

A Guide to Organizing the Home and Office

Getting and staying organized is a real challenge for many adults diagnosed with ADHD. This challenge often feels impossible to meet, resulting in the individual getting stuck in an overwhelmed mode. It is possible, however, to overcome the overwhelmed feeling and effectively organize the home or office by breaking the task down into smaller steps and following a systematic approach to accomplishing each step. This paper offers a step-by-step approach to follow.

This sheet will explain:

- why adults with ADHD have trouble with organization
- how to improve organizational skills at the home and office
- how to stay organized

It may be helpful to have a notebook handy when reading this sheet, for taking notes and completing written exercises designed to improve organizational skills. It may also be helpful to designate a bulletin board or other space on which to post organizational notes and reminders.

Why do individuals with ADHD have trouble with organization?

When analyzing organizational abilities, it is useful to view the classic symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity in terms of an executive function model. Executive functions are the brain's higher order cognitive processes that regulate and manage learning activities and behavior. Just as the conductor of an orchestra guides and directs the orchestra, executive functions guide and direct the individuals thoughts and actions^{1,2}. Effective organization requires efficient operation of executive brain functions.

To organize a room, the individual must be able to develop an organizational plan, devise a system of categories for organizing objects in the room, sort the objects accurately into the categories, put the objects in each category in appropriate containers, place the containers in a designated location, and remove or discard extraneous objects. The individual must be able to attend to a great deal of detail and persist at the task until it has been completed. Individuals with ADHD have difficulties with these executive functions, and as a result often have difficulty with organizing.

Reasons for getting organized

- Getting organized may help individuals:
- Spend less time looking for things
- Be a positive role model for children
- Reduce feeling internally overwhelmed
- Be more productive
- Make more money
- Improve their marriage or other intimate relationships

It may help to post a copy of this list on the bulletin board. Some individuals may want to recite it each time they work on organizing, or recite it to a friend who is helping.

Motivational strategies

Some people find that the use of specific reinforcements or positive rewards increases their motivation to follow organizational strategies. At the start of each organizing time, select a reward that may be earned after working on organizing. Upon completing the organizing session, the individual can indulge in the selected reward.

In addition, working with a buddy or friend can make the job go faster and easier. Some individuals have joined an organized Internet chat where a group of individuals sign on, make specific commitments to organize a space, go work on organizing for a while, then return to their computers to provide each other with mutual support and encouragement.

The use of a timer and/or music has also proven helpful as a motivational strategy. The timer can be set to go off in 15-minute increments, with breathers in between. Some individuals may choose to play their favorite CDs and keep working until the CD finishes, or play a favorite song and stay on task until it finishes.

An Effective Strategy for Getting Organized

Behavioral research has taught us that the best approach to learning a complex task is to break it down into a number of relatively small steps, and to go through these steps one at a time. The task of organizing a physical space can be broken into the following steps: (1) select the spaces to be organized, ordering them from easiest to most difficult, (2) start with the easiest space and schedule time to work on it, (3) select motivational strategies to reinforce completion of each step, (4) divide the space into sections, (5) work on one section at a time, sorting, discarding, or re-organizing each object in that section until it is finished, (6) when the easiest space is organized, gradually move up the hierarchy, repeating steps 3-6 for each subsequent space. Each of these steps is discussed in more detail below.

1. Select a space and estimate/schedule time.

The first step is to make a list of all the physical spaces that need organizing, numbering the spaces from "easiest to organize" to "most difficult to organize," using higher numbers for more difficult locations. A copy of this list can be posted on your bulletin board. It is best to start with the easiest space first, to maximize the chances of success, and later move on to the more difficult locations.

Select the easiest space from the list. Estimate how long it might take to organize it. Establish a deadline by which you expect to complete organizing this space. If the estimate is imprecise, additional time can be added later. Divide the estimated time into a number of short work sessions — 30 to 60 minutes apiece. If you believe you would get frustrated or bored in 30 to 60 minutes, shorten the session to 10 to 15 minutes and schedule more sessions. The idea is to start working for a short enough time that you can experience success without excessive frustration and becoming overwhelmed. Using a day planner or calendar (see the fact sheet on learning to use a day planner if necessary), schedule a sufficient number of short organizing sessions over the next few weeks to complete the task, assuming your estimate is accurate. Record your deadline and the organizing times in the day planner.

2. Divide the selected space into sections or centers.

Divide the selected space into a grid, and work on one portion of the grid at a time. There are a number of ways to divide the space:

Quartering: Divide the space into quarters visually or by marking it off with masking tape or string.

Around the Clock: Stephanie Winston³ has outlined the "Around the Clock" system of dividing the space into sections. Stand in the doorway of the room. Make that spot "twelve o'clock," and organize it first. Work your way around the room systematically, organizing the area at "one o'clock," "two o'clock," "three o'clock," and so on, until you return to where you started. If doing the entire room this way is too much, tackle one or two "hours" of the clock at each scheduled organizing session.

