

Notes on Managing ADHD

The pleasure is in foreseeing it, not in bringing it to term.

— Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*

This post is about managing ADHD. It is divided into two sections: “Strategies” describes the high-level control system, “Tactics” is a list of micro-level improvements (really it should be called “stratagems”, since most are essentially about tricking yourself).

Contents

1. Strategies

1. Chemistry First
2. Memory
3. Energy
4. Procrastination
5. Introspection
6. Time

2. Tactics

1. Task Selection
2. Visual Field Management
3. Project Check-Ins
4. Centralize Your Inboxes
5. Inbox Zero
6. Inbox Bankruptcy
7. Do It On Your Own Terms
8. Replace Interrupts with Polling
9. Accountability Buddy
10. Plan First, Do Later
11. Derailment
12. Using OCD to Defeat ADHD
13. The Master of Drudgery
14. Thrashing

15. Put Travel in the Calendar
16. Choice of Tools
3. Resources
4. Acknowledgements

Strategies

High-level advice, control systems.

Chemistry First

ADHD has a biological cause and drugs are the first-line treatment for good reasons. There is no virtue in trying to beat it through willpower alone.

The first-line treatment for ADHD is stimulants. Everything else in this post works best as a complement to, rather than as an alternative to, stimulant medication. In fact most of the strategies described here, I was only able to execute *after* starting stimulants. For me, chemistry is the critical node in the tech tree: the todo list, the pomodoro timers, etc., all of that was unlocked by the medication.

Some people can't tolerate a specific stimulant. But there are many stimulant and non-stimulant drugs for ADHD. I would prefer to exhaust all the psychiatric options before white-knuckling it.

A lot of people don't want to take medication for shame-based reasons. There is a lot of pill-shaming in the culture. You must learn to ignore it: we are automata, our minds are molecules in salt water.

Example: Melatonin

As a motivating example for the "salt water automaton" view: I struggled with sleep hygiene for a long time. It felt like WW1: throwing wave after wave of discipline at it and always failing. I would set an alarm, for, say, 10pm, that said: it is time to go to bed. How many times did I obey it? Never. I was always doing something more important.

What fixed it? Melatonin. I have an alarm that goes off at 8pm to remind me to take melatonin. The point of the alarm is not, "now you must log off", which is a very discipline-demanding task. The point of the alarm is simply: take this pill. It takes but a moment. Importantly, I'm not committing to anything other than taking a pill. Thirty, forty minutes later, I *want* to sleep. That is the key thing: the melatonin has changed my preferences. And then I don't need willpower to close the sixteen Wikipedia tabs or whatever, because I *want* to sleep more than I want to scroll, or watch YouTube.

Internal and External Change

The broader perspective here is that personal growth is a dialogue between internal changes and external changes.

Internal changes might come from medication, meditation, therapy, coaching, or practicing habits for a long enough time. External changes are the scaffolding around the brain: using a todo list, and using it effectively. Using a calendar. Clearing your desk so you don't get distracted by things. Journaling, so that you can introspect and notice patterns: which behaviours leads to a good workday, and which behaviours lead to a day being wasted.

Are internal changes more important? Kind of. It's more a back and forth, where internal changes unlock external changes which unlock further internal changes.

Here's an example: you (having undiagnosed ADHD) try to set a schedule, or use a todo list, or clean your bed every day, but it doesn't stick. So you get on medication, and the medication lets you form your first habit: which is using a todo list app consistently, checking it every morning. Then, with the todo list as a core part of your exocortex, you start adding recurring tasks, and forming other simple habits: you have a daily recurring task to make your bed, and so every morning when you check the todo list, you see the task, and make your bed, and in time, with your now-functioning dopamine system, you make a habit to make your bed every day, such that you no longer need to have that in the todo list.

