

## Ways to help yourself with ADHD

If you have difficulties with inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, everything from paying your bills on time to keeping up with work, family and social demands can seem overwhelming at times.

These problems can present challenges across all areas of life, from getting organised at home to reaching your potential at work. It can be tough on your health and both your personal and workplace relationships. Your difficulties may lead to extreme procrastination, trouble meeting deadlines and impulsive behaviour. You may also feel that friends and family don't understand what you're up against.

Fortunately, there are skills you can learn to help get your difficulties under control. You can improve your daily habits and learn to recognise and use your strengths. You can also develop techniques that help you work more efficiently, increase organisation and interact better with others. Change won't happen overnight though. These self-help strategies need practice, patience and most importantly, a positive attitude.

By taking advantage of self-help techniques, you can become more productive, organised and in control of your life – and improve your sense of self-worth.

### Get organised and control clutter

Inattention and distractibility make organisation the biggest challenge adults with these difficulties face. If you have these difficulties, the prospect of getting organised, whether it be at work or home, may leave you feeling overwhelmed.

But you can learn to break tasks down into smaller steps and follow a systematic approach to organisation. By implementing structures and routines and taking advantage of tools such as daily planners and reminders, you can maintain organisation and control clutter.

- Develop structure and neat habits – and keep them up.
- To organise a room, home or office, categorise your objects deciding which are necessary and which you can store or discard. To organise yourself, get in the habit of taking notes and writing lists. Maintain your newly organised structure with regular, daily routines.
- Create space. Ask yourself what you need daily and find storage bins or closets for things you don't. Choose specific areas for things like keys, bills and other items that you can easily misplace. Throw away things you don't need.
- Use a calendar app or daily planner. Effective use of a daily planner or a calendar on your smartphone or computer can help you remember appointments and deadlines. With electronic calendars, you can also set up automatic reminders so scheduled events don't slip your mind.
- Use lists. Make use of lists and notes to keep track of regularly scheduled tasks, projects, deadlines and appointments. If you decide to use a daily planner, keep all lists and notes



inside it. You also have many options for use on your smartphone or computer. Search for “to do” apps or task managers.

- Deal with it now. You can avoid forgetfulness, clutter and procrastination by filing papers, cleaning up messes and returning phone calls immediately, not sometime in the future. If you can do a task in two minutes or less, do it on the spot rather than putting it off for later.

### Manage your paper trail

If you have difficulties with inattention and distractibility, a major part of your disorganisation might be with paperwork – in endless piles or strewn across your kitchen, desk or office. Take an afternoon to set up a paperwork system that works for you.

- Set up a filing system. Use dividers or separate file folders for different types of documents (such as medical records, receipts and income statements). Label and colour-code your files so you can find what you need quickly.
- Deal with mail daily. Set aside a few minutes each day to deal with the mail, preferably as soon as you bring it inside. It helps to have a designated spot where you can sort the mail and either trash it, file it or act on it.
- Go paperless. Minimise the amount of paper you need to deal with. Request electronic statements and bills instead of paper copies. You can also reduce junk mail by placing a “no junk mail” sign on your mailbox.

### Manage your time and stay on schedule

Time management problems are common for people with difficulties with concentration and impulsivity. You may often lose track of time, miss deadlines, procrastinate, underestimate how much time you need for tasks or find yourself doing things in the wrong order. Many adults with these difficulties spend so much time on one task – known as “hyper focusing” – that they don’t get anything else done. These difficulties can leave you feeling frustrated and inept and make others impatient. But there are solutions to help you better manage your time.

Adults with attention problems often have a different perception of how time passes. To help align your sense of time, consider the following:

- Become a clock-watcher. Use a wristwatch or highly visible wall or desk clock to help you keep track of time. When you start a task, make a note of the time by saying it out loud or writing it down.
- Use timers. Allot yourself limited amounts of time for each task and use a timer or alarm to alert you when your time is up. For longer tasks, consider setting an alarm to go off at regular intervals to keep you productive and aware of how much time is going by.
- Give yourself more time than you think you need. Adults with attention problems are notoriously bad at estimating how long it will take to do something. For every 30 minutes you



think it will take you to get somewhere or complete a task, give yourself a cushion by adding 10 minutes.

