

## Help for Adult ADD / ADHD

Tips for Managing Symptoms and Getting Focused



If you have ADD/ADHD, everything from paying the bills on time to keeping up with work, family, and social demands can seem overwhelming. But it's possible to get focused and turn chaos into calm. By taking advantage of self-help techniques, you can become more productive, organized, and in control of your life—and improve your sense of self-worth.

### Managing adult ADD / ADHD: What you need to know

Adult ADD/ADHD can present challenges across all areas of life, from getting organized at home to reaching your potential at work. It can be tough on your health and both your personal and on-the-job relationships. Your symptoms may lead to extreme procrastination, trouble making deadlines, and impulsive behavior. In addition, you may feel that friends and family don't understand what you're up against.

Fortunately, there are skills you can learn to help get your symptoms of ADD/ADHD under control. You can improve your daily habits, learn to recognize and use your strengths, and develop techniques that help you work more efficiently, increase organization, and interact better with others. Change won't happen overnight, though. These ADD/ADHD self-help strategies require practice, patience, and, perhaps most importantly, a positive attitude.

## Adult ADD / ADHD self-help myths

You may be holding onto misconceptions about how much you can help yourself with adult ADD/ADHD.

**MYTH: Medication is the only way to solve my ADD/ADHD.**

- **FACT:** While medication can help some people manage the symptoms ADD/ADHD, it is not a cure, nor the only solution. If used at all, it should be taken alongside other treatments or self-help strategies.

**MYTH: Having ADD/ADHD means I'm lazy or unintelligent, so I won't be able to help myself.**

- **FACT:** The effects of ADD/ADHD may have led to you and others labeling you this way, but the truth is that you are not unmotivated or unintelligent—you have a disorder that gets in the way of certain normal functions. In fact, adults with ADD/ADHD often have to find very smart ways to compensate for their disorder.

**MYTH: A health professional can solve all my ADD/ADHD problems.**

- **FACT:** Health professionals can help you manage symptoms of ADD/ADHD, but they can only do so much. You're the one living with the problems, so you're the one who can make the most difference in overcoming them.

**MYTH: ADD/ADHD is a life sentence—I'll always suffer from its symptoms.**

- **FACT:** While it is true that there is no cure for ADD/ADHD, there is a lot you can do to reduce the problems it causes. Once you become accustomed to using strategies to help yourself, you may find that managing your symptoms becomes second nature.

## Adult ADD/ADHD self-help: Tips for getting organized and controlling clutter

The hallmark traits of ADD/ADHD—inattention and distractibility—make organization perhaps the biggest challenge adults with the disorder face. If you have adult ADD/ADHD, the prospect of getting organized, whether it be at work or home, may leave you feeling overwhelmed.

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

### Develop structure and neat habits—and keep them up

To organize a room, home, or office, categorize your objects, deciding which are necessary and which can be stored or discarded. To organize yourself, get in the habit of taking notes and writing lists. Maintain your newly organized structure with regular, daily routines.

- **Create space.** Ask yourself what you need on a daily basis, and find storage bins or closets for things you don't. Designate specific areas for things like keys, bills, and other items that can be easily misplaced. Throw away things you don't need.
- **Use a calendar app or day planner.** Effective use of a day planner or a calendar on your smartphone or computer can help you remember appointments and deadlines. With electronic calendars, you can also set up automatic reminders so scheduled events don't slip your mind.
- **Use lists.** Make use of lists and notes to keep track of regularly scheduled tasks, projects, deadlines, and appointments. If you decide to use a daily planner, keep all lists and notes inside it. You also have many options for use on your smartphone or computer. Search for "to do" apps or task managers.
- **Deal with it now.** You can avoid forgetfulness, clutter, and procrastination by filing papers, cleaning up messes, or returning phone calls immediately, not sometime in the future. If a task can be done in two minutes or less, do it on the spot, rather than putting it off for later.

### **Tame your ADD/ADHD paper trail**

If you have adult ADD / ADHD, a major part of your disorganization might be with paperwork—in endless piles or strewn across your kitchen, desk, or office. Take an afternoon to set up a paperwork system that works for you.

- **Set up a filing system.** Use dividers or separate file folders for different types of documents (such as medical records, receipts, and income statements). Label and color-code your files so that you can find what you need quickly.
- **Deal with mail on a daily basis.** Set aside a few minutes each day to deal with the mail, preferably as soon as you bring it inside. It helps to have a designated spot where you can sort the mail and either trash it, file it, or act on it.
- **Go paperless.** Minimize the amount of paper you have to deal with. Request electronic statements and bills instead of paper copies. You can also reduce junk mail by opting out of the Direct Marketing Association's (DMA) Mail Preference Service.

