

A Fairly Comprehensive Guide to Hacking Your Adult ADHD

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This is the second version of this guide. If you have read this guide and found it helpful (or not), or if you have any suggestions or corrections, please send an email to adhdguide@shaw.ca . Please also note that this email is only to receive information and not to respond back or provide any clinical advice or information.

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1. Introduction

This is a guide for anyone who might be considering getting assessed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and for those who have a diagnosis and need information about both medication and non-medication treatment. This guide can be used to collaborate with your family physician to optimize your ADHD treatment. ADHD is more than just taking meds and there are lots of tips and techniques to learn to be sure you get the maximum benefit from your treatment.

Note to Family Physicians: This guide is meant for patients to do the “leg work” for an ADHD assessment. By using the checklist that follows, an ADHD assessment can be done over several visits. This approach will also be helpful for patients who have obtained an assessment from an ADHD clinic and are requesting medications. Use the checklist to ensure that the assessment is comprehensive. For a more detailed review of physician assessment of adult ADHD, see Dr. Baerg Hall’s excellent approach: <https://thischangedmypractice.com/adult-adhd/>

The guide is divided into three sections:

- Getting a Diagnosis
- Managing your medications
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for ADHD

Have a look over all the sections and decide what is most relevant for your needs, depending on what stage of the ADHD diagnosis and treatment process you are at. If you have recently been started on medications, then have a close look at “Managing Your Medications.” Whether you choose to take medications or not, the section on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for ADHD should be relevant for everyone with ADHD. This section contains many practical skills that focus on managing the challenges that most, if not all, people with ADHD face.

Hack: A work around; a quick easy solution (not to be confused with “hacking” as in computer hacking!)

The modules below are arranged to fit into brief follow up appointments with your family physician, for example, along with medication adjustments or changes.

The guide can also be used along with counselling or coaching sessions. You may have access to a clinical counsellor through extended health benefits. Otherwise, counselling and coaching for ADHD is only available through private pay and is not covered by MSP.

Some options for ADHD coaching are provided below in Module 1.

If you are attending a post-secondary institution, check for any ADHD groups or programs. Some institutions such as Langara College and UBC may offer an excellent group skills CBT program for ADHD. There is also a province-wide virtual CBT skills program that you can be referred to by a doctor. More information about this program is on the website: <https://cbtskills.ca/> . The CBT Skills program also offers help for depression and anxiety if these are issues for you.

The [Pathways Community Service Directories](#) are websites with a vast amount of information about all kinds of health problems. Select your closest community directory. It is easy to navigate and there are lots of ADHD handouts as well as some local programs and resources.

If none of these options are available or practical, then the guide can be done on your own. You might have friends or family who could help support you, or there are many online ADHD support groups.

See below in Module 1 for some suggested online support groups.

2. Getting a Diagnosis

Doctors make a diagnosis of ADHD using criteria in the DSM5 diagnostic manual for psychiatric disorders. The criteria in DSM5 require evidence of symptoms before age 12. This is an arbitrary cut off, and you will see a reference from Dr. Russell Barkley later in the manual that is more reasonable. If you are seeing a new physician to continue with ADHD treatment and have had a diagnosis in childhood, then it will be important to have a copy of the assessment to bring to your current primary care practitioner. You are entitled to a copy of your medical record. Be sure to do this well in advance of an appointment with your new physician. The record should include a consultation from a child and youth psychiatrist (a medical doctor with additional training and qualifications in child psychiatry) or a psychologist qualified to do ADHD assessments. You should also try to find records of the medications and other treatment you might have received. Medications commonly used in childhood are Ritalin, Concerta, and Adderall. There are a number of others that also might have been used.

For many reasons, ADHD might not be diagnosed in childhood. As an adult, you might have become aware of increasing difficulties in some aspects of your life. For example, if you are taking post-secondary education or training that is more challenging than high school, then symptoms of ADHD could be more apparent. ADHD symptoms might be impacting your performance at work, especially if there are a lot of mundane repetitive tasks. Sometimes it might be family or friends that suggest you get assessed for ADHD. Doing a self-report scale such as the Adult ADHD Self-report Scale (ASRS-V1.1) available online might give some indication that ADHD needs to be assessed. Keep in mind that a self-report scale such as this is not sufficient to make a diagnosis.

It is important to be well prepared to meet with a physician to discuss possible diagnosis and treatment of ADHD. Get as much information as possible about your early development and childhood. Ask your parents about any problems that came up during pregnancy or childbirth. Ask about developmental milestones, and what you were like as a baby. Ask about family history of ADHD and other mental health issues. If you are comfortable with your physician contacting someone in your family, this can be very helpful and is recommended in clinical assessment guidelines.

It might take several visits to work with your family physician to ensure an accurate diagnosis. There is no urgency to make a diagnosis since this is a condition that has, by definition, been there since childhood. In addition to reviewing the symptoms of ADHD, you will also need to discuss how these symptoms are affecting your function in different aspects of your life – relationships, academics, work, and other areas. At least two areas of function must be impacted to establish the diagnosis of ADHD.

Your family physician might refer you to a psychiatrist for an ADHD assessment and to be sure there are no other mental health issues that might be a consideration. Be sure you have all the information from the following checklist before you meet with the psychiatrist in order to get the most out of the

assessment. The most detailed and useful form to complete to take to your psychiatry appointment is the CADDRA ADHD Assessment Form, also found at <https://www.caddra.ca/etoolkit-forms/> You will need help from your physician to complete many of the medical items, but fill in as much as you can about your childhood and your current situation.

Here is a checklist of information to gather, preferably from your birth parents if possible. There are quite a few questions here, but the doctor will need as much of this information as you can find:

Were there any complications during pregnancy or childbirth? Were you born “at term” (the right time – or were you early or late)? Is there any possibility that you were exposed to nicotine, alcohol or drugs when you were in the womb?	
What were you like as a baby? “Easy” or “fussy”? Would you settle easily with cuddling or soothing? How about problems with feeding? Did you get into a regular sleep routine as a baby?	
Were your developmental milestones normal? For example, smiling at around 4 months, sitting on your own at 9 months? Note: there is a wide range for these milestones but try to find out if they are approximately within the usual time frame.	
Were you ever diagnosed as an infant or as a child with any kind of heart problem?	
Has anyone in your immediate family been diagnosed with ADHD? If not formally diagnosed, do you suspect any family members might have ADHD?	
Is there any other family history of mental health problems?	
Getting school records is very important. Do you have any records from kindergarten, and grades 1-7? If not, can you contact the school and obtain them?	
Were you ever placed in a special class or have a learning assistance plan? Do you recall “getting in trouble with the teacher” on a regular basis, for example for talking in class, not sitting still, or other behaviour problems? Did many of your report cards comment, “could get better grades if he/she paid more attention”?	
Did you have an assessment for ADHD as a child? It is very important to obtain a copy of this assessment and any follow up information, especially medications tried and the response as well as other approaches.	

Have you ever had a head injury or concussion? As a child? As an adult? Were you “accident prone” as a child?	
If possible, ask a parent to complete the Weiss Functional Impairment rating scale about problems and symptoms you might have had as a child. Even though this is done in hindsight and is not as reliable as an assessment done when you were a child, it is still very useful. You can find the scale at https://www.caddra.ca/etoolkit-forms/	
Have you ever been treated for ADHD as an adult? Have you been prescribed psychostimulant medications previously? If so, how did it work for you?	
If you have an extended health plan, you might also want to check into coverage for long-acting psychostimulant medications such as Vyvanse, Concerta, Adderall, Basic Pharmacare coverage does not apply to these medications even though they are recommended as the best option for adults. (note: a physician can apply for “Special Authority” for the above medications after a treatment trial with one of the Pharmacare approved medications).	
Please also consider doing a couple of self-report rating scales for ADHD. Be brutally honest with your responses. If the symptom does not fit, or you are not completely sure, then rate it as “never” or “seldom”. The ASRS is available at www.caddra.ca	

3. Making Sure You Have ADHD and Not Something Else

One of the challenges for your physician will be making sure the diagnosis is correct. Unlike many medical conditions, there are no lab tests or brain scans that can be used to confirm the diagnosis. The diagnosis is based mostly on the information you provide. Information from someone else who knows you well and childhood history are also important. Physicians will vary in their comfort level in making a diagnosis of ADHD. ADHD should never be diagnosed by doing a “test run” on psychostimulant medications. These medications will often improve mental alertness for individuals without ADHD, although any such benefits are minimal will soon wear off.

Most importantly, your physician needs to be sure that the symptoms you are having are not due to some other medical or psychiatric condition. There are very few medical conditions to consider, but rarely something like hyperthyroidism might present with some symptoms that are like ADHD. Your physician will review your medical history and rule this out along with a few other rare possibilities. Unless there are more definite indications of a medical issue, then further laboratory and other investigations are not necessary.

If you have a history of heart problems, then this will need further assessment. If you have high blood pressure, then this will also have to be monitored closely. There are also a couple of ADHD medications that do not affect blood pressure if this is a significant concern. In general, unless there are specific medical issues, routine testing with an electrocardiogram is not required.

There are several psychiatric conditions that can present with some ADHD-like symptoms. The most difficult one to sort out is bipolar disorder, especially what is called bipolar 2 disorder. However, bipolar disorder presents with a cyclical pattern of highs and lows, whereas ADHD symptoms are usually pretty constant – they are present most of the time. People with bipolar often have a decreased need for sleep, and are full of energy and high spirits, but the mood changes are usually much more noticeable than any issues with attention and distractibility.

Depression can present with impairment of concentration, but usually other symptoms will be apparent such as sadness, negative thinking, social withdrawal, decreased appetite, low energy, and either increased or decreased sleep. Doing a PHQ9 rating scale will help identify depression. Recent research has identified a possible subtype of depression with more prominent problems with concentration. The “cognitive subtype of depression” is characterized by difficulty with the ability to plan ahead, display self-control, sustain focus despite distractions and suppress inappropriate behavior. Researchers were able to demonstrate changes on brain scans using functional MRI (fMRI). Before assessing for ADHD, it is important to fully treat any underlying depression regardless of the subtype.

People with anxiety disorders can also present with difficulties with focus, along with increased activity due to agitation. However, the predominant feeling for these people is worrying about some future negative outcome. People with ADHD often experience a lot of anxiety as a result of multiple stress arising in their life as a consequence of the ADHD. It can be difficult at times to separate out the anxiety issues from the ADHD issues, and both might need treatment.

Sluggish cognitive tempo (SCT) is a close relative of ADHD that, according to Dr. Russell Barkley, is probably a different disorder but there are overlapping features. Sluggish cognitive tempo is a problem with processing information and focusing attention: having difficulty choosing what is important and what is not. These individuals will also generally be socially withdrawn, reticent, shy, and prone to social anxiety. On the other hand, they tend not to have problems with self-regulation and impulsivity. Medications used for ADHD generally don't help this condition but sometimes atomoxetine (Strattera) and modafinil are worth considering. Social skills training may be more useful.

“Brain fog” is another condition that affects focus and attention. Brain fog may include deficits in planning, working memory and executive functioning, difficulty with word retrieval and fluency, and poor attention. Brain fog has been associated with post COVID (“long COVID”), fibromyalgia, myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), and some other conditions. The approach to brain fog is different from ADHD and will not be covered in this guide.

If you have a history of psychosis, it is very important that you advise your physician. Psychostimulant medications are generally not recommended unless the psychosis is fully stabilized on antipsychotic medication. In these cases, assessment and follow up by a psychiatrist is strongly recommended.

There is considerable overlap between Autism Spectrum Disease (ASD) and ADHD. This is often included in the concept of “neurodiversity”. Possibly around 75-80% of people with ASD will have a diagnosis of ADHD. As a child, did you have difficulties socializing? Are you aware of having any

repetitive movements or behaviours (“stims”)? Treatment of ADHD can be very helpful in improving function and helping the person with ASD achieve their potential. Social skills training specifically developed for ASD can also be very helpful. The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) program at UCLA is world-renowned program. PEERS trained counsellors are available in BC. PEERS also has very helpful books and YouTube videos (<https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers>).

Substance use disorders present a challenge and will often require psychiatric consultation. If you are in a stable remission, then psychostimulant medication and other treatment approaches may be helpful in sustaining your recovery. There is a significant overlap of substance use disorders and ADHD. There are a few general principles outlined later in the guide.

Finally, you need to be aware that some physicians might be reluctant to prescribe psychostimulant medications because of concerns around misuse, dependence, and diversion. Please do not take this personally. Physician prescribing patterns are monitored by the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and there are strict guidelines that must be followed. Psychostimulant prescriptions have increased significantly in recent years and this is being followed closely. There are also research reports and statistics that inform these guidelines. If your physician does prescribe a psychostimulant, be aware that physicians are advised to access your PharmaNet profile and review prescriptions you have received from all physicians. Dispensing quantities may be limited, and in some cases even weekly or daily dispensing might be required. This is for your safety, and follows the guidelines recommended by expert research. You will also have to take responsibility to ensure that you never lose or misplace a prescription. The guidelines are clear that replacement supplies or prescriptions will not be provided in these circumstances.

Some guidelines also recommend that you sign a “treatment agreement”. This is your commitment to work collaboratively with your physician and ensure that your use of psychostimulant medication is safe. Here is a sample of an agreement. You might want to initial this, and bring it in with you to your appointment:

<p>I acknowledge that it is in my best interests to collaborate with my physician to ensure the safe use of the prescribed psychostimulant medication. I will ensure that the medication is stored safely and that I am the only person who will access or take this medication. I will not share this medication with others. I also acknowledge that my physician may need to limit the quantities of medication dispensed to ensure my safety and to meet required guidelines. I understand that if I lose or misplace my prescription or my medication supply, it will not be replaced until the next scheduled dispensing interval. I understand that my physician must follow the guidelines and recommendations set by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC. This includes the possible requirement of bringing my prescription bottle to an appointment for a pill count before another prescription can be issued. These guidelines also include recommendations to require dispensing medications at shorter intervals.</p>	
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If your physician is not willing to consider psychostimulant medications, there are some good non-stimulant medication options such as atomoxetine and bupropion. For some people, these medications are as effective as psychostimulants. Also, the non-pharmacologic approach described in this guide will help with many of the issues and problems related to ADHD.

Action Plan

At the end of each section, there will be a checklist of items to consider or action items to complete.

Here are some action items for “Getting A Diagnosis”:

- Get information about your early development from a parent
- Track down report cards and any previous ADHD assessments
- Complete the self-report ADHD rating scale (ASRS)
- Ask someone who knows you well to complete the Weiss Functional Impairment Rating Scale – Parent (WFIRS-P) available online at <https://www.caddra.ca/etoolkit-forms/>

The most detailed and useful form to complete before seeing your doctor is the CADDRA ADHD Assessment Form, also found at <https://www.caddra.ca/etoolkit-forms/> You will need help from your physician to complete many of the medical items, but fill in as much as you can about your childhood and your current situation.

If you did not have an ADHD assessment in childhood and cannot get information from your parents or other sources about our childhood, then complete the Wender Utah Rating Scale for ADHD. This scale can easily be found online from multiple sources. The score is obtained from the 25 items associated with ADHD (see the last page).

4. Now You Have a Diagnosis of ADHD

The above steps might take several visits to a family physician. Once the diagnosis is confirmed, your physician will talk to you about treatment options. If you choose to start medication, then depending on your coverage (private extended health versus Pharmacare only), you will be prescribed a psychostimulant medication, or in some cases, a non-stimulant medication for ADHD.

