

SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Managing Life with Adult ADHD

Abigail's Podcast Cheatsheet

#005 Getting Started and Done

Before your start:

Figure out how long you should work on the task in advance. This is not how long you *could* spend on the task but how long you *should* spend on the task. This is an important distinction and difficult for those affected by ADHD.

Should spend on the task means looking at the value of the task, its importance in the scheme of things. If it is a relatively minor task it should be done quickly regardless of how long you *could* spend on it.

Getting Started:

Take One Baby Step at a Time

When you find you are procrastinating, start with the three smallest baby tasks you can do on the project and then take a break. Repeat and eventually you will continue to work forgetting that you were only going to take three baby steps. Keep each step really small and easy.

Start in the Middle – or Skipping the Crawl

Skipping the crawl is about skipping the beginning and starting in the middle.

We usually think we need to start at the beginning and often we are not sure how to do that. Don't let that stop you. Just plow ahead and start somewhere else. Then move to the next step. If you can't do that, then go to the next step until you find something you can do. In many situations you might have to go back and fill in whatever you left blank.

Worried you might go in the wrong direction this way? That is okay. Even though you may have to redo some things, you have at least started.

Get Mad

Sometimes the feeling of being overwhelmed ties you up inside. You are frustrated, resentful, and want to quit, but that thing still has to get done. This may be the time to get your mad on. Get mad, angry, and hostile. Then rage, be unreasonable, obnoxious, and bull-headed. Say I will not be defeated. By this time every atom within you is perched on edge, ready to fight the fight. All else fades to black as you plunge into what had got to get done.

Stay mad, feed the anger, luxuriate in it. It is power. Screw all the forces pushing against you, getting in your way. Fade everything into a blackness that surrounds you so you can keep everyone and everything out and do what must be done.

Then when you are done, breathe. Release the anger. It might already be gone since you finished your task or project.

Note: You have to have the right personality to make this work. Use this technique sparingly as it can be detrimental to people and objects nearby.

Get Clear by Making a Plan

Sometimes you don't know how to proceed. Not knowing how to proceed can get in the way and cause procrastination. The lack of a clear next step causes you to just avoid settling down to work at all.

The usual advice would be to break down the project into smaller pieces to make it more approachable and then start piece by piece. But what if you can't see how to break it down into pieces? What if you have done all the research but don't know how to put all the random information into a logical order? There are many possible approaches to take at this point.

- *Talk to a friend or family member.* Describe the project and see if that person has any ideas. If it's a research project, then describe your research. How did you end up describing it to them? Where did you begin, etc
- *Dictate into the computer.* Most computers have voice recognition software that you can dictate your ideas into the computer and then sort through them later.
- *The index card method.* Brainstorm the major topics and write down one idea per card. Then start playing around with different orders for the cards until you find what flows and what to eliminate (also important).

- *Brain dump.* Free write everything you know on the topic, then move the information around into some cohesive form. While brain dumping, don't think about form at all. Just let your ideas flow.
- *Outline the information.* Using your index card deck (see above) create a written outline based on that information.
- *Mind map the information.* Mind mapping is when you put the main topic in the center of the page and then draw lines out from the center to related topics. Then you draw lines out from those topics to sub topics, etc. Mind mapping gives a visual way to organize information.

These are just some ideas to help get clear and start making a plan. The next steps are even harder for us: executing the plan. Yet these approaches work: index cards followed by creating an outline is how I wrote my book "Forget Perfect: How to Succeed in Your Profession and Personal Life Even if You Have ADHD."

Identify the Steps You Need to Take and Execute Your Plan

To finish your task or project you need to have a plan and then make sure to execute it relentlessly – despite your desire to throw it overboard.

Step 1: Plan...but *planning is worthless* (or so we think)! *A complete exercise in futility* (or so we believe)! Why? Because we don't do step 2. Step 2 is harder so we tend to shy away from it.

Step 2: Implement the plan consistently! That means sticking to it each and every day, and not just when we feel like it. This step is incredibly hard for people like us.

To succeed at Step 2, be very clear about your goals and very specific about each step you need to take to achieve them. That way you will not have to tease out what step you need to take each day. If you have a strong, specific plan your next step will be clear.

Step 3: Continue to stick with the plan. Be a slave to it. This will be hard. We like to chase shimmery objects and ideas, not a stale old plan. We also tend to go off on tangents.

Step 4: If help is offered, make sure that it's from someone you trust and would be comfortable to reciprocate with another favor.

Step 5: Get back to the plan. Don't get distracted from your bigger priorities.

Step 6: Never lose sight on the why – why are you doing what you are doing. Remind yourself each day of your why to stay motivated.

Step 7: Stick to the plan. Don't over do it one day because you feel like you are on a roll and getting a lot of stuff done. If you overdo on one day, you won't want to work the next day due to burn out, and then once you have skipped a day you will have lost momentum. It will be difficult to restart your plan. It may even stop you from continuing to follow your plan at all.

This step-by-step process can make it easier to get things done, especially if you give yourself time to carry it out. But for those of us with ADHD, we often use time differently – to force the issue so that we have to act. This doesn't always work, and we can find ourselves in denial about the task and the looming deadline.

When Pressure Doesn't Help You Get Things Done

The nth moment, when it is now or never, usually activates us to start. But sometimes the opposite happens and the pressure to get something done stalls us out. Time for a nap? No. This is just avoidance and fear. Fear creates a situation of disbelief – disbelief that you really *are* in trouble and need to get to work.

How do you shake out of it before it is too late? You will have to find out what works for you. Here are some ideas to try out.

- *Make a list of what has to happen by what time. Assign realistic time increments for each action.*
- *Sit quietly to calm down and come to a state of acceptance that there is only so much time. Then ask yourself, What can I realistically get done in that time?*
- *Go to a friend, parent, colleague, or coach and ask for some help getting back on track.*
- *Write about it in a public forum so that you remember that you know what to do and it is time to activate (as we say in ADHD parlance).*
- *Ask yourself, What would I tell a friend to do? Then take your own advice and do that!*

Bonus Tips

To Keep Up the Momentum, Stop in the Middle

What if you've started on a task or project, but then fear that you'll lose momentum and languish if you stop or take a break?

When you are working on a long project, leave in the middle of a thought. If you have to take a break or you no longer can work on the project that day, do not wait to stop at a logical endpoint. Otherwise, when you come back to the project, you won't know what you need to do to move forward and it is hard to start working again.

When you take a break or finish for the day, leave in the middle of an idea or in the middle of an action. Let's take a writing project, for example. Don't finish the section or sentence. Leave in the middle of it because when you come back there will be some action ready and waiting for you to take. You can then pick up again by finishing the sentence or finishing the idea in the section. By starting where you know what to do, you build up momentum that helps you go on to the next idea and the next action. If you need, leave yourself a note as to what you planned to write or do next before you take your break or finish for the day.

Working this way you will never have to go back to a project that is at a dead stop. Instead it's as though there is an arrow pointing you in the right direction when you decide to restart the project.

Celebrate

An important component of getting projects done is celebrating your victories! Don't dwell on whether you got the work done in exactly the fashion you planned. The most important thing is that you got it done. You persisted.

People affected by ADHD tend to focus on what didn't work rather than on what did. We always look for a reason to judge ourselves. And that judgment is almost always negative. Regardless the situation you can find something to celebrate or to judge. The choice is yours.

The material for this cheatsheet is adapted from chapter 2 "Starting and Completing Tasks" of my book "Forget Perfect: How to Succeed in Your Profession and Personal Life Even if You Have ADHD."