

360 Treatment Tools & Tips An ADHD 360 3T's paper

ADHD & Procrastination

Procrastination can be legitimately described as the fourth feature of ADHD, accompanying hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattentiveness. The significance of this cannot be understated. Often described wrongly as laziness, the scale and impact of a person's procrastination is incredible.

This T3 paper discusses procrastination in the context of ADHD and explores some coping mechanisms that help to improve the quality of life for people with ADHD.

First, it is worth discussing why people procrastinate, and why it is often so difficult to start a task or tackle a particular assignment. Additionally, we need to revisit the 'laziness' statement. People with ADHD often, if not frequently, want to undertake the task and can often see the consequences of not completing the task, but still can't start the task and 'get on with it'. They just can't get past this 'block' and that can be seen, by an observer, as laziness.

These frequent observations, can be criticisms which over time build negative feelings inside both parties, leading to the person with ADHD starting to doubt themselves, feeling anxious and even depressed: *"I am not lazy, I just don't know what to do!"* This can put relationships under pressure too, and often does, so we need to look harder at procrastination to understand and prevent these serious pressures from building.

5 Common reasons for people with ADHD procrastination

As we delve into the 5 common reasons, we need to understand that this is caused by a chemical imbalance in the frontal area of the brain. It sounds terrible, but it isn't, it is straightforward to identify and can be treated very successfully.

1 Negative thoughts

Having discussed how people with ADHD can feel 'down' about not being able to start their tasks, we should accept that negative thoughts themselves can get in the way of starting the task. *"What if I mess it up and make a fool of myself?"* is a commonly held thought. We can recall the mid 1980's snooker player Dennis Taylor who convinced himself that: *"If I miss this last shot, I lose the championship"*. A sports psychologist worked with him and turned those thoughts to: *"When I pot this black I will win the championship"* and strange as it may seem, the gradual improvement in mindset started to make the task easier to undertake. This is how it is with the ADHD procrastinating mind.

2 Not understanding the task

Not understanding the task makes it seem far harder than it is. A feeling of 'overwhelm' is common and this just acts as another 'justification' for not starting the task. A key coaching responsibility is working out how we avoid 'overwhelm' and see the light at the end of the tunnel. This alleged justification for procrastination links strongly into the third reason, and the solution for them both begins to influence change and start off a much greater capability for starting tasks.

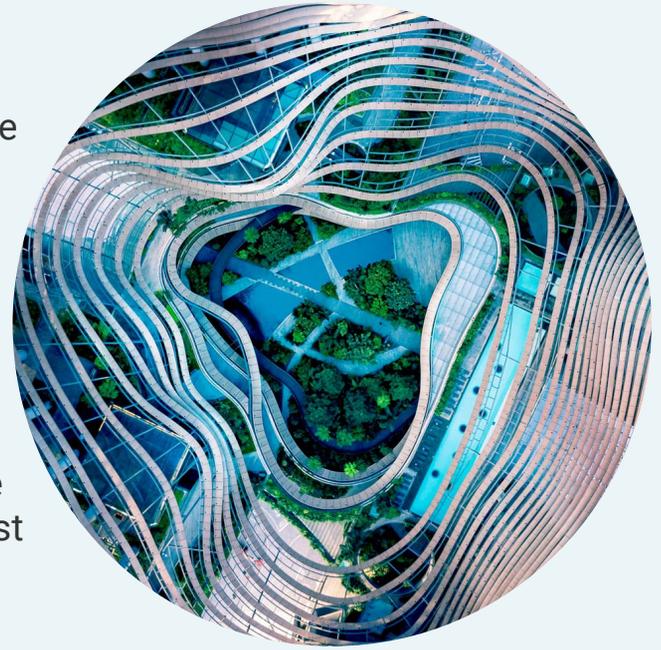


3 Tasks seem large, complex and difficult

When the task seems really large, complex and difficult, it will inevitably look really tough. Couple that scale and complexity with a lack of understanding and we have a recipe for overwhelm that is complete. We must ask ourselves: *“How will I eat this elephant?”* and our answer is: *“Bite by bite.”* By looking at a task as a series of smaller tasks we can see a way of avoiding overwhelm and making progress becomes easier. We will return to this concept later.

