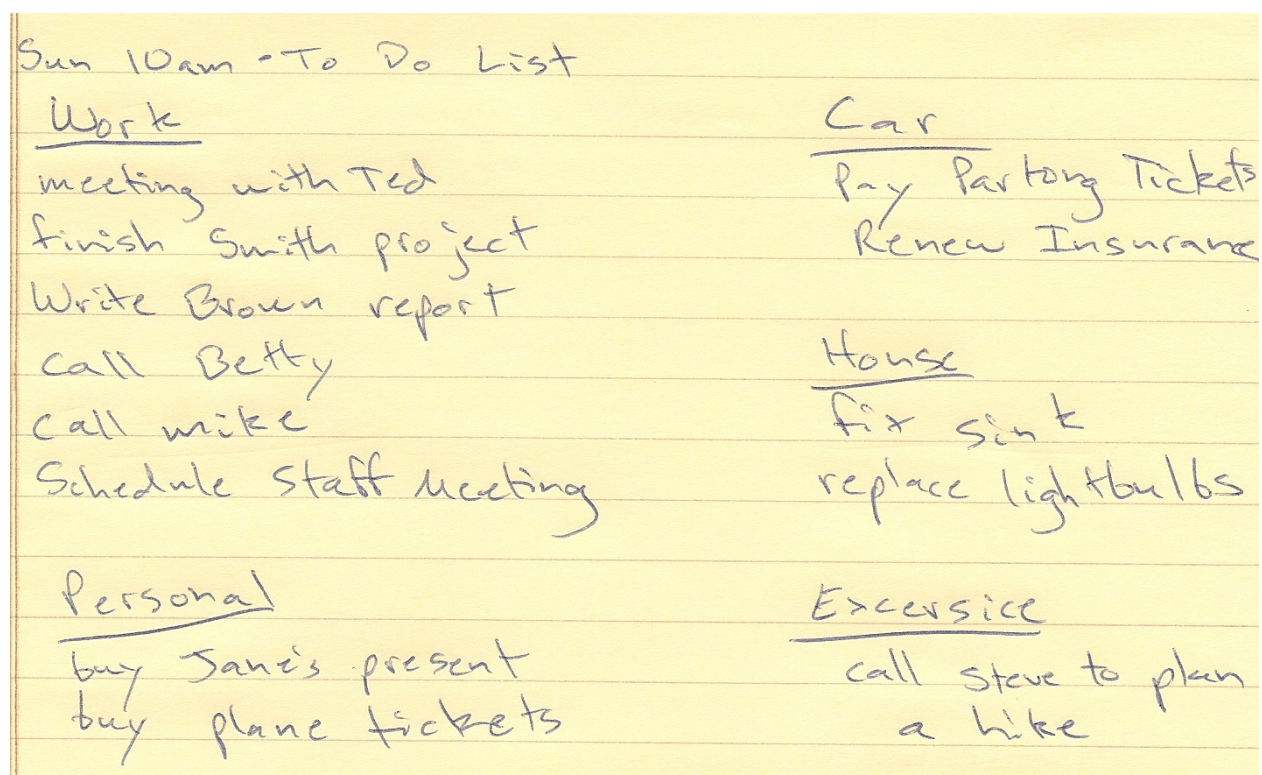
3 – **Minimize distractions** – this could include turning off your phone so you're not tempted to answer if someone calls, turning off your internet on your laptop or computer to keep you off your email or from browsing the web, getting out of your house or office to go somewhere with less distractions (e.g., coffee shop, library). Sometimes even though these locations have distractions around, they minimize the tendency to get up and do something else or make food or start cleaning the house instead of focusing. Some people also find listening to music with headphones as a way to minimize distractions if they listen to jazz, classical, or world music (basically anything without words that they understand). It becomes white noise that covers the other distractions.

4 – **Use a timer to prevent hyperfocus** – try setting a timer to go off after five to ten minutes when you're working on something where you might be prone to hyperfocus. For example, if you have 30 min to clean your kitchen, set a timer so that it goes off every 5 or 10 min and when it goes off, ask yourself, "am I doing what's most important right now?" You may find that you're reorganizing your cabinets or have somehow started reorganizing the living room (because the coffee cup in there made you remember that you wanted to move the coffee table, which made you then have to move the couch). Once you realize, "this is not the most important thing to be doing right now since my goal is to finish cleaning the kitchen before my guests get here", then you can get back on track.

