

ADULT ADHD AND ANXIETY

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Summarize the role of uncertainty in the ADHD-Anxiety connection.
- Identify principles in CBT for adult ADHD that can be used for anxiety.
- Identify at least one useful coping strategy to help with time management, procrastination, or relationships and anxiety.

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WHY IS THIS TOPIC IMPORTANT?

What is the rationale for a discussion of anxiety and adult ADHD?

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THE ADHD – ANXIETY CONNECTION

- Anxiety is the most common co-existing diagnosis with adult ADHD (not to mention situation-task anxiety)

Ramsay (in press). *CBT workbook for adult ADHD and anxiety*. New Harbinger.

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COMORBID ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

- Chung et al. (2019). *JAMA Netw Open*, 2(11):e1914344. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.14344
- Top comorbidities for adults with ADHD
 - Anxiety = 65.81%
 - Depressive = 57.06%
- Fuller-Thomson et al. (2022). Generalized anxiety disorder among adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 299, 707-714. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.10.020>
 - Of the nearly 7000 adult respondents, 682 had GAD; 272 had ADHD.
 - 25% of sample with adult ADHD also had GAD
 - Of GAD sample, 11% had ADHD, only 3% of non-GAD sample had ADHD.

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COMORBID ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

- Barkley (Ed.) (2015). *ADHD: A handbook for diagnosis and treatment* (4th ed.). Guilford.
 - Persistent ADHD from childhood - Anxiety = 46% (v. 23% NP and 9% controls)
 - Adult ADHD - Anxiety = 37-52%
- CHADD (2015). *Fact Sheet: ADHD and Comorbidities*. Author.
 - 53% of adults with ADHD have anxiety

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THE ADHD – ANXIETY CONNECTION^{1,2}

- Anxiety is the most common co-existing diagnosis with adult ADHD (not to mention non-diagnostic situation-task anxiety)
- Core theme of anxiety is (intolerance of) “**uncertainty**” (+ risk, danger, threat)
 - Stress = physiological response to external events
 - Worry = cognitive rumination about specific, realistic events, spur action (now/later)
 - Anxiety = mental and physiological response to general, vaguer, anticipated threat (upcoming)
 - Fear = response to imminent threat (now)
- ADHD anxiety might be more like “performance” apprehension/uneasiness

¹Lokuge et al. (2023). Paper presented at the annual conference of APSARD. Orlando, FL.

²Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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THE ADHD – ANXIETY CONNECTION (2)

- Adaptive anxiety = signal + motivation to action/inaction (approach-avoidance)
- A common theme in adult ADHD is the frustrating “consistent inconsistency” in performance/implementation
- Anxiety + ADHD:
 “I need to do something” + “I can’t trust myself to do that something” (+ bad HX with that something) =

↑ **ADHD PERFORMANCE ANXIETY >> escape/avoidance**

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THE ADHD – ANXIETY CONNECTION (3)

- **Cognitive** themes in adult ADHD:
 - Self-Distrust/-Mistrust: “I know I can do this but I’m not sure if I can do it *now*.” (self-regulatory efficacy)^{1,2,3}
 - Incautious optimism: unhelpful positive thoughts^{4,5}
 - Front-end perfectionism: “I have to be in the mood.”^{1,2}
- **Emotional** dyscontrol – Difficulties managing and changing feelings, such as motivation (up regulation), soothing (down regulation), managing discomfort (“ugh”)
- **Escape-Avoidance Behavior**: delay, procrastinate, “procrastivity,” get ready to get ready, etc.

¹ Ramsay (2020). *Rethinking adult ADHD: Helping clients turn intentions into action*. APA.

² Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

³ Bandura (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.

⁴ Knouse & Mitchell (2015). *Cognitive & Behavioral Practice*, 22, 192-202

⁵ Knouse et al. (2019). *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 23, 1090-1100. doi: 10.1177/1087054717707580

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THE ADHD – ANXIETY CONNECTION (4)¹

- *Overwhelm anxiety*
- *Performance/implementation anxiety*
- *Planning anxiety*
- *Forgetting-to-remember anxiety*
- *Social rejection anxiety*

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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MANAGING ANXIETY IN CBT FOR ADULT ADHD:

DISCOMFORT FROM UNCERTAINTY BUT ASSURANCE FROM ENGAGEMENT

How do we understand emotions/feelings in CBT to improve people's relationships with their feelings?

