

Organizing Your Life, Managing Your Time By Sarah D. Wright, M.S., A.C.T.

Problems with stuff and time management are often hallmarks of living with AD/HD. You think if you just had the right system, you could get it all together. You think, "If I just get this closet organizing system, I'll be able to keep my clothes in order." You believe, "If I just get this special planner, I'll become efficient and never forget anything again."

The real place to start organizing is not with stuff or time management skills, but with self-management skills. People with AD/HD often have lots of energy and ideas. The problem is corraling, containing, and focusing on those ideas so that all that energy and creativity becomes achievement.

Being in a job with a boss, rules, and consequences can help focus your attention and energy. Jobs like the armed forces, fire departments, and ER rooms are great for this. Any boss helps. But what if your boss is you? How can you SELF-manage?

Self Management. The Goldilocks in all of us. Overwhelm and Underwhelm.

Everyone knows the story of Goldilocks. How she didn't like things too hard or too soft, too hot or too cold, but just right. It's the same with everyone. And everyone's tolerances and preferences are a bit different and differ over time. This applies not only to what you experience externally, but also to what you experience internally. For people with AD/HD the internal issue is often the difference between being overwhelmed and underwhelmed.

Self-management is in some sense the same as self-regulation: the ability to be in the right state of energy or mind for what you need to do. You actually self-regulate all the time. If you get out of breath, you slow down or pause until you get your breath back. If you're hungry you eat. If you're tired, you sleep. These are examples of self-regulating your body's needs. It is also possible to self-regulate your mind and your energy levels and thus your attention.

Some Tools for Managing Your Life (self-regulation):

- External Temperature: Cooling off is typically stimulating, warming up relaxing.
- Music: Can be stimulating or relaxing, depending on the music.
- Effortful Exercise: "A little hit of Ritalin and a little hit of Prozac."
- Mindful Meditation: Exercise for your brain.
- Proprioception: Sitting, standing, being more relaxed when you're in motion.
- Competition. Race the clock. Make it a game. Make it interesting.
- Companionship

Time Management. Time Templates. Chunking: the 1-2-3s

If you're your own boss, either because you're self-employed or because you're managing a household, organizing your time can be a problem. It is easy to fall into a mode where you are responding to emergencies all the time. If this is you, always putting out fires, it becomes hard to be in control of your time. If you're not in at least some control of your time, it's hard to feel like you get anything done.

Time Templates

One powerful tool for taking control of your time is not just scheduling activities in a calendar/datebook/agenda, but the concept of a time template. A time template is where you block out chunks of time each week for certain activities, and then you honor those boundaries. Because everyone's needs and tolerances are different, it can be as simple or elaborate as you need it to be.

You can plan very specifically what kind of activity you'll do every minute of every day, or you can "chunk it" into just a few categories.

A simple example would be to block out weekday mornings and evenings for your morning and evening tasks and routines. Then, because it is VERY IMPORTANT to PLAN TO PLAN, put in an hour first thing Mondays and Fridays to plan your week and your weekend. Planning means not just what you're going to do, but what you will need to prepare in order to do what you plan to do. Then, fill in the rest with exercise, work hours, play time, kid time, chores, whatever it is you need and want to do in a week. A great online tool to help you with developing this time template is www.skoach.com from Dr. Kathleen Nadeau and her colleagues.

Time templates create supportive external structure where there is none. They help you either to know what you should be doing at any point in time or more easily decide what to do next. You will not be in control of every day, but using a time template can help you start to get *some* control and some control will help you start to get more stuff done. A time template helps create life balance as well. And it is hugely helpful to the self-employed.

Create a Time Template to Match Your Needs, Not Just Your To-Do List

Now it's time to blend the self-management and time-management techniques.

Pay attention to your own patterns and see if you can plan time template to match your energy patterns and not just your to-do list. Many people find they can concentrate best early in the day and get fuzzier and restless in the afternoon. So plan for that. Plan desk time for the morning and errands or exercise for the afternoon. Some people are more productive once it gets dark. If that's you, plan for that. Some people are slow starters. Maybe exercise first thing helps kick start your day. So plan for that. You will, of course, have to adapt to the schedules that are forced on you, like work and school and kids. But do what you can to honor your own rhythms and then you won't have to work so hard to get things done.

Chunking: The 1-2-3s

In creating a time template rather than an agenda, the idea is to have general blocks of time for certain tasks. Then you have wiggle room to adapt each day to the needs of *that* day. We all have mental or written to-do lists, which amount to a menu of choices for what to do in any chunk of time. The idea is to just do the ones relevant to "chores" during your "chore" time, to "exercise" during your exercise time, etc.

But what about the routine stuff? The stuff that has to get done every day? The stuff that shouldn't really be on your to-do list? That's where the 1-2-3s come in.

The 1-2-3s are a tool to remember the three things that you absolutely must get done in the morning, when you get home, and when you go to bed. They can be used in any situation, but those are typical situations in which they are really useful.

The 1-2-3s are different in each situation. In the morning, the 1-2-3s might be

- 1) Wash and dress
- 2) Eat and take your meds
- 3) Check you agenda

When you walk out the door in the morning they might be

Make sure you have your

- 1) phone
- 2) wallet
- 3) keys

or

- 1) phone
- 2) backpack
- 3) lunch

At night, the 1-2-3s might be

- 1) Plug in your cell phone
- 2) Do your bathroom stuff (this might have it's own 1-2-3s)
 - a. brush and floss teeth
 - b. wash face
 - c. take pills
- 3) Do you clothes (dirty clothes in hamper/clean clothes out for tomorrow)

The 1-2-3s are adaptable to any routine. They help you focus on the things that *must* be done. Everything else is optional and can be jettisoned if you're running late or forgotten about without consequence. They can be more general or more specific. They can having a couple of things rolled into one (like "do clothes" is both putting dirty clothes in the hamper and putting out clean clothes for the next day). Like in the example above, there can be sub lists.

The only habit you then have to develop is to ask yourself at each transition (eg, getting up, going out the door, going into the bathroom, going to bed, etc), "What are my 1-2-3s?" The rest follows easily.

Resources for Organizing Your Life, Managing Your Time

Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain by John Ratey

Fidget to Focus by Roland Rotz and Sarah Wright

Getting Things Done by David Allen

ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life by Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau

Organizing from the Right Side of the Brain by Lee Silber