

Adult ADHD and Emotional Regulation: Working with Negative Automatic Thoughts

Most adults with ADHD aren't surprised to learn that powerful, sudden emotions are a common challenge among individuals with this disorder. Research shows that adults with ADHD have difficulties with frustration, impatience, and excitability in particular. Like most symptoms of ADHD, the reasons for this begin in the brain. Read below to learn more about the connection between the brain and difficulties with emotional regulation among adults with ADHD, as well as strategies you can use to challenge negative thinking and emotional responses that occur as a result of these difficulties.

Emotional Regulation and Working Memory

According to lead ADHD researcher, Thomas Brown, the working memory impairments of ADHD often allow a momentary emotion to become so strong that it floods the brain with this one, intense emotion.¹ *Working memory* is a function of the brain that allows us to store and manage information in our mind over a short period of time. Specifically, working memory helps us to (a) differentiate between task-relevant and task-irrelevant information, and (b) eliminate interference from distractions². Individuals with deficits in these areas tend to be overly focused on negative information, which leads to an exaggeration of this information as well as failure to regulate resulting emotions. The effects of this can be:

- Extreme sensitivity to disapproval
- Social anxiety
- Avoidance and denial
- Difficulty getting started
- Being carried away with emotion
- Sadness
- Low self-esteem¹

Negative Automatic Thoughts

Repeated frustration and other intense, negative emotions can lead individuals with ADHD to develop a pessimistic outlook on life³. For example, an adult who has difficulties managing their chores or other responsibilities may have negative thoughts such as "I'm such a failure," "I'm so lazy," or "I can't do anything right." These thoughts may then lead to procrastination or avoidance of situations where there is a risk for failure. While this may cause some relief in the short term,

¹ Brown, T. E. (2021). *Exaggerated emotions: How and why ADHD triggers intense feelings*.

https://www.additudemag.com/slideshows/adhd-emotions-understanding-intense-feelings/?src=embed_link

² Xiu, L., Wu, J. Chang, L., & Zhou, R. (2018). Working memory training improves emotional regulation ability. *Scientific Reports*, 8.

³ Ramsay, J. R., & Rostain, A. L. *Cognitive-behavioral therapy for adult ADHD: An integrative and psychosocial medical approach* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

over time procrastination and avoidance actually worsen the cognitive and emotional symptoms of ADHD through the reinforcement of negative beliefs about oneself and the strengthening of upsetting emotions that are connected to various life demands and tasks.

Identifying and challenging negative automatic thoughts that occur in stressful or overwhelming situations is an important first step in regulating emotions. *Automatic thoughts* are the unintentional thoughts that occur in various situations throughout life. These thoughts cause us to have certain emotional, behavioral, or physiological responses. For example, when confronted with the tasks of managing household chores and paying bills, an adult with ADHD may have a thought such as, “I can never keep up with the house or my bills, I’m such a mess.” In response to this thought the individual may feel sad or anxious and may be extremely sensitive to concerns expressed by a spouse or someone else negatively affected by these difficulties. This sensitivity may lead to arguments in the relationship, initiating a cycle of negative thoughts and emotions that reinforce preexisting views of oneself as a failure or inadequate. It may also increase self-doubt and decrease motivation to attempt these or similar tasks in the future. By learning to identify and challenge these negative automatic thoughts, you can interrupt the cycle of low confidence and motivation in your life.

Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts with Thought Records

One way to begin identifying and challenging your negative automatic thoughts is through use of a thought record. *Thought records* are a specific type of journaling activity designed to help you become more aware of the connection between your automatic thoughts and feelings. Thought records also help you grow to be more active in challenging and replacing these thoughts. The more you practice, the better you become at thinking in more functional and adaptive ways.

Traditionally, thoughts records include space to write down the original negative thought and a more functional and adaptive thought. Art Freeman developed the Defense Attorney strategy as a metaphor to help individuals evaluate their original thoughts and come up with alternative ways of thinking. The strategy, which is based on a court of law metaphor, was later refined for use with adults with ADHD³. Using this strategy, think of your negative thoughts as a prosecuting attorney. The prosecuting attorney presents negative evidence against you in order to get a judge to convict you of wrongdoing. Unfortunately, the prosecuting attorney’s arguments are usually based on a limited view of the event. Unless your defense attorney steps in, you may be convicted on unfair or even erroneous evidence. Taking on the role of the defense attorney can help you identify errors, incomplete information, or exaggerations in your thinking as you work to develop more adaptive ways of thinking. In the household chore scenario, for example, while the prosecuting attorney may argue that “You can’t do anything right” or “You’re a bad spouse because you can’t get yourself to keep up with your part of the chores,” the defense attorney might respond by saying, “It’s normal for adults with ADHD to have difficulties with chores. You’re getting better at it and will keep getting better at it as you figure coping strategies that work for you. Being bad at chores doesn’t mean you don’t care about your spouse.”

Thought Record

Use the thought record below to help formulate your defense attorney responses. Questions that might help you see your situation from the defense attorney's perspective include:

- "If a friend of mine was in a similar situation and had this thought, what would I tell them?"
- "What's the worst that could happen? What could I do then?"
- "Do things usually end up as bad as I thought they would?"
- "Is there another way I can view this situation that would change my outlook?"
- "What would happen if I faced this situation rather than avoid it?"

Finish the thought record by identifying specific steps you can take to help keep your thoughts in balance.

Situation	Prosecuting Attorney Thoughts	Reactions (Feelings, Behaviors, Physiological Responses)	Defense Attorney Thoughts	Action Plan