## DAILY LIVING CHALLENGES

# HOW A COACH CAN HELP ADULTS WITH AD/HD

By Nancy A. Ratey, EdM, MCC, SCAC

### FOR PEOPLE WITH AD/HD, THE CONCEPT OF TIME IS FLUID, EVEN IMMEASURABLE.

If you want to accomplish the tasks necessary to live a normal fulfilling life, you have to develop the ability to manage activities within time constraints. This has obvious repercussions in arenas like school and work, but what about in daily life? What deadlines await you there? Well, you have to pay the bills on time, keep your living space clean and neat, wash dishes, do laundry, and buy groceries. These are the activities of daily life that often trip up people with AD/HD. A coach can help you manage these tasks through something called "structured flexibility."

Developing and keeping to daily structures is often one of the hardest things for people with AD/HD to do. Every day you must be ready to start the routine all over again. People with AD/HD know they need organization in their lives, yet tend to avoid it. It is possible, however, to introduce too many structures into daily life. Often the hunt for the right system can be a distraction itself. Some people fear they will get bored doing the same thing each day and therefore avoid any kind of regular arrangement of tasks.

#### How can a coach help?

A coach can help you chunk down your daily business into doable, manageable pieces, encouraging you along the way, so that you maintain attention and follow through no matter how boring it might seem. A coach helps you establish routines to ritualize such tasks and reduce the burden. Some of the core daily living patterns stressed in coaching include:

- better sleeping patterns
- exercise programs
- healthy eating
- personal appearance
- time to de-stress and relax
- routines and rituals to accomplish daily tasks.

Let's look at an example from the story of one of my clients.

Sonya zooms from one household chore to another but doesn't finish any of them. While cleaning her kitchen, she sees the piled-up laundry. So she puts a load into the washer and then starts folding the clean load that's been sitting in the dryer—but she never gets back to the kitchen. Sonya is always tired and run down because she is a slave to her environment. She's not in control of her tasks. They control her.

Sonya's coach sees that she needs to systematize and prioritize her jobs so that she isn't trying to do everything all at once. The coach helps her do this by setting up certain days when she does laundry, pays bills, cleans the kitchen, etc. She posts notes around the house as a strategy to remind herself when to do what job. This works because Sonya responds so readily to her environment.

However, when her fiancé visits for the weekend, Sonya panics when she sees that her pile of dirty clothes (which she had been used to laundering regularly) is missing on Sunday morning. As she frantically begins to search for them, her fiancé walks in with the laundry basket. Baffled, Sonya asks, "What are you doing?" He responds, "What do you mean? I was simply following your instructions! You wrote notes, 'DO DISHES ON SATURDAY!' 'DO LAUNDRY ON SUNDAY!'" In this circumstance one might say that Sonya's strategy well exceeded her expectations!

Daily success for the adult with AD/HD means not confusing motion with action. It means ordering one's life so that each part of it is clearly delineated and broken down into steps. The effect of AD/HD on the multitude of personal tasks that each of us must complete every day can be insidious. When we can't get up and get to work on time, when we're feeling stressed and rushed due to poor time management, when we forget to take care of our bodies and souls because we over-focus on work or school, our quality of life erodes. The inability to establish patterns of daily living can eat away at our confidence, self-esteem, and performance.

#### Meet daily challenges head-on

Some of the most common issues addressed in coaching adults concerns establishing habits and daily rituals to make each day more livable. You may be able to develop systems to organize yourself at the office, but if you neglect to pay your bills on time, or forget to go to the grocery store, or if you're always losing your keys, then all of your hard work in other areas may not be enough to help you establish and maintain balance. A coach experienced with training the AD/HD brain can help you meet daily challenges



—Thomas Jefferson



Read more articles like this on the Coach Nancy blog at chadd.org. head-on. By checking in with your coach on a daily or weekly basis you will learn to perform to the best of your ability without moving aimlessly, wasting precious energy.