Zones: Julie Morgenstern⁴ suggests organizing the sections of the room according to the function that you plan to perform in each section, and keep all of the equipment, supplies, paperwork, and other items for a given function in that zone of the room. For example, to organize a home office, you might ask yourself what functions might be accomplished in the office. Perhaps you decide that the following activities will be performed there: (1) reading and responding to e-mail; (2) surfing the Internet and making purchases online; (3) paying the bills, doing the income taxes, and

completing other miscellaneous financial paperwork; (4) writing professional papers and reading scientific journals; and (5) putting photos and slides in albums and working on digital pictures on the computer.

The room could be organized into four zones: (1) a computer zone — computer on a desk, printer, modem, printer and computer supplies, shopping catalogs, scientific journals and storage for professional papers; (2) a photo area — camera, film, lenses, photo accessories, binders for negatives and slides, and photo albums; (3) a financial paperwork area — file cabinets with financial records, bills, extra checks, bank books, and calculator; and (4) a reading zone — a comfortable lounge chair with an overhanging lamp, the telephone on a table by the side of the chair, and bookcases with books. Draw a picture of the room on a piece of graph paper, examine the current arrangement of the furniture, and plan how to re-arrange the furniture to form the four new zones. Only after carefully planning each zone and anticipating where the items in that zone will be stored would you move to the next step—working on each zone.

3. Work on each section of the grid, “hour of the clock,” or zone.

Gather everything needed to do the job (i.e., several boxes, plastic containers, garbage bags, masking tape, markers, pencil and paper, cleaning supplies, labels). Start with three boxes and a trash bag. Label the boxes “Keep here,” “Goes somewhere else,” or “Not sure.” Place any food items and/or empty food containers in trash bag. Remove any dirty dishes or silverware (place them in the “Goes somewhere else” box to return to kitchen when you are done).

Pick up one item at a time. When trying to decide in which box the item belongs, determine whether the item is still useful.

Based upon your answers to these questions, decide whether to keep or discard the item. Put the discarded items in the garbage bag. Put the retained items either in the “Keep here” box, if they belong in the section you are now organizing, or in the “Goes somewhere else” box if they belong in another section or room.

Don’t take a lot of time with each item. If you cannot decide quickly to keep or discard the item, place it in the “Not sure” box. Continue in this manner until all the items in the section have been sorted or the scheduled time has elapsed. Then, stop the project for the day. If the trash bag is completely filled, take it out to the trash. Take the “Goes somewhere else” box and return those items to their “home.” Don’t worry that the homes for these items may not yet be organized; just leave them in that section or room for now.

Leave the “Not sure” box in the room until you have finished sorting all of the items. Then, close and seal the box with masking tape. Write with a marker a future date 3-6 months away on the outside of the box. This is the date when you will re-open the box and review the contents. Mark the re-open date in your day planner. Place the box in a storage area. When you review the items on the designated day, make one of the following choices:

- If you have not had to look for the item in that box during the 3-6 month storage time, then you don’t need it. Put it in the trash or give it away.
- If you have looked for the item or decide now to keep it, find a home for it and place it there.

At the end of each organizing session, congratulate yourself on your successful effort and give yourself one of the rewards from your reinforcement list.

4. Finish organizing the space.

Repeat the steps for organizing each section until you have finished the space. Congratulate yourself and treat yourself to a large reward. Move on to the next item on the list of spaces to be organized and follow the steps outlined here. Continue to follow these steps until all of the spaces on the list have been organized.

Tips for Staying Organized

After working very hard to organize the important spaces in your life, you

want to keep them organized. Below are a number of miscellaneous tips to help maintain the de-cluttered spaces.

Paper Ideas. Five things to do with paper are:

- Trash or recycle it.
- Refer it to someone else.
- Act on it now.
- Save or file it.
- Halt it (remove your name from a mailing list).

Ticker Filing System. This is a dated filing system that eliminates the piles, files and lists that clutter up your life. The system consists of 43 folders, one marked for each month (labeled January-December) and one marked for each day of the month (labeled 1-31). Put the current month folder in front of the 1-31 numbered folders. Keep these folders in plain sight (e.g. a folder stand on the desk or kitchen counter). Every day your home or office is bombarded with papers, notes, phone messages, flyers, coupons, bills, and mail that you HAVE to know about. File these papers in the folder of the date that you need to act upon them. To make this system work, always remember to check the folders daily. At the end of each month, move the next month’s folder to the front and sort the items that are inside that folder into the appropriate daily (numbered) files.

Storage Ideas. Try some of the following techniques for neatly storing items and maintaining organization:

- If you don’t put things away because you are afraid you will never find them, try storing them in clear containers. Being able to see inside the container will also save time.
- Use “over-the-door” hanging organizers with divided pouches in each room to store things, such as office supplies, jewelry, makeup, tapes or CDs, cleaning supplies, pantry items, baby care items, gloves, hats and scarves, and craft supplies.
- Store small items in under-the-bed boxes with lids.
- Purchase a new “garbage can” to store extra sheets and blankets, or out-of- season clothes. Place the can next to your bed, cover with a floor-length tablecloth, and use as a night stand.