The BC Pharmacare program only provides coverage for the lowest cost psychostimulant treatments – short-acting methylphenidate (Ritalin) and dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine). These medications have a shorter duration of action and are more appropriate for children. Sometimes they can be effective for adults but often need to be taken twice a day - in the morning and at noon. For the best treatment response, most adults will need to take long-acting forms of these medications such as Concerta, Adderall, or Vyvanse. In order to get Pharmacare coverage, your physician will need to submit a Special Authority form. This form requires identifying either intolerable side effects or insufficient treatment response from the shorter-acting psychostimulant medications. These problems should be apparent after a couple of weeks, and then you can move on to the longer acting medication. Please be aware that Vyvanse costs 5 times as much as Adderall XR (extended-release mixed amphetamine salts) but is no more effective.

It will take a few weeks to adjust (titrate) the dose and monitor for side effects and response. It is probably best to wait until the medication has stabilized before starting the therapy program described below. Focus your attention now on the medication issues as well as learning more about ADHD. If you look ahead to the first module on CBT for ADHD, there are some resources to consider.

There is an excellent medication response questionnaire available on the CADDRA website at www.caddra.ca. Please keep this handy and be sure to fill it out before your next appointment. Here is a summary of the common side effects of ADHD medications (especially psychostimulant medications) that you can also use to track:

Side Effect	Frequency				Comments
	Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time	
Appetite decrease and weight loss					
Nausea or vomiting					
Stomach aches					
Insomnia					
Irritability					
Agitation/excitability					
Mood instability, mood swings					
Feeling like a zombie, spaced out					
Feeling worse or different when the medication wears off (crash)					
Heart palpitations, racing heart					
Increased blood pressure					
Dry eyes, skin or mouth					
Thirst					
Headache					
Dizziness					
Sweating					
Tics					
Sexual dysfunction					
Any other?					

You should also track your response to medications, and write down a few observations to bring to your follow up appointments:

- Has the medication been helpful?
- What benefits have you noticed?
- Are you taking the medication regularly?

Identify treatment goals that are based on reasonable expectations for functional improvement and quality of life. This could include goals related to:

- Improved academic performance – improved grades, assignments completed on time, staying focused in lectures, etc
- Improved work performance – improved performance evaluations, tasks completed on time, etc.
- Stable employment – timely work attendance, improved productivity, decreased interpersonal conflict
- Improved interpersonal relationships

If after a reasonable period of time on medication, you are not seeing results in these areas, then question the diagnosis and need for ongoing treatment. Research studies have shown mixed results and uncertainty about benefits of psychostimulant medications.

For a very critical review of these medications, see a review done in September 2023 by the Therapeutics Initiative at the University of B.C.: www.ti.ubc.ca

Optimizing your ADHD medication is an essential step. Adjust the dose to get the most benefit, so long as side effects are tolerable. Don't just stop with the first sign of improvement.

Action Plan

- Print out several copies of the medication side effect form above and bring it to your next appointment.
- Get a pill reminder box or pill reminder app. Most people with ADHD have trouble remembering to take their meds consistently (not too surprising!)
- Be sure you have identified reasonable treatment goals

5. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for ADHD

Medications can be very effective for many of the symptom of ADHD. However, medications alone will not address all the issues. Also, some people with ADHD do not wish to consider or are not able to tolerate medications.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is a research-proven approach that was developed for the treatment of depression. CBT has been modified and its use has expanded to a wide range of conditions including ADHD. With regular practice you can acquire CBT skills that will help you learn more effectively, perform better in the workplace, and feel more positive and confident in yourself.

CBT is based on the principle that emotions result from how we perceive situations in our life. Events and experiences will trigger thoughts that lead to an emotional response and often a behavioural response. This sequence often occurs so quickly that we are only aware of the feeling and not the preceding thought. Often the thoughts occur automatically and may follow certain repetitive patterns. These thoughts might be the “self-talk” we have about ourselves and our abilities. By becoming aware of these patterns, we can then learn ways of challenging and changing our thoughts. This will lead to a change in how we feel. CBT also teaches skills around planning and organization that will lead to a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Behaviour strategies also include building in rewards for achieving tasks and goals.

CBT can be done in group therapy classes, with a one-on-one therapist, or can be self-taught using online resources.

This guide will provide an outline of CBT therapy, and some of the specific skills that are known to be helpful. It is based on the work of one of the leading experts in the field, Dr. Mary Solanto. Her book, "Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy for Adult ADHD" provides much more detail.

If you wish to purchase it, her book also includes very helpful worksheets that you can copy and use. Dr. Solanto has also presented some very helpful YouTube videos that you can access by searching her name.

If you are doing CBT on your own, be careful to take it in small steps. You might also choose to focus on just a few of the modules that are most relevant to you. If you have a family physician or psychiatrist who is working with you on medication treatment, they might be able to also help you with the non-pharmacologic management outlined here. If you are working with a counsellor or coach, then this guide could be incorporated into your treatment plan.

Action Plan

Skim through the following sections of this guide and note which modules seem to be most relevant to you.

Module 1: Acceptance and Commitment

This first step may be the most difficult for some people. Others might wish to simply "get on with it" and focus on learning coping strategies. Regardless, you should give some thought to what the diagnosis of ADHD means to you. How has it impacted your school, your career, your relationships, your self-esteem?

Acceptance means coming to terms with the diagnosis of ADHD and especially understanding that it is a valid medical diagnosis that was not, and never was "your fault." Ultimately, acceptance is about unconditional acceptance of oneself including the thoughts and feelings we have. When it comes to ADHD, it means being aware of the layers of criticism and judgement from others and from yourself, and then taking action and making a commitment to change.

A great deal of research has been done on ADHD. Brain imaging research using extremely sophisticated MRI scanners and other technology can clearly demonstrate which brain areas and brain pathways are involved. Extensive genetic studies in many different countries have shown convincingly that more than 2/3 of cases of ADHD are genetic – passed down through heredity from one family member to another. The other 1/3 are mostly due to unforeseen complications during pregnancy. There are a very, very few cases that occur in infancy due to medical problems such as febrile seizures and certain rare forms of strep infections. The bottom line is that the cause of ADHD is not due to anything you or your parents are responsible for.

You might also encounter different terms for "subtypes" of ADHD such as ADHD with hyperactivity, or ADHD predominantly inattentive, and ADHD combined type. Researchers and specialists in the field generally disagree with these artificial distinctions. There probably is only one disorder, ADHD "combined". If you look closely at any individual, they will exhibit some features of hyperactivity or impulsivity, and of course all individuals with ADHD must have some inattentiveness by definition. However, because DSM5 must be used in various forms and applications, doctors will often be required to specify "ADHD, primarily inattentive type", or "ADHD, combined type".

It may be helpful at this stage to seek out more information about ADHD—from doctors, research, and trusted online resources such as CADDRA.ca. Please see the next section for some other resources. Many people find talking to other people with ADHD, either one-on-one or in a group to be very helpful, especially if the other person or the group has a positive and productive outlook. If you are in an academic setting, look for a group class through counselling services, or see if there is a relevant club or organization. There may also be groups in the community. There are a multitude of online support groups as well.

Hack: Is there a “neurodiversity” group in your community or at your educational institution? Or an online group? See if it might be a good fit for you. They will have tons of information and supportive members to talk to.

Learn about ADHD

The amount of information available online, in books, and in classes is overwhelming. Try to focus on finding unbiased information that is helpful for your own personal needs. Here are a few resources that may be particularly helpful:

An excellent website for finding resources is CADDAC:

<https://caddac.ca/find-a-resource/>

CADDAC for young adults:

<https://caddac.ca/about-adhd/ages-18-24-yrs/>

CADDAC for adults:

<https://caddac.ca/about-adhd/ages-25/>

CADDRA is a Canadian site that has resources for physicians, patients, and families. Click on the Resources tab and check out Resources for Adults:

<https://www.caddra.ca/public-information/adults/resources-and-links/>

CHADD – Adult to Adult: ADHD Support and Training for Adults

<https://chadd.org/adult-to-adult/>

How to ADHD

<https://howtoadhd.com/>

“Welcome to Neurodiversity University. Those of us with ADHD have brains that work differently, which means we need to work differently. Our site and our YouTube channel are dedicated to helping us do that.”

ADDitude

<http://www.additudemag.com/>

Website and magazine providing expert guidance and support for living with ADHD and related mental health conditions.

ADHD as a problem with Executive Function

If you only have time to watch one video on ADHD, this 1-hour webinar by Dr. Russell Barkley is excellent. Dr. Barkley is a world-leading expert on ADHD and his concept of ADHD as primarily a disorder of executive functioning and impulse control is very important.

ADDitude Magazine – Dr Russell Barkley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6JBgeFbYCc&t=1439s>

Dr. Barkley defines ADHD as a valid neuro-developmental disorder that results in neuropsychological traits that are not developing on time or functioning effectively in an age-appropriate manner. He suggests that ADHD is not the correct term – it is better described as an “intention deficit disorder”.

There are two categories of symptoms that define what is called ADHD:

- Delays in executive functions - those brain functions that are essential for us to prioritize, plan, manage time, make decisions, and organize ourselves. Executive functions such as this lead to acting with intention. There are many ways of listing the different executive functions. See below for 5 of the most relevant ones.
- Impulsivity – appears as hyperactivity in children but presents differently in adults and can have a significant impact on functioning and relationships.

Executive Functions include the following:

- Self-awareness – our self-directed attention
- Inhibition – self-restraint
- Working memory – the ability to hold things in your mind long enough to perform an action or do something with it. Working memory can be verbal (words) or non-verbal (usually visual). Verbal working memory is our internal self-talk
- Self-motivation – how well can you motivate yourself to complete a task when there is no immediate external consequence
- Planning and problem solving – how we “play” with information in our minds to come up with new ways of doing things.

Impulsivity can show up in many areas:

- Impaired motor inhibition (looks like hyperactivity),
- Impaired verbal inhibition (overly talkative),
- Impulsive decision making,
- Impulsive expression of raw or strong emotions, internal restlessness

Defining ADHD as a difficulty with attention is a problem because almost every psychiatric disorder causes impaired attention. Dr. Barkley states “ADHD is a disorder of persistence toward goals and toward the future in general. This is a very special kind of attention maintained by the frontal lobes of the brain.” This requires future-directed behaviour and motivation toward a goal. People with ADHD are also unable to inhibit their responses to goal-irrelevant events around them.

Once distracted, a person with ADHD will have difficulty or be unable to return to the goal-directed behaviour. This is due to a difficulty with working memory. Working memory is one of the five special

executive functions of the human brain. It is how we remember what we are doing. This leads to skipping from one un-completed goal to another.

DSM5 is based on studies done on children, and this has resulted in an arbitrary age criterion requiring evidence of ADHD symptoms prior to age 12. Studies show that in 93-98% of cases, ADHD starts before age 18-21, but there is a small percentage later than this age. There is also acquired ADHD, for example due to a head injury. There are further problems with reliability when people with ADHD or their parents try to recall the age of onset of ADHD symptoms.

Also, many of the DSM5 criteria do not apply to adults and we must stretch the definitions to fit with adult presentations. The latest version of DSM, DSM5 removes the subtypes of ADHD and now there are “presentations”. This describes the main symptoms present for an individual at a particular age or developmental stage.

Despite these limitations, the DSM5 criteria are still recommended to ensure the correct diagnosis is being made.

Dr. Barkley emphasizes that “time blindness” is a core feature of ADHD, along with inability to prioritize. Because time management is such an important issue, this is the starting point for CBT for ADHD.

The rest of this guide is about making a commitment to yourself to change, especially by learning skills that will help you in many areas of your life – your work, academics, relationships, etc.

Action Plan

Before moving on to the next modules, take some time to research ADHD especially any videos by Dr. Russell Barkley.

Module 2: Time Tracking – Time Management

Many, if not most, people with ADHD have difficulty keeping track of time. They often underestimate the amount of time a task will take. Very quickly, they can become overwhelmed with work projects, homework, household chores, and other commitments. Everything is left to the last minute, risking going from one crisis to another. Keep in mind that there is a social cost to not effectively managing your time and commitments. If you are frequently late to meet friends or your partner, they might think you don’t really care. Or it is just plain frustrating to other people in your life or work, especially if they were depending on you for something. Imagine the positive consequences of being known as someone who is dependable and timely.

There are two key skills to consciously practice:

1. Keep track of time
 - Develop the habit of always knowing what time it is.
 - Always wear a watch.
 - Be sure to have clocks visible at your desk, bedside, and anywhere else.
2. Practice estimating and then tracking time how long day-to-day tasks actually took.
 - How long do you really take to get ready in the morning?

- Build up a library of your routine activities. That way, you can be more realistic in your commitments and more consistent with your scheduling.
- Pay particular attention to “transition time.” You might find that it takes more time than expected to get to work or school than you estimated. For example, it might take an additional 10 minutes after completing your morning routine before you can get out the door to catch a bus or start driving to work or class. Be aware of whether you often do “just one more thing” before going somewhere that then makes you late.

Here is a simple exercise to help learn these basic skills:

Start with a simple 5 column list. Identify a list of common tasks in column 1. In column 2, estimate ("guesstimate") how long you think each task will take. In column 3, note the start time, in column 4 note the actual elapsed time and in column 5 compare to your estimate. Try to do this for at least 2 or 3 days. You will also have to use a watch or a clock consistently for this exercise.

Task/Daily Routine	Your “Guestimate” for the time it will take	Actual Start Time	Actual Elapsed Time	How close were you to your Guestimate?

Time Hack: Use the Pomodoro method. It was invented by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, and is named after a popular tomato-shaped brand of kitchen timer used in Italy.

The Pomodoro method involves 5 steps:

1. Identify a task that you need to complete.
2. Set a timer for 25 minutes.
3. Work on that task with no distractions.
4. When the alarm sounds, take a 5-minute break.
5. Repeat the process 1-3 more times.
6. Take a longer 30-minute break and start again if you have not yet completed the task.

You will need to modify these steps based on your own needs and ability to sustain focus. This method often works well for students or for anyone who must stay on task for a work or leisure project. There are lots of “Pomodoro” apps and more online information. Also adhdwarehouse.com has clocks and timers.

Manage your time by using hacks:

Make sure you have one central spot to drop off and pick up your keys, smartphone, etc.

Consider using apps and technology to help.

- Airtags to deal with misplacing items
- “Closet,” “Smart Closet,” “Outfit Planner” apps to help with clothing management
- Nozbe—for time management (see below)

Simplify routines.

- Consider simplifying your wardrobe, especially getting rid of clothes you don't like or never wear
- If folding and putting things away is a challenge, simplify this by storing clothes in baskets rather than drawers
- Consider kitchen gadgets like air fryers, instapots, slow cookers, etc to simplify food preparation

Time Hack: Re-define what "on time" means. On time means 8-10 minutes ahead of schedule.

Later in this guide, you will learn how to use an app or a task manager to continue to apply time management skills as a key part of keeping focused on organization.

Action Plan

- Before moving on to the next module, make sure you are very consistent at this stage in applying time management techniques. Set aside time each day to work on time estimating using the table above.
- Set up a "command central" location for all of your stuff so you don't waste time looking for what you need.
- Start to simplify your routines – pare down your wardrobe, simplify food preparation and laundry routines

Module 3: Go to Bed

Up to 70% of adults with ADHD report problems falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up in the morning.

