

# uPLifted Series

An Informational Digest of EmpowerM3 by Coach Cindy



## The Power of Planning- A Loaded Skill Why Do I Struggle and How Can I Master It with My ADHD Brain?

BY: CINDY NORTH, ACC, CALC, PQ COACH™ MEMBER

Planning. It sounds like a no-brainer. Everyone tells us to do more of it. If we planned and actually followed through on our plan, we would be more successful. Okay, perhaps that is true. Planning does help ease the load on the brain, but what if the process also taxes the brain? There is power in planning, but it is a loaded skill, especially for people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Executive Function (EF) challenges. Does this sound familiar:

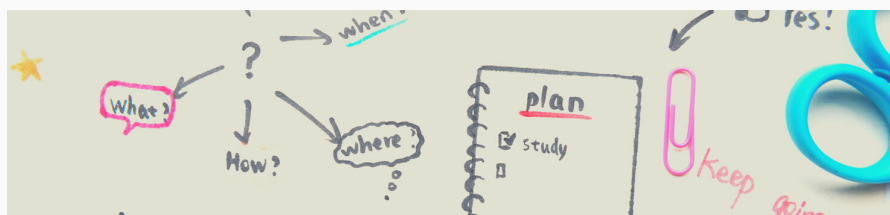
"What's the point? I start a plan and don't finish. If I do, I never follow the plan anyways. It's a waste of time."

"Plans don't work for me. I prefer to go with the flow."

"I make a plan, and then I forget the plan."

"I plan, and then life happens."

"I spend so much time planning and not enough time doing."



## This issue:

The Power of Planning-  
A Loaded Skill  
Why Do I Struggle and  
How Can I Master It with  
My ADHD Brain?  
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Eight Abilities Required  
for Planning

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Motivation  
Attention  
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Problem-solving  
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Working memory,  
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Do you hear your inner voice in any of the statements above? I have listened to all these internal dialogs and more while helping clients create better ways for themselves. Each voice was battling the efforts required in their executive functioning skill, PLANNING.

Planning is one of the critical executive functioning skills used by the brain to execute what's next. However, for people with ADHD or symptoms related to weak Executive Functioning, planning can be a huge roadblock to success. To understand this better, it is important to understand what skills are required to plan in the first place. Planning is actually a loaded skill.

Planning requires, at minimum, eight abilities; motivation, attention, focus, organization, problem-solving, time prediction, working memory, and communication. It's no wonder planning can be a serious struggle for ADHDers. Weakness in any one area could make success that much more challenging. Therefore, it is essential for successful planning that there be systems to ease the strain. Without a plan, there can be a great deal of chaos.

Before you strive to become the best planner and executor, let's dig into what is involved in planning and affecting your ability to plan in the first place.

Systems, strategies, and tools that work for you must work for you. Often, that takes tweaking the tried and true methods everyone else tells you work. For example, perhaps you are a paper calendar person or live by reminders. What works for you requires you to play around with different options. Identifying the skills necessary that might be the missing link could help you better succeed with the systems you put in place. Do you know what ability needs support? Let's find out.

"He who fails to plan prepares to fail."

“Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.”

--ALAN LAKEIN



# Eight Abilities Required for Planning



## Motivation

It's important to note that the ADHD brain craves dopamine. This is a sticking point for most who struggle to "feel" motivated. Did you know dopamine release occurs after you have taken action? This is known as the Virtuous Motivation Cycle. It's not until you get moving that the brain will release dopamine (BB-Admin, 2020). Waiting to "feel" motivated is the first error in executing a plan. Knowing this lets, you plan for actions that will spark spurts of dopamine to help you meet your goals.



Source: How Can I Get Motivated? (2020, January 15). Amie Devero. <https://beyondbetter.io/how-can-i-get-motivated/>

**Tip:** The secret to mastering the motivation to plan and use the plan is to **get started**. What one thing could you always include in any plan that would excite you? Also, don't forget to have rewards and milestones. Include what you have to gain by using the plan you create. For example, if you plan to get to the gym five times a week, you will gain strength and improve your health. **Know your why!**

"Plan your work and work your plan."

-UNKNOWN





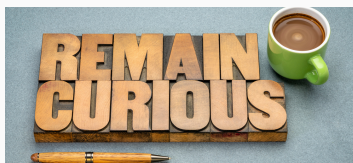
# Attention

Holding attention is easy when it's held by something of interest. Seeing through the planning process requires attention. It's much harder to maintain attention when the brain is not interested. In fact, when interest is peaked for ADHDers, it can often cascade into hyper-focus or, better channeled, "Flow State."

