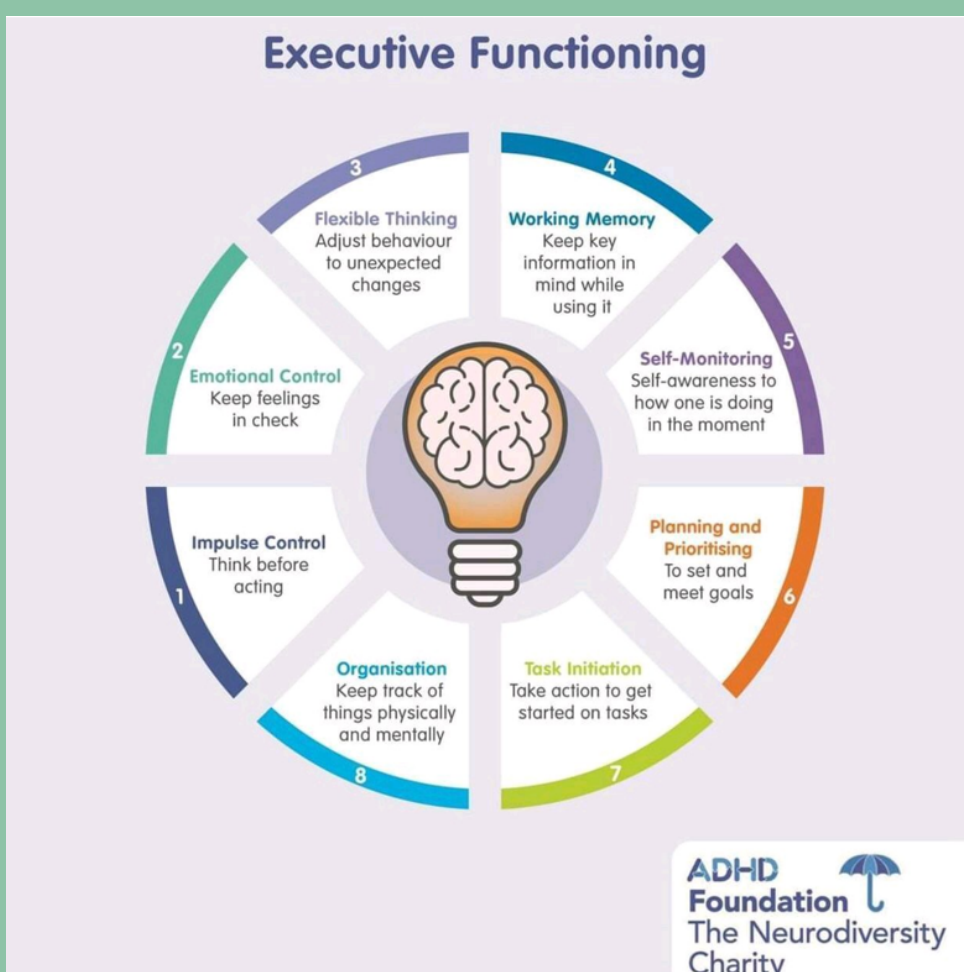


Understanding Task Initiation and Time Blindness

Challenges with Executive Functions impact the lives of people with ADHD

1. What are executive functions ?

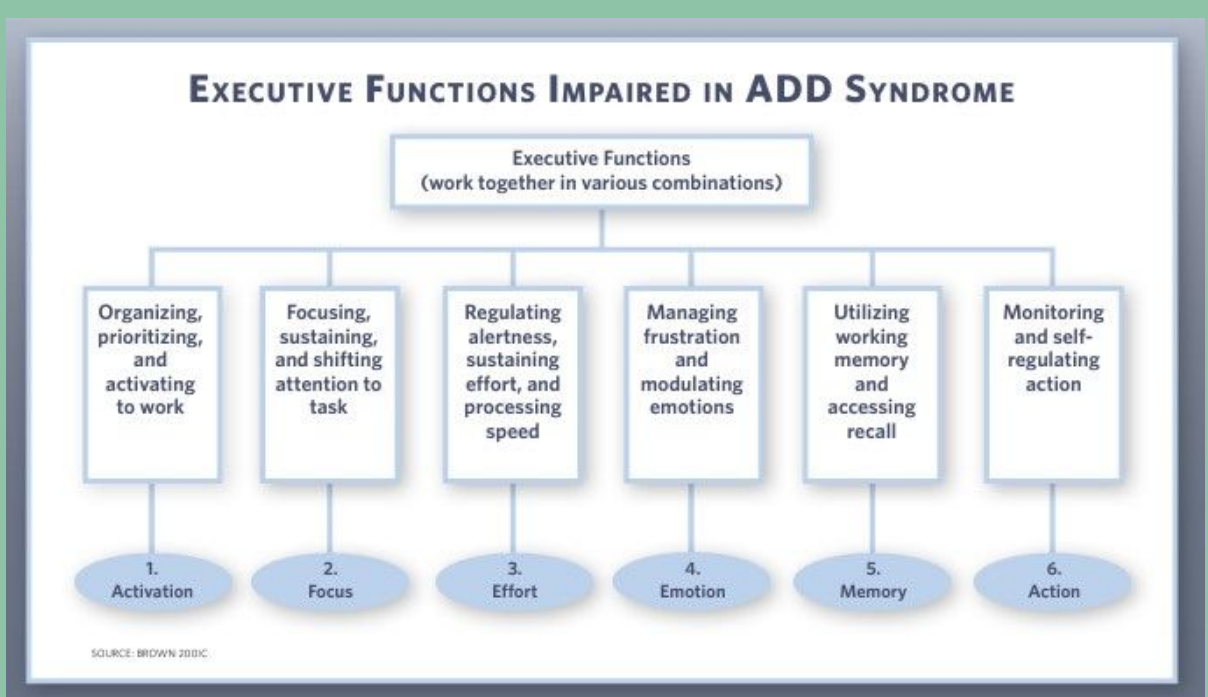


Executive Functions have a far reaching impact on a student's performance both at school and in everyday life.

Executive functions can be thought of as skills for life and are found in the frontal lobe. They are not linked to intellectual ability. They seem to develop **automatically** in many students but in others the development can be much slower and uneven. Many now believe that the executive functions continue to develop into young adulthood. However for someone with ADHD there can be a **3 - 5 year delay** in the development of executive functions (Barkley, 2015).

2. Executive Functions and ADHD

Dr Thomas E Brown has been involved in helping people rethink ADHD and understand the range of skills affected. He describes ADHD as a '**Developmental impairment of the brain's management system: Executive Functions**'. His model highlights the different areas which can be affected.



3. Task Initiation challenges

Task initiation is a **genuine difficulty in getting started**. It can be misunderstood and teachers and parents may think that the student is being 'lazy' or is 'choosing' not to do the task. Sometimes the student's intellectual ability is also questioned as it can seem like the work is too difficult. **Task initiation is complicated** and there can be many reasons for difficulties in this area.



Working Memory

Working memory can be overloaded by the introduction to a lesson leaving little mental energy for the rest of the lesson.



Task seems overwhelming

The task may seem too long or too complicated.



1 Unsure of first step

The brain could be 'buzzing' with too many ideas, it can be hard to know how or where to start.



Fear of failure

Previous experience of not completing tasks properly and negative feedback makes the student reluctant to attempt.



Every task seems new

Poor recall of previous lessons can make each task seem demanding and new. Tasks do not link or build on each other as the teacher intended.

4. Brain chemicals

The differences in the **brain chemicals** for those with ADHD bring an additional challenge to task initiation. People with ADHD have an **'interest driven'** brain due to the level of neurotransmitters. It is harder for them to feel **'content'** or **'satisfied'** by routine task, as there are lower levels of dopamine. This is caused by lower level of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine. It looks like students are choosing not to do a task when their brain chemicals are making it hard to engage.