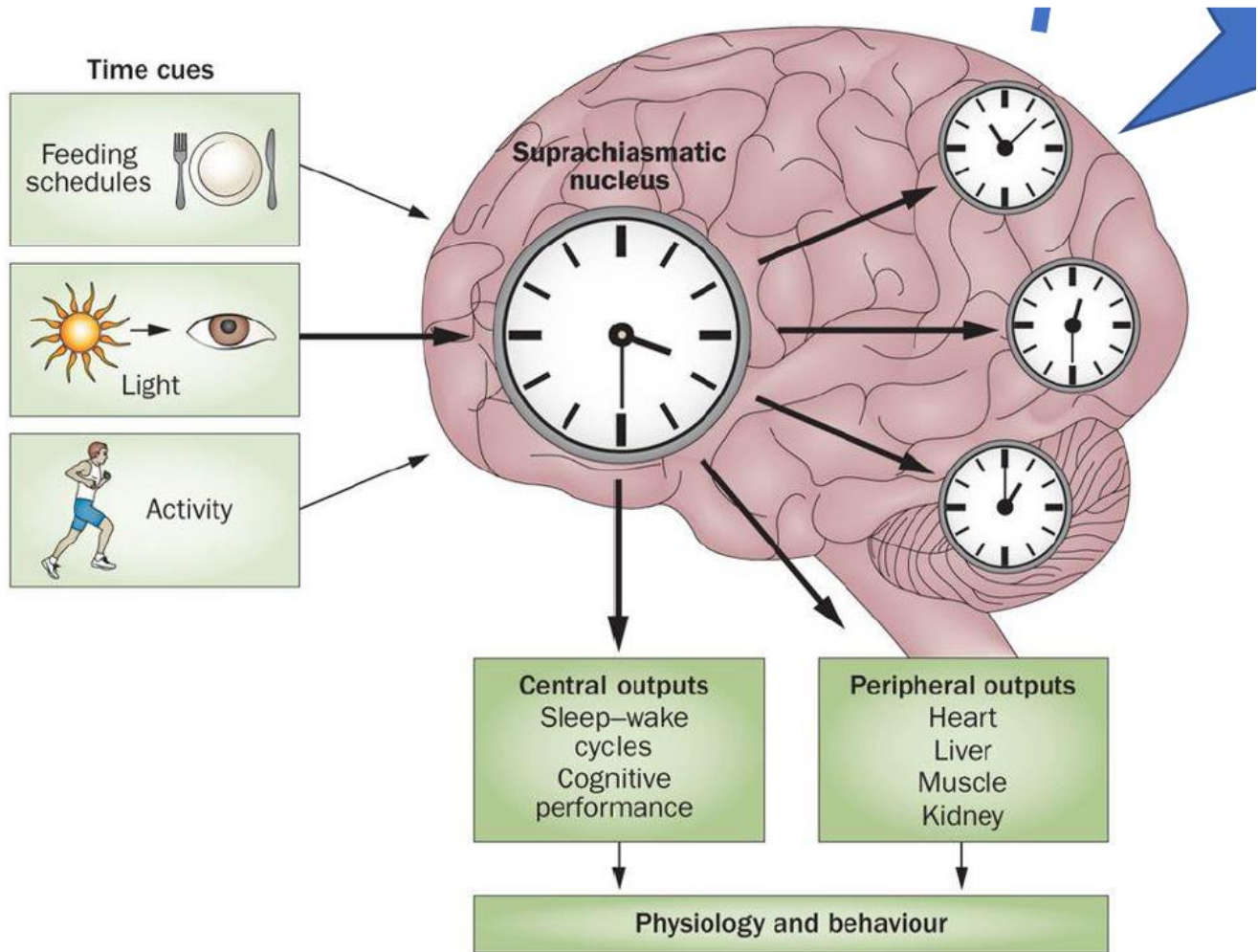
Check with your physician to ensure there are no medical issues impacting sleep quality. It is important to rule out sleep apnea. Symptoms of sleep apnea can include waking up in the middle of the night choking or gasping for air, snoring loudly, and frequently waking up in the morning with a headache. A partner might notice that you stop breathing for a minute or two when asleep. Excessive daytime sleepiness is another symptom and can affect sustained attention. Sleep apnea testing is easily done at no cost through the many stores that sell CPAP machines.

Insomnia is also a common side effect of psychostimulant medication. Please discuss this with the physician prescribing your medication. In general, it is not recommended to add "sleeping pills" or sedatives to deal with insomnia. These medications have limited benefits and sedatives counteract the effect of psychostimulants.

The most common problem is not getting to sleep when you should, which then leads to not waking up when you need to. Or having to wake up before getting sufficient sleep. This is called delayed sleep phase syndrome. This may be due to a problem with circadian rhythm – our bodies' internal clock. This

internal clock produces melatonin which is the hormone that makes you feel sleepy. People with ADHD are not as sensitive to the usual factors that set circadian rhythm and the internal clock.

The diagram below shows the main factors that set the clock – regular mealtimes, regular daily activity, and light exposure. Having a good circadian rhythm then supports many different mental and physical functions.



Hack to reset your circadian rhythm

- Control your light exposure. Expose yourself to bright light in the morning and avoid bright light in the evenings.
- There are special alarm clocks with bright lights but they are expensive. One example is the Philips SmartSleep Wake-up Light.

Have a bedtime routine that helps you wind down and stick to it. Getting to bed on time is key to functioning at your best the next day, and meeting time commitments. Often evenings are the time we have for ourselves, for example to surf the web, watch TV, catch up on social media etc. It can be hard to stop but remind yourself of the negative consequences the next day if you don't – feeling fatigued,

moody, not performing at your best, and not managing time commitments. Use the alarm function on your smartphone to set a reminder to begin your routine.

Turning off screens at least an hour before bedtime is very important. Do not have screens in the bedroom. Have some relaxing activities just before lights out – soft music, warm bath, or try listening to a YouTube bedtime story (don't watch the screen though!). There are lots of apps with relaxing sounds and music that might be helpful.

If racing thoughts are keeping you awake, try doing a “brain dump” right before bed. Set a time limit of 5-10 minutes and write down all of those ideas, plans, to do items etc. Getting them on paper will help get them out of your head and will help with productivity too.

Hack: Follow the 20-minute rule

If you have done the “brain dump” and followed all the sleep hygiene recommendations below, and you still can't fall asleep, then follow the 20-minute rule. Without looking at a clock, “guesstimate” that you have been lying in bed for about 20 minutes.

The best approach to this is getting out of bed and going somewhere comfortable. Read (not on a device) or use a mindfulness audio guide for 10-15 minutes then when you feel sleepy go back to bed.

Continue to focus on breathing and letting your thoughts go, and very soon you will fall asleep. If you choose to listen to an audio guide while lying in bed, be sure to choose one that doesn't end with a “gong.” The “Body Scan for Sleep” on the UCLA Mindfulness app is a good option.

You might need to consider a more detailed approach called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i). Training modules are available online, or you could work with a coach or therapist. One of the best options is the CBT-i Coach app available for smartphones. This app was developed by the Veterans Administration in the US and is based on extensive research. There are several options in the app but the most important one is the “Sleep Diary.”

Have a notepad beside your bed and write down what time you went to bed. When you get out of bed in the morning, write down when you think you actually went to sleep, and when you woke up for the day. Note any times you were awake in the middle of the night and for how long.

If you have your smartphone beside the bed then the CBTi app will ask you a few other questions to get a detailed picture of your sleep pattern. There are other apps that track movements while you are asleep to help calculate sleep efficiency. It is still better to transfer that information to the CBTi app.

This data will allow you to calculate sleep efficiency – the number of hours you were actually asleep divided by the total time in bed. This number should be at least 85%. The app will then provide a “sleep prescription” to help you achieve this. CBT-i is much more effective than sleeping pills and there are no side effects!

Action Plan

- Regular sleep habits are critical for success. Before moving on to the next module, be sure you are making good progress at managing your sleep.
- If you are using the CBT-i Coach App or another sleep diary, be sure to have a notepad beside your bed to enter your sleep times as soon as you wake up. Calculate your sleep efficiency and make the adjustments recommended by the app. You can also use a wearable device to monitor sleep. It is still a good idea to start with to then transfer the data from the device to CBT-i coach.
- Review sleep hygiene
 - ✓ make sure your room is dark and quiet
 - ✓ turn off screens 1-2 hours before bedtime
 - ✓ no caffeine 6-8 hours before bedtime
 - ✓ avoid nicotine before bed and during the night
 - ✓ avoid alcohol after dinner
 - ✓ exercise at least 20 minutes a day, but not within 2 hours of bedtime
 - ✓ some people find 20 minutes in a hot bath 1-2 hours before bedtime promotes sleep
 - ✓ a light bedtime snack can promote sleep, but avoid heavy or spicy meals before bed
 - ✓ do not go to bed too hungry or too full
 - ✓ avoid or reduce naps

Module 4: Planner

Rather than using your ADHD brain to keep track of tasks and events, the best approach is to use an external tool. Even for people without ADHD, this frees up “brain power” to work on thinking and creativity instead of mundane chores that a paper or computer system can manage better.

Some kind of planner or task manager is at the core of any personal organizational system. You will also need a calendar or diary to keep track of appointments and other commitments with a fixed date or deadline. This is the “hardscape” of your day. If you are using a computer task manager and calendar, they usually can be linked. You can then set up an alarm, or multiple alarms on your smartphone or smartwatch.

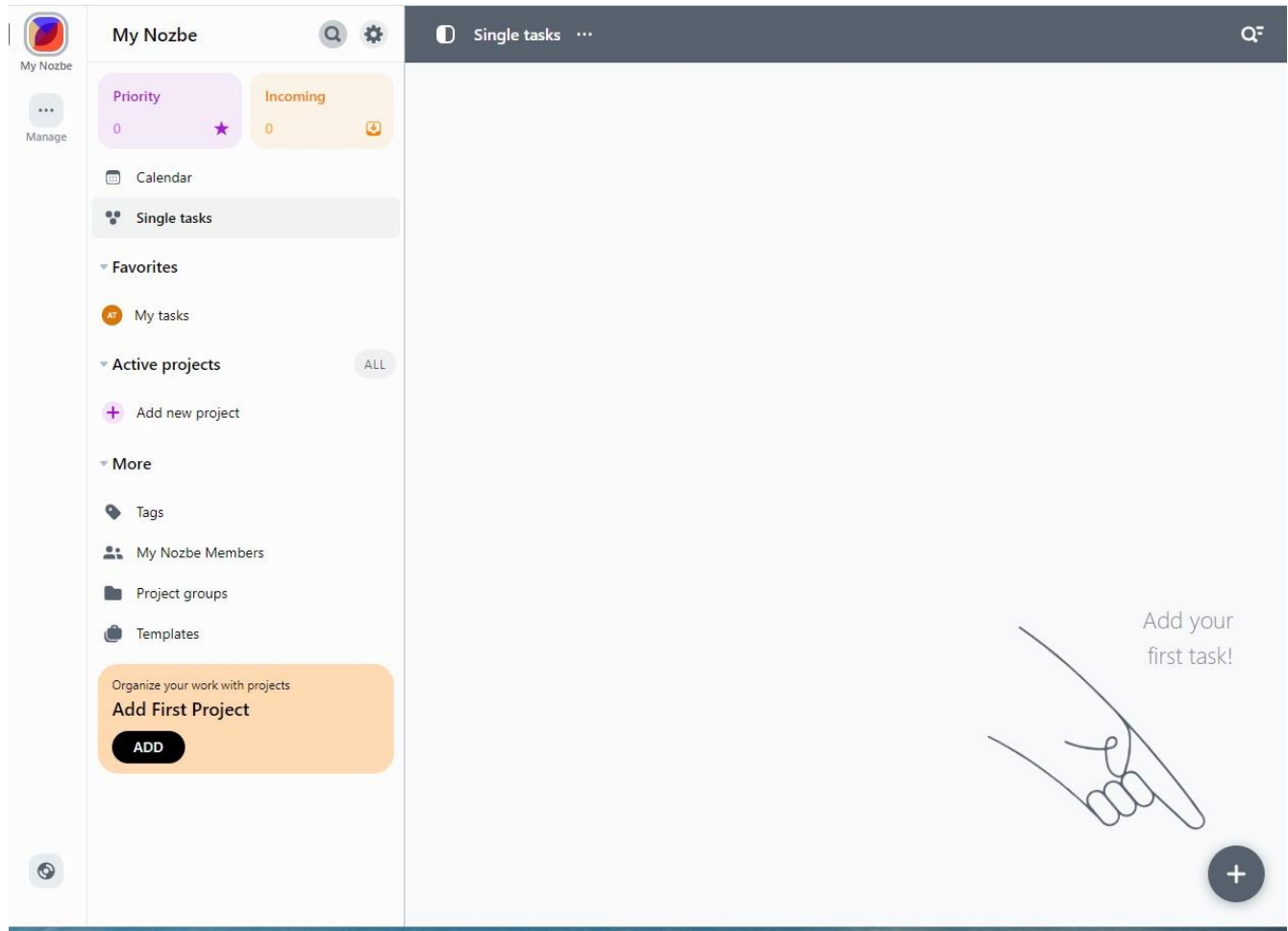
There are hundreds of planners available, including paper versions, online versions, smartphone options, etc. There is a risk of getting distracted by the enormous range of options available. There is also the risk of hyper focus on the technology and losing track of the purpose.

One of the best smartphone/computer options currently available is called Nozbe. The free version available at nozbe.com will have sufficient functionality for most people, but if you need more options, the annual fee is reasonable.