# To Do Lists & Organizing Your Time

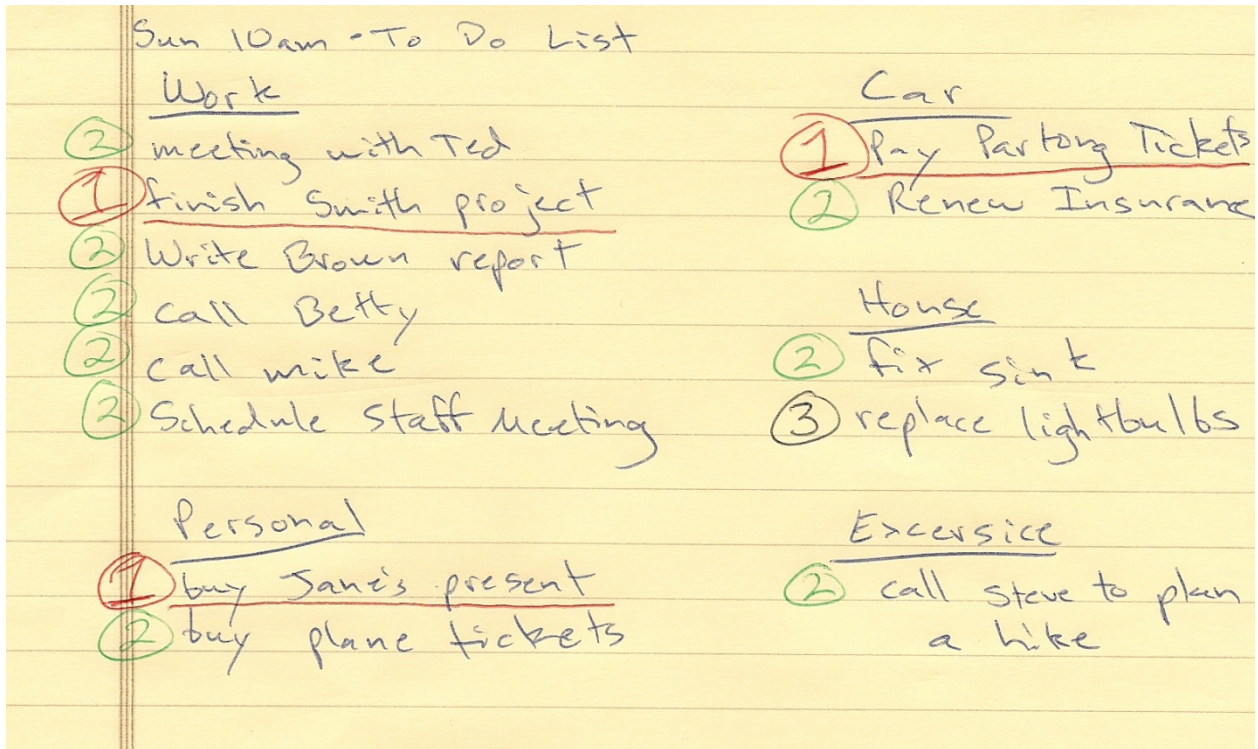
I often suggest scheduling a time in your week where you will spend up to an hour going over all your to do items, your schedule for the week, and scheduling time to do your to do items. When people make a to do list, it can often be hard to get it done because it is overwhelming or not organized in a way that helps you plan to complete the tasks. I suggest that you have 1) a master to do list and 2) that you schedule these to do items in your calendar. Write out your master to do list, then have it on a white board, put it on your phone, keep it on a pad of paper that you use, or keep it on your computer. Sometimes, having more than one to do list can be helpful so that when an idea pops in your head, you can write it down, then later write it on the master to do list. You can also leave yourself a voicemail message if you think of something, but don't have a moment to write it down (or use a recorder or a memo function on your phone).

When you sit down to write your master to do list, group the items into categories. In the example below, a person is sitting down on Sunday at 10am, February 2<sup>nd</sup> to write his to do list. He's grouped the items into categories and including large tasks such as finishing a large project and small items such as calling certain people. Remember to also include fun items, socializing, exercise, and any other kind of self care. For example, the person below has not seen his friend Steve in a while, so he has written down that he should call Steve to reconnect as well as get some exercise in.



