

TIME MANAGEMENT: Step-By-Step with a Day Planner

Is it hard for you to manage your time or make and follow plans? Adults with ADHD sometimes have problems with working memory (holding information they've just seen or heard in their memory), organization, and sense of time. These issues can result in poor time management skills and may make it difficult to fulfill your responsibilities at work and at home.

Although some adults with ADHD have had unsuccessful experiences with day planners, by deconstructing the process into manageable steps, you will find using a planner to be a great way to organize and manage your life and to follow through on commitments!

Choose the planner that's right for you.

At a minimum, a day planner is a device that includes a calendar, space to write "to-do" lists, and space to write telephone numbers, addresses, and other basic identifying/reference information. It can be:

- a paper-and-pencil model, e.g. Franklin Planner, Day Timer, or Planner Pad brands
- a calculator-sized electronic organizer
- an app on your tablet or smartphone
- time management software on a laptop or desktop computer

Electronic organizers and apps have a number of advantages. They are compact and easy to carry with you. They provide audible reminders that can serve as memory management aides. They can sort, organize, and store more information more efficiently than paper and pencil planners. They can

easily exchange information with office and home computers.

If you are a gadget-oriented person who learns new technology easily, pick one of the electronic day planners. If you are not technology-oriented, pick a paper and pencil model. Carefully review a number of different



types of day planners, either at an office supply store or online. They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, with different types of daily, weekly, and monthly views. Carefully inspect the different types of daily, weekly, and monthly pages. Do you schedule many appointments on the hour or half-hour? Then use a clear daily view. Are you making "to do" lists but not scheduling many appointments? Perhaps a weekly view with a lot of space for lists is needed.



**National
Resource
Center
on ADHD**
A Program of CHADD

Your day planner should be the only planning calendar for *everything* you do (work, home, personal). Using separate calendars at home and at the office may become confusing and overwhelming; it's too easy to forget to transfer entries from one calendar to the other and you might miss appointments or important commitments.

The process of deciding which planner is best for your life and your preferences may take time; try some out at the office supply store, do your research online, talk with friends. Once you choose your planner, familiarize yourself with its components.

Using your planner

In this fact sheet we break down the process of using a day planner into a series of small steps, each of which will help you acquire a new habit or skill. Take each step one at a time and practice it for at least one week, in order for it to become a well-formed "habit" before beginning the next step. Sometimes a beginning action may be uniquely difficult to become a regular habit for you, so you may need to practice it two or three weeks before beginning the next step. And that's okay—perfectly normal!



Identify a friend or spouse to serve as your "planner coach." The coach's role:

- help prompt your practicing each step and monitor overall progress
- praise you for your efforts and provide constructive—not critical or harsh—feedback about any mistakes
- encourage you to reward yourself at the end of the week
- focus on the positive

- praise successes and cheer you on to the next step
- avoid criticizing failures or imperfect achievement of any of the steps

Build in positive reinforcements or rewards to help you succeed in learning each step. Get this from your "coach" and from yourself!

Select someone who is capable and willing to serve in this role. Review this sheet with your coach, and discuss each step outlined below before undertaking it.

1. Find a single, accessible place to keep the day planner.

After selecting a planner, the next step is to establish a habit of keeping it in a single, accessible location at home and at work, so you will always know where to find it. The location should be clearly visible from a distance, even in a cluttered room or on a messy desk. Convenient locations might be next to the telephone, on a table near the front door, or on the desk at the office. If the day planner has a strap, you might hang it on a hook next to the front door, above the telephone, or together with the car keys. Carry it to and from work, and practice keeping it in the designated locations for a week.

2. Enter your basic information in the day planner.

Gather the most common names, addresses, and phone numbers you use. Enter them into the planner in the alphabetical name/address section. Consider what vital information might be helpful to have in the planner, such as your doctors' contact info, insurance policy numbers, computer passwords, equipment serial numbers, birthdays and anniversaries, and enter this information in the designated spaces.

3. Carry the day planner at all times.

Now that there is some information in your planner, you should carry it with you at all times. Many people claim that they have carried their planner with them at all times, but then they forget the great idea they

thought of while shopping. “At all times” means whenever you leave the car to go into a store or whenever you leave your desk to attend a meeting.