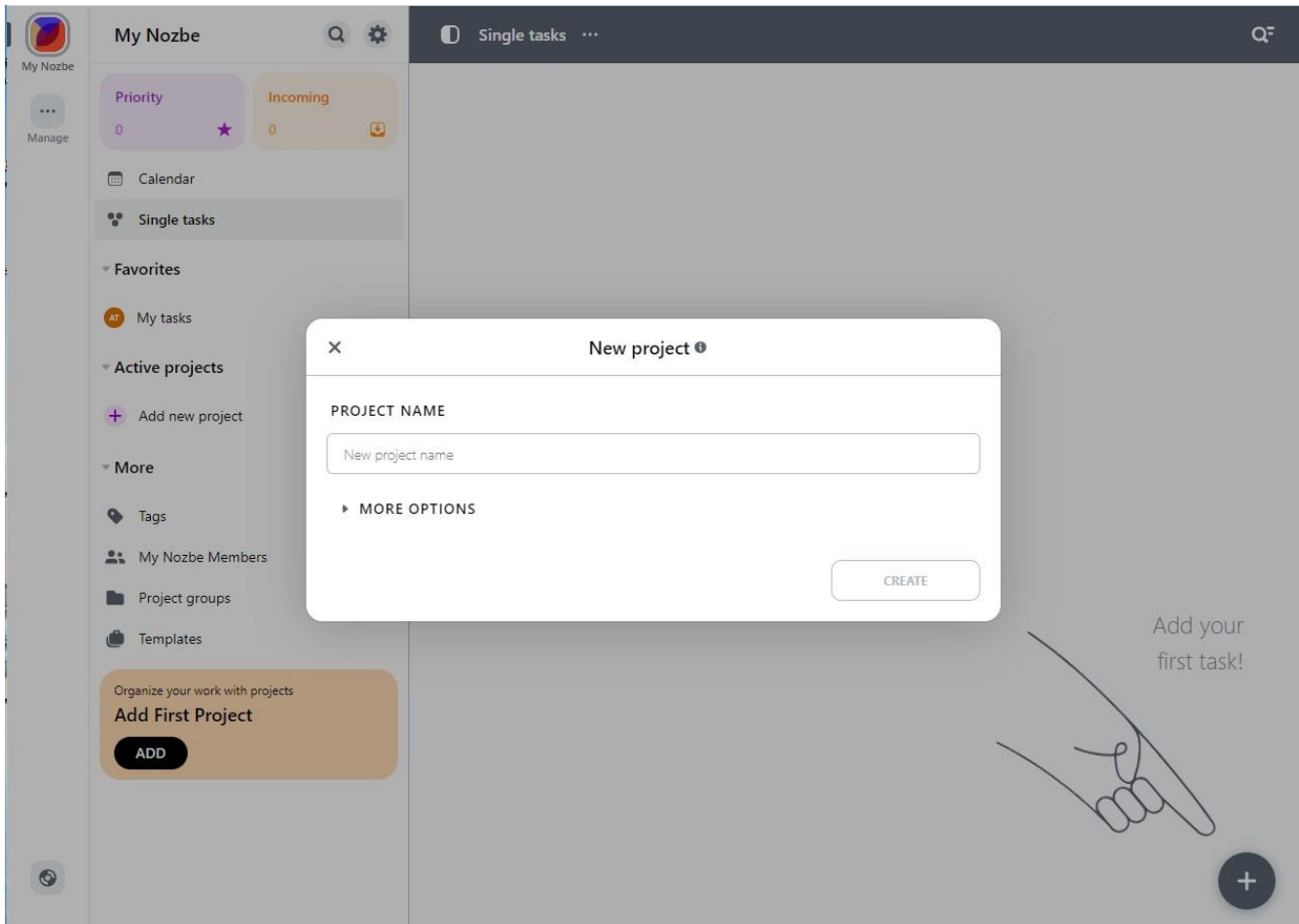
To get started with Nozbe, you simply identify what your current projects are. A project is anything you have to do that is more than one step. You can also assign a date and time for any step, and then

estimate how much time might be required. This will give you more practice at time tracking as above in Module 2.

See below for a screenshot of the Nozbe. To start with, focus on adding just a few new projects. The next module will go into much more detail on how to identify projects and tasks. There are some other features that you can learn about later if you wish, such as working in groups, using tags, and using templates. However, these added features are not essential and it is better to start with the basics.



Here is what Nozbe looks like when you click on “Add new project”:



Each project will have two or more tasks. Tasks are easily added after you click on the Project you have just added.

Look over the list of tasks for each project and identify which task will be the next action that will move the project toward completion. Click on the star beside that task. Do the same thing for all of your projects. These starred tasks will automatically appear in your Priority Task list. You are now well on your way to an organizational system that you can count on.

This approach to organization is discussed in more detail in the next section.

There are very good instructional videos on YouTube that will help you get Nozbe up and working for you. Nozbe be will synchronized across platforms, and tasks can be added easily "on the fly."

If Nozbe doesn't meet your needs then you might need to consider other digital solutions. Be sure to select the right application for the right purpose. One simple solution is staying with a single "ecosystem" such as Google. Using Google gmail, calendar and contacts will be more efficient and meet most people's needs. Also consider using voice to text applications built into your smartphone or tablet.

AI will be a game changer for people with ADHD. As of 2023, ChatGPT is already a useful tool for many things, however, you will still be further ahead if you have mastered currently available planning tools. There is also a very good chance that many of the technology solutions mentioned here will incorporate AI as they develop further versions. Virtual assistants will also become increasingly effective.

If using technology is not your preference, then you will need to use a paper planner. Any office supply store will have a variety available. Some of these planners will employ personal productivity methods. Franklin Covey has been around for many years. It incorporates Stephen Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." Other paper-based planners include Filofax and Day Timer. Look for one that you can always carry with you. It must contain pages for every day of the year so you can enter appointments and set up reminders. There also needs to be blank pages to add your lists of projects and tasks. You will be doing lots of crossing out and re-arranging so neatness doesn't matter!

Whether you use a paper planner or a computer-based one, the most important requirement is to get into the habit of entering every task and every appointment into your planner. Unless the task or appointment is entered into the planner, it does not exist and therefore will not happen.

Finally, and most importantly, you must consult your planner every day. You must check it first thing in the morning, and periodically throughout the day. For those of you comfortable with technology, you will set up alarms on your smartphone or smartwatch.

Once a week, you need to do a more extensive review. Use this time to work on scheduling all your projects and tasks. Structure is very important for people with ADHD. It is important to know your own strengths and limitations and schedule accordingly. Be sure to schedule more tedious or challenging tasks when your energy is higher. You should also schedule in some time for relaxation.

Hack: Use "time cracks" to do small, one-step tasks that you can fit in when there is a gap in your schedule. Keep a separate list of these tasks or projects in your task manager so that you can quickly take advantage of these unscheduled moments.

Here are some more tips and hacks:

1. Make sure the first step is manageable for the time you have set aside for it.

If you discover that you have "bit off more than you can chew", then simplify or reduce the task. Break it down into smaller steps. Keep in mind an important principle from the Getting Things Done approach (see below): for any project with multiple steps, just focus on the one next step, no matter how small, that will move the project forward to completion (and success!)

If you are having trouble breaking tasks down into small enough steps, here are some considerations based on behavioural psychology. (Please disregard this if it seems too theoretical, but it may be helpful for students or if your work requires managing multiple and complex projects.) For rewards and consequences to be effective for individuals with ADHD, they must be immediate and "salient" – that is, have a direct meaningful application for that person. In order to successfully identify small enough "chunks" of a task, you need to break the future into small pieces and keep the consequences close to

the event or situation and your response. In behavioural psychology terms, this is called the E-R-O system. E stands for events, which could be a research paper due or an upcoming project or exam. R is your response – what you actually have to do. And O is the outcome or consequence (preferably a reward). The challenge is to take baby steps and plan to have many E-R-O steps that are as small as necessary.

2. Tackle Procrastination

Procrastination can be a roadblock for many people. Sometimes procrastination results from taking on too many commitments and feeling overwhelmed. This is a real risk for people with ADHD who have difficulty assessing time required to accomplish tasks or get overly enthusiastic about taking on new projects (often before completing the last one or last several ones). You may also realize that a project that seemed “shiny and new” has lost its appeal and no longer really that relevant to you. Some of these projects can be abandoned especially if the only one impacted is you.

Sometimes anxiety can lead to procrastination. Are you feeling anxious because the project seems overwhelming? Revisit whether the project can be broken into smaller, more manageable parts. There may be some emotional roadblocks to consider. Using CBT to manage these “internal distractions” will be discussed later in this guide. If the project is related to your academics, then consider additional assistance or resources.

Consider other underlying reasons or issues for procrastinating:

- Fear of failure
- Perfectionism
- Need for control
- Energy depletion

3. Reward yourself - Motivation

It is very important to understand that in order to manage motivation, you must manage emotions. ADHD has a significant impact on emotional self-regulation which leads to being dependent on the environment around you for immediate consequences. There are often no immediate consequences for much of what we do. Students, for example, do not receive any immediate consequences for solving a problem on a piece of paper – nothing happens. In contrast, computer games provide continuous constant instant consequences.

To overcome this issue, have a "reinforcer" in mind for when you complete a task, especially a difficult or unpleasant one. Have your personal reward list at hand. Imagine the outcome – how you will feel and what will be different when the project is completed.

Make sure that you only reward yourself when you fully complete a step or project, otherwise you risk becoming distracted. Avoid using computer games as reward!

4. Do the hard stuff first

If you have several tasks, do the more difficult or boring ones first when you are fresh and enthusiastic. Then "reward" yourself with one that is more pleasant. This works best when you are in a high energy state.

5. Arrange to work with a partner

If this works better for you and is appropriate, then consider working with a colleague or friend.

6. Use your task management program to learn how to schedule and estimate time.

Nozbe has built in capacity to assign estimated time to accomplish a task, and to schedule tasks into your day. At the end of the day (or more frequently) check back and see how accurate your estimates were.

Make sure you consider adding some of these items to your schedule:

- Assign extra time for travel to appointments
- Add some flexible time to your schedule
- Consider any “transition times” between appointments or tasks
- Be sure to schedule in time for relaxation, exercise, going to a park or getting out in nature

7. Daily List

At the start of each day, write down a list of “must do today” items on a notepad sheet. Use an action verb with these items such as “call so and so,” “go to the bank” etc. Keep this list somewhere where you can quickly pull it out to remind yourself. This list will be a duplicate of what you have in your task manager app or journal. Cross off each item that you complete.

Use the 1-3-5 approach: have one key goal for the day and three other big tasks that must be done. The five smaller tasks left over should also be done that day, but if not, no big deal.

8. Prioritization

We often find ourselves focusing on only the most urgent tasks or on whatever seems most interesting or stimulating in the moment. This approach risks losing sight of "the big picture", or previous commitments.

Ask yourself if this project or commitment is really important or if it is what someone else expects of you rather than your own goals? If you take on this project, will you have to give up something? Ask yourself if you are living up to your own values?

Consider long and short-term goals, as well as priorities in different aspects of your life: work, family, friends, leisure, fitness, etc. "Work/Life balance" is an important issue that many of us struggle with.

Take some time to reflect on the bigger issues, considering long term goals. Consider 5-year goals, 10-year goals, or even longer planning horizons.

Using a task manager app such as Nozbe can help with organizing commitments based on your goals. This will involve identifying “Next Steps” and assigning dates to projects and tasks. If you have assigned a date to complete a certain task, it will automatically appear in your Priority Task list (be sure to assign a date a few days in advance of the due date to give yourself extra time).

The “urgency grid” discussed below might also be helpful.

9. Review your “Next Step” for each project

If you have too many “next steps” for the day, then decide which are the most important. Use the 1-3-5 method described above. For those tasks that you are not able to get to, be sure to re-assign another day or time to them. That way they you can be confident that they will appear on your priority list in time for any due dates.

10. Delegate

Consider asking for help. Could you delegate any of your tasks, or are there projects that someone else would join you on? Sometimes just talking through your struggles with someone else can be the best thing.

You may need to work as part of a team on projects at work or school. Or your “team” could be your partner or a group of friends. Using a task manager app such as Nozbe will allow you to streamline task assignment and communication. Sharing the workload will speed up successful completion and likely increase the motivation and reward. Check out the user guide and videos for Nozbe that go into much more detail. It is quite simple to put into practice and works much better than sending emails back and forth or playing endless phone tag.

11. Group Similar Tasks Together for Greater Efficiency

Once you have entered several projects and tasks, look over them and consider if you can be more efficient by doing similar tasks in the same time slot. Maybe these tasks require using similar tools or working in similar conditions or locations. In some planning systems this is called “context” or a “category.” Some examples of contexts include:

- phone calls
- shopping
- banking (includes doing online banking, updating accounting program, etc.)
- home repairs
- fitness program
- computer (when you are sitting at your desktop PC)
- at home – things that can only be taken care of at home
- errands
- at the office
- writing (e.g. reports, email correspondence, novels, etc)
- reviewing (studying for exams)

Add any context that has a meaning for you and helps group tasks in some meaningful way. In Nozbe, you can add a “category” to any task. This creates another layer of organization. With one click, you can sort all of your tasks by category, then when you are in that context, you can tackle the highest priority tasks for that situation or place.

Another tip is to have a category called “Urgent.” You can filter your task list with a single click to show only these items. You can also assign multiple categories to any task. For example, if you are in a setting where you can study effectively then select the appropriate categories for “studying” and “urgent.” You can then be sure that you are dealing with the most important tasks first.

Keep in mind, you don’t have to add a category to every task. Just use categories when you need to or when it makes most sense to be sure you can keep on top of your tasks and projects.

The Nozbe manual explains that categories are “like having an extra weapon in your arsenal, because they allow you to group tasks from different projects depending on where and with what tools they are meant to be accomplished.”

12. If it isn't in your planner, it is not going to happen

While it might seem overly rigid to "schedule your life," the result will be a greater sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in all areas of your life that are important to you.

13. Urgency Grid

If you need more help understanding prioritization consider using a 4x4 grid developed by Stephen Covey in his book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People":

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Highest priority	Assign a due date or context
Not Important	Are these tasks that other people consider urgent? Are you just putting out fires and not really accomplishing your goals?	Low priority

Another variation of this grid is called the “Eisenhower Matrix” but the basics are the same.

This grid will help you identify the tasks with the highest priority: important and urgent. Other tasks that are important but not urgent can be assigned a due date (and if appropriate, a context). Your task manager app will help with this. When the due date comes up (or maybe you set the due date a few days early), then the task will appear in your "Priority" list. This is the list you check every day, if not several times a day.

Hack: Use this grid to master anxiety. Are you stressed out because you feel overwhelmed with everything you think you need to do, like right now? Spend a moment deciding what items are a “manufactured emergency” or someone else’s priority. It is all too easy to get distracted by all these tasks, and wind up accomplishing none of your own priorities.

Tasks that are not important and not urgent could be delegated to others if possible. There are often tasks in projects that "would be nice to do someday.” Keep them in a separate list, and refer to it when you have a chunk of unscheduled time. In a task management app such as Nozbe, set up a Project labeled "someday".

14. Make Sure Your Goals are SMART Goals

Specific	Does your goal clearly state what you want to achieve? Use action verbs to define the goal. Do you need to break the goal into smaller, more readily achieved parts?
Measurable	How will you know if you have achieved your goal? What will you be doing more of or less of? What will be different?
Achievable	How can you be sure that you will succeed?
Realistic	Do you have what you need to accomplish this goal? Do you have time? resources? What challenges will there be and how can you address them?
Time Sensitive	Is there a deadline for this goal? Is it reasonable to achieve this goal in this time frame?

SMART goals can be used in all parts of your life – for academic goals, work-related goals, leisure goals, etc. SMART goals can be used for health problems and overcoming addictions. There is good research on the effectiveness of this approach.

Action Plan:

- ✓ Having a paper planner or a digital task manager along with a calendar or diary are probably the most important tools to have to master your ADHD and achieve your potential.
- ✓ Before moving on to the next module, be sure you have spent at least a few weeks mastering these tools.
- ✓ Get all your tasks and projects entered into your system.
- ✓ Start to identify what tasks and projects are a priority. Which ones are urgent?
- ✓ Identify your deadlines and enter them your calendar. This is the “hardscape” of your day.
- ✓ Make sure you follow a daily and weekly routine to check and update your planner/task manager and calendar

Module 5: Personal Productivity – Getting Things Done

Now you have learned some time management skills and are using a planner consistently. You are well on the way to becoming more organized and efficient. However, most people are faced with varying amounts of “stuff” to deal with. “Stuff” is anything that has your attention. It could be information related, or it could be appointments or commitments. Students will have stacks of stuff for each of their courses. You could have technical information related to your work. Or it could just be the day-to-day stuff that we all face in our lives, especially with what seems to be ever increasing complexity.

One of the best ways to tackle this issue is the personal productivity system called “Getting Things Done” (GTD) by David Allen. His book of the same name is easy to follow and will be helpful for people with ADHD to develop more skills beyond the Task Managers described above.