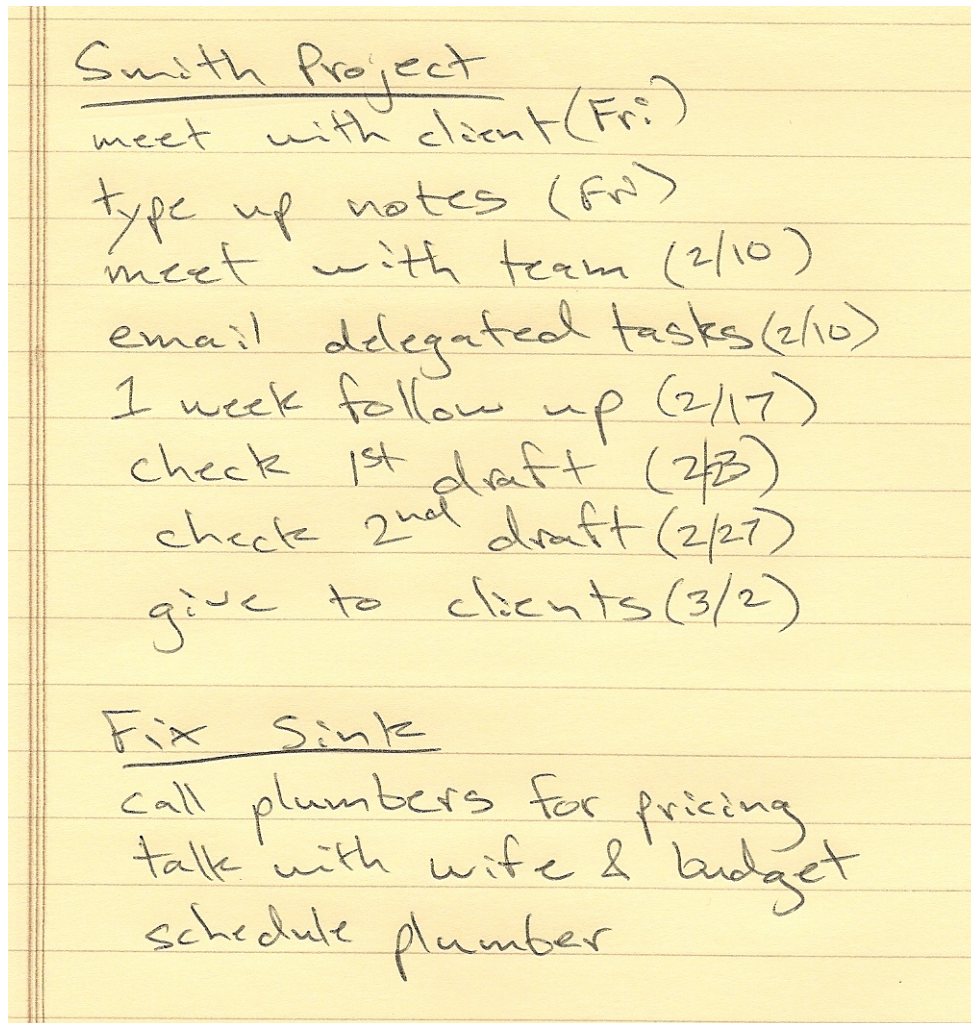
# To Do Lists & Organizing Your Time

To assign importance to items, you can color code or number each item, giving them a rating of 1 for extremely important, 2 for needs to be done, and 3 for something you'd like to do, but you don't have to rush to get to it. Limit yourself to putting a number one next to only three to six items. This helps you to visually pick out what is most important, rather than just staring at a whole bunch of overwhelming words written on the page.



