

The two big ideas

1. ADHD is not about being easily distracted by things in the environment (though that is often a trait). It is about ***not being able to tell our brain what to focus upon***.
 - a. Our brains seem to have a chronic dopamine shortage, which can be truly torturous.
 - b. No matter what our intentions are, our perpetual, over-riding need is to get enough stimulation to raise our dopamine level up to where we feel *OK*, and, ideally, to hold it there.
2. Two things seem to help
 - a. **High interest**—enables hyperfocus, which is a relief because we no longer have to spend huge amounts of energy trying to regulate a largely unregulatable brain, just to avoid humiliation and frustration.
 - b. **High stimulation**—enables focus on less-interesting tasks, because it facilitates physical and mental self-regulation in a way that seems to be automatic for non-ADHD folks, but which is highly elusive for us. (Think of simultaneous homework+music+snack or the like)

The prime directive for a happy life with ADHD¹:

We must admit to ourselves that we have passively decided NOT to do a task if we have not addressed three vital requirements:

1. Set up a **reminder** *in the environment, external to ourselves*
2. Make that reminder **unavoidable**
3. Make that reminder unavoidable **at the moment** you want to do the task

If we do this, we do the thing, most of the time, almost like neurotypical people.

If we don't, we generally won't, no matter how important the task is to us.

This is because our single-minded focus on whatever we are doing at any given moment (or our focus on the desperate quest to *find something* to focus on that way) keeps *everything else* out of our consciousness, so we cannot depend upon our brains to remember to do *anything*!

Therefore, tell and re-tell thyself:

If I do not set up a reminder that will be unavoidable at the time I wish to do the task, I am deciding not to do the task.

¹ This is my packaging of a suggestion directly from Dr. Russell Barkley, whose videos you may find helpful!

T H A N K: ADHD tips acronym (the word itself has no significance because ADHD)

Tidy up: don't expect to be able to keep things tidy—we just don't have the resources to spare to regulate putting things away promptly. Instead learn how often you need to tidy up to *keep the mess from having negative consequences...*

Hyperfocus: know the things you naturally hyperfocus upon; use them as genuine relief/recharging; monitor them for OVER-dependence (i.e. compulsion with negative consequences); set annoying alarms far away that force you to break the spell, when needed

Active: passive learning will not work; find ways to be active and move toward your learning, rather than expecting it to come to you (it may, but it won't stick!); take notes; show up to talk to teachers with notes so you don't forget what to say or how to say it!; **RWSI**; incorporate actual physical movement into studying; try to think of a good “but what about...?” question for the teacher while listening to lecture;etc.

Now: when you think of a thing you need to do, do it now or you are likely not to do it, no matter your intentions or how important it is to you or others. A distant second choice is to put a **reminder** in place that will be **unavoidable** at the **moment** in the future you want to do the thing. Teach yourself that a decision to do neither of those things is a decision NOT to remember to do the task.

Kind: adults with ADHD often have a lot of baggage of negative self-talk that is intended by the psyche to be self-protective but is really damaging to self-esteem and motivation. Notice the negative things you think about yourself and contradict them. Think at least "maybe before but not anymore" or even better "that's not true!" (and say what is). This is an important habit to build.

Do not be unkind to yourself about mistakes you make while trying to navigate ADHD; they are truly the evidence that you are working on a positive change! If you don't do a thing right away and it doesn't happen; don't get frustrated; recommit. Do it now. In fact, it is still "now!" It always is.

For Teachers and Parents:

1. Don't expect us to slow down; teach us to loop around and re-check, perhaps many times
2. We are not being careless; we often care a lot! That just doesn't translate to doing things well, and that is at least as frustrating and confusing for us as it is for you
3. "I swear that kid would forget their head if it wasn't screwed on!" We also swear that about ourselves. Think how it feels to hear that both externally and internally and not know why.
4. Really take in that thing about "High Stimulation" and let our work speak for itself. If we are listening to music and watching TV and doing homework, check the homework quality. If it is up to par, the high stimulation is helping. Under-stimulation (sometimes aka boredom) is REALLY uncomfortable and makes it very hard for us to self-regulate, let alone concentrate
5. Most of us cannot learn to retain focus, outside of hyperfocus. What we *can* do is
 - a. learn to notice changes in our body state (usually becoming more relaxed) that signal a loss of focus on low-interest information, and learn to re-aim our focus at it over and over, sooner and sooner, without self-put-downs.
 - b. learn to create an environment that optimizes our ability to focus by adjusting environmental stimuli into our own personal "just-right" zone. This does not cure our ADHD, but it is empowering and does increase our agency around
 - i. choosing what to do,
 - ii. starting it, and
 - iii. staying with it.
6. ADHD has a very in-the-moment aspect, especially emotionally speaking. I think of it as my "dolphin brain." Feelings are huge and feel like they will be forever. A commonly described impact of this is Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, but it's much broader than just that. A stern talking-to from a parent or teacher can feel like being yelled at; shame or feeling misunderstood has a very flashback quality that connects to every similar previous experience and can cause outsized reactions which may or may not be visible externally. [Great related video.](#)
7. (this list will keep growing...)