Following is a brief summary of the GTD approach and some suggestions on how to start implementing it. For more details, search YouTube for some introductory videos by David Allen. There is also a wealth of information on the GTD website, along with workbooks for sale and online courses to sign up for: gtdconnect.com and davidco.com. Also consider getting a hold of the book from your library or bookstore. The book has also been published in many different languages.

The goal of GTD is to feel focused and in control of the information, communication, and commitments you have. GTD talks about “mind like water” – calm and ready to take appropriate action when the next “ripple” comes along, free of distractions. This is a big ask for someone with ADHD but is achievable with practice.

People with ADHD have specific neurodevelopmental delays with certain thinking (cognitive) functions called executive functions. Dr. Russell Barkley explains that “ADHD is not a problem with knowing what to do; it is a problem with doing what you know – the performance part.” He recommends using an organizational system as a work-around or “hack.” The GTD approach meets this need to “get things out of your head and into a trusted system.”

First of all, consider what has your attention. There may be a rather overwhelming amount of “stuff” that might or might not require you to do something. Despite this, each “thing” needs to be dealt with in one of four ways:

- acted on immediately,
- scheduled for some future action,
- filed away in a “trusted system” for information (more about this later),
- delegated to someone else (if possible).

For each item, consider what is the “desired outcome”? And what is the next action – physical, visible action that will take you one step, however small, towards that desired outcome.

GTD outlines 5 steps to deal with “stuff”:

1. Collect – gather together all of the stuff and collect it in the trusted system you will be developing (which will be described below)
2. Process
3. Organize
4. Review
5. Do

Step 1: Collect

Every commitment you have, or unfinished tasks, or piles of information (physical or electronic), or emails to answer etc. represents an “open loop” that is occupying your thoughts and draining mental energy. By definition an open loop is something that requires some action to close or complete it.

If the amount of stuff seems overwhelming, consider whether there are commitments you can renegotiate, either with yourself or with others. Is this a project or task that you really need to do? Maybe consider being proactive and question the commitments and agreements you make. People with ADHD will underestimate the amount of time required for a project or task, which will inevitably lead to being over-committed.

The place where you collect all this stuff is an “inbox.” Everything that burdens your mind should go there. You might have several inboxes – email inbox, physical inbox (“in” tray), notes in your smartphone, a pile of paper scraps, etc. Try to limit your various inboxes and be sure you know where they all are.

Here is a suggestion for using just 5 inboxes:

Email inbox – when you have scheduled time to read emails, then quickly decide which ones you can respond to right away (two-minute rule). If you choose to reply later, then transfer them to a “For Later” folder in your email client. If the email requires action, transfer it to Nozbe (see below) or another task manager (paper or electronic). If it something to save, then transfer it to your trusted system (Google Keep, Evernote, file folder system, etc. – see below).

Physical Inbox – have a central drawer, container, file folder where you can put physical items that you can process later (or right away if it will take 2 minutes or less). Always carry a notepad or scrap of paper with you to write down important things, then put all of these notes in your physical inbox to process.

Nozbe Inbox – digital task managers will all have an inbox function. Just like a physical inbox, anything the comes to mind can be stored here and processed later. Nozbe is synchronized across platforms so if you are away from home or office, you can enter an item on your smartphone and then process it later on your desktop computer. If you have an email that requires action (a task) then you can send it directly to the Nozbe inbox. Siri or Google Assistant can also send a task directly to the Nozbe inbox.

Voice Memos – you might find it helpful to use the voice memo function on your smartphone to quickly dictate an idea or some information. You need to be sure to check your smartphone voice memo app regularly and transfer these items to your task manager or trusted system.

Computer download folder – you might also need to use this as an inbox for files or programs that you have downloaded from emails or web browsing. Again, this folder must be processed daily or weekly into actionable items or stored information in your trusted system.

Once you have pared down your stuff as much as you can, get it out of your head and into a trusted system. This system is at the core of GTD. Choose as few collection tools as possible. As described above, a task manager such as Nozbe will go a long way towards meeting this need. If you prefer a paper-based system, use a single journal that becomes the hub of your system. Or you might also use a file folder system, with a folder labeled Next Actions.

Whether you use a technologic option or a paper option, you will also need to have tools at hand to collect anything that comes up requiring your attention. We know from research that people with ADHD have a problem with “working memory”: the very short-term memory capacity to hold something in mind just long enough to do something with. For ADHD, this might only be a few seconds to a minute or so before it disappears. In order to compensate for this, try to use a visual substitute like lists, post-it notes, mind maps, and related technology. This engages a different brain circuit that will augment the working memory circuits

Always keep a small notepad with you and at most one or two others in different places where you often get brainstorm. Jot down a task or some information you need to keep the moment you think of it. But as soon as possible, transfer this to your hub. Most importantly, get these items out of your head and into a system. That way you can use your brain to process stuff instead of having stuff buzzing around your thoughts constantly. Emptying your collection system and getting stuff into your system does not necessarily mean finishing each of these items – but it does involve deciding what each of these items is and deciding what has to be done with it. You will define it and organize it in the next step.

Step 2: Processing

GTD outlines a decision tree to efficiently and quickly deal with all of this stuff:

First of all, determine “what is it”? More specifically, is this something that requires doing something – is it “actionable”?

Things that are not actionable are mostly documents that need to be stored somewhere so you can find them later when you need it. Technological solutions will provide more options for finding stuff, such as Google Keep, Evernote (fits in well with the GTD approach), OneDrive, etc. If you prefer paper options, or have some stuff that has to be kept physically, then a filing cabinet will be required. Use an A-Z system and have lots of file folders and labels.

For maximum efficiency, if possible, digitize your paper documents so you can access them anywhere – even if you have to keep paper copies for legal reasons. Be sure to use a password protected storage system (and consider 2-factor authorization as well) for any documents with sensitive or personal information. If you don’t have access to a dedicated scanner, then there are many useful apps for smartphones that do pretty much the same job. These apps will also sync to cloud-based storage systems automatically. Evernote is particularly good for this. For things like instruction manuals, you could also search the internet for an online version to store, then throw away the paper manual.

Are you a “piler” or a “filer”? What is your approach to organization? If you are a “piler” and have stacks of stuff everywhere, then the best approach may be to collect it all in one digital storage space. Then you can use the search capability of your digital storage solution to do the sorting for you. On the other hand, if you like to sort stuff, then after collecting everything digitally, apply meaningful tags.

For those paper copies that you must keep, consider sorting them into folders:

- House – purchase or rental contracts, warranty information
- Vehicles – proofs of purchase, registration
- Family – birth certificates, marriage certificate, passports, health insurance documents
- Achievements – diplomas, certificates
- Bills – bills of sale and warranties for more expensive items from the last 5 years
- Invoices – if you have business or tax records to submit to an accountant

There are many other possibilities depending on your requirements, or related to your business or profession. It is a good idea to get in the habit of starting this system as early as possible. For students, this means keeping all of your tuition and book expenses for income tax purposes.

The other common non-actionable stuff is trash – get rid of it! Make sure you shred it if it contains personal information.

Finally, there may be some items that you are not sure about or need more time at a later date to consider what to do about. If there is a specific date or deadline, then use the task manager to attach the date to the item so it comes up in your priority list at the appropriate time. If there is no particular deadline, then have a category for someday/maybe and “would be nice to do someday”.

Now you are left with actionable items. If it is a small task, especially if it can be completed in 2 minutes or less, do it now.

Is it a task that has a future deadline or due date? Then defer it and be sure to attach a reminder in your task manager. The reminder should appear in your priority list in advance of the deadline. Be sure you have allotted a realistic amount of time ahead to complete the task or project. Use a physical calendar (but be sure to have only one central calendar), or an online calendar such as Google to assign dates to these tasks. You also have to be sure to look at your calendar every day! Things that are on your calendar for the day are what is called the “hard landscape” of your day – the things that must happen.

You are now left with the projects or tasks that have your immediate focus. A project is anything that has more than one step. A project is also defined by the desired outcome. A project can be a large goal with multiple steps, or it can be a category of things you need to do.

As described above, break down the project into small, manageable steps. Then consider, what is the one single next step you can take to move the project forward.

Be careful that you don’t define something as a single-step task when in fact it is a project with multiple steps. Give a name to the project that reflects the goal but keep it concise. Tasks should be action verbs – what you actually physically need to do. List your projects in alphabetical order so you can find the project you need to work on. Some people prefer to list projects in order of urgency, but this might not be necessary if you use a task manager app such as Nozbe. While a paper system can be effective, using a digital tool is much more flexible and portable. Nozbe also allows you to attach comments to a task to provide some context or explanation. You can also add a checklist in the comments if this would be helpful. For example, if you have a single-step task but there are a few things you need to gather first, then a checklist might be helpful. You can also assign an expected time requirement and a due date for each task.

For example, if the task is “packing for a camping trip on Canada Day weekend”, you could have a checklist in the comments section with all of the things you want to remember to take along (also you can save the checklist in your trusted system for your camping trip next year – and then add everything you discovered on the trip that you wished you had taken!)

There are two kinds of projects:

- Goal-oriented projects – these projects have a concrete goal and once the goal is achieved, the project is completed and can be “crossed off”, deleted, or archived.
- Ongoing projects – these might reflect some aspect of your profession or your academics. For example, the author of Nozbe has an ongoing project called Marketing. The tasks will vary from time to time, but will fill up again as new ideas and commitments come in.

Nozbe allows you to assign colours to projects. This adds another layer of organization and will help with the processing stage that comes up next. You could assign colours to projects based on urgency or based on how close each project is to a deadline. Projects and tasks highlighted in red would require more immediate attention.

Nozbe also has labels that can be applied to groups of projects. This can be helpful to group similar projects together, or separate business, personal, and academic projects.

For more advanced users, Nozbe has templates where you can store a collection of tasks that re-occur regularly. There are some examples of these templates online at Nozbe.how.

There are only four things you have to track to become super-organized – only 4! These are your “primary action lists”:

- Projects – you need to have a list, either on paper or in your task manager such as Nozbe of all of your projects
- Next Actions – each project will have a next action
- Waiting For – this is a special category or project that makes sure you keep track of the open loops that are someone else’s responsibility, or maybe you are waiting for some resources or materials to arrive or be sent to you
- Calendar – this is where you track time or day specific actions such as meetings, appointments, exams, assignments due and other things that have to happen on a certain day

Emails require special attention. Make sure you schedule set times to deal with email rather than have your attention diverted every time a new email comes in. Quickly decide whether each email requires action or not. Nozbe and other task managers are set up to do a lot of the “heavy lifting” when it comes to sorting out email. If you are using a paper system, you will need to identify the appropriate action to take as above. Many emails can just be sent to trash. Other emails may contain useful information that can be filed away electronically or printed and stored in your filing system.

Step 3: Weekly Review

Once a week set aside a time where you are not likely to be interrupted or distracted and ensure all of your stuff from the past week has been processed. If you have collected information or action items on loose paper or in a journal you carry with you, then now is the time to transfer it to your system. Mark off any completed action items or projects – and plan to reward yourself appropriately. Review your projects. Are they still relevant? Review upcoming appointments for the next week.

Step 4: Do

Look over your list of projects and be sure that you identify which task for each project could be the “next action”. Which of the tasks associated with each project will get you moving towards your goal as quickly as possible? Look for “small victories” that give you a sense of accomplishment and help you gain some momentum.

Consider the following four steps to help decide how to get your tasks and projects accomplished:

1. Context – many action items have to be done in a particular setting and might require having some resources or tools at hand. Maybe the task can only be done at the office or when you are at home where you study and have a computer available.
2. Time Available – people with ADHD need to continue practicing estimating time for tasks and then tracking their accuracy at prediction. Pay close attention to considering how much time you really have available and whether the task you are considering can be completed in that time frame.
3. Resources – especially considering how much energy you have, including mental energy. Some actions require a great deal of creativity and mental energy, whereas others might require more physical energy.

4. Priority – what is the value of the action to you personally? Using the GTD system does not require assigning priorities to every item, but does recommend reviewing your own values and goals regularly to be sure the projects and commitments you have are aligned with what is important to you.

Those are all of the steps and elements of the GTD approach. This is a very brief summary and you will likely need to go into more detail, for example with the GTD book.

Action Item

Implementing the “Getting Things Done” approach is a big project. Make sure you can set aside enough time to do it and start with small steps. Start with collecting your “stuff”. This could take days or weeks. Start with the most important and time-urgent stuff, for example course materials for upcoming assignments or exams. When you have finished this step, move onto the next step. It gets easier as time goes on, and ultimately becomes almost an automatic habit.

Module 6: Distraction Control – Managing External Distractions

Managing internal and external distractions is a key issue for people with ADHD.

Dr. Barkley emphasizes that people with ADHD have less resistance to responding to distraction. More importantly, they have difficulty with “task re-engagement” after a distraction – getting back to what they are supposed to be focusing on. This is because of a problem with a special type of memory function called “working memory.” This is the information we have to hold in our thinking process long enough to do something with it. If you need further explanation of this, Dr. Barkley covers it in the video link in the first module above.

Set up a workspace that is relatively free of visual and auditory distractions. Avoid workspaces where television, music, or other people talking will distract you. Try using noise-cancelling headphones or listen to “white noise”. There are some types of music that help some people with ADHD focus. You might need to find a “special place” to work such as a library or a public place with a constant hum of background noise. Consider your style of work and what works best for you – then make sure you can arrange your work setting to meet your needs.

Hacks for Distraction Control:

- ✓ Noise cancelling headphones and apps
- ✓ Industrial hearing protection
- ✓ Apps to block social media for set periods of time, e.g. “Freedom”
- ✓ Focus music on YouTube, e.g. Focus@Will

Another form of distraction is social – when other people intrude on your need to have focus. In a work setting, this might be unavoidable, but consider some strategies to ensure that you have some uninterrupted time to work on your own work projects. This might require setting a schedule. There is always a constant stream of emails these days, so be sure to manage this appropriately. Often it is best to set a schedule to only check email once an hour or several times a day at designated times. Use technology to minimize other distractions, for example setting up voicemail. In the (very near) future, maybe there will be even more options with AI assistants!

Action Item – Self Care Check In

Now would be a good time to review your self-care. Make sure you are looking after yourself:

- Healthy, regular meals
- Limit caffeine, “junk food”
- Limit alcohol and other substance use
- Review sleep habits and sleep efficiency
- Schedule regular exercise
- Schedule daily relaxation time

Module 7: Distraction Control - Dealing with Emotional Distractors

Internal distractors include a wide range of emotional issues such as anxiety and depression. Anger and resentment will be covered as a separate topic.

Low self-confidence and depression are common results of repeated failure to meet expectations and can lead to feeling demoralized. There may be the thought "why bother even trying." If depression becomes severe enough to interfere with day-to-day functioning or is associated with suicidal thoughts, then seek urgent medical or mental health care.

Anxiety may be related to fear of failure and self-doubts. This may appear as perfectionism and a need for total control, which can make it very difficult to get started on tasks. Perfectionism will lead to difficulty getting started or completing tasks, since they can never be “good enough” to please that internal critic left over from childhood.

Emotional distractors can best be dealt with using cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT was first developed for the treatment of depression but has been modified to apply to a wide range of mental health and life problems.