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ADULT ADHD: EMOTION THEME

- Main EMOTION issue/theme = **tolerate discomfort**

Therapeutic tasks:

- Recognize emotions
- Label them with granularity
- Understand emotion signals, information
- Change relationship with emotions, sensations
- Accept and act without being governed by emotions/feelings
- Distanced self-talk (Kross [2021], *Chatter*. Crown)

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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FEELING AND WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

- Recognize and label emotions, including granular (personalized) label, layers??
- Normalize emotions, theme/function, reaction in context, bodily sensations
- How is this feeling trying to protect me or help me? What is its theme? HISTORY??
- What was the situation and trigger? What are my thoughts and interpretations?
- What are my options with this feeling? Use of information or modify feeling?
- What are my action/inaction options in this situation, including long-range outcomes?
- What % is helpful to keep? What % is excessive, unhelpful?¹ (dose-dependent)
- What might be some positive/adaptive aspects of this feeling? (anxiety = energy)
- What positive characteristics does this emotional reaction suggest about you?¹

¹Burns (2020). *Feeling great*. PESI.

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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WORKING THROUGH ANXIETY IN CBT FOR ADULT ADHD

How do we modify, guide, accept, and nurture our relationship with anxiety and other emotions?

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WORKING THROUGH EMOTIONS

- Grounding in the here-and-now by cycling through the 5 senses / **look-point-name**
 - Exposure, “lean in,” acceptance, willing vs want, prolongation (reframe unpleasant feelings)
 - Down regulate or Up regulate feelings (adaptive calming or activating skills, respectively)
 - “I notice that I have a feeling/sensation of anxiety.” (uncoupling, distancing)
 - **Opposite action**¹ to strong feelings (feeling “too much” even if feeling is accurate to setting)
 - Mindful awareness and observation rather than acting on feeling
 - Change body position, posture
 - Change facial expression
 - Opposite behavior – stay vs avoid, acknowledge mistake vs defensiveness, or....
- “Instead of tuna salad and being intimidated by women, chicken salad and going right up to them.”

¹Spradlin (2003). *Don't let emotions run your life*. New Harbinger.

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WORKING THROUGH EMOTIONS (2)

- “Acceptance” of discomfort/emotion to maintain “commitment” to a valued task. (i.e., Do not have to be “in the mood”)¹
- “Mindful” recognition of ADHD symptoms², emotional discomfort without escape reaction (feeling does not dictate action/reaction, **MMT = observe feeling, not extinguish as a precondition**) – change your relationship with your feelings.
- State/acknowledge what you’re feeling³, emotional labelling⁴, emotional granularity⁵
- “Willing to” versus “wanting to” engage and persist on task¹
- Exercise, sleep, good health practices, managing technology, substance use, etc.⁶

¹Hayes et al. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy*. New York: Guilford.

²Zylowska (2012). *The mindfulness prescription for adult ADHD*. New York: Trumpeter.

³Lieberman et al. (2007). *Psychological Science*, 18, 421-428.

⁴Brooks et al. (2017). *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. doi: 10.1093/scan/nsw121

⁵Barrett et al. (2001). *Cognition and Emotion*, 15, 713-724. doi:10.1080/02699930143000239

⁶Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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WORKING THROUGH ANXIETY (3)

- **Reframe** visceral feelings as “sensations” and information (could be distorted, too) ¹
- **Reframe** discomfort or intrusive thoughts as “seasonal allergy” or “pest”¹
- Thinking through, imagining future feeling, outcome, “future self,” time perspective
- **Distanced self-talk**² about feelings, sensations, situation, etc. = Talk to yourself by name or as “you” to identify and work through feelings (+ effective with tasks).
- Build on strengths, valued action, and catch/modify distortions.
- Move body where it needs to go to “touch” the task (action/exposure) ¹
- **Adults w/ ADHD cope by AVOIDANCE mainly due to emotion dysregul.**³

¹Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

²Kross, E. (2021). *Chatter: The voice in our head, why it matters, and how to harness it*. Crown. .

³Bodalski et al. (2019). *J of Psychopath and Beh Assess*, 41, 81-92.