5. Strategies to support task initiation



Modeling tasks

Thinking aloud can really help students to understand the thinking process and how to approach a task step by step. Many students do not realise that sorting and prioritising ideas is part of the process for most tasks. They may perceive that others are finding the task simple because they can not see the thinking involved.



Breaking tasks into smaller parts

Giving the tasks in **smaller parts** by cutting up the worksheet, sharing one question at time on the board or online. Provide a checklist with numbered steps. Make expectations clear and give a time scale for each part.



Discrete support

Avoid checking in with the student with ADHD first. Support can be given more discretely. Allow the students to work with a partner for the first few questions. Leave the answer to the first couple of questions on the board. Provide printed notes with key information on each table. Check in and explain the task to someone nearby. Make any support available to all.



Worked examples

Show an example of the end product at the beginning of the lesson. In Maths provide sheets with examples of the method or steps needed for a calculation. Consider helping the student make their own 'Maths dictionary.' Provide example answers, sentences and paragraphs.



Scaffolding

Tasks can be made easier to navigate through giving structure. This also takes away the fear of the blank page. This is not about making the task intellectually easier but is about providing tools to help students to organise the thinking process. Providing sentence starters and word lists can make a big impact. Charts, graphic organisers and diagrams are also useful.

6. Creating a supportive learning environment



Provide choice

Allow students to show their understanding in different ways. Understand that students learn differently.



Discuss the learning process

Make questioning and making mistakes a normal part of learning.



Celebrate strengths

Think about reward systems, language and feedback. Celebrate differences.



Encourage collaboration

Develop a supportive environment where students can discuss and share ideas.

7. Study skills programme

An explicitly taught study skills programmes can offer the support needed for all students to develop their executive functions which help to navigate middle and high school. For those with ADHD and other learning differences it can make a profound difference to their performance in school and to their self esteem.