- Plan to be early and set up reminders. Write down appointments for 15 minutes earlier than they really are. Set up reminders to ensure you leave on time and make sure you have everything you need ahead of time, so you aren't frantically looking for your keys or phone when it's time to go.

### Prioritise

Because adults with these difficulties often struggle with impulse control and jump from one subject to another, completing tasks can be difficult and large projects can seem overwhelming. To overcome this:

- Decide what's first. Ask yourself what the most important task is that you need to do, then plan your other tasks after that one.
- Take things one at a time. Break down large projects or tasks into smaller, manageable steps.
- Stay on task. Avoid getting side-tracked by sticking to your schedule, using a timer to enforce it if necessary.

### Learn to say no

Impulsiveness can lead people to agree to too many projects at work or make too many social engagements. But a jam-packed schedule can leave you feeling overwhelmed and overtired and affect the quality of your work. Turning things down may improve your ability to carry out tasks, keep social dates and live a healthier lifestyle. Check your schedule first before committing to something new.

### Manage money and bills

Money management requires budgeting, planning and organisation. So, for many adults with difficulties in these areas it can be a true challenge. Many common systems of money management don't tend to work for adults with these difficulties because they need too much time, too much paper and too much attention to detail. But if you create your own system that's both simple and consistent, you can get on top of your finances and put a stop to overspending, overdue bills and penalties for missed deadlines.

An honest assessment of your financial situation is the first step to getting budgeting under control. Start by keeping track of every expense, no matter how small, for a month (yes, a full 30 days). This will allow you to effectively analyse where your money is going. You may be surprised how much you're spending on unnecessary items and impulse purchases. You can then use this snapshot of your spending habits to create a monthly budget based on your income and needs.

Figure out what you can do to avoid straying from your budget. For example, if you're spending too much at restaurants, you can make an eating-in plan and factor in time for grocery shopping and meal preparation.



Set up a simple money management and bill paying system. Establish an easy, organised system that helps you save documents and receipts and stay on top of bills. For an adult with difficulties in this area, the opportunity to do banking on a computer can be the gift that keeps on giving. Organising money online means less paperwork, no messy handwriting and no misplaced slips.

- Switch to online banking. Signing up for online banking can turn the hit-or-miss process of balancing your budget into a thing of the past. Your online account will list all deposits and payments, tracking your balance automatically, to the penny, every day. You can also set up automatic payments for your regular monthly bills and log on as needed to pay irregular and occasional ones. The best part: no misplaced envelopes or late fees.
- Set up bill pay reminders. If you prefer not to set up automatic payments, you can still make the process of bill paying easier with electronic reminders. You may be able to set up text or email reminders through online banking or you can schedule them in your calendar app.
- Take advantage of technology and explore different smartphone apps or computer programmes (for example, Microsoft Excel) to help keep track of your finances and budgeting.

### Put a stop to impulse shopping

Impulsivity and shopping can be a very dangerous combination. It can put you in debt and make you feel guilty and ashamed. You can prevent impulsive buys with a few strategic tactics.

- Shop with cash only – leave your credit cards at home.
- Cut up all but one credit card.
- When you shop, make a list of what you need and stick to it.
- Use a calculator to keep a running total when shopping (hint: there's one on your cell phone).
- Stay away from places where you're likely to spend too much money.
- Throw away catalogues as they arrive.

### Stay focused and productive at work

Problems with inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity can create special challenges at work. The things you may find toughest – organisation, completion of tasks, sitting still and listening quietly – are the very things you're often asked to do all day long.

Juggling these difficulties and a challenging job is no easy task, but by tailoring your workplace environment you can take advantage of your strong points while minimising the negative impact of your issues.

Get organised at work – organise your office, cubicle or desk one manageable step at a time. Then use the following strategies to stay tidy and organised:

- Set time aside daily for organisation. Set aside five to 10 minutes a day to clear your desk and organise your paperwork. Experiment with storing things inside your desk or in bins so they don't clutter your workspace as unnecessary distractions.



