

ADHD

Practical strategies for attention, executive function, and wellbeing

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in attention regulation, impulse control, and executive function. It is not a deficit of intelligence or effort — it is a difference in how the brain's dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems regulate attention and motivation. ADHD often goes undiagnosed into adulthood, particularly in women, whose presentation tends to be less overtly hyperactive.

Common Presentations in Adults

- Difficulty sustaining attention on tasks that are not intrinsically motivating
- Hyperfocus on high-interest activities (often misunderstood as contradicting the diagnosis)
- Disorganization, difficulty prioritizing, chronically losing items
- Time blindness: Underestimating how long tasks take, frequently late
- Emotional dysregulation: Intense feelings, quick to frustration or overwhelm
- Impulsivity in decisions, spending, or speech (speaking before thinking)
- Difficulty initiating tasks despite knowing what needs to be done
- Sleep difficulties: Many people with ADHD have a delayed circadian rhythm

Important

ADHD often coexists with and/or presents similarly to anxiety, depression, and learning differences. Treating ADHD often significantly improves these co-occurring conditions. An accurate assessment by a psychologist or psychiatrist is the foundation of effective treatment.

Evidence-Based Strategies

01 External Structure and Systems

The ADHD brain struggles to generate internal structure, so external scaffolding is essential. Use a single calendar system (digital or paper, not both). Set multiple alarms. Create visual to-do lists and keep them visible. Use "launch pads" → designated spots for keys, bags, and items you need to leave with. Reduce decisions by building routines.

02 Body Doubling and Environmental Design

Many people with ADHD work better in the presence of another person (body doubling). Use study cafes, library sessions, or virtual co-working sessions. Reduce environmental distractions: phone in another room, website blockers, noise-cancelling headphones, minimal visual clutter.

03 Time Management: Making Time Visible

Use a visual timer to make time concrete rather than abstract. Practice time estimation: guess how long a task will take, then measure. Build in transition time between activities; time blindness affects transitions most. Plan backward from deadlines rather than forward from today.

04 Task Initiation Strategies

Break tasks into the smallest possible first step ("open the document," not "write the report"). Use the 2-minute rule: if it takes less than 2 minutes, do it now. Pair boring tasks with something enjoyable (music, podcast, preferred environment). Use implementation intentions: "When I sit down at my desk, the first thing I will do is..."

05 Exercise and Sleep

Physical exercise is one of the most effective non-pharmacological interventions for ADHD; it raises dopamine and norepinephrine, improving attention and executive function for 1–4 hours post-exercise. Aim for 20–30 minutes of vigorous activity before cognitively demanding work. Protect sleep: a consistent wake time regulates the dopamine system that ADHD affects.

06 Emotional Regulation

ADHD involves emotional impulsivity: feelings arrive intensely and quickly. Practice the STOP technique: Stop, Take a breath, Observe the emotion, Proceed mindfully. Build in a pause before responding to perceived criticism or conflict. Name the feeling to reduce its intensity ("I notice I'm feeling overwhelmed right now").

Medication: An Important Option

Stimulant medications (methylphenidate, amphetamine salts) and non-stimulants (atomoxetine, bupropion) are among the most effective pharmacological treatments in psychiatry for ADHD. Medication is not a crutch, for many people, it is what makes other strategies possible. Speak with your physician or psychiatrist about whether medication is appropriate for you.

Working With, Not Against, Your ADHD Brain

- Lean into hyperfocus: schedule your most important work during your peak focus windows
- Novelty can be your fuel: vary your environment, tasks, and approaches regularly
- Use interest, challenge, urgency, and passion as motivators, not just importance or obligation
- Celebrate completion: the ADHD brain is often only aware of what isn't done