Parents of ADHD children are often completely baffled by their child's ability to hold or not hold attention. It's become an all too common stereotype, "She has no problem doodling for hours on end. Her schoolwork is nothing but doodles. It's no wonder she misses the question. She's in her own world" Or, "He gets so engrossed in those video games that he won't even stop to eat when I call him. I don't think he even hears me. He's certainly not listening."

Adults with ADHD/EF Challenges pay what's coined the "ADHD tax" in missed deadlines, overdue bills, late fees, and more due to the lack of attention to the day-to-day details.

**Tip:** Maintaining attention on things of little interest is extremely hard for the ADHD brain. In the article, How to Get Boring Things Done (and Enjoy It), Niemiec shares how tapping into your **character traits** can help bring joy to the mundane. Tapping into curiosity and creativity brings new interest to what is being or needs to be done (Niemiec, 2017). What can you notice in creating your plan that could be more exciting? Find out your character strengths here at [VIA Character Strengths](#).



"For reasons we don't quite understand, soon after you command yourself to pay attention, you forget that you commanded yourself to pay attention."

EDWARD M. HALLOWELL, M.D.





# Focus

The ability to focus attention requires having attention. Once you have your attention, you must focus on what your attention requires. See, it's not as simple as saying, "just focus." To focus, you need to know what to focus on. Often focus can be interrupted by hyperactivity and distraction. Hyperactivity can be internal, racing thoughts, and/or external, with the inability to sit still for long.

Distractions come in all forms and affect people differently. For example, one of my clients listens to reruns of the hit TV show Friends in the background but cannot have music on, or she can't think. It can be hard to focus when your thoughts bounce all over the place, when your body wants to move or when you become distracted.



**Tip:** Strengthening **self-regulation** is vital to maintaining focus. Self-regulating focus on your plan requires you to redirect, redirect, redirect. For example, a client once shared using an object in her view as a prompt to shift her focus back to her intended plan.



If something doesn't work change the plan, don't change your goal.

--ANONYMOUS





## Working Memory

Working memory is essential to know what to do and when it must be done. The working memory encompasses your short-term memory (storage center) and your working memory's ability to manipulate the information. In the article "Working Memory: A Complete Guide to How Your Brain Processes Information, Thinks and Learns," Young highlights a popular scientific model developed by Alan Baddeley. Baddeley's model breaks working memory into four components:

1. Phonological loop – stores sounds including words, digits, sentences
2. Visuospatial sketchpad – stores images of objects
3. Central executive – directs attention and manipulates information
4. Episodic Buffer – limited capacity storage system (Young, 2019)

Working memory is often a weak executive function for ADHDers. This is why it is not uncommon for ADHDers to interrupt to avoid forgetting their thoughts. In addition, working memory is taxed even further by stress (Scott, 2021), depressive states (Science X, 2015), and sleep deprivation (Pacheco, 2022). Therefore, finding ways to implement good self-care practices and externalize and capture information becomes vital.

**Tip:** Try using **visualization**. Images stick in the brain easier. Think of creating a mental movie and watching it to help you remember. Visualization can be used for the items you need to remember to buy, what you will do when you first get home, or what you need to take out the door. Try playing out the actions in your mind of the plan you will execute.



“Making a plan without the right tools is like making spaghetti without a pot.”

-KRIS HUGHES





# Organization

Organizing an executable plan requires the brain to use attention, focus, working memory, and problem-solving to categorize needs and remember the necessary steps to maintain structure. Getting organized seems like something a person should be able to do- easy-peasy! But, for many, getting organized is hard enough. Staying organized is a whole nother deal! So when a plan derails, there is no plan at all. Dr. Hallowell shares,

"People with ADHD need not become super-organized neat freaks – a goal that is usually out of their reach anyway. They just need to become well enough organized to achieve their goals (artefact\_admin, 2020)."

Getting and staying organized requires systems that work for you. Living disorganized is taxing to your brain and creates chaos in your life. If organization is not your strength, you may consider enlisting support from a friend, parent, or Coach to stay on track.

**Tip:** Organize your thoughts using a **mind map** or creating a **timeline**. This helps with seeing what is up ahead as well as structuring time. For example, suppose you struggle with maintaining order in your space, derailing your ability to carry out your plan. In that case, you might try implementing structure in your space by having "homes" where items live-- Always! Some refer to this as **landing zones**. Plan what you need to get out the door. Place items together like your keys, wallet, phone, tomorrow's report, and lunch box. You can quickly grab everything you need from one location and go. When planning, it can be helpful to organize the plan into categories. For example, a client of mine found it helpful to put his to-do lists on colored paper. Each color represented the priority of the task.