As discussed previously in the sleep module CBT is based on the principle that emotions result from how we perceive situations in our life. Events and experiences will trigger thoughts that lead to an emotional response and often a behavioural response. This sequence often occurs so quickly that we are only aware of the feeling and not the preceding thought. Often the thoughts occur automatically and may follow certain repetitive patterns.

A good starting point to address these automatic thoughts and emotional reactions is to start a diary. CBT recommends starting with a 3-column diary to identify triggering events, automatic thoughts, and emotional responses. To start with, you might have to work backwards. You might first notice the emotion, and then note the trigger. With more self-reflection, you can then start to recognize the automatic thoughts.

Automatic thoughts often follow characteristic patterns. The following table describes some of the more common patterns. Do any of these patterns apply to you? As you look over this table, consider writing down examples of these “cognitive distortions” that you experience, and how much of a problem they are for you:

Cognitive Distortion		Examples that you might experience
All or nothing thinking	Also called perfectionism. Thinks are seen in black or white categories e.g., “if I don’t get an A on this assignment, I will never get into college”	
Overgeneralization	A single negative event is seen as an endless, often hopeless, pattern eg. “everything in my life is a mess and it will never get better”	
Selective Attention	Only dwelling on what is often one small negative detail	
Disqualifying the positive	Similar to selective attention. Overlooking positive aspects of a situation or experience, as “not counting.” For example, dismissing a complaint and thinking the other person is “just being nice.”	
Jumping to Conclusions	Coming to a negative conclusion without considering all of the information. There are two types: Mind reading – believing someone else is reacting negatively to you without checking it out Fortune-teller error – anticipating that things will turn out badly and making a decision as if the prediction is a for-certain fact.	
Personalization	Assuming that you are responsible for some event or someone’s reaction when in fact there is no evidence for coming to that conclusion	
“Should” statements	Telling your self you “should” or “must” do or feel something in order not to be punished or feel guilty.	
Catastrophizing	Assuming the worst possible outcomes if something happens or doesn’t happen	

Once you have recognized some common patterns, add a fourth column where you challenge the automatic thought. Start by identifying the relevant cognitive distortion. Sometimes just recognizing that it is a common thinking trap that many people with depression and anxiety experience will be very helpful in dismissing it. Consider alternative explanations or try looking at the issue from a different perspective.

Here are some other techniques:

- Ask yourself what is a more adaptive or rational response?
- Try being more fair or kind to yourself.
- What would you say to a friend who is in the same situation?
- What is the evidence that the thought is true?
- Is there an alternative explanation?
- What is the worst that can happen?
- Could I live through it?

- What is the best that could happen?
- What is the most realistic outcome?
- What is the effect of my believing the automatic thought?
- What could be the effect of changing my thinking?
- What steps could I take to do something about the triggering event, relationship, or situation?

After you have applied these arguments, how do you feel?

"Cognitive distortions" may have a common underlying theme. This is called a "core belief" in CBT terminology. People with ADHD may be vulnerable to feelings of depression and anxiety resulting from being criticized and demoralized in childhood because of the problems caused by ADHD – through no fault of their own. There may be core beliefs around feeling incompetent and “not good enough.” By repeatedly challenging cognitive distortions, the core belief you have about yourself might start to become less harsh.

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind, especially when you are having a difficult time, is to visualize the rewards – especially the long-term rewards. Consider the tangible benefits such as improved academic performance, promotion at work etc as well as the intangible benefits such as improved self-esteem and an increased sense of control over the direction your life is going in.

Keep in mind that CBT takes a lot of practice before you can expect to notice changes in your emotional reactions, and even longer before you might notice changes in how you feel about yourself. The gains you make could well have life-long benefits in many areas of your life.

Action Item:

Doing CBT on your own can be challenging. Here are some online resources that you might find helpful:

- CBT Skills Group: <https://cbtskills.ca/>
- PathwaysBC.ca – start your search with your home community and then click the tab for “Information Handouts, Videos & Websites” for some excellent workbooks and handouts. You can also search for therapy programs in your community.
- Centre for Clinical Interventions (Australia) has some excellent modules: <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself>

Many clinical counsellors and therapists will offer CBT, but a generally require a fee.

Module 8: Dealing with oppositional feelings

Many people with ADHD have experienced a long history of demands and expectations from other people in their lives such as teachers and parents. Through no fault of their own due to ADHD these demands could be difficult or even impossible to achieve. This can lead to persistent feelings of resentment and resistance as an adult. Anger is an under understandable reaction to frequent criticism

for something that is not under your control. There may be a sense of injustice which could become directed against those who are perceived to be (and actually are) authority figures. All these issues could interfere with job and academic performance and have an impact on your relationships. These feelings could even come up as you work on some of the skills in this program.

Self-awareness is an important first step. If there is someone you trust in your life, or if you have a therapist who you feel has a good understanding of you, they might help you become aware of repeated patterns in your life. Ask yourself if you often feel secretly (or openly) anger when you have demands or restrictions placed on you. Does it feel that you are being imposed on?

Try using the CBT approach by tracking triggers, thoughts, and feelings or behaviour.

Here is an example of how to use the 4-column method to help analyze and challenge thoughts:

Situation	Thoughts	Feelings	Helpful Alternative Thought
e.g your partner criticizes you for being “messy”	“they are just like my parents, never happy with anything I do”	Anger	“Maybe it would be nice to be able to find things more easily if I tidied my room...and I think it would also be a nice thing to do for my partner. I just have to put aside my feelings from the past because it is not the same as when I was a kid”
You receive a negative performance review at work	“I did the best I could. They just don’t appreciate my skills. I should just quit this job and walk away.”	Disappointment, frustration	Try listing out the pros and cons of the job. What are the risks and benefits of quitting? On balance what is the best decision for your long-term well being and your life goals?

There are many ways of challenging or re-framing negative thoughts. Ask yourself “what is the evidence that this thought is true?” “Am I self-sabotaging (shooting myself in the foot).” It is often very important to consider your own goals and priorities and consider whether resisting a task is really in your own best interests? Sometimes “labelling” a negative thought can be helpful, for example, if the thought is a flashback to childhood criticism and labelling it as an “authority figure” issue may help you as an adult to put it behind you as no longer relevant. Always keep in mind the long-term outcome for getting something done and working towards short and long-term goals. Visualize what that outcome would look and feel like. This is covered in more detail in the next session on activation and motivation.

If you are feeling 'stuck' on this issue, consider talking to a therapist.

Module 9: Emotional Impulsivity and Deficient Emotional Self-Regulation

Closely related to the issue of oppositional feelings is emotional impulsivity. Very likely, emotional impulsivity is the direct cause of oppositional issues starting in childhood.

The concept of emotional impulsivity has been under-emphasized and was even removed from consideration as a criteria in DSM5. Dr. Barkley stresses that emotional impulsiveness is a core feature

of ADHD and can have serious negative effects on a person's function. It can also worsen other ADHD symptoms.

Deficient emotional self-regulation is the inability to regulate responses to certain emotions and to avoid overreacting to life situations.

What is involved in emotional self-regulation:

1. Inhibit inappropriate behaviour related to strong negative or positive emotion
2. Self-soothe and down-regulate physiological arousal
3. Refocus attention away from the emotional trigger (distraction). Stop paying attention to what's bothering us, and think about other ways of interpreting the provocation (reappraisal)
4. Organize your emotions for coordinated action consistent with goals and long-term welfare—new emotions or healthier emotions

Features of emotional impulsivity include:

- Quickness to anger
- Easily excitable
- Low frustration tolerance
- Impatience
- Irritability – feeling “grouchy”
- Lability – frequent mood changes and reactivity
- Difficulties with accurately interpreting the emotions of people around you, often interpreting them as hostile when they aren't
- General difficulty adapting emotional intensity to the situation or difficulty adapting your emotions and reactions to what you want them to be or what would be appropriate for the situation, social norms, or your values

“Emotional coherence” is another issue. People with ADHD may have difficulty getting in touch with all the nuances of their emotions. It is like an orchestra with many instruments and trying to distinguish each one from another, e.g. distinguishing between frustration and disappointment, or anger and fear. There may also be a disconnect between physical symptoms and emotional state—either under or over regulation.

Displaying emotions much more quickly and intense expression of negative emotions will lead to social problems and problems in the workplace.

Brain research has identified the connections and “circuits” that account for the difficulties people with ADHD have in regulating emotions. The connections from and to the frontal lobes and the other emotional centres of the brain such as the amygdala can be shown to be affected by ADHD.

This kind of brain research provides further solid evidence that ADHD is definitely a neurodevelopmental disorder. It also means that the cause of emotional dysregulation is biological and is a core symptom of ADHD (even if the DSM committee doesn't think so!)

Emotional dysregulation in ADHD reliably predicts a range of issues that will be covered in Module 10 on “Risk Assessment.”

How do you distinguish emotional impulsivity (EI) and deficient emotional self-regulation (DESR) from other mental health problems such as bipolar disorder? It is important to note that with ADHD, there is a failure to regulate normal emotion, as opposed to a mood disorder such as manic depressive which involves abnormal emotional excess (or deficit).

In ADHD, emotions are:

1. Very short duration—as opposed to more persistent mood changes in depression or bipolar
2. Specific to a situation
3. Rational - reasonable
4. Provoked—other people can understand what upset you

Up to 20% of people with ADHD can have a concurrent mood disorder. This can be hard to sort out. Please talk to your physician or mental health professional if you are experiencing more persistent mood changes or mood changes that are not like the ones described above.

Medication treatment of ADHD will improve symptoms of emotional dysregulation. Psychostimulants will “dampen down” the under-regulated emotions centres of the brain. Atomoxetine, a non-stimulant medication for ADHD, works differently by improving function of executive control of emotions. Clonidine and guanfacine are also non-stimulant medications that modulate executive control. There is also some research on combining an SSRI antidepressant such as citalopram with a psychostimulant. Because different medications for ADHD do different things, careful combinations are sometimes the best approach.

ADHD medications will help, to some extent, with some of the life complications due to emotional dysregulation. However, many of these problems will also need additional interventions or therapy. CBT and mindfulness will help, especially in combination with medication.,

Here are some general principles and tips to manage emotional dysregulation:

1. Look after yourself—diet, exercise, sleep, all help build and maintain resilience (include habits—drinking, smoking)
2. Social Support
 - Choosing relationships more carefully, especially positive ones
 - Avoid isolation
 - Search out peer support—you don’t have to go it alone. Find a safe place to be around people who “get it”, and especially who “get you”
3. Stress Management and Coping Skills
 - Either reduce stresses in your life (A.K.A. commitments) or improve coping skills
- 3.1 Anticipatory coping
 - Often, we face recurrent issues such as difficult relationships. Being aware and being prepared may help reduce your emotional reaction.
- 3.2 Self-talk

- Re-framing, reappraisal of a situation. Consider alternative explanations, especially toward more benign ones.
- “It takes 7 positive comments to neutralize 1 negative comment” - monitor your self talk.

3.3 Shifting attention

- Change your focus to some other less activating thought.
4. Address Trauma & adversity
 - You might need to discuss this with a mental health professional, especially if you have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACE)
 5. “Brute” willpower
 - “Biting your tongue” or “chewing glass” metaphorically and not saying or reacting to something that makes you feel annoyed or frustrated. And remember it is your interpretation, what went on inside your head, that made you feel that way. You think it so you can unthink it”
This takes a lot of practice, especially when the emotional reaction is very strong (as it often is).
 6. Enlist someone else to help you through
 7. Take some positive steps to either problem solve or to de-escalate your emotional reaction, eg mindfulness. This could also mean deciding to make a major life decision such as leaving a toxic situation—but be sure this is a carefully considered plan and not an impulsive reaction.

Try to focus on one issue at a time. Have a plan on how you will tackle the issue, and anticipate and plan for situations and triggers. Be kind to yourself. This is not going to be easy, and you will need repeated practice. Reward yourself for small gains.

CBT has been well studied as an approach to improving emotional coping. Adding mindfulness is showing some promising early results. You will also need to find a counsellor or therapist you are comfortable working with.

Most importantly, your chances of success are much improved by the practice you do outside of therapy sessions. This is often called “homework.”

Hack: If you object to the term “homework” re-label it as “self-work.”

Another evidence-based approach is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). This focuses on self-compassion and learning to accept and tolerate emotional reactions while at the same time, committing to self-analysis and making constructive changes. One of the leading experts in ACT is Dr. Steven C. Hayes, PhD. His website has some very helpful tools and helpful podcasts (www.stevenchayes.com/tools). There are many other self-help books, but often working with a qualified professional will be more effective.

Action Item:

Managing emotions and emotional dysregulation is often a very challenging issue. If this is causing difficulties for you in your life and in your relationships, consider seeing a counsellor or therapist. Go to the Pathwaysbc.ca website to search for options that meet your needs.

Self-care and mindfulness (the next module) are basic tools that you should try to apply daily.

6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness on its own or combined with CBT has been shown to be a very effective approach for a wide variety of conditions and to help manage stress in general. Simply put, mindfulness is a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you are sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Jon Kabat Zinn, one of the leading experts in mindfulness, defines it as “what comes out of paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, as if your life depended on it, non-judgmentally...nothing else than awareness.”

Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress.

An excellent starting point is the UCLA Mindful App available for free at:

<https://www.uclahealth.org/programs/marc/free-programming-resources/ucla-mindful-app>

Try to set aside 10-15 minutes (or more) each day. Pick a time of day that is likely to be free of interruptions and when you have a better chance of sustaining your focus. Even if your attention drifts off frequently, mindfulness encourages non-judgmental acceptance. Just note to yourself that you have drifted off, and then come back to focus on breathing and imagery. Having an audio guide is very helpful. Eventually you may be able to do without the audio sometimes and apply mindfulness in a wide range of settings. For example, taking a few minutes to focus on breathing and relaxation during an exam will help with your attention.

You might also consider adding a “mantra” to your meditation – a helpful thought. Dr. Barkley suggests “everything comes to those who can wait” (from Rabelais). This might help build in a pause between the event and what you plan to do about it. In ADHD, there is no pause. By learning how to pause a moment, then you can engage other executive brain functions. You might visualize solutions using your “mind’s eye” by recalling previous experiences. Looking back in hindsight will lead to thinking ahead (foresight). Use the pause for self-talk. The voice in your head will help control yourself. Because of ADHD, these abilities will be delayed, often until well into adulthood, and will require conscious effort to learn.

The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD: An 8-Step Program for Strengthening Attention, Managing Emotions, and Achieving Your Goals by [Lidia Zylowska MD](#) (Trumpeter Books, 2012) provides much more detailed instructions. The book also includes a link to downloadable audio files to help get you started.

Hack: Dr. Zylowska’s mindfulness audio tracks are available for free online at

<https://soundcloud.com/shambhala-publications/sets/mindfulness-prescription-for-adult-adhd->

[excercises](#) Shambhala publications has even more meditation audio tracks available by other authors if you are interested.

Dr. Lidia Zylowska is an assistant clinical professor and worked at the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center in Los Angeles. Her book is based on extensive clinical work and research that confirmed that people with ADHD can learn and benefit from mindfulness. You can also search YouTube on “Lidia Zylowska mindfulness” for an excellent overview.

The following is a summary of Dr. Zylowska’s approach.

