Time Management for Adults with ADHD: Improving Task Initiation and Follow Through

Time management can be especially problematic for individuals with ADHD due to difficulties with task initiation. *Task initiation* refers to the ability to be motivated and stay with tasks until their completion, even if you encounter challenges. When confronted with a task, individuals with ADHD may make negative, pessimistic predictions about the task that make it difficult to get started. These negative predictions are often based on past experiences in which the individual has failed to follow through, made mistakes, or otherwise experienced a poor outcome. We call this type of thinking a *motivational deficit.* Motivational deficits along with ongoing difficulties with executive functioning often result in prolonged avoidance and procrastination and may even activate core beliefs such as "I'm such a failure."

Another type of thinking that can lead to difficulties initiating tasks is called *positivity bias.* This is the view that everything will work out somehow, when the time is right. While generally positive in nature, this type of thinking can result in the same unhelpful avoidance and procrastination.

Strategies such as creating to do lists, prioritizing tasks, and using a planner are effective and necessary tools for time management, especially for adults with ADHD. Yet, in order to maintain use of these tools over time, it is necessary to first identify and address motivational deficits that interfere with task initiation and make following through with plans difficult. Coping strategies such as entering a room with a plan, breaking down tasks into smaller parts, challenging negative thinking, and developing behavioral scripts that enable rather than hinder completion of desired plans are beneficial for this objective. Complete the questions below to practice using these strategies as part of your overall time management goals.

Start Small

As stated, individuals with ADHD often have difficulty prioritizing and initiating tasks in their daily lives. Breaking down larger tasks into smaller steps can help make achieving goals more manageable and increase the likelihood of completing the task. Think of something relatively simple you've been hoping to accomplish. It could be anything from organizing a room in your house to learning a new skill. What would be the first step you would need to take in order to accomplish this goal? Write this task down here:

Develop New Behavior Patterns

Our thoughts and behavioral patterns have a significant influence on our motivation to get tasks done. Unfortunately, we all have behavioral routines that decrease our motivation. These routines, called *behavioral scripts*[1], interfere with our ability to achieve long-term goals; however, we can change dysfunctional behavioral scripts by entering the room with a plan. Say, for example, one of your long-term goals is to clean out your garage. You've broken this task down into smaller parts and have decided to spend 15 minutes each night after work sorting through the boxes on the right side of your garage. Each night after work you come home resolved to sort through the boxes but first make dinner and have something to eat. After eating dinner, you usually feel tired and want to relax. Although you tell yourself you'll get to the boxes in a few minutes, you typically get lost in whatever activity you've engaged for relaxation, leaving the boxes unsorted night after night.

In the above example, cooking and eating dinner had the effect of increasing a sense of tiredness and the desire to relax. Making small behavioral changes can create new behavioral scripts allowing for increased task initiation and follow through. For example, rather than cooking dinner after work, the individual could develop the routine of coming home, changing their clothes, sorting through the boxes, and then cooking dinner. Think about the task you identified above. What behavioral script prevents you from accomplishing this task? Write down this behavioral script here:

Now, think about changes you can make to this behavioral script to increase the likelihood of completing your task. Write your new behavioral script here:

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

Challenge Negative Thinking

Sometimes thoughts can interrupt new behavioral scripts. Identifying and challenging these thoughts can minimize the effect these thoughts have on your ability to implement your new behavioral script. For instance, the person in the example above may have thoughts such as "I'm really hungry after work," "It won't take me that long to cook dinner," or "I've worked all day and deserve to relax," which may decrease her motivation to sort through the boxes. Identifying these thoughts and coming up with new, more adaptive ways of thinking can enhance your motivation to stick with your new behavioral script and create a greater sense of confidence long-term. What negative thoughts may interfere with your ability to stick with your new behavioral script? Write these thoughts in the box below, along with a new thought to challenge and reframe each negative thought.

Negative Thought	Alternative Thought