The very nature of AD/HD predicts that the brain's executive function is not working well enough; therefore, planning ahead, prioritizing and following through is hard. Things that other people take for granted are often a real struggle for people with AD/HD. Paying bills, getting enough sleep, taking your medication consistently, and keeping your home clean are simply matters of course for most, but for people with AD/HD, they can present as much of a difficulty as a long-term project at work.

If you have AD/HD, daily time management and organization are obstacles to living effectively. To move beyond these obstacles you must establish routines for recurring activities like getting up, going to bed, grocery shopping, doing the laundry, etc. The mundane tasks in life seem so simple on the surface, but have you ever stopped to think how many steps are involved with something as seemingly straightforward as doing them? For example, stop and think how many steps are involved in paying your bills.

These issues are often skeletons in the closets of people with AD/HD. The career woman who appears to be at the top of her game at work may feel she's leading a double life. She may shine in the boardroom, but have piles of papers reaching to the ceiling of her dining room. The feelings of shame and the amount of energy that is drained trying to fix or feeling guilty about not being able to fix daily life details is immense. A coach can help you gradually establish patterns and routines that can give you a sense of control and well being in your daily life. You will develop your brain's executive function and become the boss of your own life. By learning to organize, plan, and prioritize, using strategies that you and your coach create, you can clear the hurdles of daily living with success and confidence.

#### The power of coaching

Change is hard. Altering or eliminating old habits and patterns is never fun or easy. Worse, the job of trying to replace old destructive behaviors or habits with new healthy ones takes a lot of time, effort and persistence. If you have AD/HD no one has to tell you that making things stick is hard. Chances are you have struggled many times to develop new habits but simply gave up after repeated attempts. Negative tapes and the constant

voices of criticism prevail over your efforts.

Why can't you just keep a to-do list? Why are you so disorganized? Just hang your keys on a hook and you won't lose them anymore! Can't you just pick up your room and clean your desk for once? For the person with AD/HD it is more a matter of losing hope than lack of effort to change. Because of how the AD/HD brain functions, there is often an inability to maintain a steady, consistent course of action long enough to establish it as habit. All too often, what started out as a new commitment, a new challenge, slips off into the distant crevices of your brain, gets clouded over and disappears.

A coach understands this on again, off again tendency and will talk with you to discover where and how you slip off the road. In conjunction with a coach, you can isolate the warning signs to alert you that you are straying from the road, and you can discover strategies to sustain attention long enough to follow through on a course of action. Keeping the entire goal in mind and sustaining motivation to completion are the keys to success. Regular contact with your coach will help you accomplish what you set out to do. You can slowly build a history of successfully meeting your goals, thereby learning self-reliance.

Due to the neurobiology peculiar to individuals with AD/HD, change can be harder than normal. Sticking to one course of action can be a particular challenge as well. If a coach does not know better, he or she may see the symptoms of AD/HD masquerading as resistance, denial, passive-aggressive behavior, and so on. A coach needs to understand AD/HD to effectively coach clients to make necessary changes. This means not judging slips and slides, but rather, helping clients to better understand how their neurobiology gets in the way and what they can do about it.

The level of self-observation necessary to work with a coach in the process of filling the potholes in personal behavior helps the client to be engaged in creating strategies, thereby forcing the client to use his or her brain to develop critical thinking skills. This is the power of coaching. The strategies stick because *you* came up with them. You understand where they emanate from, so you know how to bridge them. You can stop the self-blame and demystify how you get off track. Knowledge is power! You are the driver who knows where the potholes are and which way to swerve to avoid them.

Nancy A. Ratey, EdM, MCC, SCAC, has a private coaching practice in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where she specializes in coaching professionals with AD/HD. Her latest book is The Disorganized Mind: Coaching Your ADHD Brain to Take Control of Your Time, Tasks, and Talents (St. Martin's Press, 2008). Ratey is a past member of CHADD's professional advisory board.