So the timeline is:

1. Internal change: starting medication unlocks...
2. External change: using a todo list, which provides scaffolding (e.g. daily recurring tasks) for forming new habits, which unlocks
3. Internal change: new habits formed (make bed, brush teeth in the morning)

Taking Ritalin with no plan for what you will do today/tomorrow/this week doesn't work. Dually, an ambitious todo list will sit idle if your brain won't let you execute it. So personal growth comes from using *both* internal and external changes, like a ladder with alternating left-right steps.

Memory

A todo list is a neuroprosthesis that augments long-term memory for tasks.

I use **Todoist** on my desktop and my phone. The pro plan is worth it. I don't really think of it as an app, rather, it's a cognitive prosthesis.

The todo list provides three things:

- **Memory:** the list remembers things for me. I'm not at the mercy of my brain randomly ping me that I forgot to do X or I want to someday do Y. The todo list remembers.
- **Order:** the todo list lets you drag and drop tasks around, so you can figure out the ordering in which you're going to do them.
- **Hierarchy:** the todo list lets you break tasks down hierarchically and without limit.

Of these, the most important is memory. The todolist is an action-oriented long term memory prosthesis.

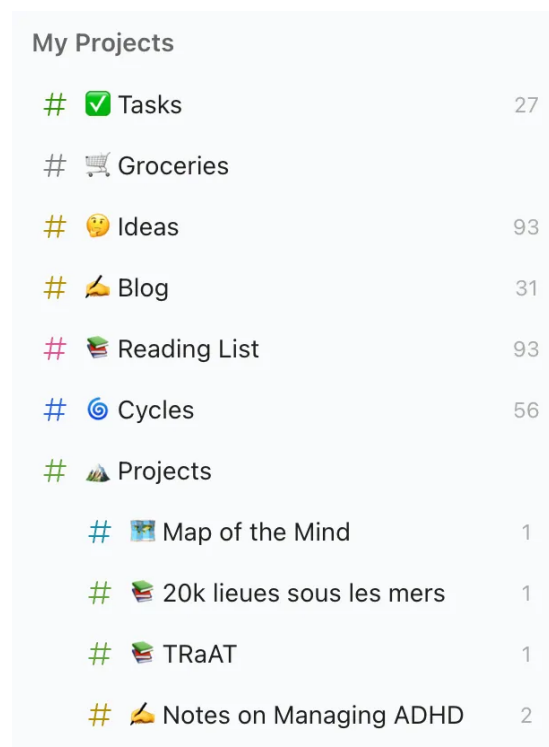
This is especially useful for habit formation: my biggest blocker with forming habits was just remembering that I'd committed to doing something. If you think, I will make the bed every day, you might do it today, tomorrow, and by the third day you forget. You're failing by simply forgetting to show up, which is a sad way to fail. By making something a recurring task on the todo list, it ensures I will see it. In a sense, the todo list turns many habits into one. You don't need to remember "I will make my bed every day", "I will floss my teeth every night", etc., because the todolist remembers all those things for you. You only need to form a *single* habit: checking the todo list.

Analogously, I often fail to finish projects simply because I forget about them. I start reading a book, but I don't write it down anywhere (say, in Goodreads) that "I'm reading this book" is something I have committed to. I leave the book on a table where it's out of sight (and therefore out of mind) for all of my waking hours. I glance at it occasionally and think, oh, yeah, I was reading that book, and then I'm distracted by something else. And weeks later, when I've already started another book, I notice the first book, with the bookmark on page 20, abandoned.

The todolist prevents this failure mode: you create a project to represent reading the book, and that project is now tracked, and when you open the todo list, you can see it in the list of active projects.

How I Use Todoist

In Todoist, every task is part of a **project** (which really should just be called a list). My sidebar looks like this:



Tasks is the list for ad-hoc tasks. Mostly chores and things that don't fit in elsewhere. Unload the dishwasher, reply to this email, etc. The only rule for this list is that everything in it must be scheduled.

Groceries is self-explanatory.