## **Adult ADD / ADHD self-help: Managing your time and staying on schedule**

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Trouble with time management is a common effect of adult ADD/ADHD. You may frequently lose track of time, miss deadlines, procrastinate, underestimate how much time you need for tasks, or find yourself doing things in the wrong order. Many adults with ADD/ADHD spend so much time on one task—known as “hyperfocusing”—that nothing else gets done. These difficulties can leave you feeling frustrated and inept, and make others impatient, but there are solutions to help you better manage your time.

### Time management tips for adult ADD/ADHD

Adults with attention deficit disorder often have a different perception of how time passes. To align your sense of time with everyone else, use the oldest trick in the book: a clock.

- **Become a clock-watcher.** Use a wristwatch or highly visible wall or desk clock to help you keep track of time. When you start a task, make a note of the time by saying it out loud or writing it down.
- **Use timers.** Allot yourself limited amounts of time for each task and use a timer or alarm to alert you when your time is up. For longer tasks, consider setting an alarm to go off at regular intervals to keep you productive and aware of how much time is going by.
- **Give yourself more time than you think you need.** Adults with ADD/ADHD are notoriously bad at estimating how long it will take to do something. For every thirty minutes of time you think it will take you to get someplace or complete a task, give yourself a cushion by adding ten minutes.
- **Plan to be early and set up reminders.** Write down appointments for fifteen minutes earlier than they really are. Set up reminders to ensure you leave on time and make sure you have everything you need ahead of time so you're not frantically looking for your keys or phone when it's time to go.

### Prioritization tips for adult ADD/ADHD

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

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

### Learn to say no

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

## Adult ADD / ADHD self-help: Managing money and bills

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

### Get in the driver's seat to control your budget

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

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

### Set up a simple money management and bill paying system

Establish an easy, organized system that helps you save documents, receipts, and stay on top of bills. For an adult with ADD/ADHD, the opportunity to do banking on the computer can be the gift that keeps on giving. Organizing money online means less paperwork, no messy handwriting, and no misplaced slips.

- **Switch to online banking.** Signing up for online banking can turn the hit-or-miss process of balancing your budget into a thing of the past. Your online account will list all deposits and payments, tracking your balance automatically, to the penny, every day. You can also set up automatic payments for your regular monthly bills and log on as needed to pay irregular and occasional ones. The best part: no misplaced envelopes or late fees.
- **Set up bill pay reminders.** If you prefer not to set up automatic payments, you can still make the process of bill paying easier with electronic reminders. You may be able to set up text or email reminders through online banking or you can schedule them in your calendar app.
- **Take advantage of technology.** Free services such as Mint and Manilla can help you keep track of your finances and accounts. Both services take some time to set up, but once you've linked your accounts they automatically update. Manilla consolidates your statements and bills from all of your accounts into one place. Mint tracks all of your bank account and credit card transactions, and also offers budgeting and other financial analysis tools. Both tools can make your financial life easier.

## Put a stop to impulse shopping

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

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

## Adult ADD / ADHD self-help: Tips for staying focused and productive at work



ADD/ADHD can create special challenges at work. The things you may find toughest—organization, completion of tasks, sitting still, listening quietly—are the very things you're often asked to do all day long.

Juggling ADD/ADHD and a challenging job is no easy task, but by tailoring your workplace environment you can take advantage of your strong points while minimizing the negative impact of your ADD/ADHD symptoms.

### Get organized at work

Organize your office, cubicle, or desk one manageable step at a time. Then use the following strategies to stay tidy and organized:

- **Set aside daily time for organization.** Set aside 5 to 10 minutes a day to clear your desk and organize your paperwork. Experiment with storing things inside your desk or in bins so that they don't clutter your workspace as unnecessary distractions.
- **Use colors and lists.** Color-coding can be very useful to people with ADD/ADHD. Manage forgetfulness by writing everything down.
- **Prioritize.** More important tasks should be done first. Set deadlines for everything, even if they are self-imposed.

### End distractions

Let your workmates know you need to concentrate, and try the following techniques to minimize distractions:

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

### Stretch your attention span

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

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

## Adult ADD/ADHD self-help: Tips for managing stress and boosting mood

Due to the impulsivity and disorganization that often accompany ADD/ADHD, you may struggle with erratic sleep, unhealthy eating, or the effects of too little exercise—all issues that can lead to extra stress, bad moods, and feeling out of control of your emotions. The best way to stop this cycle is to take charge of your lifestyle habits and create healthy new routines.

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

### **Exercise and spend time outdoors for adult ADD/ADHD**

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

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

### **Get plenty of sleep for adult ADD/ADHD**

Sleep deprivation can increase symptoms of adult ADD/ADHD, reducing your ability to cope with stress and maintain focus during the day. Simple changes to daytime habits go a long way toward ensuring solid nightly sleep:

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

### **Eat right for adult ADD/ADHD**

Eating healthfully can reduce distractibility, hyperactivity, and decrease stress levels dramatically.

- Eat small meals throughout day.
- Avoid sugar as much as possible.
- Eat fewer carbohydrates, while increasing your protein intake.