4 Tedium and boredom

Tedium and boredom will never motivate anyone to start a task, and even those emotions alone can frustrate progress and task initiation. Commonly, in relationships especially, the fact that the laundry bin isn't emptied and the washing isn't done, or the ironing isn't done, or the car isn't cleaned, can easily be seen as laziness. But if the brain's chemicals are not motivating the individual to start the boring task, well, it just doesn't get done.



5 A lack of urgency



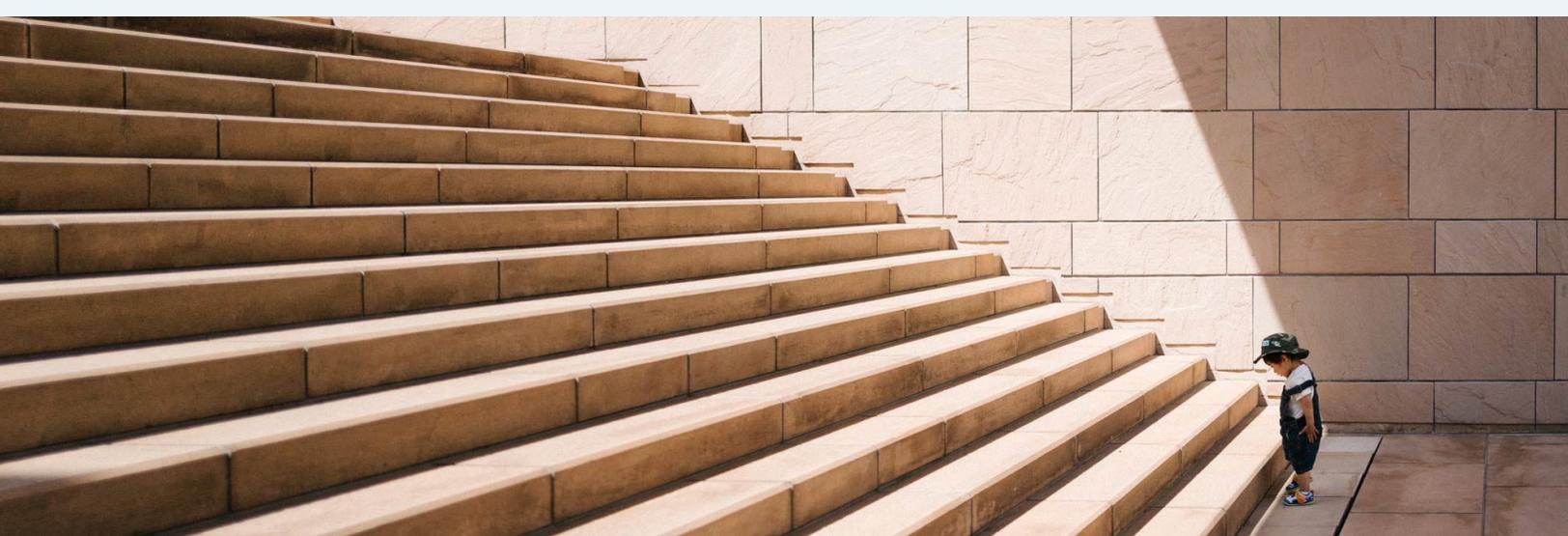
A lack of urgency can really facilitate, allow if you will, procrastination. The lack of stimulus afforded by the lack of requirement, just lets the task float around untouched. Of course then we see the looming deadline for the homework, or the work assignment or the University project and 'all hell' is unleashed as we go to 'total hyperfocus' to ensure the now urgent task is completed on time. What happens now is the extreme fear of immediate failure has overridden the procrastination, literally injected new chemicals into the relevant brain pathways and we are running on a new adrenalin fuelled panic. Often seen and interpreted as a 'healthy ability to hyperfocus', it isn't, it produces far too much 'locked out' thoughts at the expense of other things, leads to a 'burn out' and although it produces results better than a procrastinated void, the results are often hurried and not to the standard that represents the best the person can deliver.

