

Working with ADHD

By Sue Potter

I would like to share a couple of experiences with you. Two young people with ADHD were struggling with the “tasks at hand”. One was getting very bored in her job tasks and needed to be able to re-focus on her work; the other one was feeling frustrated and hopelessly upset as he was so far behind.

In both cases you could hear their creative ADHD brains trying to get them to relinquish responsibility and give up on the work at hand. You could hear it making excuses, and providing justifications for the individual to get out of starting and following through with obligations that, in both cases, if completed, would make the individual feel much better about themselves, and of course, much worse if they gave up and listened to their ADHD brain.

Getting started, and following through, are a frequent struggle for the person with ADHD, especially if they are stuck in an un-stimulating activity, one which is routine, highly repetitive and requires a great deal of concentration without much movement or variety.

What to do? Where to start?

Here are a few pointers that would give to help these individuals minimize the occurrence and/or the impact of these situations. They will make it easier to boost determination and commitment. With practice, these strategies will help the person to get started, get “the job” done, and to assert control over their ADHD thinking (this is boring, I can’t get at this, I’ll never finish this, I’ll never get caught up, I’ll take a break and surf the net) which would take them down a much less fulfilling path.

- Set a timer (you can get them at the Dollar Store) for 5 minutes
- First:
 - Pick the one most important thing that needs to be done, (absolutely essential that you do it, big consequences if you don’t get it done on time). You have 5 minutes in which to do this. BBBBrrriingg!

- Your 5 minutes is up. You only had to work on that one thing – and only for 5 minutes. Nothing else. Congratulate yourself when you are finished, even if you had to set your timer twice for 5 minutes each.
- The timer gives you structure, makes it easy to hold the end in sight, and helps you focus in on the task for such a short time. The process described helps you define exactly what you are trying to accomplish in that period. It brings clarity as to how you will use your time. This puts a little pressure on the brain (like waiting until the last minute to do something) to wake up and start. And it certainly adds another ‘mental push’ when the alarm goes off!
- Second:
 - Set your timer for 15 minutes. (the choice of timing is yours but keep the blocks of time very small at the beginning, 5 or 10 minutes, and never longer than 30 minutes or you may get into hyperfocus and write too much, or material that isn’t relevant – or you will get frustrated again and quit)
 - Break it down (that one most important thing) into small, concrete steps, and write the steps out in point form.
 - Use a bright coloured paper or your favourite coloured pen. You do this to give colour and pizzaz to what may otherwise seem like a very dry and tedious bit of work. BBBBrrriigg!
 - Use point form to avoid getting caught up in sentence structure, and semantics. Just the points!
- Third:
 - Set your timer for another 10 minutes.
 - Complete JUST the first small step. BBBBrrriigg!
 - Now here you do something that is often contrary to how you would normally think. Normally you might say “Oh – look what time it is and I only have a small piece of this done, what am I going to do, I’ll never get finished”.
 - DON’T SAY THAT.
 - Instead, tell yourself that you have now “identified your highest priority, have broken it into easy doable steps, and have already completed the first step”. What a difference in

the message you are giving yourself! This is positive reinforcement for what you have accomplished. It comes from the most important person as well – you!

- When you do this consistently, following a strategy that works, making it work, and dutifully congratulating yourself, you will begin to see the “possibilities” as opposed to all the negatives.
- This change in your self-talk is very important to keep you motivated and to help you begin to realize that “yes you can accomplish things”. But with ADHD, it always helps to have a system that meets the needs of your different brain wiring. Structure, colour, clarity of intent, focusing on one small thing at a time to prevent overwhelm and shut down are important. Working for short time periods and timely self acknowledgement for your accomplishments are critical.
- Fourth:
 - Fun time! (but also an important part of the strategy)
 - You have worked for half an hour already. Good for you.
 - Now set your timer for a 10 minute break. Go wild. If you are at school or at work you can always get up and go for a brisk walk, meditate, go to the washroom etc. At home - do sit-ups; dance on the spot; sing your favourite song; write yourself a silly note, draw pictures, eat an apple – anything that gives you a complete and utter break from your activity..
 - But as soon as your timer goes off “BBBBrrriingg” re-set it, perhaps for 15 minutes this time and now complete the second small step of your most important thing.
- Keep following this pattern until you have your most important thing accomplished.
- This is a wonderful strategy to get started, keep going, and complete something. You learn to appreciate yourself for the things you accomplish. You start to see that you can get things done. Of course, it must be obvious that if you don’t use this strategy it doesn’t work. Thinking about it or trying it only once simply doesn’t cut it! Many people with ADHD indicate that this has helped them to get started on very difficult and complex pieces of work. So try it for a week and see what you think. If anything it will teach you to focus on what you do get done and what you have achieved.
- Other tips that feed your ability to get things done:

- Remember how good you will feel after each tiny accomplishment. SOOOOOOOO much better
- Remember how you felt the last time you accomplished what you set out to do – these are good feelings and they are the ones you need to keep in mind.
- Be vigilant about your health. People with ADHD tend to have somewhat heightened sensitivities – to food, to environment, to sleep (or lack thereof), to emotional events, it is very important to make sure you are doing everything you can to be healthy. Good health makes us feel good about ourselves and supports optimal brain function.
- If you start to get overwhelmed with all the thoughts in your head, get them out of your head and onto a sheet of paper, in point form (not long sentences). Leave them and come back later to review them. Put a #1 next to your top three priorities and then re-write these top three.
- Schedule a time to do the most important one and follow the steps above. This way you will at least get the most important one accomplished, rather than putting them all off and getting further behind.

Do what you need to do to get excited about what needs to be done. Get it done. Acknowledge your achievement. Know that you can do it again.