4. Refer to the day planner regularly.

Many adults with ADHD put things in their planners but rarely look at what they wrote, relying instead on memory, with disastrous consequences. Before you can use the planner as a calendar or for your “to do” lists, you need to develop the habit of checking it regularly. Start by checking the planner a minimum of three times per day—once in the morning to plan and review the day’s upcoming events, once in the middle of the day to make any mid-course corrections and refresh your memory about the remaining day’s events, and once in the evening, to plan and review the next day’s events.



There are several ways to remember to check your planner. First, alarm wrist watches or alarm functions in your electronic planner can be set to go off at regular intervals when you wish to check your planner. Second, you can associate checking your planner with activities that you do around the same time each day such as eating meals, getting dressed in the morning or ready for bed at night, or arriving at or leaving the office. Third, leaving reminder notes in strategic locations (on the desk in the office, on the mirror in the bathroom, or on the dashboard or door handle of the car) can be helpful in reminding you to look at the planner.

5. Use the day planner as your calendar for everything.

You are now ready to use your planner as a calendar. On scrap paper, make a list of all appointments scheduled at any time

in the future. Then, write or input these appointments in the appropriate time slots in the planner for the particular days and months. If you have regularly recurring meetings or activities (e.g. with your therapist, writing group, classes, or work hours), enter the dates, times and locations in your planner. Most electronic planners will allow you to indicate that an activity is “recurring” on the same day of the week and time, with a specific periodic frequency (weekly, biweekly, daily, etc.).

Now enter into the planner a time preceding each of your engagements for preparation and travel time, both before and after the activities. This will ensure that you’re ready and can get to your activity on time!

Review the scheduled appointments for the day each time you check the planner. During the day, add any additional appointments as soon as you schedule them.

If you’re using a paper planner, use different color pens for writing different types of things on your calendar (e.g., red for appointments, blue for work activities, and green for family events). This will permit you to recognize different types of events as your eye scans the page. For a very busy family, use different colors for each family member’s activities. Most electronic day planners also have color-coding features available.

6. Use your planner as a “brain dump” to capture your ideas.

Adults with ADHD experience a constant stream of ideas flooding their minds. They often become frustrated because they cannot remember these ideas when they need them. Using the day planner as a “brain dump” avoids this dilemma. With your planner with you at all times, practice writing down or typing in any ideas you want to capture as they occur to you. Put them either on blank, lined planner pages or in the section of the planner for that day’s “to do” list. If you find that many of your important ideas come at times when it is hard to put them in your day planner, consider carrying a small, digital voice recorder. Dictate

your ideas into the recorder and transcribe them to your planner later that day. Smart-phones and some hand-held computers and pocket PCs have built-in digital recorders.

7. Construct a daily “to do” list and refer to it often.

Only after you experience success using your planner as a calendar should you start making a daily “to do” list. Most planners have a place near the calendar each day for “to do” lists. Before you go to bed at night, if your mind is on things you need to do the next day, jot them down. Then during the first review of your planner in the morning, use those notes and any “brain dump” notes to make a list of things that need to get done that day. Try to keep the list relatively short, 5–8 items, so you aren’t overwhelmed and can experience success completing all the items. Be realistic about what can be accomplished in one day, and remember to schedule some “me time,” by listing a personal activity or time as one item. List specific actions, rather than vague concepts. For example, “buy my wife flowers” would be a more specific item than “be nice to my wife.”

Examine the list and assign the items to particular dates and times in the day planner. Try to complete them as scheduled, referring to the list often. Check off any completed items (a great feeling!) and review remaining uncompleted items.

At the end of the day, examine the list. Congratulate yourself if you completed all the items on the list. Do not berate yourself if you did not complete all the items. If there were only a few unfinished items, move them forward to the next day’s list. However, if you have many unfinished items, consider whether you have unrealistic expectations for how much can be done. Analyze the uncompleted items and what got in the way of completing everything on your list (phone calls, other interruptions, not enough time, not having everything you need to get the task done, unexpected crises). Thinking in these terms will help you become more realistic about what can be accomplished in a day. Either scale back your expectations or find other

approaches to completing tasks, such as delegating, streamlining, breaking up complex tasks into smaller chunks, or eliminating tasks.

