

Studying successfully with ADHD

This is a guide for people with ADHD who are studying at school, college or university.

People with ADHD may find some aspects of studying independently hard. However, with support, understanding and some small changes to capitalise on your strengths and talents you can succeed.

Many people with ADHD are noted for strengths such as:

- Ability to 'hyperfocus' on things they are interested in
- Willingness to take risks
- Spontaneous and flexible
- Good in a crisis
- Creative ideas – thinking outside the box
- Relentless energy
- Often optimistic
- Being motivated by short term deadlines – working in sprints rather than marathons
- Often an eye for detail

What is ADHD?

ADHD has three core symptoms which affect people with it to different degrees:

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|----------------------|--|
| Inattention | Difficulties with concentration, short term and working memory
Difficulties with planning and getting started (activation)
Difficulty with organisation and losing things
Easily distracted by small things which others wouldn't notice |
| Impulsiveness | Acting or speaking on the spur of the moment without thinking through the consequences.
Difficulty controlling emotions |
| Hyperactivity | Whilst older teens and adults with ADHD are usually less active than children with ADHD, they may still have symptoms such as restlessness and the need to tap or fidget. Some people are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, without hyperactivity: this is particularly the case for girls and women. |

Whilst not a core symptom, many people with ADHD have problems with sleep. This can have knock-on consequences for being alert to study the next day.

ADHD can be diagnosed on its own, but often comes alongside a number of other associated conditions. These include sensory difficulties (being over- or under-sensitive to sights, sounds and other sensations), dyslexia, dyspraxia (coordination difficulties), tics, and autistic spectrum disorder.

What helps people with ADHD to study successfully?

1. *Get your work space set up right*

Your workspace is your zone to study effectively, and some small preparations before you start can really help:

- Find a place to work which is different and separate from where you sleep / relax / play computer games. It's unusual for people to focus well under a duvet.
- Use visual prompts – e.g. wall charts for routines or timetables, checklists, post-it notes for reminders
- Give yourself physical reminders – e.g. laying out everything needed for tomorrow at the end of today, labeled 'homes' for storing tools or equipment
- Keep a clock visible. Use alarms or timers to tell you when to start and stop breaks and study periods.
- Use sensory input to keep your mind focused on your task – see what works for you:
 - Wear headphones with music or ambient noise, or ear plugs – you will figure out what types of music keep you focused rather than distracting you
 - Chew gum
 - Fiddle with something like putty / Blutac or a fidget toy
- Keep videos, social media and other screens off – they are designed to be super-distracting.
- Consider working alongside others who are also working or doing a quiet activity (e.g. with a buddy or in the library) to help with focus. This is known as a body doubling – watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni9biXNDZe0> for more info.

2. *Chunk up your work*

People with ADHD often struggle with long deadlines. How can you get enough adrenaline firing to get you going on an essay with a deadline 4 weeks away? The answer is that you need to break down the task into **short term goals** and make yourself accountable for achieving them. Then, work in bursts of productive activity with regular breaks. So:

- **Planning is everything.** Break down your work into manageable chunks, with clear deadlines, and focus on these.
- **Allow yourself more time for each chunk than you think.** Don't forget to schedule in time for breaks and meals. It's better to have too much time in your schedule for tasks than too little.
- **Reward yourself when you have achieved one of your chunks** (e.g. drink, snack, phonecall, visiting a friend, checking social media – but get back off it again!)
- **As you work, build in regular movement / stretching breaks:**

'Pomodoro working' is when you divide your time so work for, say, 25 mins with a 5 min break, with longer break (20-30 mins) after 4 Pomodoros. 'Pomodoro' refers to an Italian tomato timer which you can use to keep yourself on track (though your phone will do the job). The ticking may help with concentration too! Google it for more information.



Another approach to breaking down time is Ben Finn's **Third Time** approach – see <https://benfinn.medium.com/third-time-a-better-way-to-work-3597e98e5502>



Visible timers can be very useful you can buy one cheaply online.