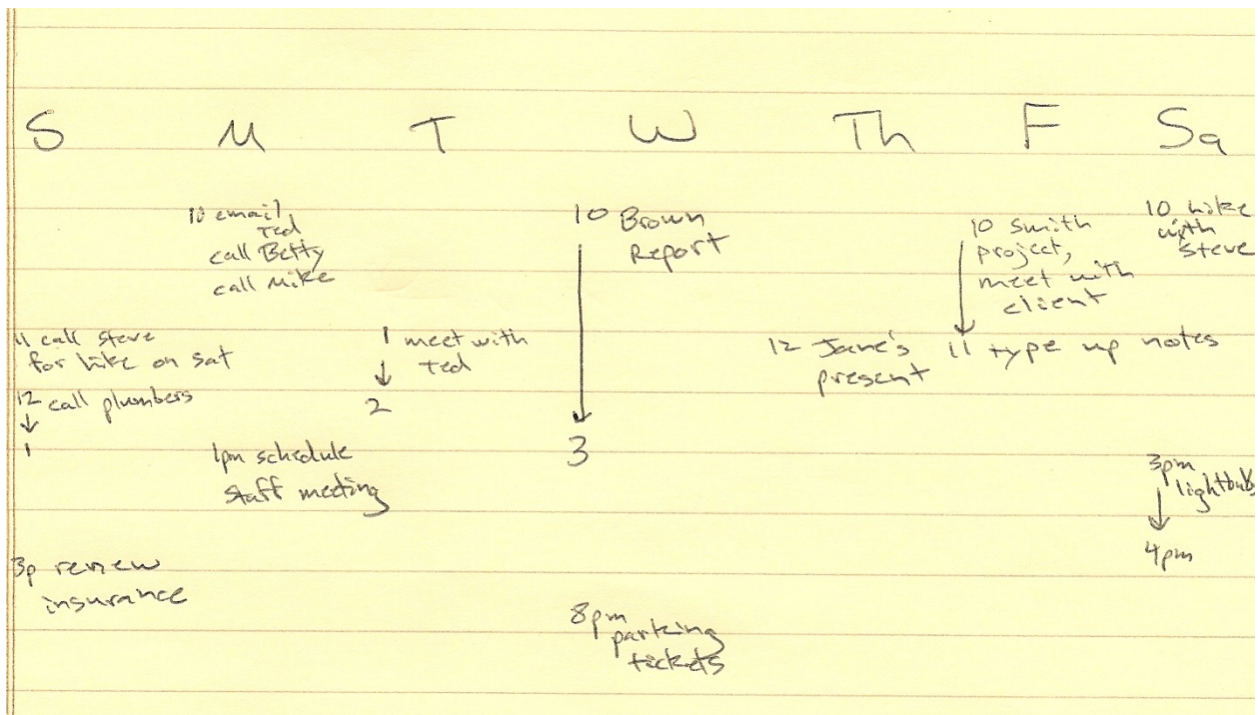
# To Do Lists & Organizing Your Time

Once you've gotten your priorities straight, take the complex, multistep items and break them down into their steps. Think of each step that you will need to take in order to complete the task. Once you've done this, then schedule each task over time. Many times a to do list can be overwhelming because there may be 30 items that need to be done. Often, these items don't all need to be done today, nor do they even have to be all done that week. By taking items off your current to do list and scheduling them for a few weeks from now, you can already feel less overwhelmed and disorganized. Also, estimate the amount of time each part will take you.



# To Do Lists & Organizing Your Time

Next, look at your General Weekly Schedule and see how the to do items fit into your week. In this example, the schedule is just written down on scratch paper. After it is written out, you can then transfer it to your calendar, outlook on your computer, or on your phone. You may even want to set alarms on your phone so that you can be reminded of what you need to do when. If you don't have a calendar on your phone, you can create a google calendar. You can set it so that google will text you when you have a task scheduled. Also, remember to use the "daily check in time" from your General Weekly Schedule in order to keep yourself on track on a daily basis. Remember, the daily check in is just a 5 min checking of your calendar to help you organize and envision what you need to do that day. This time can be the first 5 min you get to work, 5 min while eating breakfast, the first 5 min when you get home in the evening, or the first commercial during your tv time at night. Making a habit of checking your schedule will help you keep on track and won't let all that time you spent organizing go to waste.



# General Weekly Schedule

To begin to get organized, it is helpful to have an idea of what your generally weekly schedule is. Some people go to sleep at different times everyday or eat lunch or dinner at different times, just grabbing something as they gone. By creating a schedule, you can begin to regulate your body through sleeping and eating around the same time every day. You can also start to see the windows in your schedule where you can schedule time to do the things that sometimes get pushed to the side like planning your week, writing out a to do list, paying your bills, dealing with your mail, or balancing your bank book. Here's an example of a schedule of someone who works a 9-5 job.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
6:30		Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	
7:00		Workout	Workout	Workout	Workout	Workout	
7:30							
8:00							
8:30							
9:00		Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	
9:30							
10:00							
10:30							
11:00							
11:30							
12:00		Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
12:30							
1:00		Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	
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7:00		Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	
7:30							
8:00							
8:30							
9:00							
9:30							
10:00							
10:30		Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	
11:00							



# General Weekly Schedule

First, either use an Excel Spreadsheet or a sample of one of the forms here to write out your weekly schedule. Your life may not be so regular since you may travel for work, have a variable class schedule, or are juggling your children's. If you do have a variable schedule, put in what an ideal week would look like. If you travel sometimes, then put in a week where you wouldn't be traveling. We can try to mentally maintain this structure when there are big changes.