The 8 steps will likely be helpful for anyone with ADHD:

1. Become More Present – Attention and the Five Senses
2. Focus the Wandering Mind – Mindful Breathing
3. Direct and Anchor Your Awareness – Mindfulness of Sound, Breath, and Body
4. Listen to Your Body – Mindfulness of Body Sensations and Movement
5. Observe Your Mind – Mindfulness of Thoughts
6. Manage Your Emotions – Mindfulness of Feelings
7. Communicate Skillfully – Mindful Listening and Speaking
8. Slow Down to Be More Effective – Mindful Decisions and Actions

You might notice that the 8 areas above address all the issues that Dr. Russell Barkley describes as core features of ADHD. These are all related to what are called “executive functions” and self-regulation. For some people, especially those who cannot tolerate or do not wish to take medications, this approach can help compensate for many of the effects of ADHD. If you choose to pursue ADHD medication, then it may be advisable to wait until your meds are stabilized before starting (although doing some basic breathing exercises would be a great any time).

Dr. Zylowska’s definition of mindfulness: “The essence of mindfulness is intentionally bringing your attention to the present moment with openness and curiosity.” Mindfulness also involves self-compassion and being non-judgmental – turning off the “inner critic.” Dr. Zylowska call this “mindfulness=heartfulness.”

Getting started with mindfulness does not require a big-time commitment, but you will get a lot more out of it by daily practice. There are two ways to practice – formal and informal. You will need to start with regular, scheduled practice using some kind of a guide. The free audio guide available online at the UCLA website is a great start. Build this into your daily routine. You only need to dedicate 5 to 15 minutes to be effective.

Hack: Use your day planner and task manager to schedule the two most important regular activities to manage your ADHD – daily formal mindfulness practice, and daily entry in your sleep diary to ensure regular sleep habits and improved sleep efficiency. You might also set up an alarm reminder on your smartphone or watch.

Once you have mastered the basics of breath control then you can also do informal practice. This simply means being mindfully aware while doing your daily activities.

Getting Ready for Mindfulness

Formal mindfulness is usually done in a sitting position. Find a comfortable location either on a chair with good back support or sitting on a cushion on the floor. Imagine your body being supported by your spinal column connecting you to the earth – “grounding” you. Notice the weight of your body pressing down through your buttocks. This will ensure your posture is more upright rather than slouched back.

Inevitably your attention will wander away from the mindfulness practice. This happens to everyone, even people without ADHD. When you become aware that your focus has drifted away, try to label the experience. Where did your thoughts go? Was it something you are worrying about? Or some future event you are planning for? Some examples of labels include “worrying”, “planning”, “feeling impatient”, or just “thinking.” You might tell yourself “everyone’s mind can wander.” Labeling is a simple technique that describes what is going on in a completely non-judgmental way. It then allows you to return to focus on breathing. Labeling is an effective tool in cognitive behaviour therapy: “if you can name it, you can tame it.”

Eight Step Program

Step 1 – Attention and the Five Senses

Before learning breath control, a good starting point is to intentionally focus on sensations in the present moment. Being intentional means making a voluntary choice. This is also called a “top down” approach meaning that you are actively directing what you will focus on. People with ADHD are challenged to pay attention to the right thing at the right time. Therefore, strategies that improve your ability to sustain focus will help you cope with ADHD.

To start this exercise, be seated comfortably in a supported position with your hands resting on your lap or belly. Your eyes can be closed or if you prefer open, let your gaze rest on one spot at a comfortable distance. Now start paying attention to the sensations from your environment. Go through your senses one at a time. Start with visual. Look around you and notice any interesting colours, lines, or objects. You might experience different thoughts or judgments but shift to an attitude of observation – “just seeing.”

Move onto hearing and notice any sounds around you. Notice any moments of silence between the sounds. Again, don’t get caught up in thinking about the sounds – “just hearing.” Be open to even unpleasant sounds.

Now notice any smells around you. If there are no noticeable smells, appreciate the absence of smell. You could also have some objects at hand that have a scent. Be creative. If appropriate, many people use incense to create a meditation or mindfulness focus.

Consider having something available to taste. You could have a small piece of chocolate or something to drink that has a flavour.

Finally, spend a few moments focusing on touch. Are there any interesting textures on objects nearby? If your hands are resting on your lap, notice any sense of pressure there. Do you have a pet or a comforting object (“stuffy”)? Touch them with full awareness of the present moment.

Some people with ADHD have a tendency to sensory overload. If this applies to you, be particularly gentle in your approach to this exercise. Choose an environment with minimal sensory stimuli and focus on soft sounds, smells, and textures.

Now that you are starting your mindfulness practice, build this into your daily routine. Use your day planner and task manager to set aside dedicated time. To start with, just 5 minutes a day is all you need. Over the next few weeks, build this up gradually.

Mindfulness Hack: You don't need to spend hours and hours meditating or doing mindfulness. Build up to at least 12 minutes at a time (or longer if you like). Later you will learn about combining mindfulness with every-day activities such as going for a walk with intention.

Step 2 – Focus the Wandering Mind

Using breathing to anchor mindfulness is the secret to shifting from a state of stressed and reactive to relaxed and grounded. When stressed, our breathing becomes shallow and more in the chest. When relaxed, breathing is slower and comes from the diaphragm (belly breathing). By focusing on “belly breathing” we can induce the relaxation response. This in turn, will allow for sustained focus.

You might need some coaching to learn belly breathing. For others, it comes fairly. To start with, pay attention to your breathing. Breathe in through your nostrils and notice the feeling of the air flowing in. Breathe out through your mouth and notice the air across your lips. Then shift to focusing on your chest and abdomen. Is there some movement of your abdomen as you breathe? Put one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. Focus on moving the belly outward as you breathe in while not moving the chest.

Now you are ready for an audio guide. The UCLA Mindfulness app has some options to focus on breathing, or search for a YouTube guide. Sit in comfortable position, either on the floor supporting your buttocks on a cushion or sit on a chair in an upright relaxed posture. Consciously set your intention: “I am going to focus on my breath now.” Take a normal breath in and then breath it out completely to empty your lungs. Now draw the air in using your diaphragm, filling your lungs from the bottom. Only use your belly, and not your chest. Focus on the sensation of your belly moving in and out. Once that is automatic, shift your focus to your nostrils and your mouth. If your mind wanders, that is okay. Just gently remind yourself to return back to the breath. If your mind wanders off one hundred times, bring it back one hundred times!

If you need further help with focus, try counting as you breath in and out. Count “one” as you breathe in and “two” as you breathe out. Go from 1 to 10, then start back at 1. You could also mentally repeat a helpful word such as “relax” or “calm” as you breathe out. Some people can use imagery, a mental picture, to help maintain focus. For example, imagining ocean waves coming and going as you breath in and out.

Breath Control Hack: Mindfulness is just as much about *returning* to breathing as *staying* with breathing. Making a conscious effort to return your attention will be very good practice to refocus in other aspects of your life.

Once you have mastered the basics, try applying breathing while doing daily activities. Do this with intention. For example, go for a walk with the intention of practicing breath awareness. If you are doing a task, for example working on the computer, pause for a few minutes of mindful breathing.

For this step, set the goal of practicing mindful breathing for 5 minutes each day. Use an audio guide if available.

Step 3 – Direct and Anchor Your Awareness

The intention of mindfulness is to train our focus and alertness. This is an important difference from meditation or “getting into the zone.” While it helps to be relaxed when doing mindfulness, that is not the primary objective. This point is especially important for people with ADHD who need to gain control over their intention to focus.

A key point is to match your attention with a previously set intention. Intention is making a conscious choice based on your goals and values. What is the ultimate long term goal that you hope to achieve? Or maybe there are some steps along the way to this goal that you will focus on with intention.

Start to practice setting intention with something a bit easier though.

All that you need to do is set aside 5-10 minutes for a mindfulness exercise that has a specific focus you have decided on in advance – an “anchor.” This puts you “in the driver’s seat” of your attention. Practice staying with this anchor until you consciously decide to pick another one.

For this exercise, you will focus on sounds. Set your intention to bring awareness to sounds around you. There might be sounds inside the room and outside the room. Allow each sound to just come to you without giving any thought to what each sound is from or why it is happening. While you maintain this focus, continue to engage in the breathing technique you have learned. Whenever you notice your attention wandering off, label it as “wandering” or “daydreaming” and gently return to the intended focus. After a few minutes of focus on the anchor, set your intention to notice your breath. Gently rest your attention on the sensations as you breathe in and out. Notice the flow of air in through your nostrils and out through your mouth. Notice your belly moving in and out. Continue this for a few minutes. Next shift your focus to body sensation. Notice any feelings coming from within your body. You might notice a feeling of restlessness. Be curious about such feelings. You might want to label the feeling, simply mentally noting “restless.” Notice any feeling of pressure where your body contacts the chair or the floor. Continue this for a few minutes then end the meditation.

STOP Practice

You can continue to use this approach in your daily life. Think of sounds, breath, and body sensations as your three main mindfulness anchors. Any time you have a few minutes for mindfulness or especially when you need to get yourself settled, then apply the STOP technique:

S -Stop (or pause)

T – take a breath and relax

O – Observe in the present moment

Notice any sounds around you

Engage in slow belly breathing

Notice any body sensations – any muscle tension that you can let go of

P-Proceed

What is my intention – what is the conscious direction I need to go in at this present moment

If you have paused in the middle of an activity, is this something you wish to continue?

Continue applying these techniques in different settings. Go for a walk in a peaceful place. Notice the sounds around you and pay attention to your breathing. If you can’t get outside, the website www.peacefulwalks.com simulates the sounds you might encounter on a walk outside.

Step 4 – Listen to Your Body

All of us can get so busy or stressed that we ignore what is happening inside our bodies. People with ADHD especially can struggle with uncomfortable sensations such as restlessness, low energy, muscle tension, or pain. Sometimes restlessness or vague discomfort may be a message from our bodies that signal an unconscious issue. This speaks to mind-body connections.

The first exercise is a body scan. Check the UCLA app for an audio guide to do this or do it on your own. A body scan is best done lying down so you can focus on the feel of your body being pulled down by gravity. Use pillows and blankets to ensure that you are warm and comfortable. Start with deep breathing. Close your eyes or keep them half-closed focused on a distant spot.

Start the body scan by focusing on your forehead. Relax any feeling of tension. Then make sure your lips and jaw are relaxed. Your lips should be just slightly apart and jaw hanging loose. Think of your tongue resting on the floor of your mouth. Next are the shoulders. This is often an area of built-up tension and will need extra attention to relax completely. Work your way down each arm in turn from the shoulder down to the wrist and the fingers. All of these muscles should feel loose and relaxed. Stretch out your fingers, then let them relax back to a neutral position. Next, shift to your back. Notice the feeling of pressure where your back rests of the mattress or padding. Move to the chest and abdomen working from top down noticing any sensations. You might notice some chest and abdomen movement as you breathe in and out. Now notice each leg in turn. Notice the pressure where your leg rests on the pad. Let go of any muscle tension. Then shift to the other leg. Finally focus on each foot in turn. Now that you have relaxed all of the muscles in your body, spend a few minutes just focusing on your breathing. Enjoy the pleasant feeling of warmth and relaxation throughout your body. If you notice some tension re-appearing, just let it go. Relax the muscles again. If your attention wanders off, just notice that without judgment and come back to the relaxation and deep breathing. Continue this for as long as you wish but try for at least 12 minutes.

The full body scan is an excellent mindfulness exercise to do several times a week. There are several other variations of applying mindfulness to mind-body awareness. For example, mindful walking is a traditional practice in meditation. Slow the pace of your walking and pay attention to sensations in the moment. Notice the feeling of your feet connecting with the ground. Notice how your arms move. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your feet. Also spend a few minutes focusing on breathing as you walk. Walking meditation can also be combined with self-talk and imagination. You could imagine the moving your foot forward symbolizes starting something new, advancing your goals and intention toward the future.

Mind body can be accessed through music and dance if that is something that appeals to you. Yoga is of course very much a mind body practice along with other movement-based approaches such as Pilates or Tai Chi. Mind-body awareness can be incorporated into any aerobic exercise, especially less vigorous activities.

Mind body is a two-way street. You might discover as you become more aware of body sensations that there is a shift in how you feel and think. It also one more tool to learn how to focus your attention, and to match attention with intention.

There is a lot of research of the value of mindfulness for managing pain and restlessness. There is a saying in mindfulness that “pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.” By accepting the pain in a non-reactive, non-judgmental way, suffering can be minimized. This approach helps move us away

from overidentifying with the discomfort (“my pain” vs “the knee pain”) or catastrophizing (“it will never end”, “I am powerless”). As you focus on the pain, the feeling and thoughts might get worse. Notice these thoughts and label them, then accept that they are “simply thoughts.” Then shift your attention to a comfortable spot on your body or shift to your breathing. This will take some practice but the results can be very significant.

Working with restlessness is much the same. Restlessness can be a common problem for people with ADHD. Notice the restlessness with curiosity and acceptance. Apply a neutral, non-judgmental label, simply noting “here is restlessness.” Then shift your attention to something that is more comfortable like your breathing or sounds in the environment. You might go back and forth between the comfortable focus and the restlessness. Do this with intention. This will help you achieve your goal of mastery over your attention. You can also consider other techniques to manage restlessness such as “fidget spinners” or doodling.

Step 5 – Observe Your Mind

Many people with ADHD have a restless or busy mind. Sometimes this can be helpful and leads to all sorts of creative ideas. However, it can also be distressing and make it difficult to stay on track. With ADHD, ideas often jump from topic to topic or get sidetracked. Other people with ADHD can get stuck in their thinking. Accurate self-perception is often difficult, and people with ADHD may under or over-estimate their capabilities.

Mindfulness teaches a different way to relate to our thoughts. Rather than considering the content of the thoughts, watch the flow of thinking. Imagine your thoughts as if they were clouds floating across the sky or an everchanging stream. This can decrease the tendency to get caught up in unhelpful ruminations and negative self-talk. Thought become detached and externalized.

Practice using an audio guide that focuses on “Mind Like a Sky” (search on YouTube). Assume a relaxed posture. Close your eyes and notice your breathing. Then imaging a blue sky with clouds floating gently across it. Notice your thoughts and feelings as if they were clouds coming and going. As you imagine the clouds drifting across, label them without judgment or personalizing – “just a worry”, “just sadness.” Notice that some clouds drift away more slowly, or maybe they come back again. They may appear dark and heavy. Notice the space between the clouds. This is the space of open awareness where you can observe your mind without being pulled in any direction. Observe your reactions with openness and curiosity. You might even have a sense of playfulness as you do this exercise.

There are other variations of this approach such as imagining you are observing a flowing river and thoughts and feelings float by like leaves in the water.

If this exercise brings up strong emotions that interfere with your ability to let thoughts drift away, then go to the next section on Manage Your Emotions. Later you can come back to Manage Your Thoughts.

Approach judgmental and self-critical thoughts in the same way. Just notice the negative self-talk and label them “just thoughts.” Step back from the thoughts and shift your focus to breathing. You might become aware of an emotion that is fueling the negative thinking such as shame. Consider with intention having an attitude of self-compassion at that moment. For example, if you are dwelling on some mistake or embarrassing interaction, you could tell yourself “tomorrow is another day.” By the next day, the issue might well have been forgotten or you will have a chance to correct the issue next time and move on. You could also consider how you might feel if a friend was struggling with a similar

issue. Consider treating yourself with the same compassion that would for someone else. Often, we are kinder and more supportive towards others than we are toward ourselves.