Stop trying to be a person who keeps it together in the same way people without ADHD do.



You need to do things in a way that makes sense to your ADHD brain.

Additudemag.com



# Organization

**Bonus:** Play with the **OHIO Method**. OHIO Stands for "Only Handle Item Once." It simply means put things where they live Now. This can be for mental thoughts, too. Rather than think about something over and over and over again, try writing it down. Then, when it comes to mind again, tell yourself you've got that covered. The ADHD mind thinks in two forms, Now and Not Now. Be in the now timeframe to stay organized. If you leave the cereal box out now, it will be out tonight.



**Hint:** Petersen suggests, "make a rule that whenever you catch yourself mentally telling yourself you'll do something in "the future," you have to **stop** and write down exactly **when "in the future"** you're going to do it (Petersen, 2016)."



"Organizing skills aren't only a strength or natural ability, but a skill... As such they can be taught."

DIANE O'REILLY,  
ADHD COACH





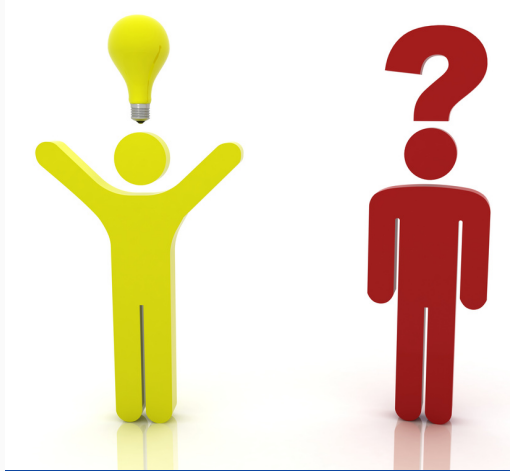
# Problem-solving

Carrying out any plan requires you to first identify that there is something to be done. This can be taxing on attention, focus, and working memory. Problem-solving includes discovery, decision-making, comprehension, brainstorming, and goal-oriented actions. What is it you need a plan for?

Often, ADHDers live in the current moment and cannot chunk down tasks that feel too big. Not planning at all becomes the problem. Procrastination sets in, and urgency becomes the activator instead of carefully chunking out tasks for completion. Problem-solving the plan moves you from inaction toward thoughtful execution.



**Tip:** Look at the plan from a **different angle**. Often changing your perspective or asking questions to get more specific can help get your plan going. Making the tasks smaller can help you take the next step.



“You can increase your problem-solving skills by honing your question-asking ability.”  
— MICHAEL J. GELB



# Time Prediction

Time prediction may be one of the most costly hidden symptoms of ADHD. The failure to effectively manage time has detrimental effects on personal and professional success. In 1997, Dr. Russell Barkley first noted Time Blindness or temporal myopia affecting people with ADHD (A.P.A. PsycNet, 2022).

Researchers believe the brain processes the passage of time through the sensation of heart rate, light, and temperature changes (Green, 2022). Considering ADHD is a deficit in self-regulation, it seems plausible that time awareness would be a genuine struggle. It is no wonder that the inability to effectively manage time makes effective planning and plan follow-through extremely difficult.

**Tip:** It is essential to set an executable plan considering your **available time**. You can strengthen time prediction by recording the time you spend doing a task. Record start and stop times, including breaks. This is key to effectively carrying out a plan. Over time this record will help you estimate how long you actually need when planning specific tasks. Keeping track of how much time you spend on things that cause time warp is essential to using time effectively. If you know you get lost in social media, be mindful of when you allow yourself the opportunity to scroll. Building your inhibition in distraction areas is vital to successfully executing a plan.

**Hint:** Many people rely on alarms and timers; check out [Time Timer®](#) to activate and execute planned tasks.



"A year from now you may wish you had started today."

--KAREN LAMB





# Communication

How are you getting the information you need to make a plan? Planning requires practical communication skills. You have to know what must be done first and then be able to prioritize and delegate if necessary. You must be able to receive information, process/filter what is important, determine what to do next, and check back in. Communication requires attention, working memory, inhibition, and emotional regulation. Struggles in any of these areas can make effective communication difficult.

Communicating your support needs with others and employing an effective accountability system is essential. Effective communication skills may be a missing link in your successful plan execution.

**Tip:** What do emotions have to do with it? If you are working on planning your day, week, month, or future goals, **tune into your feelings**. This is a vital area of the communication process that is often weak for the ADHD brain. The ability to employ emotional regulation during the planning process is essential.

