

NO MORE 'STICKIES'!

Help your patients bring their 'to-do' list into the 21st century

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Difficulty with time management and organization is one of the most common complaints of patients with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Being unproductive and inefficient also is anxiety-producing and depressing, leaving patients with additional comorbidity.

Although medication can help improve a person's focus, if the patient is focusing on a set of poorly designed systems, he (she) will see little improvement. A comprehensive approach to improving day-to-day task management, similar to the one I describe here and use with my patients, is therefore as important as medication.

Needed: An 'organizing principle'

Imagine that supermarkets displayed food in the order it arrives from the food distributors and producers. You'd walk in to the store and see a display of food that lacks hierarchy—1 random item placed next to another. The experience would be jarring, and shopping would be a much slower chore. Furthermore, what if you had to go to 5 stores to cover all your needs?

Yet, that is how most "to-do" lists are executed: A thought comes in, a thought goes down on paper. Or on a sticky note. Or in an app. Or in a calendar. *Or all of the above!* Often, there is neither an organizing principle (other than perhaps chronological order) or a central repository. No wonder it's hard to feel present and clear-minded. Add to this disorganization the volume of information coming in from the environment—e-mails, voice mails, texts, notifications, dings, beeps, buzzes, and

maybe even snail mail—and the feeling of being overwhelmed grows.

Unconscious motives for maintaining poor systems also might play a role. People with a "need to please" personality type or who are more passive-aggressive in their communication are more likely to overcommit, and then forget or be late completing their tasks, rather than saying "No" from the outset or delegating the work.

Survival basics for time management

Assuming there is simply a skills deficit, you can teach basic time and project management skills to patients with ADHD (and to any patient with suboptimal executive functioning). Here are basic principles to adopt:

- If you can forget it, you will, so *all* tasks should go onto the to-do list.
- You should keep only 1 list. Adding on "stickies" is not allowed.
- Your list is like an extra lobe of your brain: It should be present at all times, whether you keep it in "the Cloud," on your desktop, or on paper.

continued

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Disclosure

Dr. Braslow is the founder of Luminello.com.

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Keep 1 list that you review and update daily, categorized by buckets and urgency

- Review your list and clean it up *at least* daily. This takes time, but it also saves time—in spades—when you can call upon the right task, at the right time, with energy and drive.

- The first action you should take in the daily review is to weed out or delegate tasks.

- Next, categorize remaining tasks. (Note: The free smartphone app Evernote allows you to do this with “tags.”) Categorizing allows you to process sets of tasks in buckets that can be tackled as a bundle and, therefore, more efficiently. For example, having all of your errands, items to research, and telephone calls that need to be returned in separate buckets allows for speedier processing—as opposed to veering back and forth between line items.

- Then, move remaining high-priority items to the top of the list. However, remember that, if everything is urgent, nothing is. Items that are low-hanging fruit that you can cross off the list in a matter of minutes

can be prioritized even if they are not as urgent. By doing that, your list becomes more manageable and your brain can dive deeper into more complex tasks.

- Block out calendar time for each of your buckets with this formula: (1) Estimate how much time you’ll need to complete the tasks in each bucket, then add 50% for each bucket. (2) Add in commuting, set-up, or wind-down time, if you need it, to the grand total for all buckets, and then add 50% more than you’ve estimated

Set the brain free!

This process will seem like a burden at the beginning, when the synapses underneath it still need to get stronger (much like how the body responds to exercise). However, as long as these principles are put into action daily, they will become a trusted, second-nature system that frees the brain from distraction and anxiety—and, ultimately, for being more creative and mindful.



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