3. Keep it active

Most people find that trying to make facts and information 'go in' just by reading is hard going – and this is especially true for people with ADHD. Active learning is more likely to work, so:

- **Rather than just reading something, make organised notes** as you go that you can use directly in your final essay
- **Make revision notes/flash cards or test yourself** rather than just reading things through when revising.
- **Use movement** (reading, underlining, writing in margins, highlighting, talking to yourself (yes!) and conversation to stay alert while studying).

4. Make use of technology

There are a number of apps which can help you. However, these are not a 'magic bullet' and the wrong app can just put an extra burden on your memory to keep it updated, so do some exploring to find what works for you. Potentially helpful apps include:

- **To do list / reminder scheduling apps** (e.g. *Todoist, Wunderlist*)
- **Text to speech software** if reading is hard (e.g. *Captivoice.com*)
- **Speech to text software** if handwriting is hard (e.g. *Google Docs Voice Typing, Apple Dictation, Otter*)
- **Blockers to eliminate distractions by shutting down social media, messaging and email during tasks** (e.g. *Cold Turkey*)
- **White noise / ambient noise apps** to have on in your ears as you work (e.g. *Coffivity – café noise!, Focusatwill*)
- **Note taking apps** (can be as simple as notes function on phone)

5. As you go through your day....

- Make sure your **to-do list and schedule for the day is visible to you**
- For emails and paperwork **use the O.H.I.O principle - Only Handle It Once.** When you receive a message, email or document try to respond on the spot, throw it away, or file it permanently.
- **Use routines and even rituals** as much as you can – these are your friends.

6. End your day so that you can relax

When you finish studying, get yourself ready for the next day. That way you can really switch off and enjoy your non-study time. So:

- **Organise your desk and put things away if you can**
- **Make a to-do list for the following day** – including anything you haven't finished today

7. Talk to your lecturer / teacher

Your college / university tutors can only help with any challenges you are facing if they know about them. So:

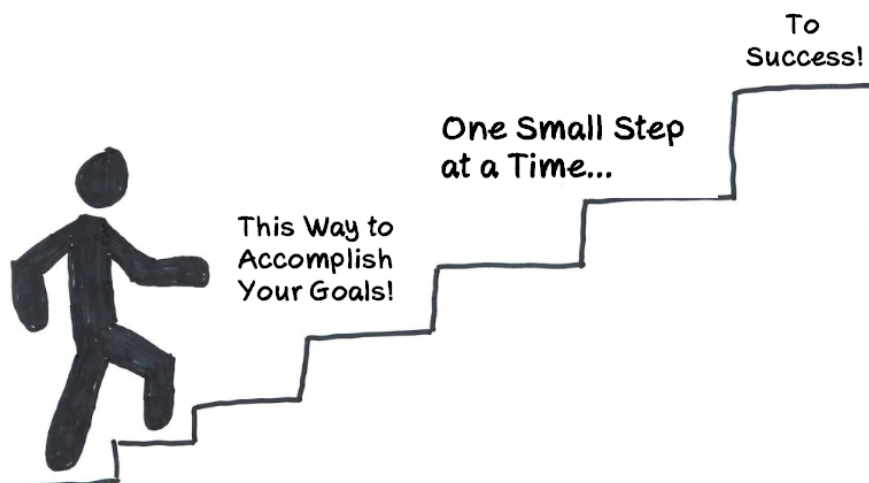
- **Get to know your lecturers early on**, talk to them about your ADHD if you feel you can

- Go and see your lecturer about difficulties you are having, or if you have missed something – don't let things build up.
- Consider visiting your university / college's learning support or disability services department. They may be able to help with coaching, funding for technology or other things.

Where to go for more information

These books may help:

- *Delivered from distraction: getting the most out of life with Attention Deficit Disorder* by Dr Edward Hallowell and Dr John Ratey (one of the most respected books for people with adult ADHD, written by someone with it himself)
- *Fast Minds: How to thrive if you have ADHD (or think you might)* by Craig Surman and Tim Bilkey



There is a lot to take in here and you won't be able to try everything at once. Pick one or two small changes you'd like to make to your study time, try them out and see how they go before moving on...

This guide has been produced with support of young people with ADHD. To provide comments or feedback on it please email adhdglasgow@outlook.com – we would love to hear your suggestions about how it can be improved.

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