



5 ADHD-Friendly Ways to Maximize Productivity

5 ADHD-FRIENDLY WAYS TO MAXIMIZE PRODUCTIVITY

I spent years developing study skills and productivity strategies before I was diagnosed with ADHD. It turned out I had been optimizing my system for people with ADHD without even knowing it! Once I understood what was going on inside my brain, though, I started seeing my problems in terms of the circuits of an ADHD brain.

The ADHD brain operates with a shortage of chemicals needed to make neuron connections. At any moment, a connection might fail. It's like a string of holiday lights; if the connection is interrupted, the whole string goes dark. You don't just stop; you "lose" what you were doing.

I've learned to think of tasks like circuits, and every step in the process like a light bulb that might go out without warning. The ADHD Circuit™ has helped me develop strategies that minimize the chance of ADHD getting in my way by reducing steps needed to complete tasks. Fewer steps means fewer opportunities for circuits to be cut and less strain on the brain.

Here are five of the most valuable ways to get things done when you have ADHD:

1

GET IT OUT OF YOUR HEAD

I learned the hard way that I can't rely on my ADHD brain alone to follow through on a task. No matter how determined I might be, and no matter how simple the task—even



getting my son a cup of milk—every step in the process is a chance to get derailed by an “ADHD moment.” Like a string of lights going dark when a single bulb goes out, the entire process of what I am doing can disappear from my brain. I don’t even realize I had forgotten anything until later.

The first lesson, then, is to get tasks out of your head. You must write everything down! All appointments, tasks, commitments... everything that will require action from you in any way must be written down as a reminder. (Obviously, you won’t write reminders for spontaneous tasks like filling a cup of milk, but get everything else captured in writing.)

If you can’t write it down immediately, don’t agree to do it! If I am talking to someone while I am driving and they ask me to do something, I will tell them honestly, “I’ll be happy to do that, but I can’t promise I will remember and I’m not in a position to make a note. Please send me an email, or feel free to call me again next week.” Otherwise, I don’t let the other person “go” until I’ve written down anything I need to remember.

Nothing is too simple. People often think they can handle “simple things” and don’t need to write them down. They figure they won’t have trouble remembering a major due date or to pick up milk after work. I hear this from students all the time, yet they forget assignments. When I ask why they don’t record the assignments in their planners, they usually shrug, “I don’t know. It’s a simple assignment. I didn’t think it would matter.” It is almost as if having to record their daily homework assignments is an insult to their intelligence. But it’s not an insult; it’s about making smart use of their brainpower.

People with ADHD are often very bright and have great memories; they remember a lot, but their brains don’t reliably access those memories at the right times. Their strengths lie in what the “back” parts of the brain can do. The back of the brain handles things like memory and problem solving, but the front of the brain handles “executive function” tasks



like focus and deciding what to do next. The front part of an ADHD brain is always under-powered and gets overtaxed easily. Getting things out of your head frees up valuable bandwidth in the frontal lobe of your brain.

2

CREATE SYSTEMS

If there is anything in your life that you can systematize, do so! Everything from your morning and nighttime routine, to grocery shopping, to checking email, to tackling your to-do pile. Systems are another way to dramatically reduce the burden on your mental bandwidth, particularly in the front region of your brain. It takes time to think about what you can systematize, develop the system, and write it down, but the time you invest in creating these systems will pay dividends in the future! A set routine means less time thinking about what to do next and more time doing it.

To get the greatest benefit from your time, start with the tasks that cause you the most pain. The 80/20 principal says that 20% of your tasks drain 80% of your energy. Starting with one of these tasks ensures you'll feel big results from your efforts.

The key to creating an effective system is to eliminate as many steps as possible. Too often, people try to "organize" their lives by giving themselves extra tasks to perform, and they end up generating more stress for themselves. Every new step in a task, no matter how small, is an extra burden on the brain.

Sometimes you need an outsider's perspective to build an effective system. When I explained the principle of eliminating steps to my husband, he came up with a system to help me tackle packing, which was a task I hated.



I do a lot of travel for business, but I always dreaded packing! Family vacations would be even worse because we had to pack for the children, too. My husband suggested that we make lists of things I commonly need for each type of trip (personal or business) and organize the list by “geographical” regions of the house. Since most of those items are stored in my closet, my list starts there. The next section of my list includes things from my bathroom, kids’ rooms, hall closet, coat closet, and finally, my office.

I now begin “packing” by sitting in one place and thinking for a few minutes about what I will need. (This helps me access the back regions of my brain, taking a load off of the frontal lobe.) I look over my pre-made packing lists and I highlight anything on the list I will need to pack. (I eliminate many steps from the process by having these lists pre-printed.) If there is anything I need to add to the list, I write it in on the section of the list corresponding to where that item is located in my house.

This process has been a miracle for me! I no longer dread the process of packing. I no longer have to make 20 trips back and forth between my bedroom, bathroom, closet, and the rest of the house. I can get packed in a fraction of the time I used to need, and I forget fewer things.

A good system can also involve delegation. My husband and I made another deal: since I hate packing and he hates unpacking, he takes the lead on packing the kids for family vacations and I take the lead on unpacking after the trip. It’s a win-win situation.

3

“BATCH” YOUR TASKS

The way we tend to organize our work has us making thousands of unnecessary transitions between front-brain and back-brain functions. One minute we are making



front-brain decisions about what to do, the next minute we're using our problem-solving back brain, and then it's time for another decision. Each transition is a chance to get distracted and puts extra stress on the brain.