Once you've created your schedule, find times where you can add in 1 hour to schedule your week, look for times that you can sort your mail daily, a time where you can plan your day, and a time you can review your spending either daily (if you're in danger of overdrawing your accounts daily) or weekly. Also, add in the chores that need to get done around the house.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
6:30		Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	Wake Up	
7:00		Workout	Workout	Workout	Workout	Workout	
7:30							
8:00							
8:30							
9:00		Work*	Work*	Work*	Work*	Work*	
9:30							
10:00	Plan						Pay Bills
10:30	Week						Banking
11:00							
11:30							
12:00		Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
12:30							
1:00		Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	
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3:00							
3:30							
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5:00		Sort Mail	Sort Mail	Sort Mail	Sort Mail	Sort Mail	
5:30		Laundry	Laundry	Laundry	Laundry	Laundry	
6:00							
6:30							
7:00		Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	
7:30		Dishes	Dishes	Dishes	Dishes	Dishes	
8:00							
8:30							
9:00		Schedule	Schedule	Schedule	Schedule	Schedule	
9:30							
10:00							
10:30		Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	Bedtime	
11:00							

\*Not noted on the schedule, but the first 15 min of work will be used for the daily schedule

# General Weekly Schedule

Once you've figured out how you can fit time into your life to plan your week, check your daily to do list, sort your mail, do your chores, check your schedule at the end of the day, pay your bills, and reconcile your banking, you can schedule these on your calendar or in your phone with an alarm to remind you. The goal is to help these become routine habits. We're attempting to develop a routine such as rather than just coming home, getting a snack and turning on the tv, coming home, quickly sorting the mail into garbage, to be filed, and important piles, then throwing a load of laundry in the wash, then going to get a snack and watch some tv. Whatever way you can fit these activities into your routine, will help you to develop positive habits. Now try filling out a generally weekly schedule on your own.

# General Weekly Schedule

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
5:00							
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# Systems for Organization

When we have difficulty focusing attention, encoding information into memory (e.g., where did I put my keys), inhibiting impulses, and difficulty with organization we need systems for organization so that we develop habits and processes for completing tasks, not losing items, and functioning well.

- 1) **The Macharena** – when leaving your home, do the mini macharena. Pat your pockets or look in your purse to make sure you have everything. Go through your day and think of all the things that you need. This may only take 60 seconds, but it can save you minutes and hours of scrambling to run home from work or drive to the store later on.
- 2) **Final Scan** – try to get in the habit of scanning your environment when leaving a room to make sure you didn't leave anything, when leaving a cab, or leaving an appointment.
- 3) **Launching Pad** – have a launching pad in your home where you put everything that needs to go with you. If you're a student, put your bag, books, papers, computer, lunch, etc. at your launching pad at night, so in the morning you know where everything is. It can also be helpful to have a cork board or white board to write reminders for yourself or for your family to write reminders for yourself so you can see it before you leave.
- 4) **Basket or Box for "My Stuff"** – have a small basket or box or place where "your stuff" goes. This may be the spot where your roommate, partner, children, or anyone else in the house knows where to put your keys, wallet, phone, etc. that they might find in the refrigerator, in the couch, on the floor, etc. Keep the box or basket small, so it doesn't pile up with weeks and weeks worth of items.
- 5) **Mail System** – create a system for mail. You can have multiple boxes, files, etc. I like to suggest one box where the mail for the day comes in, then going through that daily and emptying it. Sort the mail into 2 boxes, one of which being important things that need to be dealt with (e.g., bills, parking tickets) and the other unimportant things and things that may just need to be filed (e.g., bank statements). When sorting the mail in this first step, automatically throw out any of the junk mail or catalogs you know you probably won't get to. Next, pick a time of the week (hopefully a consistent time) where you go through the important stuff box. Keep envelopes, stamps, and check books right there, so you don't have to run around to get all the supplies (and possibly get distracted). Also, set a weekly, biweekly, or monthly day to file away the unimportant things in your box. Again, make sure the box isn't too big or you may let it build up forever. When filing, use specific file names and color code so you can easily find it later.
- 6) **Email** - email can get backedup just like mail. Some tips that may be helpful are to, one, have a separate email account that you use when you purchase something up online or sign up for a newsletter, that way your other inbox doesn't get clogged up with spam and is only given to important things like friends, family, and/or work. A second helpful tool can be to using folders and creating "rules" to have certain emails from certain senders go into particular file. Again, this is another way of keeping your inbox sorted. Lastly, you can use either a folder for important follow up and check it

daily or weekly or use flags or stars to mark important emails that you need to return to. Find a time that you can get in the habit of looking at that folder. Maybe you check it after lunch or after dinner. Someway that you can make it a habit.

