

# How ADHD Adults Can Change Habits

## Increase focus, end procrastination and more with these self-help strategies from cognitive behavior therapy.

By Carl Sherman, Ph.D.

Be more mindful when you face a difficult situation, or when you notice your emotions changing for the worse," suggests Dr. Ramsay. "Take a moment to reflect on how you're thinking about whatever's going on - what thoughts and pictures are going through your mind, how this is affecting the way you feel, and what you're doing as a consequence. Is there evidence that these thoughts are true? Is there a more helpful, realistic way to think about it?"

### Stopping procrastination

Many ADDers put off paying bills, completing chores, and doing other things they consider boring. But other ADDers put off doing tasks they are convinced they *cannot* do - often because of past experience. If you've failed at something many times in the past, you may be reluctant to try again.

Ramsay says, "Ask yourself what you are assuming will happen if you try. Is there another way this could possibly turn out? If a friend had AD/HD, how would you advise and encourage him? Why assume that the same thing wouldn't work for you?"

Another way to beat procrastination is to cut tasks into pieces. If going through a pile of papers makes you think, "I'll never get it all done," commit to going through half the pile.

"Keep reducing the piece of the task until you can say, 'I can do this easily,'" advises Mary Solanto, Ph.D., director of the AD/HD Center at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. "Once you get started, you may be buoyed by the results and continue spontaneously."

A similar approach is the "10-minute rule." Commit to working at a large job for only 10 minutes. Tell yourself you can stop after that, guilt-free. Since getting started is often the hardest part, you're likely to keep going. That will give you a sense of accomplishment, not to mention a smaller job to finish.

### The to-do dilemma

"People make to-do lists but never commit to doing things at a particular time on a particular day," says Dr. Solanto. In CBT, she says, "we have a saying: 'If it's not in the planner, it doesn't exist.' We ask people to schedule the things they want to accomplish, and tell them to carry the planner with them at all times."

Keep all your to-do lists in a single notebook. Link checking it to routine activities, like brushing your teeth, eating lunch, walking the dog, and so on. That way, you'll check the lists regularly.

## **Staying focused**

To focus more easily, Dr. Safren recommends the following: Each time you sit down to tackle a boring task, set a timer for as long as you think you'll be able to stay focused. Whenever a distracting thought comes to mind (typically, something else you need to do), jot it down in a notebook. Tell yourself, "I'll do this later," then go back to work.

When the timer goes off, review your list. If the items you wrote down don't need to be dealt with right away, work a bit longer on the task. Go back to your list at the end of the day.

Another way to stay focused, says Safren, is to place colored stickers on sources of distraction, like the telephone or computer. Each time you spot a dot, ask yourself, "Am I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing?"

## **When goals prove elusive**

People with ADD have trouble achieving long-term goals. And no wonder: It can take years to save for a new home, whereas splurging on a new outfit feels good right away. This kind of thinking can lead to a lifetime of unfulfilled ambitions.

"You have to make distant rewards more present," says Solanto. "One way to do this is by visualization. Imagine what it would be like to accomplish your goal, until it becomes so real, so visceral, you can almost taste it."

A student who is tempted away from writing a paper by friends who want to party might think ahead to how good it would feel to ace the course.

## **Self-esteem trouble**

Years of low self-esteem engender a defeatist attitude: If you're no good at it, why try? "People tend to focus on their weaknesses, and overlook their strengths," says Lily Hechtman, M.D., director of ADD research in the child psychiatry department at McGill University in Montreal.

To overcome this problem, she recommends writing a list of your positive attributes - things that other people might consider your strengths. Then identify one personal shortcoming - and do something about it.

For example, if you seldom finish projects, come up with a task that takes several days. Set a deadline, and do your best to meet it. Each incremental success gives your self-image a boost.

## **Your inner voice**

If you run into trouble putting these strategies into action, tune in to your inner voice. Is it saying, "I just know this won't work, it never did before"? If so, ask yourself why it didn't work. Figure out what you need to do differently. Commit to trying the new approach for a week before deciding it's not worth the effort.

To track your inner voice, keep a daily "thought record." Divide a sheet of paper into five columns. Use column one to record the thoughts that come up in a problem situation, column two to describe the situation itself, column three to list the feelings aroused by the thoughts, column four to list the thought distortions you can identify, and column five to list more realistic thoughts.

Give yourself credit where credit is due. If you catch yourself belittling one of your achievements, recognize this as the distortion it is. When you meet a goal, reward yourself with a special meal or another indulgence.