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The Disorganized Adult

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ADHD is as prevalent among grown-ups as children — and just as essential to manage with organizational techniques.

One of the most common and debilitating symptoms for adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is severe and chronic disorganization. Needed items at work and home get buried in piles of clutter. Bills don't get paid. Projects go unfinished. Jobs are lost, careers flounder. Intelligent, creative, and otherwise successful individuals are plagued with chronic feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted. As many adults with ADHD can tell you, their lives don't simply *feel* out of control, they *are* out of control.

Organizational strategies are essential for managing ADHD symptoms. A healthy and realistic goal is not to become super-organized, but simply to make work and home life more manageable. Transforming an environment of chaos into ordinary messiness can, and should, be considered a job well done.

A successful system of organization must be individually designed to meet a person's particular needs and address specific problem areas in his or her life. The strategies and routines discussed here provide ideas for getting started. If more help is needed-for you or someone you know-please don't hesitate to consult a behavior therapist or professional organizer.

Organizing Time

It's been said "The best way to get nothing done is to try doing everything at once." For many adults with ADHD, this is not just a truism but a maddeningly frustrating way of life. Using some type of planner with a calendar function-either a weekly-minder paper version or computer software program-is essential for any time management system.

Every activity that involves scheduling (appointments, social events, deadlines, exercise routine, etc.) goes into the planner. Avoid the common mistake of trying to schedule every hour of the day, which is usually counterproductive and leads to failure, frustration and discouragement. Leave blank spaces in your schedule for breaks, flex time and the unexpected. Don't schedule every activity, only the essential ones.

A calendar or planner also serves as a reminder system. Learn to live by the principle that "If it's worth remembering, it's worth writing down." Since such a datebook is only as useful as the frequency with which it's checked, get in the habit of looking at your planner as often as you look at your watch.

Organizing Tasks

Many ADHD problems that result in low productivity are due to failures in planning, prioritizing and following through on tasks. Those ever-present feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted come from a myriad of half-completed projects and put-aside to-do's. Two basic strategies that help are to put routine essentials-laundry, washing dishes, general cleaning-on a set schedule, and maintain a prioritized list for comparatively incidental tasks. The one requirement for completing routine chores is that they must be done at regular and consistent times. (See "The Top 3 Task List").

The lack of consistent follow-through required to complete tasks is caused by ADHD symptoms of excessive procrastination and forgetfulness. Let's face it, there is no way to establish any degree of consistent time and effort put into routine tasks unless those tasks become part of a regular schedule. Draw up a weekly schedule with set times blocked out for basic housekeeping work. Some chores, such as laundry and cleaning, can be done via

multi-tasking within the same block of time. Many people find that even a half-day a week is sufficient. Use shorter or longer time slots to fit your level of patience and frustration tolerance, but the one essential requirement is that these times must be kept consistent.

Larger projects or tasks are more manageable when they're "chunked" by breaking them up into smaller pieces and scheduling each piece a realistic amount of time. Writing a paper, completing a project for work, or cleaning out the basement are some tasks that fall in this category. Start by setting a firm deadline for completion. Estimate the total amount of time you'll likely need, then work backward from the deadline and carve out time slots for completing each "chunk." Since many adults with ADHD are notoriously poor in judging how much time activities actually take, use the 1.5 Rule. After estimating the duration of a project, multiply the number by 1.5.

Organizing Things

PICK A SPOT:

Lost keys, bills, documents-these are the bane of life with ADHD. Odds 'n ends and needed items are buried in piles, causing hours of wasted time and untold aggravation. The basic rule for keeping track of possessions is that every item needs a "home." Keys go on the key hook, located just inside the front door, and are never stored in a jacket pocket or on the dresser. Wallets, watches, purses and other frequently used items go on a tray or other open container on the bedroom dresser or a desk.

STORING OR PURGING:

Limit sentimental attachments to a few prized possessions-to protect against an infestation by the insidious "pack-rat syndrome." When there isn't room to provide an item with its own "home" location, it belongs in one of three places:

- the trash bin
- a give-away bin for materials to be donated
- a long-term storage bin in a long-term storage location. (P.S. An empty corner in a bedroom is not a long-term storage location!)