8. Prioritize your “to-do” list.

There are many ways to prioritize a “to do” list. One way is to number all of the items on the list in order of decreasing priority. Another way is to classify items into one of three categories: “essential,” “important,” and “do only if I have extra time.” Pick the method that best fits your style and begin prioritizing your daily “to do” list. Also keep in mind that some tasks will have specific deadlines, such as paying your bills on time.

As you go through the day, perform the items on the “to do” list in order of highest priority first. Adults with ADHD are often tempted to ignore the priorities and may need strategies to keep themselves on track. Set the alarms on your wristwatch, phone, electronic planner, computer task management software, or beeper to go off at regular intervals as a signal to check whether you are on task following your priorities. Use self-talk to help avoid distractions. Train yourself to repeat reminders such as “I will avoid getting distracted,” “I will stick with my priorities,” and “I won’t switch now, I’m almost done.” Also, if medication is part of your treatment plan, make sure you’re taking an effective dose that lasts throughout the day. See [Medication Management for Adults](#) for more information about determining an effective dose.

9. Conduct a daily planning session.

By the time you have completed the first eight steps, you will be conducting “ad hoc” daily planning sessions where you construct and prioritize your daily “to do” list. It is best now to formalize this process as “the daily planning session.” To avoid becoming obsessive about constantly checking your lists, set a specifically scheduled time for constructing and prioritizing lists as your daily planning session. The goal of this session is to plan the upcoming day’s activities and develop a plan of attack to carry them out. In addition to listing priorities and reviewing schedules, the planning session is the time to consider exactly how each task

will be accomplished. What materials will be needed? What individuals will have to be consulted? What obstacles are likely to be encountered? How can these obstacles be overcome? Asking and answering these questions will help prioritize the items on your “to do” list. The planning session will provide a mental map that guides you in carrying out the tasks on your list.

When you have reached this point in the program, congratulate yourself! You have mastered the basic steps of using a day planner to manage time! Continue to follow these steps. As they become habitual, consider trying the last step, which bridges the gap between short-term and long-term planning, but understand that it is more challenging and may require the assistance of an ADHD coach or a therapist.

10. Generate a list of long-term goals and break the long-term goals into small, manageable chunks, allocating these chunks to monthly and weekly planning sessions.

First, generate a list of all your long-term goals. These are broad goals to be accomplished over many months and years. Then, take one goal at a time and break it down into small chunks or sub-goals that can be accomplished on a monthly basis. Assign one sub-goal to each month of the year. At the beginning of the month, conduct a monthly planning session where you decide how to accomplish the sub-goal over the course of the month. Assign various tasks to each week of the month. At the beginning of each week, conduct a weekly planning session where you decide how to align aspects of that week’s sub-goal with the daily task lists for the entire week. During each

daily planning session, plan the details of the assigned task that will be performed that day.

Summary

We have outlined a step-by-step approach for learning to use a day planner to manage time effectively and augment or “boost” inherently inefficient executive functions in adults with ADHD. Follow each step for at least one week or longer, reward yourself at the end of that period for practicing the day planner skills, and identify a friend as a planner coach to provide support and encouragement for your efforts.

Some adults with ADHD may find that even the step-by-step approach outlined here is difficult to follow. If you find that you cannot adhere to the guidelines given here, don’t give up. You may need to have the learning process broken down into even smaller steps. You may need assistance overcoming emotional barriers based upon a lifetime of unsuccessful experiences before you can master using a day planner. You may need strong support systems and the guidance of a trained professional. Consult a professional, such as a therapist familiar with adult ADHD or an ADHD coach, and show them this sheet. The professional will be able to tailor the steps to your particular situation so that you can experience success managing time through the use of a day planner.

Using day planners can help you:

- *manage time*
- *remember responsibilities*
- *stay organized*
- *lessen the impact of ADHD on your work and home life*

[Find your local CHADD Chapter](#)



For further information, please contact
National Resource Center on ADHD:
A Program of CHADD
4601 Presidents Drive, Suite 300
Lanham, MD 20706-4832
1-800-233-4050
www.chadd.org/nrc