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WORKING THROUGH ANXIETY AND ADULT ADHD IN RELATIONSHIPS

How do we change, steer, and/or change our relationship with anxiety and other feelings?

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES

Rejection Sensitivity (RS)¹

- Transdiagnostic phenomena, akin to “impostor syndrome” = context-specific targets + person-specific issues (and experiences)
- Emotional dyscontrol (ED) magnified by experiences of **public** aspects of ADHD + criticism. ADHD is a predisposing factor for public gaffes → criticism, and ED a predisposition for oversensitivity.
- Many existing pharmacotherapy options for ADHD address ED
- Psychosocial treatments focused on skill-implementation, behavioral-emotional-cognitive management, and real-life exposure/practice are well-suited but not yet specifically studied for RS.

¹Dodson (downloaded 2022, July 8). *Additude Magazine*. <https://www.additudemag.com/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria-adhd-emotional-dysregulation/>

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (2)

- What situation triggered my RS? (Define in behavioral versus emotional terms.)
- What are my thoughts about this situation? (relevant history?)
- How can I reevaluate my thoughts?
- What are my feelings about this situation?
- What are my feelings telling me, and how can I manage them?
- What am I doing or not doing to handle this situation?
- What is my implementation plan for this situation?
- How do I wield my social capital in this situation?

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (3)

- Identify trigger – What happened?
- What is your thought/interpretation/meaning? HISTORY?
- What is the emotion or layers of emotion?
- What are the themes of these feelings? How do these feelings make sense? (normalize)
- What information do they provide?
- Is your perception and emotional reaction accurate? To what degree?
- Even if accurate, what percentage of your feeling is not helpful?
- Even if unpleasant, what percentage reflects a positive quality of yours that you want to keep? (“My guilt is excessive, but it means that I take responsibility for my actions.”)
- How will you use this information adaptively and handle this situation proportionally?

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (4)

- **Define Your Role**
 1. Define the problem/situation in actionable terms
 2. What is your role/job in this situation?
 3. What do you have to do to fulfill this role?
 4. Disentangle mind-reading, fortune-telling, & factors out of your control (cannot control how other reacts)
 5. What is the behavioral script of what you can do to fulfill your role and how you will do it? (Sometimes restating facts as you see them.)
 6. Anticipate barriers
 7. Implement – After last syllable, you have fulfilled your role (but finish the job)
- This is a reframing of **assertiveness/self-advocacy** in actionable terms

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (5)

- **Using assertiveness: fulfill roles, set limits, self-advocacy**
 - Define relationship as a “task,” identify roles, duty, values, specificity
 - Relationship promoting actions (doing)
 - Relationship promoting inhibitions (not doing)
 - Score/accumulate “points” (random acts of friendship, affection)
 - Managing requests (“impulsive compliance,” saying YES right away)
 - **Buy time:** “Let me think it over/check and get back to you”
 - **Say “No”** using DYR steps, “stay on message” (“Thank you, but no”)
 - **Counter proposal:** conditions under which you can say “yes”
 - **UNDER promise/Over deliver** (be mindful of paying down “debts”)

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (6)

- **Communication Skills**
 - Disarming – acknowledge at least a grain of truth in what speaker said
 - Thought empathy – paraphrase the person’s description
 - Feeling empathy – imagine the person’s emotional reaction
 - Inquiry – have the person elaborate their reaction, “anything else?”
 - I feel statements – When sharing your view, focus on behaviors, and your reactions, such as “*When this happens, I feel...*” rather than “*you*” or “*you need to*” statements and framing in character traits
 - Stroking – focus on a spirit of respect and find some positive about the interaction and the person and desire for a positive outcome

Burns (2020). *Feeling great*. PESI.

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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL ROLES (7)

- **Self-compassion and adult ADHD: elements¹**
- 1. Self-kindness (vs. self-judgment) – treat yourself in the supportive way you would someone else – particularly if that someone else has ADHD
- 2. Mindfulness (vs. overidentification) – take notice of and observe your reactions to a situation without necessarily having to eradicate them and without being flooded by negativity
- 3. Common humanity (vs. isolation) – recognize and normalize difficulties associated with ADHD and that others experience them and people without ADHD have other difficulties but that such imperfection is a human universal rather than assuming one is broken or inadequate

¹Neff cited in Beaton et al. (2020). *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01464-w>

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TIME (AND TASK AND EFFORT) MANAGEMENT

“Define, prioritize, and choreograph what you do.”