Ideas is the where every half-formed goal, intention, project idea etc. goes. “Go deeper into metta” and “learn how to use the slide rule” and “go penguin watching in Manly” and “write a journalling app” and “learn **PLT Redex**”. I put these things here so that they don’t live in my brain. And occasionally I go through the list and promote something into an actual, active project.

Blog is like the ideas list specifically ideas for blog posts.

Reading List is for media I want to consume. This is divided into: fiction books, non-fiction books, technical books, blog posts, papers, games, films.

Cycles is for recurring tasks. This one is divided into sections by period: daily, weekly, and above. The daily recurring tasks are things like “take vitamin D”, “meditate”, and the inbox-clearing task.

Projects is a container for actual projects: an objective which takes multiple tasks to accomplish. Why lift projects into lists? Why not just use a top-level task to represent the project’s objective, and nested subtasks to represent the execution steps of the project? Because having the project in the sidebar is one mechanism I use to ensure I don’t forget about it. Every time I glance at the todo list, I can see the list of active projects. I can notice if something has not been worked on for a while, and act on it. Otherwise: out of sight, out of mind.

Energy

The difficulty class of the tasks you can perform declines throughout the day.

There are many metaphors for the concept of mental energy. **Spoon theory**, for example. The usual metaphor is that “mental energy” is like a battery that is drained through the day, in greater and lesser quantities, and is replenished by sleep.

To me, energy is less like a battery and more like voltage. Some machines require a threshold voltage to operate. Below that voltage they don’t just operate slower, they don’t operate at all. Analogously, different categories of activity have different threshold voltages. For me, it’s like this:

1. Things I am averse to, the things I intuitively want to put off because they bring up painful emotions, are high-voltage.
2. Creative, open-ended work is high-voltage to start, but once you get started, keeping it going is medium-voltage.
3. Simple chores like cleaning, throwing clothes in the washing machine, etc. are low-voltage.

And when I wake up I have the highest possible voltage, and throughout the course of the day the voltage declines. And that’s the key difference from spoon theory: spoons are fungible across time, voltage is not. For each category of activity, there is a span of the day when I can action it.

When I wake up, I do my morning routine, get some quick wins, and then I try to tackle the thing I dread

the most, as early in the morning as possible, because that's the time of day when I have the most energy and self-control. I get that done and I move on.

(Another reason to do the dreaded tasks first: if you put it off to, say, late morning, well, why not put it off again? And again and again. And then it's 7pm and you can't even think about the task, and it's late, and I don't have energy, so I couldn't even do it if I wanted to, so let's do it tomorrow.)

And then, when I have removed that burden, I work on projects. The creative, generative, intellectual things. The things that move some kind of needle, and aren't just pointless chores.

And when I run out of energy to create, I read.

And when I run out of energy to read, I clean and go to the gym and do the other things.

And when the sun goes down everything starts to unravel: I have zero energy and the lazy dopamine-seeking behaviour comes out. So I take melatonin, and try to be in bed before the instant gratification monkey seizes power.

Procrastination

Typology of procrastination, approaches.

In my ontology there are three types of procrastination:

- **ADHD Procrastination:** you want to do the task, but can't because of distraction/hyperactivity.
- **Anxious Procrastination:** you know you have to do the task, but you don't want to, because it triggers difficult emotions.
- **Decision Paralysis Procrastination:** you *don't know* how to execute the task, because it involves a decision and you have difficulty making the decision.

ADHD Procrastination

This is the easiest kind to address. The solution is pharmacological treatment for ADHD + having a productivity system and some tricks.

Anxious Procrastination

This one is harder. The good thing is you know, cognitively, what you have to do. The hard part is getting over the aversion.

In the short term, the way to fix this is to do it scared. Accept the anxiety. Asking for help also works, sometimes you just need someone in the room with you when you hit send on the email. You can also use techniques like CBT to rationally challenge the source of the anxiety and maybe overcome it.

In the long term: write down the things you procrastinate on due to anxiety, and find the common

through-line, or the common ancestor. By identifying the emotional root cause, you can work on fixing it.