Eating the Elephant

The 'bite by bite' conversation should be taken very seriously. Only by breaking down any task into small elements can overwhelm be avoided, and procrastination be banished if this becomes an ADHD skillset.

Looking at how we can overcome procrastination can be, and should be, something an ADHD coach or supporting family member focuses on.

If we pose the question: *"How do we make boring tasks appealing, even 'exciting'?"* then we open a whole set of answers that do need coaching to support the person with ADHD; experience tells us that attempting this unaided can easily fail. One trick is to become competitive: *"How many shirts can I iron before this TV programme finishes?"* Another consideration is to set a target with a reward: *"Get that homework done, it should only take 30 minutes and then you can have half an hour Xbox time without me nagging."* This is how a coach or supportive family member can really help. We speak a lot about switching from a negative model to a more supportive reward based one, and this can be from a parent's perspective as well as for the individuals.



Imagine a mindset in a relationship: *"If I vacuum the house and make it smell nice for when my partner gets home, I know I will have done right and we then can relax together happily this evening"*. This is far more motivational than living in the fear of not doing things. The role of the partner is to be happy on getting home, set a positive follow through agenda and join in the reward of happiness. One word of caution in an ADHD procrastination setting: don't be the parent or partner of the boy who didn't tie his shoelaces.

Little Johnny put his school jumper on himself for the first time without being asked, Mum was delighted, he needed praise, and although Mum said "Well done!" she followed up with: " But you didn't tie your own shoelaces."

Success hinges on sustained, consistent rewards, which for some people with ADHD can be very emotionally driven, and the feeling of 'job well done' is very much needed. This can assist a procrastinator to slowly release themselves from those negative thoughts of failure to become someone more willing to 'give it a go'.

If you are genuinely no good at something, delegate it. Fact: if you never are going to be any good at it, you know you're no good at it, unless you delegate it, it may never ever get started, never mind completed. Take for instance building a patio:

This may sound like a far fetched idea, but for one of our patients, it was his reality. His partner knew he had said he would build the patio, he knew he had said that, but he also knew he didn't like 'groundwork' and wasn't very good at it. In his mind even if he built the patio it would be terrible, and his partner would not like it. So as well as not feeling skilled (a procrastination trigger), he also didn't want to show himself up, a further justification to 'just think about it a bit longer'.

So rather than fall out over it, he got his brother to do the groundwork, and in return he helped his brother with some photography he needed, which our patient was good at and enjoyed.

As this anecdote tells us, in the event that it's better to delegate than procrastinate, it is effective provided there is a balance, and we do complete tasks we know we are capable of. Delegating everything isn't an option.

We can also try switching tasks as rotating between two tasks can bring change, a little diversity and allow us to keep going in bite sized chunks with variety.

Find 15

The final tip is the '**Everyone can find 15 minutes**' tip, and we can. So if you find yourself procrastinating over a task, finding reasons not to start, then find 15 minutes and make a start, even if only planning what to do in the first active 15 minute session that follows. "*Find 15*" is a good statement to make to yourself, "*All I have to do is find 15*".

Novelty and challenge can bring joy and happiness and we should ask ourselves "*What's making this so difficult?*" and then apply some of these tricks and techniques and expect more happiness, both within yourself and in your relationships. The task of today that is causing angst and anxiety, may well be the task that delivers rewards tomorrow and an inner confidence with a feeling of satisfaction.

'Find 15', 'Eat the Elephant' and give it a go.



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