IN VIEW IN THE ROOM:

Due to distractibility and forgetfulness, most adults with ADHD have a huge problem keeping track of what's not in plain sight (also known as "out of sight, out of mind"). Vertical filing systems, such as an open bookcase, work better than closed file cabinets. Use transparent plastic containers in your bedroom closet, garage, or other storage places.

Overcoming The Resistance

Adults with ADHD often bristle at adhering to schedules and routines. After a while, structured activities start to feel like unpleasant obligations, or being boxed in a jail cell.

Fighting through this resistance requires not biting off more than you can chew. Change one behavior at a time, and do it in small enough increments to make it tolerable.

A helpful technique is to add as much entertainment value as possible to a scheduled activity. Play music while cleaning or doing dishes. Help stick to a workout schedule by exercising with a friend. Seek support from family and friends, or consider working with a professional organizer. Reward yourself in some way for a job well done.

The bottom line is, structure isn't restrictive -- it's liberating! Visualize the positive changes and benefits that will come from improved organization, and stick with the plan. It can take months and years to develop routines and build new habits, but the payoffs are more than worth the investment.

CLUTTER PREVENTION ROUTINES

- Every item needs a home location. After use, all objects are returned "home." No exceptions.
- Unused items belong in the trash, in storage or in a giveaway box.
- Discard outdated, identical or similar items. (You don't need a half-dozen telephone books.)
- Don't let paper pile up! Toss newspapers, old magazines and catalogs without mercy.
- To reduce paper clutter, scan old documents you might someday need, save them onto a CD and then shred or trash the originals.
- Set up a mail-processing center on your desk and sort through mail as it arrives by using the O-H-I-O (Only Handle It Once) system and these three categories:
 - junk mail (gets tossed in the trash immediately)
 - bills (are paid immediately)
 - important papers (i.e., bank statements, tax documents) are sorted and files right away

THE TOP 3 TASK LIST

- This strategy really does help with remembering, planning and prioritizing. To use it most effectively, maintain separate task lists for work and home.
- At the top of each list, write the Top 3 tasks to be worked on first.
- Draw a line under those three.
- Work only on the Top 3 tasks. It's all right to jump around between them, but stay focused only on these priority tasks.
- When a Top 3 task is completed, replace it with another task from the list.
- Repeat the process.

MONEY MANAGEMENT ROUTINES

- Limit the number of charge accounts, credit cards, bank accounts, etc. Less is more.
- Use only one credit/debit card.
- To discourage impulsive spending, establish a weekly cash budget, and then restrict any ATM card use for emergencies only. (Here's a needs test: "Am I stranded? Am I bleeding?")
- When possible, arrange automatic payments, money transfers and deposits (especially for saving toward big-ticket items, such as for retirement, a college fund, a house down payment.
- Use your mail-processing center as a bill-paying center by creating a "home" location for bills, the checkbook, stamps, etc.
- Use the O-H-I-O method to pay bills when they come in.
- Discard old bills and statements after 12 months.
- Scan and digitize records you need to keep, then toss the paper copy.

MIGHT YOU HAVE ADHD?

Here are the signs and symptoms of the condition in adults:

- Chronic difficulty with poor attention and concentration.
- Excessive mental and/or physical restlessness or impulsivity.
- Chronic difficulty organizing your things, tasks and activities.
- Chronic and excessive procrastination.
- Challenges with planning, prioritizing and getting work started.
- Inability to complete projects.
- Excessive forgetfulness in daily activities.
- Difficulty following through and completing tasks in a timely manner.
- Easily frustrated and excessively impatient.
- Persistent feelings of being overwhelmed and underachieving in life.

If you have concerns about possibly having ADHD, consult a health care professional for a diagnostic evaluation. Coping techniques and solutions are available through the use of systems, counseling and, in some cases, prescription medication. Additional information about ADHD and its symptoms can be found in our [FAQs](#).

About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude**

Magazine and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.