Be aware of “mind traps” or “cognitive distortions.” These are the same mental traps that are discussed in the section on CBT:

All-or-nothing thinking – everything is either all good or all bad

Blaming – blaming others or blaming oneself

Magnifying – thinking of the worst possible outcome, catastrophizing

Minimizing – overlooking facts or discounting your own limitations

Making assumptions - “mind reading” other people’s intentions without checking it out

“Shouldy” thinking – setting rigid and usually harsh rules

There are many other thinking traps that we can fall into. The first step is to recognize what we are doing. CBT teaches us to label the thought and then question it. Use the STOP technique described previously:

S – stop

T – take a breath

O – observe your thoughts non-judgmentally with curiosity

P – proceed with intention

This can take some the intensity away from the negative self-talk and allow to you focus on breath and mindful non-judgmental acceptance. Mindful-based CBT is a very effective approach to many problems that we all experience, and especially to many of the issues with ADHD.

Step 6 – Manage Your Emotions

Dr. Russell Barkley defines ADHD as having two components: difficulties with executive functions such as working memory, and difficulties with impulse control. Hyperactivity is a problem due to lack of physical impulse control. Impulse control can also affect emotional control also.

A study by Dr. Barkley in 2010 showed that up to 86% of adults reported some problems with emotional control such as:

- Chronic impatience
- Being quick to anger
- Being easily frustrated
- Overreacting
- Being easily excited
- Losing their temper
- Being touch or easily annoyed

Problems with emotional control have significant effects on relationships and friendships and can cause difficulties at work or school. Often people with ADHD struggle with emotional impulsivity and emotional sensitivity and insecurity. This can lead to further overreacting.

There are two key elements to managing emotions:

- How we understand and relate to our emotions
- Mindfulness based approaches that encourage non-judgmental and positive acceptance

Understanding emotions requires having words to describe emotional states and becoming aware of the sequence of events that leads up to an emotional reaction. This is also the core technique of cognitive behaviour therapy. You might first become aware of a feeling state, feeling “upset.” The next step is to try to identify the specific emotion, then identify the event or situation that triggered the emotion. This could also be internal – a thought that came to mind that was upsetting. If the trigger was an external event, then you need to identify what was going through your mind at that moment.

This process will take practice, but the goal is to be able to step back and watch emotional reactions without necessarily acting on them. Mindful observation will help with this process.

Another key point is becoming aware that emotions will often have a sudden intense onset, then subside. There may be a more prolonged residual phase where your thoughts and feelings will still be coloured by the emotion. Being aware of this “refractory period” will help achieve better control over your responses.

Mindfulness practice will help with acceptance of one’s emotional responses because it encourages us to be nonjudgmental.

Use the RAIN technique to practice dealing with difficult feelings:

R – recognize and label the feeling you are experiencing

A – accept what you notice even if you don’t like the feeling or experience

I – investigate the feeling – are there physical sensations? What are the thoughts going through your mind? Are there any other associated feelings?

N – non-identify. Practice a non-judgmental acceptance, and be kind to yourself

Using the RAIN technique gives us a chance to ask ourselves:

- Do I want to stay with the feeling or do something to diminish it?
- Do I ignore the feeling (or the person that provoked it)?
- Do I respond?
- If I respond, when and how do I do it?

Loving-kindness mindful meditation can be helpful to deal with painful emotions such as shame and despair by promoting attitudes of self-compassion, patience, and forgiveness. There are many loving kindness meditations available by searching on YouTube. If this is still a challenge for you, consider talking to a therapist or counselor for more guidance. If you are a spiritual person, then incorporate your faith beliefs into your meditation.

You might also need to have some additional tools to manage to intense emotions, especially when you are not able to use mindfulness practice. Here are a few distress tolerance skills:

- Distraction – push the distressing situation out of your mind by getting busy or by doing something with a strong sensation such as taking a cold shower, eating a spicy food, or smelling an intense scent
- Taking care of your physical health – making sure that you eat properly, get enough sleep, exercise regularly and avoid excessive drugs and alcohol that can make your emotions extreme
- Doing something that comforts or relaxes you – talking to a supportive friend or relative, spending time with your pet, using soothing imagery, reading an encouraging book, writing in a journal, going for a walk in natural surroundings

Step 7 – Communicate Skillfully

ADHD can contribute to communication challenges such as:

- Tuning out part of a conversation
- Being told you “don’t listen”
- Forgetting what was said
- Feeling lost in a conversation
- Interrupting
- Impatience in a conversation
- Talking too much or too loudly
- Blurting things out and saying things you later regret
- Going off topic or providing too much detail

Try using the STOP technique to become more aware of your conversations:

S – Stop the response you intended to make

T – Take a mindful breath

O – Observe how the conversation is going and where you are in the process. Ask yourself:

- Am I focused on the speaker and the original question or topic?
- What are my inner thoughts and feelings?
- What is my attitude right now?
- Is there an urge to interrupt when the other person is speaking?

P – Process either by continuing as you were or by making a course correction

- If you are distracted, refocus on the speaker
- If you are going off topic, return to the original topic
- If you are tense, take a breath and relax your body
- If you are feeling reactive or triggered, label the feeling and try to take a few deep breaths
- Notice if you are being judgmental, and challenge yourself to change your perspective by adopting the other person’s point of view (stand in their shoes)
- If your mind has wandered off, be honest and tell the other person that you had an ADHD moment

Sensitivity to Criticism

This is a special category of communication issues. Many people with ADHD (and many without ADHD too!) struggle with emotional sensitivity, especially when feeling criticized. Be aware of whether this is a tendency for you. Observe your reactions with curiosity. Label the feeling.

It may also be helpful to identify the thoughts. There may be a number of automatic thoughts. This is where CBT approaches can also be added to mindful awareness. Are you engaging in “all or nothing” thinking, or some other thinking trap? Sometimes it is helpful to simply acknowledge “hearing criticism is hard for me.”

Step 8: Slow Down To Be More Effective

Many people with ADHD know what to do, but struggle with doing what they know. Mindful awareness will help you make decisions and get things done. The goal is mindful self-coaching to guide your actions each step of the way, especially when combined with an organizational system.

The three steps for using mindfulness with actions are:

- Pausing
- Practicing calm focus
- Mindful self-coaching

During the course of the day, make it a habit to stop and pause several times. “Take stock” of your actions and how you are addressing the tasks that need to be done. Use the STOP technique to help with this. Ask yourself about your level of interest and motivation. How is your energy level? Have you shifted to another task without realizing it (and without completing the first one)?

Calm focus is essential for productivity and effectiveness. Notice if you are feeling tense, restless, or overwhelmed. Take a few mindful breaths and do a body scan. Notice any sources of tension. Choose a meditation audio track that helps with focus, for example “Mind Like An Ocean” or “Mountain Meditation” (on YouTube or SoundCloud).

Mindful self-coaching is the inner voice that helps guide our actions. Use this along with tools such as your task manager and calendar planner to accomplish tasks and goals. Self-coaching requires some practice to ensure that you are being compassionate and caring – to yourself. Frequently check in to your inner dialogue to be sure you are aware of your present moment. If necessary, shift the dialogue in a positive direction. Acknowledge your progress so far and give yourself a boost much the way a good coach would if you were on a sports team.

Putting It All Together

Using these three steps of pausing, calm focus, and mindful self-coaching along with your task manager and calendar planner will lead to improved productivity. Get in the habit of monitoring your progress as you work through a task or project. Check in to the present moment and notice your inner state at each stage.

Tasks can be broken down into 4 stages:

- Choosing
- Starting
- Doing
- Finishing

Choosing a task is often a challenge. The “Getting Things Done” productivity approach is often very helpful. You simply need to identify the one next step that will move a project forward.

Another approach that might also help is based on reflecting on our values – the principles that guide our life and action. They are guiding standards. You might have values in different areas of your life: relationships, work, social life, hobbies, spiritual, etc. Consider how much time you are spending in each of these areas. Does it align with your values or is there a mismatch?

The values worksheet might help you understand how well you are living up to your values:

Life Domain – one important value for each line	Rate how important that value is to you on a scale of 1-10	Rate how important this value seems to be as demonstrated by your actual behaviour	Come up with one short-term and one long-term goal that can help you bring your actions in line with your values
Health and well-being			
Intimate relationship			
Family relationship			
Friendship/social			
Career/work			
Education/personal growth			
Spirituality			
Volunteering			
Add others that are important to you			

Motivation is the driving force that gets tasks started. Be curious about what motivates you. Jump start your motivation by imaging the outcome. Really savor the image and feelings you expect to have. Make sure your self-talk is positive.

Sometimes we have to take on tasks that are more difficult to stick with or a boring and repetitive. In this situation, reflect on your long-term goals and values. Consider adopting a “hate-it-but-do-it” self-talk to endure the discomfort because the outcome is meaningful or important. This builds self-discipline that you can apply to other areas of your life and provides long-term benefits.

Doing the task can be challenging if you find yourself frequently getting off track. Remember this is to be expected and adopt a non-judgmental approach to simply return to the focus. Make sure you have broken the task or project into small, achievable steps. Build in appropriate reward as you accomplish each step – but be careful not to over-extend the breaks! You might need to use a timer to help with this.

Wrapping up the final details of a task is a challenge for people with ADHD. It is even included as one of the diagnostic criteria in DSM5. Be aware that this will likely come up for you and anticipate that you will need to pay attention. Notice your feelings as you get close to finishing a task. How about your energy level? Ask yourself If you are really done or are there more details that need to be completed. If you are really done, then notice with mindful awareness your thoughts and feelings. And give yourself a reward!

Final Thoughts

If you stop practicing mindfulness for a while, remind yourself that it is always something you can come back to for life-long benefits. If you need a spark to renew your interest, consider looking for a class or a group. You can also find lots of interesting online communities, such as www.eMindful.com. Explore different online mindfulness resources. There are also other practices such as yoga or tai chi that incorporate elements of mindfulness. Build mindfulness into your daily routine to develop, with intention, greater awareness of the present moment. Be curious and open. Be kind to yourself.

If you need even more links to mindfulness resources!
www.headspace.com – fee based, headspace app is well designed
www.mindful.org – lots of links to free guided mindfulness

7. Risk Assessment

This might be a good time to take inventory of any other behaviour associated with ADHD that might be risky or self-sabotaging.

We know from research and clinical experience that ADHD can have wide ranging impacts on day-to-day functioning. As described earlier, ADHD impacts executive functions and impulse control:

- Impulsive decision-making and poor contemplation of possible outcomes leads to decisions being made very quickly without fully considering all the potential consequences.
- Motivational impulsivity is focusing on immediate gratification including high-risk activities rather than long-term goals and reward.
- Emotional impulsivity results in expression and poor regulation of strong and raw emotions. There is also difficulty in settling down quickly.

Emotional impulsivity can lead to problems like:

Workplace	Work conflict, job loss, frequent employment changes, more episodes of unemployment, lower performance rating
Relationships	Trouble sustaining long-term relationships, marital conflict, intimate partner violence, risky sexual behaviour, increased risk of STD, unplanned or teenage pregnancy
Driving	Teenagers who lack neurologic capacity to safely drive, speeding tickets, road rage, poor driving skills
Financial	Problems managing money, impulsive spending, poor credit rating, overdue bills and mounting debt
Substance Use	Higher risk of problem alcohol or substance use, high rate of combined ADHD and substance use disorders

Many of these issues will start in adolescence, emphasizing the need for early identification. Medications will play an important role in decreasing the impact of ADHD, but they are not the whole answer. Nevertheless, the above list of issues confirms the recommendation that if medications are helpful, they should be taken all the time. This has also been confirmed with research studies.

In addition to medications, consistently following the non-medication recommendations described in this guide will be a good starting point. You can then move on to taking more specific steps to address

any identified problem areas in your life. For many of these issues, counselling or coaching will be important to consider. ADHD often has an impact on communication skills. Learning skills to address this will help in the workplace and in relationships. Work with your partner and seek expert help if required for financial issues. Substance use is a complex issue that overlaps with ADHD. This will be discussed in more detail in the next module.

Action Item:

Talk to someone close to you with whom you have a trusting relationship. Be prepared to accept their observations with an open mind and curiosity. Re-frame their comments in positive terms and identify steps you can take to address these issues. Be kind to yourself and recognize that many steps and much time might be required. There will likely be some “fences to mend” with your friends and relatives.

8. Substance Use

A full discussion of substance use and ADHD is beyond the scope of this guide. Here are few key points, though.

Management of ADHD for someone who is also struggling with substance use issues is generally not something most family physicians would have sufficient background or resources. These are people who need a specialized team and psychiatric consultation, preferably with a psychiatrist with a background in addictions.

As a general principle, use of psychostimulants for someone who is not in well-established recovery is not recommended. The risks outweigh potential benefits and there are other alternatives. Atomoxetine (Strattera) is a non-stimulant ADHD medication that can be as effective as a psychostimulant for some people. Atomoxetine can also be helpful for an associated anxiety disorder. Clonidine is another non-stimulant medication that can be used. For individuals in recovery, lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse) has a lower risk and can be used in some cases with close attention to the treatment contract described earlier in this guide. Emphasis on non-medication approaches will be very important in all cases.

9. Hyperfocus

Hyperfocus is the ability to become completely absorbed in a specific task or activity, often to the exclusion of all else. It is a bit of a mystery why this occurs. It also seems like the opposite of what one would expect for someone with ADHD. Hyperfocus can be harnessed for productivity, but it can also be a problem if you miss urgent deadlines or other important activities. There is a risk of losing all sense of time, and becoming focused on some pointless activity, or on some pleasurable but non-productive pursuit.

Here are some tips to manage hyperfocus.

- Make use of your organizational system and task manager by setting up alarms for deadlines or appointments that might help “snap you out of” hyperfocus.

- Enlist the help of a friend or relative. Explain the nature of hyperfocus and how it is related to ADHD. Help them identify the signs that you are hyper-focusing and use an agreed upon cue to snap you out of it.
- Learn how to switch hyperfocus on and off and use it to achieve important tasks. Maybe this means having a set-aside workspace already prepared with everything you need for productivity.

10. Accommodations in the Workplace or School

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can have a significant impact on your ability to function in the workplace or in academics. There are complex issues around advocacy and disability rights, but at an early stage of receiving a diagnosis, you should consider seeking accommodations.

Accommodations are adaptations or changes in educational or work environments or practices that help people overcome the barriers presented by their disability. In most cases, you will need to work with your primary care practitioner to establish specific adaptations for you. Having input from your support team will also be very helpful in this complex task.

Action Item:

If you think you might need accommodations, one of the best resources is on the CADDAC website:

<https://caddac.ca/about-adhd/in-general/>

Click on the links for “In Education” or “In Workplace” for very well-organized checklists.

References

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<https://www.additudemag.com/product/time-management-productivity-adult-adhd/>

10 Steps to Ultimate Productivity. Michael Sliwinski. Nozbe Academy 2018. Also see the companion website at ProductivityCourse.com/bonus for articles, tips, and videos

ADDitude Magazine, Podcast 334. Dr. Joel Nigg, Oregon Health & Science University
 Go to this webpage and search through for any podcasts and webinars that interest you:
<https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-expert-webinars-index/>

The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD: An 8-Step Program for Strengthening Attention, Managing Emotions, and Achieving Your Goals by [Lidia Zylowska MD](#) (Trumpeter Books, 2012)