Decision Paralysis Procrastination

And this is the hardest, because you don't know, cognitively, what the right choice is, and also you probably have a lot of anxiety/aversion around it. Many things in life are susceptible to this: you have set of choices, there's good arguments for/against each one, and you have a lot of uncertainty as to the outcomes. And so you ruminate on it endlessly.

I don't have a good general solution for this.

Talking to people helps: friends, therapists, Claude. This works because thinking by yourself has diminishing returns: you will quickly exhaust all the thoughts you will have about the problem, and start going in circles. Often people will bring up options/considerations I would never have thought of. Sometimes, if you're lucky, that's all it takes: someone mentions an option you had not considered and you realize, oh, it was all so simple.

One thing to consider is that *thinking in your head* is inherently circular, because you have a limited working memory, and you will inevitably start going in circles. Writing things down helps here. Treat the decision, or the emotions behind it, like an object of study, or an engineering problem. Sit down and write an essay about it. Name the arguments, number the bullet points, refer back to things. Make the thoughts into real, physical, manipulable entities.

Introspection

Journaling is good for detecting maladaptive patterns and tracking your progress.

I keep a hierarchical journal in **Obsidian**. Hierarchical because I have entries for the days, weeks, months, and years. The directory tree looks like this:

```
Journal/  
  Daily/  
    YYYY/  
      MM/  
        YYYY-MM-DD.md  
  Weekly/  
    YYYY/  
      YYYY-WW.md  
  Monthly/  
    YYYY/  
      YYYY-MM.md  
  Yearly/  
    YYYY.md
```

In the morning I finish yesterday's journal entry, and begin today's. Every Sunday I write the review of

the week, the first of each month I write the review of the previous month, the first of each year I review the past year. The time allotted to each review is in inverse proportion to its frequency: so a monthly review might take an hour while a yearly review might take up a whole morning.

The daily reviews are pretty freeform. Weekly and above there's more structure. For example, for the weekly reviews I will write a list of the salient things that happened in the week. Then I list on what went well and what went poorly. And then I reflect on how I will change my behaviour to make the next week go better.

Journaling is a valuable habit. I started doing it for vague reasons: I wasn't sure what I wanted to get out of it, and it took a long time (and long stretches of not doing it) until it became a regular, daily habit. I've been doing it consistently now for three years, and I can identify the benefits.

- The main benefit is that to change bad patterns, you have to notice them. And it is very easy to travel in a fix orbit, day in, day out, and not notice it. Laying it out in writing helps to notice the maladaptive coping mechanisms. Reading back over the journal entries helps you notice: when an event of type X happens, I react with Y.
- Today's journal entry is a good default place for writing ad-hoc notes or thoughts. Often I wanted to write something, but didn't know where I would file it (how do you even file these little scraps of thought?) and from not knowing where to put it, I would not do it. Nowadays I just begin writing in the journal. Later, if it is valuable to file it away, I do so.
- Creating a journal entry in the morning is a good opportunity to go over the goals and priorities for the day and explicitly restate them to myself.
- The final benefit is retrospection: I can look at the past and see how my life has changed. And this is often a positive experience, because the things that worried me didn't come to pass, the things I used to struggle with are now easy, or at least easier.

There's a paradox with productivity: when you grind executive function enough, things that you used to struggle with become quotidian. And so what was once the ceiling becomes the new floor. You no longer feel proud that you did X, Y, Z because that's just the new normal. It's like the hedonic treadmill. You might feel that you never get to "productive". Journaling helps to combat this because you can see how far you've come.

Time

Manage time at the macro level with calendars, at the micro level with timers.

To manage time, you need a calendar (macro) and a timer (micro).

Macro

At the macro level, I use the calendar very lightly. Mostly for social things (to ensure I don't forget an event, and that I don't double-book things). I also use it to schedule the gym: if the goal is to lift, say, five times a week, I schedule five time blocks to lift. Lifting is special because it has a lot of temporal constraints:

1. I lift exactly n times per week.
2. I lift at most once a day.
3. I lift in the evening, which potentially clashes with social things.
4. There are adjacency constraints, e.g. doing shoulders the day before chest is bad.
5. There is at least one rest day which has to be scheduled strategically (e.g. to have maximal distance between successive deadlift sessions).