Enumerated tools from: Ramsay & Rostain (2015). *The adult ADHD tool kit*. Routledge.

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TIME/TASK MANAGEMENT

- Planning/Precommitment reduces decision fatigue/cognitive load¹
- Specific to-do plans also reduce decision fatigue and promote:¹
 - Event segmentation
 - Temporal sequencing
 - Specific, actionable, targeted pivot points²
- “Winging it” + frequent task switches are high cognitive load + fatiguing.¹
- Helps face anxiety triggers and reduce avoidance + procrastination and reduce overall anxiety by being more on top of things

¹Levitin, D. (2014). *The organized mind*. Dutton.

²Ramsay (in preparation). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.

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DAILY PLANNER

“How do you ‘spend yourself?’”

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DAILY PLANNER

- Externalize time, effort, and energy = TIME MACHINE
- Track throughout day and across days and weeks
- “See” the future, placeholders for tasks
- Planner is a diary of your accomplishments

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DAILY PLANNER (2)

1. Decide on paper vs. electronic planning system – if in doubt, start with paper planner.
2. Find a planner size and format that fits the scheduling demands of your life.
3. Plan to “over” use your Daily Planner. It is a place for scheduled appointments, work and school commitments, as well as personal, recreational, and self-care tasks.
4. Err on the side of “under” scheduling, leaving enough buffer time between tasks and meetings.

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DAILY PLANNER (3)

5. Keep your “task appointments” as specific and behavioral as possible.
6. Define start times and end times for tasks and activities, whenever possible – “lower the bar.”
7. Your Daily Planner a “tool of daily life,” along with your keys, wallet, purse, cell phone, etc.

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USING YOUR PLANNER

1. Get your Daily Planner and take it to a reduced distraction setting.
2. Devote at least 10 minutes (600 seconds) to planning your day.
3. Review any obligations you have already recorded in your Planner.
4. Record any known commitments or obligations for that day, including meetings at work, classes, picking up and dropping off from school, etc.
5. Reserve times for self-care tasks, such as sleep, meals, exercise.

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USING YOUR PLANNER (2)

6. Leave adequate buffer time between tasks for breaks, commuting, etc.
7. Make appointments for tasks from your Daily To Do List.
8. Make sure that tasks in #7 are defined in reasonable, behavioral terms.
9. Schedule “down time” and other recreational or social activities

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USING YOUR PLANNER (3)

10. Make sure the order of tasks throughout your day makes sense and is realistic.
11. Trust the plan – focus on engaging in your first task and take it one-step-at-a time.
12. Refer to your Daily Planner frequently throughout the day.

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INTERVENTIONS

- **Cognitive:** Challenge the thought “I’ve done this before for a little while, but I also stop doing it” and “I don’t like making plans.”
- **Behavioral:** Developing the habit of using + referencing planner during the day
- **Emotional:** Tolerate getting used to having + using a planning system + personalizing it.
- **Implementation:** Action-based “appointments” for tasks, If X, Then Y pivot points
- **Interpersonal:** Under-promise + over-deliver, relationships as “tasks,” give self credit for accomplishments

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TO DO LIST

“What do you have to do?”

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TO DO LIST

- **TO DO List** is for tasks that fall outside the flow of your typical day, which require specific and targeted efforts to remember and implement
 - Student does not put “go to class” on To Do list...
 - ... but might plan to “go to library to study between classes”
- Externalize tasks for memory, recall, and behavioral priming
- Limit to 2 – 5 reasonable tasks

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COMPREHENSIVE TO DO LIST (BUT **NOT** WHAT YOU ARE DOING TODAY!)

1. Get a notebook or open a computer file that will be devoted to your Comprehensive To Do List.
2. Find a place free from distractions.
3. Write down ALL your obligations, plans, errands, commitments, recreational ideas, etc. for the upcoming 1 to 6 weeks (or whatever time frame suits your needs) – this is your “dump list.”