- Use colours and lists. Colour-coding can be very useful to people with difficulties in organisation. Manage forgetfulness by writing everything down.
- Prioritise. You should do more important tasks first. Set deadlines for everything, even if you set them for yourself.

End distractions – let your workmates know you need to concentrate and try the following techniques to minimise distractions:

- Where you work matters. If you don't have your own office, you may be able to take your work to an empty office or conference room. If you're in a lecture hall or conference, try sitting close to the speaker and away from people who chat mid-meeting.
- Minimise external commotion. Face your desk towards a wall and keep your workplace free of clutter. To discourage interruptions, you could even hang a "Do not disturb" sign. If possible, let voicemail pick up your phone calls and return them later. If noise distracts you, consider noise-cancelling headphones or a sound machine.
- Save big ideas for later. All those great concepts that keep popping into your head – jot them down on paper for later consideration.

### Stretch your attention span

As an adult with attentional problems, you're capable of focusing – it's just that you may have a hard time keeping that focus, especially when the activity isn't one you find particularly engaging. Boring meetings or lectures are hard on anyone. But for adults with attentional problems, they can be a special challenge. Similarly, following multiple directions can also be difficult. Use these tips to improve your focus and ability to follow instructions:

- Get it in writing. If you're attending a meeting, lecture, workshop or another gathering that needs close attention, ask for an advance copy of the relevant materials – such as a meeting agenda or lecture outline. At the meeting, use the written notes to guide your active listening and note taking. Writing as you listen will help you stay focused on the speaker's words.
- Echo directions. After someone gives you verbal instructions, repeat them out loud to be sure you've got them right.
- Move around. To prevent restlessness and fidgeting, go ahead and move around – at the appropriate times in the right places. As long as you aren't disturbing others, taking a walk or even jumping up and down during a meeting break for example, can help you pay attention later.

### Manage stress and boost your mood

Due to the impulsivity and disorganisation, you may struggle with erratic sleep, unhealthy eating or the effects of too little exercise. All these issues can lead to extra stress, bad moods and feeling that your emotions are out of control. The best way to stop this cycle is to take charge of your lifestyle and create healthy new routines.



Eating well, getting plenty of sleep and exercising regularly can help you stay calm, avoid mood swings and in many cases fight the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Healthier habits can also reduce your difficulties with inattention, hyperactivity and distractibility, while regular routines can help your life feel more manageable.

Exercise and spend time outdoors. Working out is perhaps the most positive and efficient way to reduce hyperactivity and inattention. Exercise can relieve stress, boost your mood and calm your mind, helping work off the excess energy and aggression that can get in the way of relationships and feeling stable.

- Exercise daily.
- Choose something vigorous and fun that you can stick with, like a team sport or working out with a friend.
- Increase stress relief by exercising outdoors. People with attentional and hyperactivity problems often benefit from sunshine and green surroundings.
- As well as relieving stress, relaxation exercise such as meditation, yoga and tai chi can teach you to better control your attention and impulses.

Get plenty of sleep. Sleep deprivation can increase symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, reducing your ability to cope with stress and maintain focus during the day. Simple changes to daytime habits go a long way toward ensuring a good night's sleep.

- Avoid caffeine late in the day.
- Exercise vigorously and regularly but not within an hour of bedtime.
- Create a predictable and quiet bedtime routine.
- Take a hot shower or bath just before bed.
- Stick to a regular sleep-wake schedule, even on weekends.

### Mindfulness

This can be a way to practice stretching your attention span and a way to bring your focus back to what you're doing. Some people may use their breath or senses as "anchors" back into the present moment. Your mind will likely wander off as that's what it's meant to do, yet with practice over time it may become easier to notice and shift it back to something.

- Several apps can help you with this practice. Search for Smiling mind or Headspace.
- You can do mindfulness in an active way, such as paying attention to when you're walking or doing chores. It can even help shift your focus back on to these tasks.
- Having reminders around the house to be mindful or present can also help you to practice noticing when your mind has wandered off.

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