

Time Management and ADHD: To-Do Lists

YOU’VE READ IT IN MAGAZINES, IN BOOKS AND ONLINE. You’ve heard it from organization experts and others: If you want to get things done, you need to keep to-do lists. But what does that mean, and how do you use one?

The idea behind to-do lists is that they give you a place to write things down so you don’t have to worry about remembering them or tie strings around your fingers and hope that’s enough to jog your memory. You’re busy, you’ve got a lot on your mind, and ADHD often means thoughts come and go before you have a chance to act on them. It can be difficult retaining all the information about what you need to get done on a daily basis or over a longer span of time. Whether you want to feel more organized in the mornings as you get ready for work and your kids off to the school bus or you have so many home-improvement projects you’re too overwhelmed to even begin, to-do lists can be an important tool in your life.

What a to-do list looks like

To-do lists can be for short-term (a day) or long-term (a year) planning. You might need both, but it’s best to keep them separate. If one of your long-term goals is learning another language, you can’t expect to accomplish it in one day. Plus, writing it down over and over each day may make you stop paying



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attention to it over time, and then it will likely never happen. Or you might keep writing it down and feel disappointed that you never seem to get around to doing it.

When you’re thinking about what to include on your list, make sure you focus on specific actions you can take, rather than vague ideas. “Walk to the library and back” or “do 25 pushups and 25 sit-ups” is likely to get done, because all you have to do is read the item and you know what to do. If you tend to do more than one kind of exercise—or none at all—and you’ve simply writ-

ten “exercise,” your brain may see that item on the list and skip right over it.

If you have big items that need doing, break them down into separate steps. For example, “clean the kitchen” is so broad you might ignore it—and not just because you don’t like cleaning. Instead, break it down into the steps that are involved, giving each its own entry, such as:

- empty dishwasher
- wipe down counters
- throw out expired food
- sweep

Then you can cross each item off as you go and are more likely to complete the project.

Written lists are standard, but for some people, a sketch or other visual approach to list making is more appealing. In fact, one research [study](#) found that when you're trying to remember something, drawing it instead of writing it in words can be really helpful. You don't have to be a trained artist—no one will see it but you. Draw or sketch a quick illustration of something related to each item (a broom, for instance, if you need to sweep; a phone if you need to call for an appointment) and then make a quick note next to it to clarify. You might write “kitchen” next to the broom or “dentist” next to the phone. Just make sure your drawings are clear enough that you'll remember what they mean, and don't let creating your to-do list get in the way of completing the items on it!

It can also be a good idea to keep a bigger list that serves as a place where you write down every task or project that comes to mind whenever it comes up. Then, once a day or every couple of days, you can transfer items from that larger list or “brain dump” onto your action-item list.

How to use a to-do list

If all the things you need or want to accomplish keep you up at night, you might think about spending 5 or 10 minutes before bed writing down your list for the following day. You'll sleep better writing out a list of long-term projects or goals, if they're what's on your mind. Some people prefer to start their day by creating a list. Choose whichever works best for you.

If your to-do list is made up of just a couple of small items, you will probably make your way through it without much prompting. But if

there are 12 things that need doing, taking a minute to prioritize will clear your mind and allow you to follow through. Choose the three most important things on the list and mark them with numbers (1, 2, 3) to make them stand out and increase the odds that you'll get them done. Some experts also suggest a 1-3-5 approach to a long list. There, you indicate which of your to-do items are big, which are medium, and which are small in terms of time, energy, and resources needed to get them done. Accomplishing one big item, three medium-sized items, and five small items every day will help you tackle your list.

Be sure that items with a deadline, such as bills that need to be paid, get done whenever they are on a to-do list. You may struggle sometimes to get such items and others that are real priorities done. If so, you may need strategies to stay on track. If medication is part of your treatment plan, make sure you're taking an effective dose that lasts through the day. If not, speak with your doctor or healthcare provider about what will work.

What happens to items that don't get crossed off? Most people find themselves with a few things that they keep writing over and over till they have to wonder why they're not getting those items done. If that

happens to you, take a minute and ask yourself what the problem is. Is the task too big? If so, break it into smaller subtasks. Is it something you are dreading? Promise yourself a small reward for accomplishing it. Some to-do items lose their importance over time or no longer need a place on your list. (Your spouse called the vet? Cross it off your list!)

Where to keep to-do lists

The key to a successful to-do list is keeping it somewhere you'll see and use it. If it's tucked away in a drawer you might forget to write things on it, and you are certainly not going to reference it often.

Many people like to write (or draw) their lists in longhand on a piece of paper and then cross each item off as they complete it for a feeling of satisfaction. But others prefer the tidiness and ease of their smartphone, where they can use an [app](#). It may be one that's specially designed for list making or something that is more generally for notes. Having the list on your phone means it's probably with you most of the day, accessible in case you think of other things to include on it.

Experiment to see which format works best for you. Choosing one can be the first item you cross off your list! 📱

Related Document:

[Time Management and ADHD: Day Planners](#)



For further information, please contact National Resource Center on ADHD: A Program of CHADD

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