- 7) **Returns or Errands** – Keep a box in your car (maybe a clear box so you can see what is in it) where you have the items you need to return to the store or drop off at the Salvation Army. After you do your weekly to do list, you may load up the things that you need to return or drop off in four days, but by putting it in ASAP, you'll be more likely to remember it on the day you plan to deal with it.
- 8) **Backup Plan** – always have a backup plan. Keep an extra outfit in your car, email your resume to yourself so its online in case you forget it and need to run to Kinkos before an interview to print it, have a spare set of car keys, etc.

Remember, those that are “successful” at managing their ADHD don't have their symptoms completely go away, but they learn how to create accommodations in their life and systems to succeed despite their difficulties. It's important to learn what systems work for you as each person has unique strengths that they can use to overcome their weaknesses.

# ADHD and Relationships

Some of the key elements to a good relationship is the extent that you feel your partner is there for you when you need them and whether they love and accept you. When we're upset and turn to our partner for comfort or to talk to them to work out a problem, if they're responsive to us, then we often feel secure in the relationship. When we feel that our partner loves us, has our best interest at heart, respects us, and accepts us for who we are, we also feel secure. Here are a few ways that ADHD gets in the way of this:

**Forgetfulness, Distractibility, and Disorganization** – often the non-ADHD partner can interpret forgetfulness, distractibility, and disorganization as signs that the partner with ADHD does not love and respect them. They may feel that if the ADHD partner is not changing these behaviors, it means that they don't care about the pain it causes them. The non-ADHD partner may have a hard time giving their partner the benefit of the doubt that its being done due to ADHD, rather than disrespect or with malicious intent. To deal with this, remind your partner that you love them, hate to see them in pain, feel horrible that the ADHD causes them pain, and assure them that you're trying. Although part of it is about the results of the effort, but the big part that spells love is the effort. Let your partner know you're making effort and if you're not, put the effort in.

**Shame** – often the partner with ADHD has lived with a lifetime of getting in trouble, getting yelled at, which can cause that person to feel bad, maybe cause depression, and maybe feel like they're not a good person. They may think, "I'm a failure", "I'm not good enough", "nothing I'll ever do is right", or feel like they don't deserve good things. This is the shame talking, which comes from a place of not feeling like a good person. Shame can cause us to be defensive ("I don't always forget to do the dishes, I did it last week" which means "I'm not all bad, please tell me I'm not all bad"), to avoid communication when it might be about something that didn't go right (e.g., bounced a check, got fired, said something impulsive that hurt your partner's feelings but don't want to talk about it and face up to what you've done wrong), and to feel like you can turn to your partner to get your needs met (e.g., I'm no good so I don't deserve their love or for them to listen to my complaint about such and such behavior), which can lead to going outside the relationship to get one's needs met (e.g., only talk to friends about problems and not partner, complain to others about partner rather than talking to them, having an affair), thus moving father apart.

**Impulsiveness and Emotional Regulation** – often, partners tend to fall into two roles: pursuer and withdrawer. The pursuer tries to talk with the withdrawer about the problems and may go on the attack (e.g., yelling, saying hurtful things, becoming physically aggressive). The withdrawer may get overwhelmed, shut down, leave, or if cornered, blow up. When they're not being pursued, the withdrawer may just try to avoid dealing with any of the problems. Both partners tend to feel alone because they don't feel their partners are responsive to them and also often don't feel loved by their partner. Understanding this dynamic can help to make changes. When ADHD is involved, it can cause difficulties in getting out of this cycle. Impulsivity can cause a pursuer to quickly go on the attack and say very hurtful things. Withdrawers may have a hard time calming down, so they need to leave or they may impulsively attack back. When you notice you're doing the behaviors of the withdrawer or the pursuer, see if you can try to calm down or take a time out, then try to come back and talk about what's going on for you. The key is to stop the usual cycle that leads to explosion and to talk about what's going on for you.