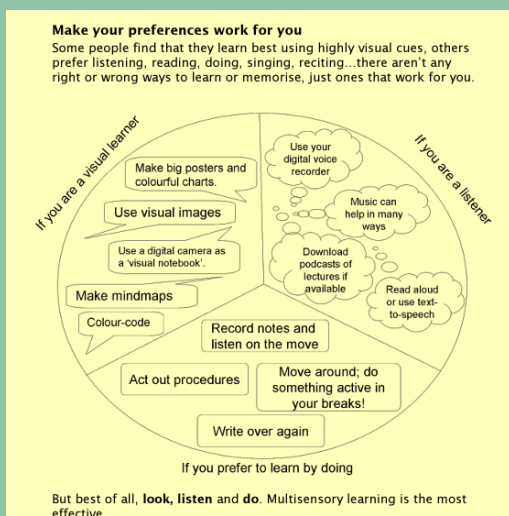
What could be included? Practical organisation, understanding yourself as a learner, how memory works, notetaking, managing stress.

Who should deliver it? Form Tutors, Homeroom teachers, support teachers, subject teachers

How? Individually, in small groups or to whole year groups

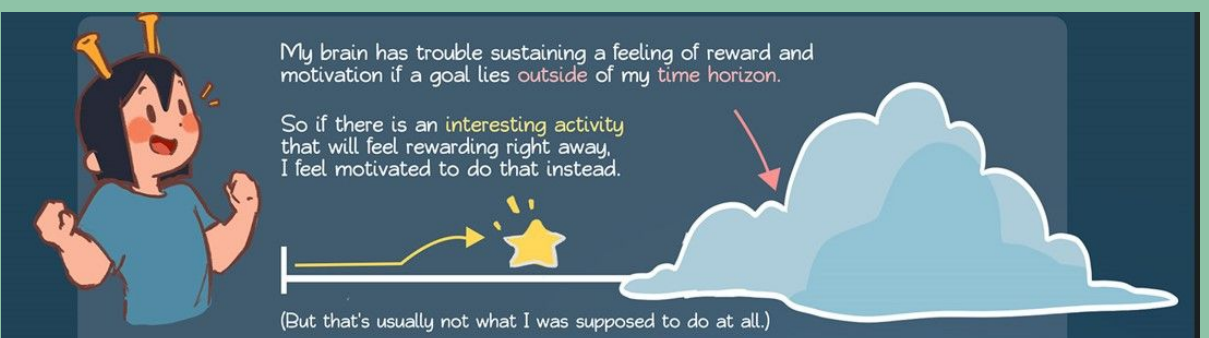
Each school has to develop a programme that matches their context and students.

Southampton
University
study guide



8. Time blindness challenges

People with ADHD often have a poor sense of time. This could be because when we do some tasks time seems to go very quickly but at other times it seems to go very slowly. This is more significant for people with ADHD as when they hyperfocus, they lose all sense of time. Equally their tolerance for boredom is low, making 'dead' time seem painfully slow.



Pina ADHD Alien explains the difficulties people with ADHD have with time very clearly. She illustrates how people with ADHD focus on the immediate and find it hard to focus on tasks in the future.

This means if a homework task is due in a week this seems too far away for any action to be taken. Even if the teachers intention was for the work to be spread out over several nights. So a longer project could all be left until the night before when there is not enough time to complete it properly.

Planning how much time things takes is challenging. For example when planning a journey someone with ADHD will not take account of the transitions or normal delays. Equally estimating how long it takes to get ready in the morning maybe inaccurate as each activity may not be accounted for.

9. Towards solutions

Visual timers

Sand times and timers that use colour to show the time left can help to make time more 'visible.'



Alarms / Digital Reminders

There are many alarms that can be set on both phones and computers to remind a student to start or finish a task. There are also apps that help to set reminders.

Developing sense of time

When doing homework tasks work in fixed blocks of time: 15 - 20 minutes with a 5 - 10 break. Keep track of how much you complete in each block. Make a note of how the time of day, tiredness and mood can impact how long a task takes. Practise time estimation for different tasks and make a note of how accurate the estimate is. Discuss the variation of the time taken for different task. Consider making a chart showing typical times to refer to.



Support with planning

In the beginning stages an adult will need to talk through how to break a task into smaller parts and how to estimate how long each part will take. Writing a clear plan together with the student including when and how to do each part will help. Over time more responsibility for planning can be passed onto the student.



Clear shorter deadlines

Teachers can help by setting specific deadlines for each part of a longer task. They can also provide an outline or checklist of the elements needed to complete a task.



10. Useful resources

Dr Thomas E Brown articles

<https://www.browнадhdclinic.com/proof>

Peg Dawson articles - particularly 'Some thoughts on Task Initiation'

<https://www.smartbutscatteredkids.com/resources/print-articles/>

Chris Dendy Podcast - 'Get Ready to Launch'

<https://www.chrisdendy.com/additude-magazine-recent-publications>

Maggie Sibley Podcast

<https://www.additudemag.com/webinar/i-dont-care-teen-angst-motivation-executive-function-adhd/>

Barkley, R.A. (2015). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Handbook for Diagnosis and Treatment, 4th ed. New York: Guilford Publications.