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COMPREHENSIVE TO DO LIST (2)

4. Store your notebook or computer file in a place where you can retrieve it and refer to it later.
5. The Comprehensive To Do List provides you with reminders of tasks and obligations without relying on your memory. Refer to it periodically for helpful reminders of things that you can do, but this is not your Daily To Do List.
6. The Comprehensive To Do List is also an emotion/stress regulation exercise of therapeutic writing, distancing

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DAILY TO DO LIST

1. Find an index card, back of an envelope, or other disposable piece of paper.
2. Devote 10 minutes (600 seconds) to defining your To Do List for the day.
3. Your Daily To Do List is made up of tasks you want to do that are not part of your typical schedule but that require a special investment of time and effort to complete.
4. Limit your list to no more than 2 to 5 items. When in doubt, err on the side of fewer items rather than more – you can add more after you complete these, if you like.

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DAILY TO DO LIST (2)

5. Define tasks in specific, behavioral terms or actions that you can “do.”
6. Set a realistic time frame (time or task bounding) to spend on each task.
7. Use your Daily Planner to find times in your day when you will make an “appointment” with yourself to perform each task in the flow of your day.
8. Do each task at the scheduled time – get it off the list.

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INTERVENTIONS

- **Cognitive:** Challenge the thought “I’ve had lists before. This does not work for me.” Also challenge thoughts of “winging it” or “I have to be in the mood” or “I shouldn’t have to do this, no one else does”
- **Behavioral:** Defining the act of actually making a “to do” list
- **Emotion:** Tolerate process of finding what works, exposure to tasks
- **Implementation:** Associating “to do” list with specific actions at specific moments during a day (planner) – If X, Then Y plans for initiation
- **Interpersonal/Social:** Consider how “to do” tasks affect others, specific tasks that you perform to benefit your social connections

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REDUCE PROCRASTINATION INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

“How You DON’T Do Things” Form

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PROCRASTINATION: DEFINED

- “(T)o procrastinate is to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay.” (p. 66)¹
- Procrastination is the “temporary preference for early reward at the expense of greater reward later.”² (Smaller Sooner > Larger Later – “temporal/reward discounting”)
- Procrastination is the quintessential self-regulatory failure.¹
- EFs are central culprits in procrastination – for *everyone*, ADHD or not – notably *emotional regulation*, but particularly for ADHD.^{3,4}
- *Procrastivity* is a specific sub-type of procrastination (sometimes called “productive procrastination” or “structured procrastination”).

¹Steel (2007). *Psychological Bulletin*, 133, 65-94.

²Ainsle (2010). In (Andreou & White, Eds.) *The thief of time*. Oxford UP.

³Jaffe (2013). *APS Observer*, April. www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/why-wait-the-science-behind-procrastination

⁴Bodalski et al. (2019). *J of Psychopath and Beh Assess*, 41, 81-92

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM “PROCRASTIVITY” : BRIEF SUMMARY OF INTERVENTIONS

- **Cognitive** modification, self-regulatory efficacy
 - Self-trust, define task in specific, “doable” terms, enough-ness, valuation
- **Behavioral** modification, habits, and coping skills
 - Engagement, “touch the task,” “go to” stations, time bounding, priming
- **Emotional** acceptance, mindfulness, persistence
 - Tolerate “discomfort,” emotional labelling/granularity, “willing vs want”
- **Implementation** strategies, pivot point between “not doing” and “doing”
 - “If I face or do X, then I will respond with goal-consistent behavior Y” – execute intention
- **Interpersonal** strategies/skills, advocacy/information, specific actions
 - Assertiveness (“define your role”), ask for/accept help, fulfill roles, social capital

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HOW YOU DON'T DO THINGS

- What is the **task/goal** you are not doing? What is its **value** to you?
- **Barriers?** Cog/emot/behav
 - Task-interfering **thoughts?**
- Redefine task in more **actionable terms**
 - Emotional interference? Discomfort? **Ugh?**
- Define smallest, specific, actionable **starting** step (off-task → on-task)
 - **Escape** behaviors?
- Specific **time** task will be performed (with start- and **end-time; bounded**)
 - What is your **implementation plan?**
- **Where** will the task be performed?
 - (IF/WHEN “**X**,” THEN I WILL DO “**Y**”)

Ramsay (in press). *Adult ADHD & anxiety workbook*. New Harbinger.
Ramsay (2020). *Rethinking adult ADHD*. APA.

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IN CONCLUSION...

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