

ADHD

What it is and what helps

Why a capable brain struggles with dull tasks, and the systems that make daily life easier.

🕒 WHAT ADHD IS

ADHD is the low end of a spectrum of executive function: the brain skills that start, plan, remember and finish tasks. It isn't an on-off switch. The diagnosis draws a line on a continuum.

Attention isn't missing. Focus comes easily on rewarding things, like a video game, and costs a lot on dull ones. The trouble shows up in memory, time sense, getting started and handling emotions.

🧠 HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT

A helpful way to hold the label: "This tells me how to look after myself." An unhelpful one: "It's biological, so tools aren't for me." The cause doesn't change what helps.

Many adults carry years of being called lazy. That harsh self-talk is learned, not a symptom, and it can be unlearned. When a tool fails, the setup is usually the problem, not you.

📦 TREATMENT HAS THREE PARTS, AND MOST PEOPLE DO BEST WITH ALL THREE

Systems

Tools that remember for you: a calendar, a task list, a timer. They work with any brain.

Skills

An ADHD-specific CBT workbook, plus ways to handle harsh self-talk. Both work best alongside medication.

Medication

Stimulants are the most effective option, and non-stimulants exist. More isn't better: too high a dose brings anxiety and irritability.

Start with the tools. Medication makes them easier to use, but it doesn't replace them.

☀️ START HERE: ONE CALENDAR, ONE TASK LIST

These matter more than any other tool. The calendar holds things with a set time. The task list holds the rest.

- Use one system only. No sticky notes.
- Write everything down at once, in 3 to 5 words. "I'll add it later" means never.
- Review 2 to 5 minutes each morning, 15 minutes weekly.
- Judge it after 30 days. If you fall off, sort the pile and restart.

👉 BE KIND TO YOUR OWN HEAD

ADHD comes with a lot of harsh self-talk. This three-step shift puts distance between you and a thought like "I'm a failure":

- I'm a failure.
- I'm having the thought that I'm a failure.
- I'm noticing that I'm having the thought that I'm a failure.

Picturing the critical voice with a silly face filter helps too.

Then add one tool at a time. Check the one you will try next.

- ☐ Label tasks A (today or tomorrow), B (this week) or C
- ☐ Break big tasks into steps that start with a verb
- ☐ Work in timed bursts, like 25 minutes on, 5 off
- ☐ Keep a pad for distracting thoughts, then go back
- ☐ Set up a landing spot by the door for keys and phone

- ☐ Put recurring bills on autopay
- ☐ Clear your desk and keep your phone out of reach
- ☐ Try a grayscale phone, or delete the apps you scroll
- ☐ Exercise regularly. The evidence is real
- ☐ Practice mindfulness. The evidence is modest but real

❓ RULE OUT LOOK-ALIKES

Trouble focusing has other causes. Ask about:

- Poor sleep or sleep apnea
- Anxiety or depression
- Alcohol or cannabis use
- Thyroid problems or a learning difference

Before a stimulant, mention any bipolar disorder or psychosis, fainting, chest pain with exertion, or a young relative's sudden death.

📖 BOOKS AND RESOURCES

Mastering Your Adult ADHD: Client Workbook by Safren and colleagues. The one to buy if you buy one thing.

ADHD 2.0 by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey.

Feeling Great by David Burns and **The Happiness Trap** by Russ Harris teach the thought skills above.

CHADD (chadd.org) for information and support groups.

⚠️ IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE OR HURTING YOURSELF

Call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time, or go to the nearest emergency room. If you are in immediate danger, call **911**.

Source. Adapted from Dr. Malzberg's ADHD Top 10 Tools guide and Psychofarm podcast conversations on ADHD with Dr. Fu.

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