But outside these two categories, my calendar is empty.

The calendar might be useful to you as a self-binding device. If you keep dragging some project along because you “haven't made time” for it: consider making a time block in the calendar, and sticking to it. Creating a calendar event is, literally, making time: it's like calling `malloc_time()`.

Some people use the calendar as their entire todo list. I think this kind of works if your todo list is very coarse grained: “buy groceries” and “go to the dentist”. But I have a very fine-grained todo list, and putting my tasks in the calendar would make it overwhelming.

Another problem with calendars is they are too time-bound: if I make a calendar block to do something, and I don't do it, the calendar doesn't know it. It just sits there, forgotten, in the past. In a todo list, everything gets dragged along until I explicitly complete it. Along the same lines, the calendar is not good for collecting vague ideas and plans for things you want to do in the future, while todo lists are ideal for this.

Micro

The problem with todo lists is that they're timeless: there is no sense of urgency. You look at the list and think, I could do the next task now, or in five minutes, or in an hour. There's always *some* time left in the day. Or tomorrow. You need a way to manufacture urgency.

If you have ADHD you've probably heard of the Pomodoro method, tried it, and bounced off it. The way it's framed is very neurotypical: it's scaffolding around *doing*, but ADHD people often have problems with the doing itself. And so the scaffolding is kind of pointless.

The method works well in three kinds of contexts:

- **Overcoming Aversion:** when you have a large number of microtasks, each of which takes a few seconds to a few minutes, but the number of them, and the uncertainty factor, makes the sum seem a lot larger. A classic example for me is having to reply to like ten different people. Realistically, each person can be handled in 15s. One or two might require a couple of minutes to

compose a longer reply. But often I will avoid those tasks like the plague and drag them across the entire day.

The pomodoro method works here because you're basically trading (up to) 25m of pain for an entire day's peace and quiet. So you get all the annoying little tasks together, start a timer, and go through them. And usually you're done in maybe ten minutes. And you feel *really* good after, because all those annoying little tasks are done.

It really is amazing what a little bit of fake urgency can do.

- **Starting:** sometimes the problem is just starting. It is very trite, but it's true. You have something you *want to want* to do, but don't *want* to do. I want to want to read this book, to learn this topic, to write this blog post, to work on this software project. But I don't *want* to do it. The pomodoro method helps you start.

You're not committing to finishing the project. You're not committing to months or weeks or days or even hours of work. You're committing to a half hour. And if you work just that half hour: great, promise kept. 30m a day, over the course of a single month, is 15h of work. And often I start a 30m timer and end up working four hours, and maybe that's a good outcome.

- **Stopping:** dually, sometimes the problem is stopping. If you're trying to advance multiple projects at the same time, if you hyperfocus on one, it eats into the time you allocated for the others. And more broadly, spending too much time on one project can derail all your plans for the day. Maybe you meant to go to the gym at 6pm but you got so stuck in with this project that it's 8:30pm and you're still glued to the screen. So the gym suffers, your sleep schedule suffers, etc.

Actually stopping when the pomodoro timer goes off can prevent excessive single-mindedness.

Additionally, the five-minute break at the end of the pomodoro block is useful. It's a time to get up from the computer, unround your shoulders, practice mindfulness, essentially, all those little things that you want to do a few times throughout the day.

Tactics

Stratagems, tricks.

Task Selection

To select the next task, pick either the shortest or the most-procrastinated task.

I don't like the word "prioritize", because it has two subtly different meanings:

- "Weak prioritization" means to sort a list of tasks by some unspecified criterion, that is, to establish an order where some things are prior to another.

- “Strong prioritization” is to sort a list *specifically* by importance.