You can strengthen your Emotional Intelligence by tuning into your body during the planning process. What do you notice when you hear what needs to be done? Information sparks a feeling—yeah, I can do that, or uhhhhggg, I don't want to do that. The brain is filtering and making choices. You can have control of choice when you notice what you are feeling and move with intention toward your desired outcome.



"Don't be afraid to ask for help, and to admit when you need it."

—CHARLES SCHWAB

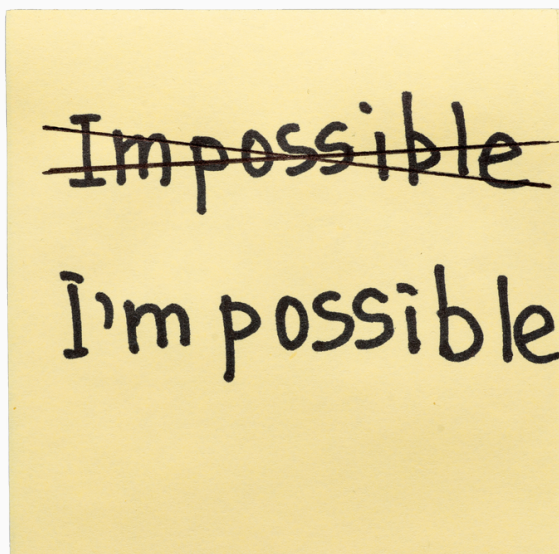




## Planning in Conclusion

It is a wonder the capacity of our brains. Learning to work with your brain is essential to your success. You are only limited when you choose to not take action. Planning requires motivation, attention, focus, organization, problem-solving, time prediction, working memory, and communication. Becoming self-aware of how your brain functions or doesn't function well in these areas is key to creating the positive change you want.

Getting your life in order by planning will iron out the chaos you suffer every day. Planning is not so simple, but by breaking it down, you can identify where you need support and where you soar. ADHD and EF challenges can make planning hard but not impossible. Perhaps some tips in this article will spark your creativity toward the desired outcomes. Remember, "***I'm Possible when I get to the root of it.***" From there, you will grow.



Failure to plan ahead. The ADHD symptom you forget you have until it's too late.

--NEIL PETERSEN



How will you remember what you will do today?



## Hello

Thank you for joining me. My name is Cynthia North, but people know me as Cindy. I am ACC Certified Life Coach with the ICF as a Certified ADHD Life Coach (CALC) and a trained PQ Coach™ member with Positive Intelligence® devoted to partnering with clients to create self-success within ADHD and living life. I work with all ages having a special interest in how the brain affects the outcome. I help ADHDers and stuck people move from crippled in doubt to capable with clarity. I have expanded to offer personalized Mental Fitness Coaching through Shirzad Chamine's Positive Intelligence® Program. New possibilities bloom with deeper self-awareness and through the strength in your mental fitness. I have an innate desire to empower others no matter what difficulties they face with or without ADHD. I believe everyone is worthy of stepping forward out of stuck.

ADHD has touched me personally and professionally.

I know first-hand how ADHD symptoms and behavior can wreak havoc on family dynamics, school, and work success. I chose to become a Certified ADHD Life Coach as well as a member of Positive Intelligence® as a PQ Coach™ because I want others to discover their greatness within ADHD strengths while working with their executive functioning challenges through a positive mindset. I am where I am today because of my two dynamic ADHD children. They both teach me and open my mind to more each day. Their needs were beyond a hug, discipline, structure, or praise. So I sought professional help, ultimately finding a trained ADHD Life Coach. And here I am serving people who want different and deserve ease and flow.

Life experiences have made way for opportunity. I am on a journey to slay stigmas surrounding brain differences. Finding a Life Coach to empower my child led me to become a Certified ADHD Life Coach myself to serve others past their stuck ways and ADHD stigmas. Choosing to strengthen your inner self is where Empower M3 starts. The work is an inside job where your "M3" begins. Connecting your heart and brain with a Coach creates empowerment opportunities. EmpowerM3 - is where the 3 connect to take flight.



There is a more extraordinary tomorrow when your discovery starts today.

“Strengthening planning skills offers you the future you had in mind.”

— CINDY NORTH,  
LIFE COACH AND AUTHOR





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### Disclaimer:

The uPLifted Series is not provided to diagnose or treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or any other mental illness. The information included in each uPLifted Series is offered with the intention of being value-added to the ADHD community and to those who are invested in brain health. This publication is created to start the conversation. This is not a sole source of available information nor intended to be considered so. I am not affiliated with any product suggested in this publication nor do I receive any compensation from the associated businesses or products. Please consult with your medical professionals only using this information as you see fit.



## Resources

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