More Attention, Less Deficit

Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD



Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA

What the experts are saying about this book!

More Attention, Less Deficit is outstanding. Written in a clear and easy-to-understand style, the book brings together a vast amount of information, ideas, suggestions, and research. Dr. Tuckman's energy and empathy sustain the book throughout. All adults with ADHD can benefit from this book, as well as all people who care about them. Superb!

Edward Hallowell, MD, author of various books and founder of The Hallowell Centers in New York and Massachusetts

Dr. Tuckman has provided us with a richly detailed discussion of ADHD in adults and especially how it should be managed, directly written for the adult with ADHD in mind. Wonderfully supportive and informative, this book provides countless recommendations for addressing the myriad symptoms of poor self-control and time management, inattention and disorganization, and impulsive and careless behavior that afflicts nearly every major domain of life activities for adults. The book should prove enormously instructive for both adults with ADHD and for clinicians who specialize in its diagnosis and management.

Russell A. Barkley, PhD, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
Medical University of South Carolina (Charleston)
And Research Professor of Psychiatry, SUNY Upstate Medical University (Syracuse)

More Attention, Less Deficit is a great "life manual" on how to live successfully with any, and all ADHD challenges. It is full of great strategies and helps the reader to understand the underlying issues so the strategies can truly stick. Dr. Tuckman's book is comprehensive, practical and easy to read—just what the adult with ADHD needs and wants!

Nancy A. Ratey, EdM, MCC, SCAC Strategic Life Coach, Author, The Disorganized Mind

Dr. Tuckman has done a fantastic job at providing a virtual smorgasbord of information for adults with ADHD. By using the menu provided at the beginning of each chapter, the reader can select articles specific to their situation resulting in greater reader interest and satisfaction. I wholeheartedly recommend this book for all adults with ADHD. It's like getting an individualized consult with Dr. Tuckman!!

Patricia O. Quinn, MD Director, The Center for Girls and Women with ADHD, Washington, DC www.addvance.com

More Attention, Less Deficit is the new "Bible" of ADHD. Dr. Tuckman brilliantly maps out strategies and tips while peppering it with facts in a way that makes it interesting and easy for the adult with ADHD to devour in bite-sized pieces. A must-read for all who are touched by ADHD.

Terry Matlen, ACSW
Author of Survival Tips for Women with ADHD, Director, www.addconsults.com

Dr. Tuckman has given us a thorough compilation of science-based information on Adult ADHD that is down to earth, easy to understand, practical, and highly useful. This book provides the essential ingredients of hope, guidance, and knowledge for anyone who wants to understand and gain better control of this complex disorder.

Kevin Murphy, Ph.D. President, Adult ADHD Clinic of Central MA

This valuable book will help adults with AD/HD and those who care about them, have a greater understanding of the disorder—and more importantly—learn what to do about it. Written in a very user-friendly manner, the book can be read in any order the reader finds useful. Packed with strategies for successfully managing symptoms, adults with AD/HD will also find ways to come to terms with all that the disorder adds and subtracts in their lives. This is no small feat, believe me! An excellent resource from an author who really "gets" what it is like to have AD/HD.

Marie Paxson, President, CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder);

Personal opinion as CHADD does not endorse publications.

This is the first book I have read where a healthcare professional has conveyed an accurate overview of the coaching process and how it fits into the whole, comprehensive picture of successful ADHD management. Dr. Tuckman's book represents an excellent educational resource, for not only understanding ADHD, but as a strong starting point to identify potential strategies which can powerfully enhance the treatment of ADHD.

David Giwerc, MCC, Founder & President, ADD Coach Academy Former President of the Attention Deficit Disorder Association

As a follow up to his highly respected book for professionals, *Integrative Treatment for Adult ADHD*, Dr.Ari Tuckman has done a masterful job culling the scientific literature to design a user-friendly, comprehensive blueprint for living well with adult ADHD. *More Attention, Less Deficit* will be an invaluable resource for adults living with ADHD, their loved ones seeking to understand the disorder, and clinicians looking for tried and true coping strategies that will help their patients.

J. Russell Ramsay, Ph.D., Co-Director, Adult ADHD Treatment & Research Program, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine
Author of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Adult ADHD:
An Integrative Psychosocial and Medical Approach

Ari Tuckman offers an insightful, practical and most important user friendly guide for adults with ADHD. This book is chock full of great ideas and exceptional strategies. Most importantly, Tuckman provides a reasoned and reasonable appreciation of ADHD, an essential foundation to help those with the condition find the strength and motivation to take charge of their condition.

Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., Co-Author Clinician's Guide to Adult ADHD

CHAPTER 1

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS: IT ALL FLOWS FROM HERE

ADHD involves far more than merely not enough attention or too much hyperactivity. It affects many aspects of how you process information and manage the demands in your life. This chapter covers *executive functions*, our highest-level brain processes that enable us to make good decisions in a complex world. Research is increasingly finding that people with ADHD display specific weaknesses in certain executive functions. This explains why people with ADHD tend to have the particular struggles that they do—and also why they don't have other struggles.

This is why I chose to start the book with a chapter on executive functions, rather than the obvious choice of beginning with getting diagnosed (that comes second). If you understand how executive functions operate, everything else in this book and about ADHD makes perfect sense. It explains

- all the difficulties that people with ADHD face in various parts of their lives, as well as the areas where they don't have trouble;
- why certain time-management and organizational strategies tend to work well for people with ADHD, whereas others don't; and
- why some treatments are effective for ADHD, whereas others aren't.

This unifying framework not only explains why your past looks the way it does but also offers some promise for making the future look better. This foundation means that you don't need to reinvent the wheel every time you're faced with a new challenge, since you already know how your brain tends to operate. This makes life much easier.

This chapter includes a series of related articles on the topic of executive functions. Since most adults with ADHD struggle with reading books cover to cover, I've included summaries here so that you can choose the articles that are most helpful to you or most relevant right now.

Executive Functioning: Who's Calling the Shots Around Here, Anyway? (p. 7) The executive functions are our highest-level brain processes. They enable us to make good decisions in a complex world. Research is increasingly explaining ADHD struggles as deriving from executive-functioning weaknesses.

Response Inhibition: It Starts with Stopping (p. 8) The key to successful decision making is that tiny little pause where we think through our options and make a good choice. People with ADHD have difficulty creating this pause and therefore get distracted, forget things, and leap without looking.

Working Memory: The Brain's RAM (p. 9) We use working memory constantly to hold information in mind as we remember what just happened, relate it to long-term memories, and think ahead into the future. People with ADHD tend to have blinky working memories, which leads to a variety of problems in their daily lives.

Sense of Time: It Can't Be 5:00 Already! (p. 11) People with ADHD have difficulty monitoring the passage of time and planning accordingly, a skill that's really important in today's busy world. As a result, they tend to spend too long on some activities and not plan enough time for others. This contributes to their well-known time-management problems.

Remembering to Remember: It's All About Timing (p. 12) In our busy lives, we all have dozens of little (and not so little) things to remember to do over the course of a day, such as phone calls and appointments. People with ADHD have great difficulty reminding themselves of these tasks at the right time, often forgetting completely or remembering only when it's too late.

Emotional Self-Control: Having Feelings Without Acting on Them (p. 13) People with ADHD tend to express their feelings more strongly than others do and are more influenced by their feelings than other people are. This also affects their ability to see beyond their emotions and to take others' perspectives into account.

Self-Activation: Getting That Heavy Ball Rolling (p. 14) Everybody has to use a certain amount of force of will to get going on boring tasks, but people with ADHD have a much steeper hill to climb. As a result, they tend to procrastinate until the pressure of a looming deadline pushes them into action.

Persistence of Effort: The Little Engine That Sometimes Could (p. 16) Once someone with ADHD gets going on something, there's the second challenge of sticking with it all the way through. Unfortunately, most of our daily obligations don't give partial credit for tasks that are mostly done.

Hindsight and Forethought: Using the Past and Future to Guide the Present (p. 17) We use the lessons from past experiences to make better choices the next time around. People with ADHD have a hard time stopping long enough to remember those lessons and apply them forward, so they're more likely to make the same mistakes.

Executive Functioning: Who's Calling the Shots Around Here, Anyway?

There is growing consensus among researchers that ADHD involves weaknesses in *executive functions*, a broad range of high-level information-processing functions that are crucial to success in life, especially as an adult. Rather than respond automatically and thoughtlessly to whatever the environment throws at us (like amoebas do), we use executive functions to modify our behavior for a better outcome, to maximize future gains, even at the price of losing out in the short term. This can mean forgoing something enjoyable in the moment (like a fat piece of chocolate cake) or pushing ourselves to endure something boring but important (like studying for a test). We could almost say that the executive functions enable us to see beyond the current moment by bringing back the lessons from the past and bringing forward the goals of the future to better guide our behavior. Executive functions enable us to resist distractions and temptations to go for the greater gain.

Although we can intentionally choose to approach situations in certain ways, many of the executive functions operate without conscious awareness, like breathing. If you watch little kids talking themselves through a difficult task, they are sort of verbalizing their executive functions—for example, "one step at a time," "slow down," "don't look over there." Eventually it becomes automatic and we don't have to think about it as much, but we may still find that we talk ourselves through challenges sometimes.

Different researchers have created somewhat different lists of executive functions. I've found that Russell Barkley's *response inhibition theory* is the most thorough and useful of these, so most of what I talk about in this chapter is an outgrowth of his work. His theory is incredibly detailed and impressive but contains far more information than most nonclinicians need to know. So I've pulled out the aspects that are most useful for your daily life—the parts that not only explain why some things are so hard for you but also set the stage for the rest of the book to offer helpful strategies. Even though I talk about specific executive functions, keep in mind that they interact constantly and the lines between them can be pretty blurry.

In case you're interested in the details, Barkley breaks the executive functions into four connected types: nonverbal working memory; verbal working memory; self-regulation of affect, motivation, and arousal; and reconstitution (planning). There's a lot to the executive functions, but the details are less important in terms of your day-to-day life.

As you will see in the rest of this chapter, the executive functions give rise to all sorts of important abilities, some of which I'll talk about in detail. And as you probably know far too well, a significant price is paid by people who are weak in

these various skills. Life as an adult in this society is complicated, so those who have weak executive functions will struggle and stand out. They will have trouble managing all the details of life and making "responsible" choices (i.e., ones that benefit the future more than the present). As a result, many adults with untreated ADHD are seen as irresponsible or immature because they tend to react too much in the moment and lose sight of the bigger picture. Society expects and forgives this of children, but not of adults. As a result of these difficulties with managing the thousand and one details of daily life, people with ADHD spend a lot of time scrambling to hold it all together and prevent disaster. It takes a lot more energy to put out fires than to prevent them. This reactive lifestyle is much more stressful than the one led by adults without ADHD.

We expect adults to be able to show self-control and not need as much direction from others. Because people with ADHD struggle with making themselves do the right thing at the right time, parents and romantic partners often step in to provide these executive functions to keep their loved one from going too far off the rails—for example, by reminding her about upcoming appointments, organizing her stuff, or stopping impulsive purchases. Alternatively, she may find tools that can do the job for her—for example, setting up automatic debits to eliminate having to remember to send out the bills or using a PDA to remind her of upcoming meetings.

Spend some time on this chapter and maybe even come back to it later. I think you will find that it explains a lot.

Response Inhibition: It Starts with Stopping

What makes ADHD *ADHD* rather than Asperger's syndrome or whatever? Russell Barkley, Ph.D., indisputably the top ADHD expert in the world, has created the *response inhibition theory* to explain why ADHD people have certain typical weaknesses, yet don't have other weaknesses. This sophisticated theory places primary emphasis on response inhibition—that is, the ability to hold back a response.

Barkley proposes that our executive functions can work only when they have a space to work in. Unlike simpler life forms that respond automatically to stimuli from the environment, humans are able to pause and think through the various response options and then choose the best one. This may ultimately lead to choosing a larger payoff in the future instead of a smaller payoff in the moment (also known as *delay of gratification*). But what we're talking about here is much more fundamental than consciously deciding to resist impulse buys. It's an almost invisible information processing that happens in a split second. An example is almost subconsciously deciding to ignore the sound of someone dropping a pen while you're working at your computer (i.e., not getting distracted), or holding your thought to what someone is saying until she finishes talking (i.e., not impulsively interrupting).

This explains why people with ADHD don't always do what they know they should—they have trouble filtering out external and internal stimuli, so they react to the "wrong" thing. An example is getting lost in a magazine rather than paying the bills sitting next to it. This can look like bad judgment, but what really happens is that these other stimuli have too big an impact on the ADHD person's decision making, so a less-than-optimal choice is made. It isn't bad judgment because he didn't stop long enough to judge. This is why those dreaded questions of "why did/didn't you..." lead to such unconvincing answers along the lines of "I don't know. I just didn't think of it," which is actually pretty accurate. Their brains didn't stop long enough to get a chance to think about it.

Because people with ADHD tend to be so vulnerable to external and internal stimuli, many of the strategies to help them be more effective focus on increasing the strength of the desired stimuli or decreasing the strength of less desired stimuli so that they do the right thing in that moment. For example, a beeping PDA that tells the person to leave for a meeting overrides the focus on what else he was doing. Medications (and possibly neurofeedback) work directly by increasing the brain's ability to create that delay, thereby reversing the fallout that comes from an insufficient delay. This is also why admonitions to "just try harder" don't work—they ignore the fundamental problem that people with ADHD have trouble creating that moment of pause to try harder in. It's like telling someone who needs glasses that she just needs to try harder to see.

As you read about the rest of the executive functions in this chapter, remember this delay, because this is the tripping point for many executive functioning malfunctions.

Working Memory: The Brain's RAM

Even though we often talk of memory as if there were only one kind, we actually have many kinds of memory. People with ADHD sometimes complain that they don't remember well. (And their family members probably complain more!) This is somewhat true, but not completely. Their *long-term memory* is fine—for example, Columbus discovered America in 1492 or my third-grade teacher was Mrs. Phillips. Although ADHD folks may get distracted at times when trying to remember this information, their memories actually work well. (For more on long-term memory, see *The Fundamentals of Memory* on p. 237.)

Where they run into trouble is in getting information into that long-term memory—if something never gets into long-term memory, then there is nothing there to remember, so it isn't really a memory problem at that point. Where things break down is in the *working memory*, which is the part of memory that holds information in the moment as it is being processed. We use working memory

whenever we do anything that involves integrating two or more pieces of information. Here are examples:

- Integrating two or more things that happen close together in time, such as tracking the things that are said in a conversation or following events in an article or book
- Connecting a new piece of information with something from longterm memory, such as considering how a new task will fit into an existing schedule
- Holding some pieces of information while simultaneously paying attention to others, like keeping in mind that you need to change the laundry while you stop to answer a child's question

We use working memory constantly and in almost every aspect of daily life. If a person's working memory tends to blink and drop pieces of information, all sorts of problems occur, as you may know far too well. So, even if the rest of your brain works great and you are absolutely brilliant, a weak working memory will limit your ability to perform to your potential (something else you may know too well).

To use a computer analogy, long-term memory is like the hard drive and working memory is like the RAM. So ADHD folks' hard drives work well, but their RAM is kind of glitchy. Just as when you try to do too many things at once on your computer and a program crashes, ADHD people are prone to working-memory dumps where something important gets pushed out by something new. For example, while walking back to your desk to get some information for your boss, your cell phone rings and your attention goes to that, so your boss's request gets pushed out the back. If you're lucky, some bits and pieces got recorded into your long-term memory, so you may remember it later, especially if reminded by something else. So you get back to your desk and see the paperwork that your boss wanted and suddenly remember her request. Other times the memory is completely gone, so even a lie detector wouldn't pick anything up when your boss asks why you didn't get her the information. (What information? You didn't ask for any information.) It's easy to get the feeling that other people enjoy making things up if you have no memory of things that others swear happened. This also makes for all sorts of fun arguments.

Another example of a working-memory blank is forgetting where you put your keys down the instant that they leave your fingers, making it impossible to remember when looking for them the next day.

One outgrowth of a blinky working memory is that many people with ADHD learn better by doing something than by reading or hearing about it. This is because actively engaging in a task requires less working memory than remembering what one was told, picturing oneself doing the task, and then applying it later.

An unreliable working memory explains some of the distractibility, impulsive decision making, not listening, and poor use of time that plague many with ADHD—and frustrate their family members. But since so much of our thinking is based on our working memories, other more complicated problems can develop. For example, someone with ADHD may know that he should live within some budget constraints, but when faced with a tempting purchase, he may not be able to call to mind his entire weekly or monthly budget to see how this purchase fits into the bigger picture. So he spends the money, only to realize later that he forgot about some upcoming expenses and won't have enough money. Many of these processing problems look like bad judgment or foolhardiness, but it's really that the person has lost some of the relevant information from his mental calculations and therefore makes a flawed decision based on partial information.

Because these problems are based in working-memory glitches, judgmental lectures won't help the person make a different decision next time (but *will* help the person feel bad about himself and/or resent the lecturer). The second half of this book is packed with techniques that take these processing problems into account and are therefore more likely to help you be successful. So stay tuned; it does get better.

Sense of Time: It Can't Be 5:00 Already!

We all have an internal clock that tells us how much time has passed. For some people, this clock ticks loudly and consistently, and they're pretty good at judging the passage of time and knowing when to go on to something else, like going to a work meeting or getting into bed. They have a loose schedule in mind and they know where they are in relation to that schedule—what they have left to do and how much time they have to do it. For ADHD folks, the clock ticks too softly, so it doesn't guide their behavior reliably enough. As a result, they may stay absorbed in fun activities when they should really transition to more obligatory, less fun activities. This can even spill over into obligations, like picking up the kids at school, a situation that causes great anguish for all involved.

Besides the fact that their internal alarm clocks don't go off, they aren't good at predicting how long things will take. When planning ahead, they may use "best-case-scenario planning," basing predictions on everything falling into place perfectly without unexpected detours or delays. Of course, rarely does it work out this well, so they tend to run over their deadlines or show up late. (Some of this is also based in difficulties with getting going on things until the pressure of the last minute drives them into action, which is covered further in *Self-Activation* on p. 14.)

Once people with ADHD start something, time can still be really flexible. When doing something boring, like vacuuming or paperwork, time slows to a crawl and what feels like an hour may be as little as ten minutes (which is a horrible realization). So it takes a real force of will to spend as much time on that boring activity as they had hoped to. On the other hand, when doing something fun, an hour can feel like ten minutes, so they may spend too much time on it. In both cases, they may not get as much done as they had planned.

This sense of time is extremely important in today's society, not just at work but also with family and friends. Almost all parts of life require planning, forethought, and otherwise remembering what needs doing and, just as important, *when* it needs to be done. ADHD adults usually know what they need to do but have trouble doing it at the best times. Probably one of the most common and problematic examples of this is getting into bed on time each night. Assuming you have a specific bedtime, it takes a fair bit of planning, monitoring the passage of time, and making adjustments to climb into bed at the designated time and with everything done. Most ADHD adults fall victim to at least one of the many landmines as they make their way through the night's various activities. In fact, getting into bed on time requires that a lot of things go right, so we can almost say that being able to consistently hit your bedtime is a good sign that you're doing well overall. For more information on this specific topic, see *Actually Get a Good Night's Sleep* on p. 300.

Remembering to Remember: It's All About Timing

Related to the prior article, *Sense of Time*, another ability that is crucial these days is *prospective memory*, which is the ability to remember to remember. It's the capacity to remind yourself to do the right thing at the right time. Not an hour before or an hour after (those don't usually count for much, unfortunately), but right on time. Examples are "I need to call that guy after I check my email," and "I have a report due at work at the end of the week." It could even be something like remembering to bring an umbrella with you when you leave the house—remembering before you pass the umbrella doesn't help much, and remembering after you left really doesn't help much. It all comes down to remembering at exactly the right moment as you get ready to leave. We all have dozens of these sorts of tasks to keep track of every day. I would go so far as to say that one reason electronic organizers are so popular is that our brains can't handle all the information we're trying to store, so we use electronic brains to do some of that work for us.

For many people with ADHD, this is where good intentions come to die—they have trouble holding the thought from the moment that they think of it until the

moment when it's the time to act. They have trouble bridging that gap in time, of carrying that thought reliably into the future.

Let's be clear, though, about a really important distinction. This forgetfulness is fundamentally different from situations in which someone consciously decides that she won't do something. When the situation is due to a failure to remember, the task doesn't even enter consciousness for a decision to be made—and that's the key difference. On these occasions, the ADHD person may be as surprised and disappointed as everyone else that the task wasn't completed.

Of course, most people expect our words and actions to line up, so they eventually run out of patience and stop believing that the ADHD person simply forgot to do what he said he would. This is especially true when the promised task is boring or difficult. Instead, they may peg the person as irresponsible or selfish—and a liar, to boot. For the ADHD person, this can add insult to injury, because he is forced to deal with both the practical consequences of the forgetfulness, such as a late fee on the electric bill, and the social fallout, such as his girlfriend becoming upset with him (again). Unfortunately, even the most trusting people eventually stop believing the promises. Most people use their own experience to understand why other people do what they do, so someone who has a pretty decent memory will assume that the ADHD person purposely chose to not do something, since that would be the reason that the non-ADHD person didn't do something. Of course, in this case that reasoning may be wrong.

In fact, when doing an ADHD evaluation, I ask about times when the person forgets and pays a price for it. This is fundamentally different from the times that he might have something to gain from supposedly forgetting. He should have no incentive to forget something that then comes back to bite him.

Emotional Self-Control: Having Feelings Without Acting on Them

Although it isn't part of the official diagnostic system, people with ADHD are often known for their strong reactions. And not just anger—every feeling may be more intense. It's sometimes said that people with ADHD are more spontaneous than others. I think what this is referring to is that people with ADHD are more likely to be guided by their strong feelings, whereas others may stop and think for a moment before acting. (By the way, it's labeled "spontaneous" if it works out well, and "impulsive" or "irresponsible" or worse if it doesn't.) For example, I had a client who would get excited about things, like taking a trip, and start talking about the trip as if it were a done deal. His kids would of course get excited about it, only to be disappointed later when it turned out that they couldn't take the trip. He would get excited about things and let that show, without stopping to think about

the effect that it would have on others who got caught up in his excitement. They would be equally surprised when that excitement would quickly fade and he would forget about the potential trip that they were still fantasizing about.

By contrast, adults without ADHD are more likely to display a diluted version of their initial feelings. They're more likely to hold back that initial response and temper what they express rather than show their feelings at full strength. They may have strong feelings, but they tend to consider the larger situation before expressing them—they still have them but don't act on them as much.

The ability to create this pause is important because it gives us objectivity when we can see beyond our own initial reaction and change how much the feeling colors our thoughts and affects our actions. For example, we may get angry at our boss but remember that we need a steady paycheck, so we don't tell him how we really feel, even if he deserves it. Adults are expected to be able to pause long enough to talk themselves down from their initial feeling and talk themselves out of acting rashly. By contrast, adults with ADHD are more prone to letting their initial feelings guide their behavior without considering this bigger context.

In addition, being able to view our feelings with objectivity gives us the ability to see someone else's perspective even when it differs from our own. We're able to set our feelings aside and see that someone else may feel differently about the same situation. As with anyone who gets caught up in the moment, adults with ADHD will have trouble with this, at least in the heat of the moment. They may see it more clearly afterward when things have cooled off, but it may be too late by then. This is one of the reasons that adults with ADHD are sometimes perceived as self-centered. It isn't really that they think only of themselves; it's just that they sometimes have a hard time seeing beyond their feelings in the moment to be able to appreciate another person's needs. Unfortunately, apologies afterward aren't always enough to mend fences.

Finally, being able to exert at least some control over our feelings leads to motivation to start and stick with tasks and get things done. By focusing on the rewards for a job well done or some enjoyable aspect of the task, we create the appropriate feelings within ourselves when the task itself doesn't motivate us. This is discussed further in the next two articles, *Self-Activation* and *Persistence of Effort*.

Self-Activation: Getting That Heavy Ball Rolling

When we're kids, the various adults in our lives help us get going on tasks such as doing homework, getting dressed, and doing chores. You know, all the boring stuff that we don't really want to do. As adults, we're expected to get ourselves going—and people assume all sorts of negative character traits for those who can't get

themselves going reliably—lazy, self-indulgent, or irresponsible. (Any of these sound familiar?) Unfortunately, ADHD folks have two strikes against them on these matters. The first, as described in the article *Remembering to Remember*, is the not-so-simple act of remembering what needs to be done. But assuming that the person is aware of the task, she needs to make a choice to do it.

Two things determine whether someone will get going on something—external pressure and internal pressure. *External pressure* comes from the world around us. A report that is due tomorrow has much more external pressure than one that is due in a month. A boss who is breathing down your neck creates greater external pressure than a boss who says nothing. Everyone is more likely to start tasks with high external pressure.

Internal pressure is motivation that comes from within us. It's easy to get going on things that we enjoy. The trick is firing up that internal pressure for things that aren't fun. Some people have lots of internal pressure and get going on things long before they're due. This is mostly a good thing but can be problematic if someone takes it too far, for example by stressing out and slaving away on that report for the entire month, even past the point of diminishing returns. So, more isn't always better. Especially for boring tasks, people with ADHD have a hard time mustering up that internal pressure. They may think about it occasionally, but they just won't hit that magic threshold where they can get themselves going.

Since people with ADHD aren't as good at generating that internal pressure, they are more dependent on external pressure. This is why they procrastinate. That last-minute pressure gets them going and provides the focus that their weak internal pressure just can't. Of course, as you probably know well, this procrastination tends to drive non-ADHD people crazy because they can't understand it. Their internal pressure builds as the deadline approaches and nothing is being done, so to make themselves feel less anxious, they begin applying external pressure upon the ADHD person, even though it's probably not appreciated. Not that it makes it any less annoying at the time, but try to remember that the person isn't trying to control you, he's just trying to make himself feel less anxious. At its worst, the non-ADHD person just does the task himself, resenting that the responsibility fell to him, even if he took it upon himself.

To make matters worse, the non-ADHD person sees the ADHD person self-activate pretty easily for enjoyable things but not for boring things. The non-ADHD person therefore might see it as a matter of choice and become resentful about having to pick up the slack on the boring jobs. This is where those negative assumptions about character traits come in. The thing is, for people with ADHD, this is usually more about brain-based low internal pressure than it is about character. We'll talk more about how to prevent and clean up some of these messy assumptions in chapter 15, *Relationships and Friendships: Strive for Balance.* Someone with

ADHD may also avoid dealing with a situation that she feels pessimistic about. As a result, there is a feedback loop where past failures fuel current doubts and reduced effort. So ADHD struggles in the past also contribute to current avoidance.

Persistence of Effort: The Little Engine That Sometimes Could

As discussed in the previous article, *Self-Activation*, getting going can be hard enough, but keeping going can be just as hard. There are two possible reasons for this difficulty with *persistence of effort*, depending on the situation:

- *Distractibility.* Sometimes it's a simple matter of getting interrupted or distracted by something else, so the person never returns to finish the first activity, even if she intends to.
- *Boredom.* Whereas some people take great pleasure in completing something, this doesn't do much for many ADHD people. They get something mostly finished, then lose interest. They've figured it out, the challenge is gone, and it no longer lights their fire, so it falls by the wayside. Even if they know they should just go through the motions to finish something, it can feel almost impossible to force themselves to bring something to completion. Repetition can be deadly.

Of course, this mostly applies to boring activities, because fun things are easy. It's kind of like riding a bike downhill—it doesn't take much effort. But it takes effort to force yourself to do something you find uninteresting, just as it takes effort to ride a bike uphill. Of course, this is true for everyone. It's just that for people with ADHD, that hill is much steeper on the boring stuff, so it takes a much greater force of will to stick to it all the way through. This means that ADHD folks get more mentally tired from doing boring jobs and are therefore more likely to take a break sooner. Meanwhile, those fun distractions have much steeper downhills, so it's easy to take a detour rather than trudge ahead.

For people with ADHD, the difference between the downhills and the uphills is much greater than it is for people without ADHD. Unfortunately, a lot of the family members, friends, and coworkers of people with ADHD often don't understand this and take the attitude that the ADHD person should "just bite the bullet and get it done," not realizing that it isn't that easy. If it was, they would just do it. As discussed in the previous article, *Self-Activation*, since their ability to self-generate motivation is weak, external pressure helps those with ADHD not only start something but also push themselves through to the end. By analogy, you'll probably pedal harder up the hill if a big dog is chasing you.

Success in life often requires the ability to complete all sorts of uninteresting tasks on a pretty regular basis. If this is hard for you, it can affect every area of your life: school, work, finances, family, and friends. Unfortunately, life rarely gives partial credit for things that are only partially done.

The irony, of course, is that most of these activities aren't really that hard, in and of themselves. It's not like people with ADHD don't have the skills to handle these tasks. For example, doing laundry, paying bills, and filing papers aren't inherently difficult—fighting the boredom is the hard part. Before a diagnosis, though, it can lead to accusations from oneself or others that these activities are easy, so the person should just do it. I had a client who had a really hard time getting all the groceries put away. After probably spending too long at the store and getting behind schedule on other things, it was all she could do to get the groceries into the kitchen and throw the perishables into the fridge. It would make her husband nuts to find the counters piled high with full bags. He would get on her about it, wondering why she couldn't just spend a final five minutes and get them all put away, since it's not like she didn't know where everything went. Unfortunately, it's more complicated than that.

Hindsight and Forethought: Using the Past and Future to Guide the Present

With age comes wisdom (usually). After going through an experience once or twice, ideally we learn something that will make the next time better. The struggle for most people with ADHD is to apply that wisdom in the heat of the moment. If you were to ask them beforehand how to best handle a particular situation, they could tell you. If you were to ask them afterward, they can tell you how they could have handled it better. Unfortunately, this knowledge doesn't translate reliably enough into doing the right thing at the right time.

The snag occurs when they aren't able to use their hindsight (a.k.a. wisdom) to guide their actions in the moment. The reason is that we need to stop for a moment to think before acting in order to have time to bring back the lessons of those past experiences. This is that crucial pause I was talking about in *Response Inhibition* on p.8. For too many people with ADHD, they've already leaped before looking and only afterward realize that they're in trouble. As a result, they're often in a position of having to explain why they did something that even they know wasn't such a good idea—why they bought something from the telemarketer without getting all the details, and why they used a butter knife to pry the lid off the paint can. The problem is that there are no good explanations, since they know they made a bad decision. This leaves them with "I don't know. I just didn't think about it," which is actually pretty accurate. Maybe not satisfying, but accurate.

One of the reasons they make these less-than-ideal choices is that adult life involves lots of situations where we're faced with a choice that offers an immediate small reward but a larger punishment later. For example, staying up too late watching a movie is fun in the moment but painful the next day. Impulse buying is exciting at the time but problematic when the credit card bill arrives. As kids, we have adults around us who know these things and prevent us from making these kinds of choices. As adults, though, we're expected to be able to do this for ourselves, which is easier said than done for those with ADHD.

Another reason people with ADHD make these problematic choices is that they may not do enough planning ahead, so they have to figure things out on the spot. We use forethought to look ahead to see likely challenges and think about what kinds of responses will probably work best. To predict the future accurately, we have to be able to stop and think about how similar situations worked out in the past, evaluate current circumstances, mentally sort through our options, and choose the best one. So there's a lot going on here, even if it occurs in an instant. Without this ability, people with ADHD are forced to constantly reinvent the wheel and make things up on the spot, often with predictable results.

Of course, for this forethought to work well, we have to have a pretty good idea of what's going on so that we can prepare for the right situation. This involves both self-awareness as well as awareness of other people and outside events. Therefore, we have to monitor all of these internal and external events as they unfold so that we can plan and respond accordingly. To work well, this monitoring requires a gap between stimulus and response—we have to be able to take it all in and think about it before doing anything. This means not just reacting to the most obvious aspects of the situation, but also considering the more subtle parts.

Unfortunately, people with ADHD tend to react too quickly and without looking at the full picture of what's going on. When they do stop and take stock, they drop bits and pieces out of their working memory when mentally manipulating all the various details of the current situation and comparing their options of what to do next. As a result, they may respond in a way that fits only part of the situation but looks like bad judgment when you consider the forgotten pieces. For example, during a meeting with her boss, a person may go into a long story about an interaction with a customer without noticing that her boss is looking at his watch and giving signs of needing to stop. If she had noticed that, she could have cut her story short and gotten to the important question that she needed to ask but ran out of time for.

Or if they need to create a multistep plan, they may have trouble putting all those steps into the optimal order (known as *sequencing*). As a result, they lose efficiency when they need to go back to a step they didn't plan for or forgot. Perhaps the classic example of this is the child who tells his parents at dinner that

he has a science project due the next day, not figuring into his planning that he should have gotten supplies from the store earlier in the day or week. Parents love these moments

This brings up the idea of being able to sense when events are slipping away from us and changing course to get things back on track. In addition to drifting off onto the "wrong" activities, people with ADHD may not notice when it's time to change gears to do something else. In both cases, whether it's doing something they shouldn't or not doing something they should, it's a matter of being out of sync with the current situation

The ultimate goal of hindsight and forethought is to create the best possible future by managing the interactions in the present most effectively. People with ADHD often have trouble following through with these plans, even if they know how to create them. For example, they can tell others how to handle situations but then can't follow their own advice. This is frustrating for family members and others who don't understand why the person with ADHD doesn't plan ahead more or follow the plans that he does create. It's not that he can't ever create these plans; it's just that he doesn't do it often enough, so he winds up flying by the seat of his pants.

This is where the indignant lectures often occur, even though they don't address the real problem. I can appreciate the frustration, but lectures aren't part of the solution. Rather, the solution lies in setting things up to make it more likely that the person with ADHD will stop long enough to consider these lessons from the past before jumping into action. That's what most of the rest of this book is about.