# ADHD and Dealing with Strong Emotions

With ADHD comes a lot of impulsivity, which can become difficult when we are triggered emotionally. Someone may say something that makes us angry and we lash out or we may get sad and fall to pieces, or we may get anxious and make impulsive decisions. What we want to practice is beginning to try to slow down and be more mindful of what we're thinking and try to pause before we make a response. The goal is to try to go from being reactive to being responsive. When we're reactive, we don't think about it. Someone says something and we react or we feel a feeling and we react to it. Sometimes our first reaction is not the best strategy for dealing with the problem (e.g., yelling at someone, throwing the phone, saying something we'll later regret). When we're responsive, we notice what our thought process is (I'm thinking I want to call that person up and yell at them because I think it will make me feel better), but we take time to think about the consequences of our actions (e.g. will I really feel better, will there be any negative consequences for yelling at that person, was it their fault, could I live without having a relationship with that person if they got so upset after I tell them off?). After we've taken some time to cool down, then we can try to respond in the best way we know how, taking into account the possible consequences for our actions.

Some techniques for moving from being “reactive” to “responsive” –

**Mindfulness** – mindfulness is just noticing what's going on for you, how are you feeling, what are you thinking, what is your impulse. We have both an emotional and rational part of our mind and we need to use both of these to use our “wise mind”. We want to both be rational, but also trust our gut and emotions, but not actually be blindly driven by them. By being mindful, you might notice that you're thinking, “it's all their fault”, so you can then check it out. Is it all their fault? Well, maybe when you calm down you realize the person wasn't trying to be mean and maybe you also had a part in it and clarify some things might fix the problem. Or maybe you're thinking, “I have to buy that now” and you notice and think “hmm, I'm thinking I need it right now, is that true?” You may think about your finances, how badly you need the item, then respond by either not buying the item, buying it, or figuring out a plan to buy it later.

**De-escalation** – when we are triggered, all the blood in our brain is going to our fight or flight center and our “emotional mind”. That “rational mind”, higher cortical area is shut off. To access our “wise mind” we need to calm down in order to engage both our emotional and rational parts. Some things you can do to de-escalate are to do some relaxing types of coping (e.g., deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, count down from five, take a walk, take a bath, watch tv, other healthy ways of calming down) or activating types of coping (e.g., sprinting down the block to get yourself worn out, doing a bunch of push ups or sit ups, a cold shower, holding ice in your hand, other healthy ways to get an intense release). Once you've deescalated you can take some time to use your “wise mind” to think about how to respond to the situation. Remember, not everything has to be dealt with at that moment. Sometimes putting it off a little can give you perspective.

**Sitting with Emotions** – often times we try to not feel the emotions that we are experiencing because they are painful, so we try to get rid of them by avoiding them, trying to cope with them in healthy ways, or trying to cope with them in unhealthy ways (e.g., smoking, drinking, over eating, sex, porn, gambling, cutting, risk taking behaviors). Our emotions are signaling us that there is something wrong that we need to take a look at, like the gas light in your car. We need to be able to sit with those emotions and explore what they might be telling us so that we can begin to be responsive. If we just feel bad and then try to go be with friends and have drinks, but don't explore why we feel bad, then we can't fix it. Maybe if you had sat down and sat with the bad feelings you notice that you were feeling anxious about getting work done and fearful failing again at another project. You can then look at how to organize your time to get the project done and then go out with friends, if you realize by looking at your schedule that you have time. By sitting with the feelings we can learn what's wrong and fix it, rather than just avoiding any bad feelings with behaviors that create more problems.

**Bouncing it Off Someone** – to move from being reactive to responsive, it can also be helpful to bounce your ideas off someone to figure out if you're being reactive and how you can respond. You can talk to a friend about how you're thinking of reacting and whether that's a good idea. Remember to know what friend you're talking to. Some friends can really help us look at ourselves and make good decisions, while others may be more interested in putting off responsibilities and avoiding (oh, just forget about that, lets go out and have a drink or go away for the weekend) or others could be more interested in just validating you to an unhealthy level (how horrible that your boss said something to you about being late again, what's his problem, its ok to be late). Some of those could be helpful, but too much can lead you to not deal with the problems. So again, talk to someone about your thoughts and see if you can find someone that can really help you be more mindful and problem solve and be more responsive.