“Weak prioritization” is something everyone should do: it takes a moment to go over the todo list and drag the tasks into more or less the order in which you will do them. This keeps the most relevant tasks near the top, which is where your eyes naturally go to.

“Strong prioritization” is a terrible job scheduling algorithm. Importance alone is not good enough.

Consider the case where you have a very important task A which takes a long time to finish, and a less important task B which takes 5m to finish. For example, writing an essay versus replying to an email. Which should you do first? I would execute B first, because doing so in turn unblocks B’s successor tasks. If you reply to the email and then get to work on task A, the other person has time to read your email and reply to you. And the conversation moves forward while you are otherwise engaged.

Of course, the pathological version of this is where you only action the quick wins: all the minute little chores get done instantly, but the big tasks, requiring long periods of concentration, get postponed perpetually.

My task-selection algorithm is basically: do the shortest task first, with two exceptions:

1. Stalled tasks get a priority bump. If I created a task weeks ago, or if I’ve been postponing in for many days in a row, it has to be done now.
2. Content-dependence: if I’m working on a particular project, I’d rather focus on tasks from that project, rather than from the global todo list.

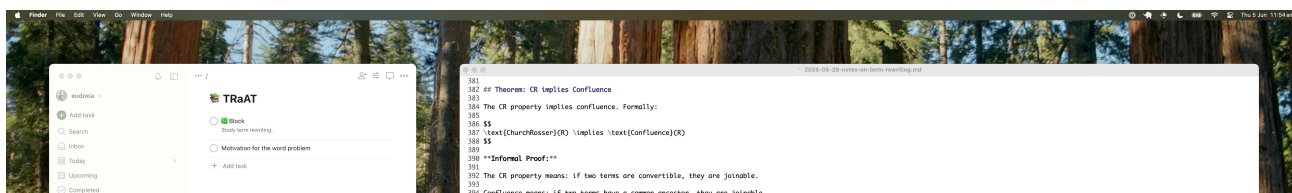
Visual Field Management

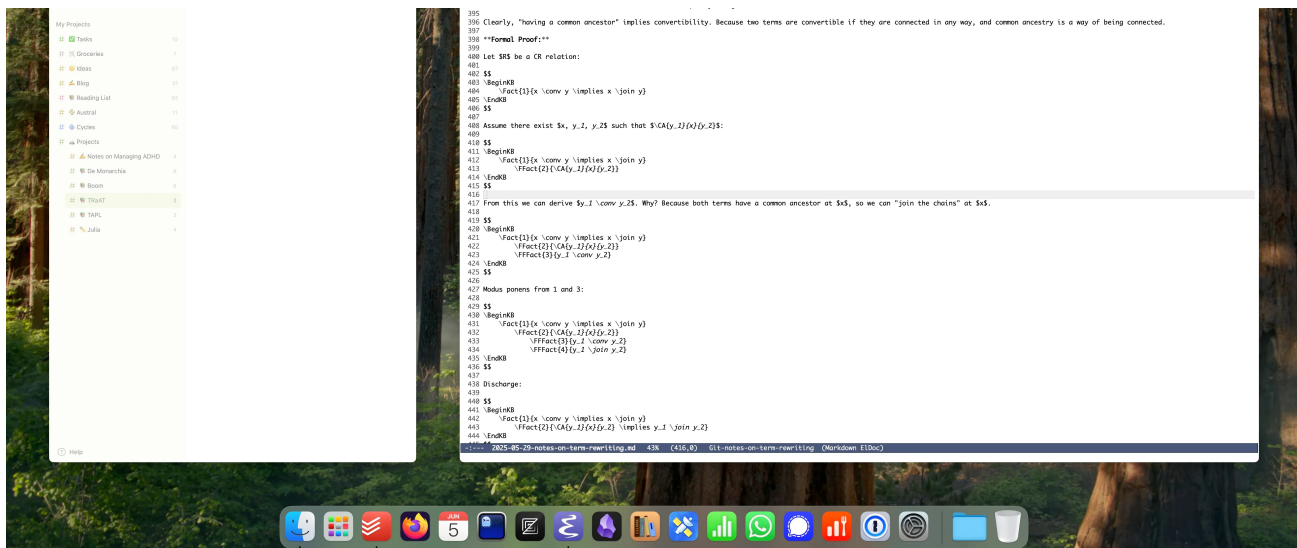
To remember something, put it in your visual field. Dually: to forget, get it out of sight.