The trick is to minimize these transitions by batching your tasks according to the kind of brain function they require. Front-brain tasks involve quick decisions, sequencing, and responses. Generally emails that can be handled in two minutes or less require a front-brain response. Back-brain tasks require more concentration and deliberation. They often require *more* than two minutes.

Batching is not something that comes naturally to most people with ADHD. You need systems in place to make the best use of the batching strategy.

For example, I "batch" my email to get through it more quickly. Going through your inbox requires you to make judgments about each message, then think of responses to the ones that need them. That can involve a lot of switching between front- and back-brain functions. Email was a black hole for me that sucked hours out of every day until I figured out a batching system for it. I owe the outlines of the system to David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*.

The first thing I do is organize my messages by the frame of mind required to answer them. I can go through this process of organizing my emails when I'm looking for the quick fix of seeing my latest messages. At that point, I am not in the frame of mind to respond to time-consuming or detailed emails. What I can do without switching gears is sort those messages into three batches: what I can answer or delete in two minutes or less, what needs more than two minutes to handle, and messages that are waiting for additional information or responses.



By batching the more challenging emails together, I get them out of my inbox and reduce my email anxiety. This lets me focus on the “quick” things when I am in a “quick” frame of mind. Then I can transition into a more focused frame of mind to deal with the other batches, or I can handle to them later. Either way, when I approach my batched items, I more easily transition into a higher level of concentration since I don’t have to switch frames of mind so quickly. Invariably I get through all of them much faster than if they had been scattered in my inbox.

Anybody can improve their efficiency by minimizing the number of times their brain has to shift between front-brain and back-brain dominance. These transitions are especially taxing for an ADHD brain. Minimizing them can be a life-saver for people with ADHD.

4

HARNESS THE POWER OF MUSIC

Music is a simple yet valuable tool to help balance the brain and shift it into a state of high concentration. It’s like getting your brain to dance!

Music also affects the frequency of brain waves. The brain begins to mirror the frequency of the music as it processes it. Steady music provides a continuous frequency. This facilitates continuous neuron connections in the brain, firing at a regular rate, which dramatically improves concentration. With neuron connections in a better state of flow, some of the pressure comes off of the executive function centers of the brain’s frontal lobe. However, the right type of music is essential to this function.

To best promote concentration, you need music that matches alpha frequencies. Alpha brain waves, in the frequency of 8 to 12 Hertz (cycles per second), are associated with certain restful states.



There is good news and bad news here. The bad news is that most popular music doesn't match alpha frequencies. The good news is that the right music works so well to promote concentration that you won't notice it playing. You'll get your work done much faster, and you can get back to the music you like before too long.

How do you find alpha music? You can search iTunes, Amazon, or Google for "alpha brain music" and find plenty of choices. Baroque music is a style that remains consistently in alpha range. Whatever you find, be sure to listen to a few tunes and make sure you like them before you decide to play it while you work.

I build two-hour blocks into my daily work schedule that I refer to as "alpha zone" time. I close my doors, turn on the alpha wave music, and work on things that require a lot of concentration, such as writing or developing new programs or curriculum. I normally take 20 to 40 minutes to get settled into a project, but alpha music usually reduces that time to less than five minutes.

5

USE ONE-HAND STRATEGIES

As you look for ways to minimize steps in your routines and organizational systems, look for containers that can be accessed with one hand. Open baskets, desk-top stacking trays, wall-mounted sorting trays, and milk crates stacked on their sides are some of the best tools for one-hand organization.

For example, filing always backs up because no one wants to take the time to rifle through file folders and put papers in their proper place. "Rifling" takes two hands, so you have to drop whatever else you were doing to do it. On the other hand, a set of stacked trays on your desk allows you to sort papers with one hand. You can be doing something at your



desk with one hand, quickly slide a paper into the appropriate tray on your desk with the other, and go back to your original task without shifting gears. Items you have to access frequently are best kept in a one-hand storage container.

People trying to get organized often make the mistake of *adding* steps to the process of putting things away. Anything with drawers, doors, lids, or that requires a step-ladder to access, add steps to the process and reduce the chances that you'll actually use it.

I recently advised a parent who bought a row of old school lockers for her children to unload their coats and backpacks when they came home from school. She put them by the door thinking it would be easy for her kids to keep the house neat. But when they came home they would just drop their things in a pile in front of their lockers. I suggested she take the locker doors off the hinges and just leave them open. Once the extra steps of opening and closing the door were removed, her kids used the lockers like she had intended!

The same principles can get you organized at work. Eliminate steps to create an organizing system that you will actually use. Sliding something into a tray is one step; putting it in a binder or a folder in a drawer can be six or more. Since "sliding" will win out anyway, get stackable trays! Otherwise, you'll probably end up sliding things into messy piles on your desk.

CONCLUSION

When you understand ADHD, you can develop strategies that keep it from slowing you down.

The Five Ways to Maximize Productivity are:

1. When you need to do something—anything—don't rely on your memory. Get it out of your head and onto paper!



2. Create systems to handle the tasks that give you the most trouble, and make sure that those systems have as few steps as possible.
3. Use your systems to “batch” tasks based on the frame of mind you need to be in to do them, and don’t forget the power of the right music to get you into the right frame of mind.
4. Harness the power of alpha music to promote concentration.
5. Use one-hand sorting strategies to keep organized without making your life more complicated.

Start with just one of these strategies and you’ll quickly notice a major impact.

Good luck!

Find more of Susan Kruger’s advice and strategies at www.ADHDCircuit.com.