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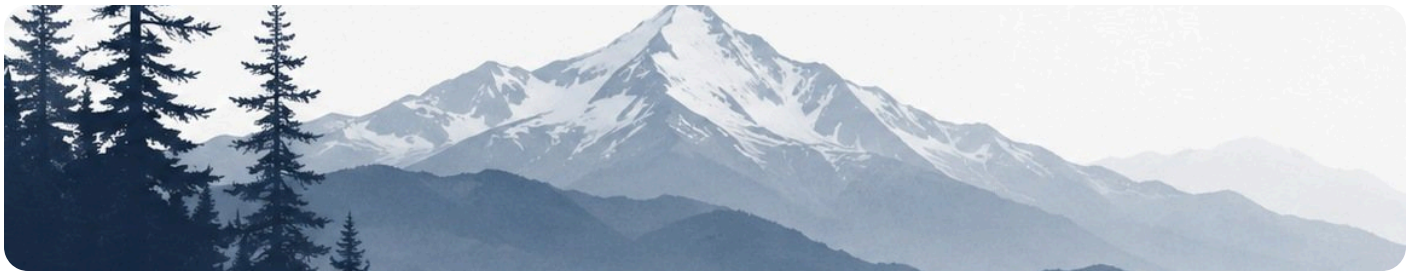
CLIENT HANDOUT



ADULT ADHD

ADHD: What Actually Helps

Everyday strategies for getting started, keeping track of time, and going easier on yourself.

ADHD affects attention, time, getting started, stopping, and how fast feelings hit. It isn't laziness, and it isn't a character flaw. It starts in childhood and runs strongly in families. About 4 to 6 in 100 US adults have it, and about half of adults with a diagnosis didn't get one until adulthood. Plenty of them are smart, creative and hardworking, and still forget the dentist appointment.

The problem usually isn't knowing what to do. It's doing it at the right moment. That's why "just try harder" and "get a planner" rarely work on their own.

What works best is a combination: understanding how your brain works, structure you can see, therapy built for ADHD, and, for many people, medication prescribed by a medical provider. Sleep and movement matter more with ADHD, not less.

The strategies in this handout have the best track record. You don't need all of them. Pick two or three that fit, practice them for a few weeks, and add more once those feel automatic.

QUICK REFERENCE

Where to start

IF THIS SOUNDS LIKE YOU	START WITH	PAGE
I can't get started, even on things I care about.	Shrink the first step. Five minutes, then decide.	2
I'm always running late or out of time.	Make time visible. Guess, then time it.	2
I forget things the minute I look away.	One place for everything. A launch pad by the door.	2
My feelings hit fast and hard.	Name it. Change the channel.	3
I'm exhausted all day and wide awake at midnight.	Same wake time, every day.	3
I feel like I'm always letting people down.	Count the wins. Help them understand.	3

Get the right diagnosis.

Anxiety, depression, trauma and poor sleep can all look like ADHD, or show up alongside it. A thorough evaluation sorts it out.

Simple beats perfect.

The fancier the system, the faster it gets dropped. Keep it simple and keep it where you can see it.

Expect slips.

A missed day isn't failure. It's ADHD. Start again the next time you notice.

✳ PART ONE

Organize and get going

Your memory is a bad place to keep things, and a big task feels like a wall. Put it where you can see it, and make the first step small.

STRUCTURE

CAPTURE

One place for everything

A notebook, a notes app or voice memos. Pick one. Five places means nothing gets found. If it isn't on the calendar, it isn't happening, so add appointments the moment you make them.

REMINDERS

Cues where the action is

Meds next to the toothbrush. The library book on top of your keys. A note on the door at eye level. A reminder in the wrong room doesn't help.

LEAVING THE HOUSE

A launch pad by the door

One tray or basket for keys, wallet, phone, badge and meds. Everything goes back the minute you walk in. Give it a few weeks before it feels automatic.

GETTING STARTED

BREAK IT DOWN

Shrink the first step

"Do my taxes" is a wall. "Find last year's return" is a step. Make the first one so small it feels a little silly, and give each piece its own deadline.

START

Five minutes, then decide

Set a timer for five minutes and start, badly if you have to. When it rings, you're allowed to stop. Most of the time, you'll keep going.