The Launch Pad. Set up a table (or small bookshelf) by the door to the house. Place a small container or basket on the table to hold keys, glasses, and wallets. Brief cases and backpacks can also be placed there for the next morning.

Centers. Set up “centers” to hold similar items and supplies needed to complete a particular task. The items for each center can be placed in any available mobile container, including baskets, tackle boxes, buckets, and carts on wheels. This will save time because all of the supplies needed to complete a project will be in one place. Make a list of the centers that you develop and the items in each center. Post the list on your bulletin board so you will easily remember where these items are.

Eight ways to maintain a newly organized space:

1. The handy box.

Keep a box or basket handy for items that are out of place as you are cleaning out a room. When you come across out-of-place items, put them in the container. After you have completed cleaning the room, take a few minutes to put these items in the proper room.

2. "On the fly."

- When you pass an open drawer, close it.
- When you pass a full wastebasket, empty it.
- When you see a clothing item on the floor, hang it up.
- When you see some loose papers, put them in the to-file box.

3. Ten minute pickup.

Spend 10 minutes each night on a quick pick-up. Take a basket and go through the house quickly picking up and dropping things off where they belong. Better yet, get the whole family involved by having them clean up their space each evening before bed.

4. Erase the evidence (Gracia, 2002).

- Pick up the dropped stuff.
- Put away what you use.
- Wipe up a spill as soon as it happens.

5. Fifteen minute rule (Gracia, 2002).

This is an excellent way to get started on a project you have been putting off.

- Set a timer for 15 minutes.
- Focus your effort on one thing for those 15 minutes.
- When the timer goes off, decide whether you can keep going for another 15 minutes.
- If you can, set the timer again for the next 15 minutes.
- If you can't, simply stop and do the same thing later in the day or the next day, until the project you are trying to finish is completed.
- It may seem like a short amount of time but it soon makes a difference.
- You can always see and feel what has been accomplished in that time slot.

6. Subtract before you add (Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002).

- Make a rule for yourself 'Always subtract before you add!'
- You will not add (purchase) a new item unless you subtract one
- (i.e. no new books or magazines unless I read or give away unread books or magazines.).

7. Five and ten system (Moulding, 2002).

Whenever there are a few minutes to spare, put away five or ten items that are not in their correct place. These could be toys that the kids have left somewhere, letters that need filing away, or socks that need to be put in the drawer.

8. Throw-away/give-away box (Gracia, 2002).

Make throw-away/give-away into a daily habit. Keep a box or bag in a storage area to collect give-away items. As you notice an item that you don't want or use, immediately take it to the give-away box. Don't let unwanted or unused items take up valuable space waiting for a periodic dig-out. Place small throw-away items in the trash, and larger ones in a storage area for trash pick-up day.

Conclusion

This sheet has outlined an "ADHD-friendly" approach for learning to improve the organization of physical spaces. Some readers will be able to implement this approach after they read about it. Others may find that they need the assistance of a coach, professional organizer, or therapist to implement this approach. If you need such assistance, don't despair or give up. It took a lifetime to get to the state of disorganization in which you have been living. It is worth having assistance for a number of months to improve your organization. See the What We Know sheet on Coaching for Adults with ADHD for more formation about selecting a coach. Share this sheet with your coach, organizer, or therapist.

References

1. Barkley, R. A. & Gordon, M. (2002). Research on comorbidity, adaptive functioning, and cognitive impairments in adults with AD/HD: Implications for a clinical practice. In S. Goldstein & A. Teeter Ellison (Eds.), *Clinician's guide to adult ADHD: Assessment and intervention* (pp. 43-69). New York: Academic Press
2. Brown, T. (Ed.) (2000). *Attention deficit disorders and comorbidities in children, adolescents, and adults*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press.
3. Winston, S. (1995). *Stephanie Winston's best organizing tips*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
4. Morgenstern, J. (1998). *Organizing from the inside out*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Suggested Reading

- Eichermuller, P. (2002). (article) *Taking control of your clutter*. www.sunshineorganizing.com
- Gracia, M. (2002). www.getorganizednow.com (forum) Hall, J. (2002). www.overhall.com
- Kolberg, J, Nadeau, K. (2002). *ADD-friendly ways to organize your life*. New York: Brunner-Routledge
- Moulding, C. (2002). *Ten ideas for quick clutter control*. Get Organized Now Newsletter
- Schechter, H. (2001). *Let go of clutter*. New York: McGraw-Hill (www.letgoclutter.com)

Suggested Web sites

- Checklists, www.checklists.com
- Ready Made Lists and Templates, www.listorganizer.com Fly Lady, www.flylady.net
- Online Group, groups.yahoo.com/group/messiness-and-ADD Messies Anonymous, www.messiesanonymous.org
- National Association of Professional Organizers, www.napo.net Organize It, www.organizes-it.com
- Organized Home, www.organizedhome.com

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