

Adulting With ADHD

Do you find that your ADHD symptoms are keeping you from being the put together, productive member of society you want to be? I've been there. When projects stack up on work and your decision fatigue blocks your ability to prioritize, or stress paralysis takes over and you just can't help but dive into a your current hyperfocus (that has nothing to do with any of the projects you need to accomplish), it can feel defeating.

It feels hopeless, but it's not. Here are some tools I use on a daily basis to help regulate my executive function and attain the productivity I crave.

1. Routine, routine, routine:

This can be a tricky one! If you're like me, you might have a love hate relationship with routines. Routines bring stability that a chaotic ADHD brain needs. But it also doesn't always give us those nice dopamine hits that we crave. Be sure to include some of the other strategies in the routine, and they will make it more enjoyable.

Your routines don't have to be long and really structured. They can be simple- like sitting at a table or desk for 2 minutes every day to write a to do list. Or getting your lunch/work items together before bed so they can be ready in the morning. Or trying to put your shoes and keys in the same place every time you get home.

Routines help to eliminate decision fatigue and require less executive function than trying to decide each moment what you should do next.

2. Habit Stacking:

Building a new habit can be really hard. Try going slowly and using a technique called habit stacking. Habit stacking is linking a new habit to an already established habit. For example, I was struggling to take my medication at the same time every day. I would set alarms and try to keep it in visible places, but I would inevitably keep forgetting. Eventually I decided to take my medication as I was waiting for my morning coffee to brew. Making coffee before leaving the house was an already established habit, and I was able to gain consistency in taking my medication at the same time (most) days by doing them together.

3. Visual Aids:

The ADHD brain can be quite a chaotic space. Because of this, visual aids are your brain's best friend. Visual aids can vary a lot in form. It can be writing events into your calendar as soon as you make any plan. Making check lists for the day or week so that you can refer to a physical source when brain fog is keeping you from remembering what you need to do next. Set timers to keep you on track. Put items you need to take with you next to the door. My key to ADHD is never trust my brain to remember something in the future- always leave hints so that future me will remember what past me wanted. Visual aids often provide a clear end point, or an item that you can scratch off of a list, and this really helps give an extra kick of dopamine to tasks that can often feel boring and mundane.

4. Break tasks into smaller steps:

This is key for accomplishing big projects. Overwhelm can be the number one enemy for ADHD brains. It activates your anxiety and keeps you from getting anything done. Breaking tasks down into smaller steps can help to keep the anxiety at bay.

When I get a project at work, I break it down into as many subcategories as I possibly can. Then I start with the easiest task and gradually work my way to harder tasks. This helps me ease into the project and remind my brain that it is capable of the tasks that need to be accomplished.

5. Pomodoro Technique (Timers):

I already mentioned timers in visual aids, but the Pomodoro technique is so powerful, that it deserves its own section. The Pomodoro technique is setting a 25 minute timer and working on a task, taking a 5 min break when the timer is over, and repeating until the task is done.

I like to use variations of this depending on how unfocused my mind is. Sometimes I start with a shorter time-like 10 minutes- to kick start my brain into productive mode.

6. Do things when you remember them:

A professor in college gave me this advice, and it has made a big difference on my day to day life. When I have a running list of tasks I need to accomplish, I jump between them based on what I remember in the moment and what my current hyperfocus might be.

It's important that you only do this when you don't have an upcoming deadline for a particular task. If there is a deadline for something, that should be prioritized.

7. Self compassion:

Arguably the most important technique of the list is the ability to show compassion to yourself when you are struggling. Your brain functions differently than other people's. Your productivity will look different. It is okay to mess up. When we fail to show compassion to ourselves, this can be a major road block in moving forward. We can engage in negative self talk and convince ourselves that we are not capable of success. But this is not true, and it can take us into a downward spiral.

Self compassion is key to being able to make lasting changes and remain present with yourself/the people around you.

Functioning in a neurotypical world is challenging when you have ADHD, but it is not impossible. Always remember that what works for one person might not work for you. It is important that you keep trying new strategies so that you can build a toolbox that works for you. Good luck!

References:

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