COMPANY

Work next to someone

A friend on a video call, a coffee shop, a coworker doing their own work. Having someone nearby makes starting easier. So does telling someone what you'll finish by Friday.

TIME

SEE IT

Make time visible

With ADHD there's often only "now" and "not now." A clock you can see from every room and a timer that shows time running out help close the gap.

ESTIMATE

Guess, then time it

Guess how long getting ready or the commute takes, then time it. Most people with ADHD guess short. Add half again to your guesses until they match.

TRANSITIONS

Alarms to leave, not arrive

Set the alarm for when to walk out the door. Plan backward from deadlines, and leave a buffer between appointments. Switching gears takes ADHD brains longer.

FOCUS

YOUR SPACE

Work the way you work best

Some people focus better with background noise, others with headphones and quiet. Standing, pacing or something to fidget with can help. Try it and see.

DISTRACTIONS

Out of reach, not out of willpower

Phone in another room, one browser tab, notifications off for a set stretch. Short, planned blocks of 10 to 30 minutes beat long, vague ones.

STRAY THOUGHTS

Park it

When a thought pulls at you mid-task, write it down in a few words and keep going. Read the list at your break. Do what matters, and cross off the rest.

MAKE THE RIGHT THING THE EASY THING

Set things up so the right choice takes the least effort: gym bag by the door, vitamins on the counter, bills in one basket, the charger where your phone lands. And lean on what comes easily to you. That isn't cheating.

✳ PART TWO

Feelings, body and people

ADHD isn't only about focus. How you sleep, move, handle feelings and treat yourself all feed into how your days go.

FEELINGS

BIG FEELINGS

Name it

Strong, fast feelings come with ADHD for many adults. "There goes my ADHD" beats a three-hour argument about a wrong turn. You're still responsible for what you do. Naming it tells you where it's coming from.

STUCK ON IT

Change the channel

The focus that locks onto a good project can lock onto a worry. Waiting it out in your head rarely works. Do something active that pulls you in: a call, a walk, a game.

SHAME

Count the wins

Years of "you'd do fine if you applied yourself" leave a mark. ADHD brains move on fast, even from what went right. Write down one win a day. It's evidence.

BODY

SLEEP

Same wake time, every day

Up to three in four adults with ADHD have a body clock that runs late. Get up at the same time, weekends too, get bright light soon after, and dim screens in the last hour before bed.

MOVEMENT

Move before you focus

Even one round of exercise gives a short boost in focus and self-control. A brisk 10 to 20 minute walk right before a hard task is a good place to start.

QUICK FIXES

Notice what you reach for

Alcohol and cannabis tend to make sleep, focus and motivation worse. Skipped meals do too. If you're using something to slow down or switch off, bring it to session.

PEOPLE

HOME

Help them understand

Once the people close to you see ADHD isn't carelessness, they can help instead of criticize. Ask a few you trust for honest feedback. ADHD makes it hard to see yourself from the outside.

COUPLES

Partner, not parent

When one partner becomes the reminder system, the relationship starts to feel like parent and child, and both end up resentful. Phone alarms, a shared calendar and your own systems can carry the reminders, so your partner doesn't have to.

WORK AND SCHOOL

Ask for what helps

Instructions in writing, check-ins on big projects, a quieter spot. You don't have to name a diagnosis to ask. The Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org) has free ideas.

My ADHD Plan

THE STRUGGLE I'M WORKING ON FIRST

TWO STRATEGIES I'LL TRY FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS

WHERE MY LAUNCH PAD AND ONE CAPTURE PLACE WILL BE

WHO CAN HELP ME STICK WITH IT

BRING IT TO SESSION

If ADHD is costing you at work, at home, with money or behind the wheel, bring it up. So are feelings of failing that won't let up. We can work on the strategies and the shame together.

If you're in crisis, call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, available 24/7) or call **911**.

✳ Educational material, not a substitute for clinical care. Informed by Hallowell and Ratey (Driven to Distraction), Russell Barkley, Safren and colleagues (CBT for adult ADHD), Solanto, Melissa Orlov (ADHD in couples), the CDC (Staley and colleagues, 2024), Kessler and colleagues (2006), the World Federation of ADHD consensus statement (2021), Luu and Fabiano (2025) and Xu, Zhao and Hu (2026).

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