



Feel like your life is a train wreck sometimes? Well, it's no wonder.

by Judith Kolberg

AD/HD

and Organization: A Collision Course?

Life requires us to be on time, have a plan, prioritize and re-prioritize, *and* get rid of clutter—the activities we call being organized. But many adults with AD/HD are on a collision course with organization. That's because most AD/HD patterns run counter to the “patterns” it takes to be organized.

Distractibility

Organizing requires attentiveness, a kind of single-minded focus over at least a brief period of time in order to get the job done. But distractibility, one of AD/HD's hallmark traits, couldn't be more at odds with this requirement. Take de-cluttering your dining room table, for example. You finally hear it scream, “Organize me! Get this month's worth of mail off of me!” So you begin opening the mail with great gusto. But the credit card offer you just opened is too hard to ignore. You start looking for your current APR so you can compare it to the new offer. Now you are deep inside your financial files and you take the opportunity to toss out a few ancient bank statements. The trip to the trash takes you into the kitchen where the counter needs a good cleaning, so you go under the sink in search of a clean sponge. There you see that the cleaning products need to be organized. It turns out to be a big, dirty job that simply must end with a quick shower. On your way to the bathroom, you pass the dining room table, remembering that your original goal was to clear the clutter.

So what can you do? First, give yourself a break. Then, take responsibility for your disorganization by learning how to cope given your AD/HD. Here's how:

Strengthen your intentions, weaken your distractions

- Set an alarm for 15 minutes. De-clutter the dining room table for all of that time. Don't go anywhere or do anything else. At the end of 15 minutes, run your errands to the trash or the filing cabinet. Then come back for another 15-minute round.
- Take “green” breaks. If you feel fidgety, work for 10 minutes and break for five minutes. A green break is just that. Go outdoors. Look at something green. It is calming and restoring to the brain. Stretch, breathe and bend, but don't go far afield. Drink water and come on back.
- Self-talk yourself back to the task at hand. Say out loud, “What do I need to be doing right now?” or “Where was I before I got distracted?” It's important that you self-talk out loud so you can overcome any internal distractions.

Organizing can be difficult for even the most well organized among us, but it is especially challenging for adults with AD/HD.

AD/HD and Organization

- Reward yourself in proportion to the organizing chore. A de-cluttered dining room table deserves at least a massage or a new CD.

Cut clutter off at the source

- Use less plastic (credit cards)—it just means more paper. Get yourself down to one solid, low-interest credit card.
- Limit your subscriptions to magazines and newsletters. Do you really need *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*?
- Dump the catalogs unless you are ready to order the same week they arrive. I promise you'll get another catalog in six weeks. And, most importantly,
- Develop the routine of opening your mail every day.

Stimulation

A stimulation-seeking brain is another AD/HD trait that runs counter to organizing. Organizing is notoriously boring. That's because organizing is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It's supposed to be a little dull so you can reap its benefits without being absorbed by its utility. Take filing for example. It is not exactly stimulating to pick up a piece of paper, create a file and stick it in a filing cabinet. But let the filing mount up, causing a few frantic searches or the havoc of hiding stacks of papers when company comes, and now we're talking stimulating!

We call this the 'critical mass' approach to organizing. Sometimes, just waiting until the stacks are about to fall over or the late fees are mounting up provides the critical mass to motivate organizing. But the price you pay in stress for losing important papers or the feeling of being overwhelmed all the time, plus the ugliness of stacks of papers everywhere, is not worth it.

Organize every day

- File documents, read newsletters, process the daily mail, pay bills and put things away every day. All in all, it will take you about an hour, but will pay off in reduced stress, faster retrieval and a feeling of control.

Spice things up a little

- File with music on
- Organize with a friend
- Use beautiful containers and colorful file folders

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

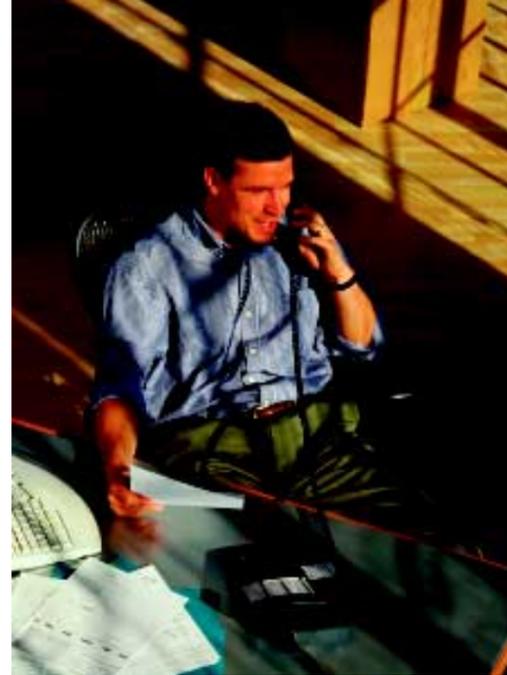
Many adults with AD/HD are OosOoms (out-of-sight-out-of-mind). You need to keep things out in full view in order to remember to deal with them. For instance, if your weed-trimmer needs re-wiring, you might leave it on a living room chair with pictures to be framed. Have to return library books or videos? Not a chance—unless you trip over them on the way out the door. It makes perfect sense to keep things in sight and in mind if you are an adult with AD/HD, but from an organizing point of view, a negative cycle begins. You keep things in view, they mount up, you get anxious, and pretty soon the compelling reason for taking action gets lost.

Use your creativity to keep items visible

- Keep things in sight, but attractively. Use see-through folders, nice baskets and terrific looking clear containers.
- Retire your filing cabinet. Go for crates-on-casters. They're open, easy to see inside, and easy to stash inside a closet when company comes.
- Use multiple reminders like sticky note messages on the bathroom mirror, on the dashboard of the car, and stuck to your day planner.

Hyperfocus

When really engaged, nobody can beat an adult with AD/HD for concentration. But from an organizing point of view, hyperfocusing can wreak havoc on planning. How many times have you planned time with your family, then picked up your e-mail, journeyed out on the Web, and returned from your virtual trip only to be late for that reality-based recital, picnic or ballgame?



- Know your hyperfocus traps and avoid them when other commitments need attention. Common traps are: Web surfing, online investing, computer games, reading the newspaper, browsing catalogues, watching TV and shopping.
- Snap yourself out of hyperfocus by setting a loud alarm, computer reminder or arranging for someone to interrupt you.

Organizing can be difficult for even the most well organized among us, but it is especially challenging for adults with AD/HD. Appreciate that fact about your life and go on from there. It is very easy to adopt someone else's expectations for being organized as your own. There is a lot of pressure out there to "get it right." Get it right, for you and your needs. ■

Judith Kolberg is the co-author of the recently released book, *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*, with Dr. Kathleen Nadeau. Her book, *Conquering Chronic Disorganization* is available from Amazon.com. Kolberg (www.organizerswebring.com/fileheads) is a professional organizer and founder of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization.