Executive Function Challenges
Practical Strategies for Adults

Executive function is the brain's project manager. It's the set of mental skills that help us plan, organise, remember things, manage time, stay focused, and switch between tasks.

When executive function works well, it's invisible. You just... do things. You remember appointments, start tasks without drama, and have a reasonable sense of time passing.

When executive function struggles, everything becomes harder. Not because you don't care or aren't trying, but because the mental systems that coordinate all these tasks aren't working smoothly. It's like having a sat nav that keeps losing signal, or trying to juggle whilst someone keeps throwing in extra balls.

Executive function challenges are common in ADHD and autism, but also affect people experiencing anxiety, depression, stress, trauma, burnout, or sleep difficulties. They're real neurological differences, not character flaws.

If you've spent years being told you're lazy, careless, disorganised, or "not living up to your potential," this might be what's actually going on. Understanding that can be both a relief and a grief. It explains so much, and it can't give you back the years of struggle.

What it can do is help you stop fighting yourself and start building systems that actually work for your brain.

Quick reference: general principles

- **Stop fighting your brain.** Build systems that work with how you actually function.
- **Externalise everything.** Write it down, set alarms, use checklists. Don't rely on memory.
- **Reduce friction.** Make the right thing the easy thing.
- **Simplify.** Fewer things to manage means less executive function required.
- **Build routines.** Consistency reduces the daily EF load.
- **Assume things take longer.** Build in buffers.
- **Rest matters.** Executive function gets worse when you're tired, stressed, or depleted.
- **Progress, not perfection.** Some days the systems will fail. That's okay. Start again.

Working memory

The brain's notepad. It holds information temporarily whilst you use it.

What challenges look like:
- Going into a room and forgetting why
- Losing track of conversations
- Forgetting what you were about to say mid-sentence
- Struggling to follow spoken instructions
- Reading something and immediately forgetting it
- Needing to re-read emails multiple times

What helps:
- **Write everything down.** EVERYTHING. Working memory doesn't improve much with practice, but external systems compensate beautifully.
- **Keep a capture system** (notebook, phone app, voice memos) and use it relentlessly.
- **Don't trust yourself to remember.** If it matters, record it immediately.
- **Use voice memos** for thoughts that arrive at inconvenient moments.
- **Repeat information back** when someone tells you something important.
- **Ask for written instructions** rather than relying on verbal ones.
- **Set reminders liberally.** Multiple reminders for important things.

You're not stupid. You're not careless. Your brain's notepad is smaller than some people's, so things fall off. That's not a moral failing. It's a reason to build better systems.

Task initiation

The ability to get started on something, even when you know what to do.

What challenges look like:
- Staring at a task you need to do but being completely unable to begin
- Procrastinating for hours, days, or weeks
- Knowing exactly what needs doing but feeling paralysed
- Doing everything except the thing you're supposed to do
- Needing pressure (deadlines, other people) to finally start
- Feeling like there's a wall between you and the task

What helps:
- **Make starting tiny.** The task isn't "write the report"; it's "open the document." It isn't "clean the kitchen"; it's "put three things away."
- **Use the two-minute rule.** Commit to just two minutes. Often, starting is the hardest part.
- **Body doubling.** Work alongside someone else, even virtually. Many people find it much easier to start when another person is present.
- **Create starting rituals.** A specific sequence that signals "now we begin": a particular drink, a specific playlist, sitting in a certain spot.
- **Pair starting with something pleasant.** Your favourite tea, comfortable clothes, background music you love.
- **Reduce friction.** Make starting as easy as possible. Leave documents open, put equipment out the night before, remove barriers.

- **Forgive the delay.** Shame makes starting harder, not easier. You're starting now. That's what matters.

Task initiation struggles aren't about motivation or willpower. Your brain's "go" button works differently. You're not procrastinating because you're lazy. You're procrastinating because your brain genuinely struggles to shift into gear.

Planning and prioritisation

Working out what needs doing, in what order, and how long it might take.

What challenges look like:
- Feeling overwhelmed by everything you need to do
- Not knowing where to start when there are multiple tasks
- Underestimating how long things take (every single time)
- Missing deadlines despite good intentions
- Struggling to break big projects into steps
- Everything feeling equally urgent

What helps:
- **Get everything out of your head.** Brain dumps onto paper or a digital tool. You can't prioritise what you can't see.
- **Use a project management tool or a simple list system.** Find one that works for you and stick with it.
- **Plan the week on Sunday** (or whenever works). Decide what must happen and when.
- **Work backwards from deadlines.** "It's due Friday. What needs to happen by Thursday? By Wednesday?"
- **Assume everything takes longer than you think.** Add 50% to your estimates. Then add a bit more.
- **Prioritise ruthlessly.** Not everything can be urgent. What actually matters most?
- **Use templates and repeatable structures.** Don't reinvent the planning wheel each time.

If planning feels impossible, it's not because you're incapable. It's because planning requires holding lots of information in your head whilst manipulating it, which is exactly what executive function challenges make hard. Get it out of your head and onto paper.
Then it becomes manageable.

Time awareness

Sensing time passing and estimating how long things take. Difficulty with this is sometimes called "time blindness."

What challenges look like:
- Genuinely not noticing hours have passed
- Constantly running late despite trying hard not to
- "Five more minutes" that become forty-five

- Completely misjudging how long tasks will take
- Missing appointments or nearly missing them
- Time feeling slippery, unreliable, unpredictable

What helps:
- **Make time visible.** Analogue clocks, visual timers, Time Timers. You can't feel time, so you need to see it.
- **Set multiple alarms** for important things. One alarm isn't enough if you dismiss it and forget.
- **Build in buffers.** If you think you need ten minutes, allow twenty. This isn't pessimism; it's realism.
- **Use calendar blocking** so your time is visually accounted for.
- **Track how long things actually take.** The gap between your estimate and reality can be humbling, but it's useful data.
- **Schedule transition time** between activities. Back-to-back scheduling doesn't work when time is slippery.
- **Work backwards from when you need to arrive,** not when you need to leave.

You're not disrespectful of other people's time. You're not selfish. Your brain doesn't register time passing the way other brains do. That's a real neurological difference, not a choice you're making.

Organisation
Creating and maintaining systems for belongings, information, and physical spaces.

What challenges look like:
- Losing keys, wallet, phone repeatedly
- Piles of paper and clutter that seem to generate themselves
- Not being able to find things even though you "just had it"
- Struggling to maintain any system for more than a few days
- Important documents lost in chaos
- Feeling overwhelmed by mess but unable to tackle it

What helps:
- **Reduce possessions ruthlessly.** Fewer things means fewer things to organise.
- **Create specific homes for things you lose repeatedly.** Keys live in this bowl. Always.
- **Use technology.** Key trackers, phone cases with card holders, digital documents.
- **Make the right choice the easy choice.** If something should go in a box, put the box where you naturally drop things.
- **Do small daily tidying** rather than big occasional reorganisations.
- **Use clear containers** so you can see what's inside.
- **Accept "good enough."** Your organisation system doesn't need to be Instagram-worthy. It just needs to work.

You're not a slob. You're not lazy. Organisation requires remembering where things go, putting them there consistently, and maintaining systems over time. All of that requires executive function. When EF is limited, organisation struggles. It's not a character flaw.

Flexible thinking

Adapting when things change, shifting perspective, and trying different approaches.

What challenges look like:
- Getting stuck on one approach even when it's not working
- Distress when plans change unexpectedly
- Difficulty letting things go
- Struggling to see other people's perspectives in disagreements
- Rigidity about how things "should" be done
- Taking longer than others to adjust to new situations

What helps:
- **Notice when you're stuck.** Awareness is the first step. "I'm stuck in rigid thinking right now."
- **Ask yourself: "What's another way to see this?"** Even if you don't believe the alternative yet.
- **Practice small flexibilities deliberately.** Different route to work, different order for your routine.
- **When something isn't working, consciously stop** and ask what else you could try.
- **Build in processing time** when changes happen. You don't have to adapt immediately.
- **Use "Plan B" thinking.** Regularly ask yourself: "What's the backup if this doesn't work?"

Needing things to go a certain way isn't you being controlling or difficult. Flexibility requires your brain to rapidly shift gears, which is genuinely hard when executive function struggles. Give yourself grace when changes throw you.

Impulse control and emotional regulation

Pausing before acting and managing emotional responses.

What challenges look like:
- Saying things you regret in the heat of the moment
- Making impulsive decisions (spending, commitments, reactions)
- Emotions that feel overwhelming and hard to manage
- Difficulty calming down once upset
- Reacting before thinking
- Knowing you shouldn't do something but doing it anyway

What helps:
- **Know your warning signs.** What happens in your body when you're about to tip over? Catch it early.
- **Build regulation into your day.** Breaks, movement, time alone, whatever helps you stay steady.
- **Have scripts ready** for when you're losing it. "I need to pause for a moment." "Let me think about that and get back to you."

- **Create space between trigger and response.** Sleep on big decisions. Wait 24 hours before sending angry emails.
- **Reduce baseline stress.** Impulse control is worse when you're already depleted.
- **Repair matters more than perfection.** You will react badly sometimes. What you do afterwards counts.

You're not "too much." You're not dramatic. Emotional regulation relies heavily on executive function. When EF is limited, emotions can flood the system before the thinking brain catches up. That's neurology, not weakness.

Sustained attention

Maintaining focus over time, especially on tasks that aren't immediately engaging.

What challenges look like:
- Difficulty staying focused on anything that isn't interesting
- Starting many projects, finishing few
- Mind wandering constantly
- Needing novelty and stimulation to stay engaged
- Inconsistent productivity: brilliant some days, useless others
- Struggling to get through tedious but necessary tasks

What helps:
- **Work with your attention, not against it.** Short bursts with breaks often work better than powering through.
- **Use the Pomodoro technique.** 25 minutes focused, 5 minutes break. Adjust the times to suit you.
- **Know your peak focus times** and protect them for important work.
- **Reduce distractions externally** since internal filtering is unreliable. Website blockers, phone in another room, quiet spaces.
- **Make boring tasks more engaging.** Timers, music, games, rewards, variety.
- **Accept that sustained attention may always be effortful.** Build your life around that reality rather than fighting it.

You're not lazy. You're not lacking discipline. Your brain's attention system works differently. It craves stimulation and novelty. That's not a moral failing. It's information about how to structure your work.

Building a life that works for your brain

If you've recently realised that executive function challenges explain a lot about your life, you might be feeling several things at once. Relief that there's a reason. Grief for the years of struggle. Frustration that no one told you sooner. Uncertainty about what to do now.

Here's what might help:

Start small.
You don't need to overhaul everything. Pick one area, try one strategy. See what works.

Expect trial and error.
Not every strategy works for every person. You're learning what works for your brain.

Let go of how things "should" be done.
If your system looks weird but works, it's a good system.

Be honest with people where appropriate.
"I need that in writing" or "I'll set a reminder" isn't weakness. It's self-knowledge.

Stop comparing yourself to people whose brains work differently.
Their ease isn't your benchmark.

Build in recovery.
Living with EF challenges is tiring. You're working harder than others realise to do ordinary things. Rest is not laziness.

Forgive yourself repeatedly.
You'll forget things. You'll run late. You'll miss deadlines. You'll react badly. You're human, and your brain works differently. Learn from it, repair what needs repairing, and keep going.

You've got this far. That took more effort than most people will ever understand.

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