Out of sight, out of mind. The corollary: to keep something in mind, put it in your visual field; to keep it out, leave it out.

My desk is very spartan: there’s a monitor, a mouse, and a keyboard, and a few trinkets. My desktop is empty. There are no files in it. The dock has only the apps I use frequently. And at a higher level, I try to keep the apartment very clean and orderly. Because everything that’s out of place is a distraction, visual noise. That’s the negative aspect: the things I remove.

The positive aspect, the things I keep in my visual field: most of the time, I have two windows open on my computer the todo list occupies the left third of the screen, the right two-thirds are occupied by whatever window I have open at the time, e.g.:





And so at a glance, I can see:

1. What I'm currently working on.
2. What I will work on next.
3. The list of active projects, so that I don't forget they exist.

Project Check-Ins

Keep in regular contact with long-running projects.

A common failure mode I have is, I will fail to finish a project because I forget I even started it. Or, relatedly: I will let a project drag on and on until enough time has passed that my interests have shifted, the sun has set on it, and it is now a slog to finish.

One reason I do this is that creative/intellectual work often requires (or feels like it requires) long stretches of uninterrupted time. So I procrastinate working on something until I can find such a chunk of time. Which never comes. Time passes and the project begins to slip the moorings of my attention, as other new and shiny things arrive.

And sometimes I will pick the project back up after months or years, and I have lost so much context, it's impossible to know what I even intended. And then you procrastinate even more, because you don't want to feel the guilty of picking up a project and realizing it has become strange and unfamiliar to you.

One way to combat this is to make regular project checkins. This could be a daily or few-times-a-week recurring task on Todoist that just says "spend 30m on this project".

You don't even have to work on the thing: just allocate fifteen minutes to hold the project in your mind and nothing else. If it's creative writing, you might open the Word document and just look at it. If it's a programming project: read the Jira board and look at the code again. Don't write anything. Just read the code. You will likely come up with a few tasks to do, so write those down. Think. Plan. Build up the structures in your mind, refresh the caches. If you can do, do, otherwise, plan, and if you can't even do

that, read.

When you're doing this regularly, when you're in regular contact with the project, when the shape of it is clear in your mind, you will have the tasks on the top of your mind, you will no longer feel that you need a giant empty runway of time to work on it, you will be able to work on it in shorter chunks.

To manage long-term creative work, keep in regular contact. That doesn't mean work on them every day, but maybe *look* at them every day.

The **pomodoro method** works here. Set a timer for just 25m to keep in touch with the project.

Centralize Your Inboxes

Bring all tasks, broadly defined, into one todo list.

Life is full of inboxes:

1. Email
2. DMs on Twitter, iMessage, WhatsApp, Signal, Discord, etc.
3. Twitter bookmarks
4. Browser bookmarks
5. Your Downloads folder.
6. Messages in my myGov inbox.
7. The physical mailbox in my apartment.

These are inboxes because they fill up over time and need action to empty. You can also think of them as little domain-specific task lists. "Centralizing your inboxes" means moving all these tasks from their silos into the one, central todo list.

For example, I have a daily task called "catch up" to clear the digital inboxes:

1. Go through all my communication apps (email, Discord, Twitter DMs etc) and triage the unread conversations: if something needs replying to, I either reply immediately or make a task to reply later so I don't forget.
2. File the contents of my Downloads folder.
3. Go through Twitter/browser bookmarks and turn them into tasks (e.g., if I bookmark an article, the task is to read the article).

In this way I mostly manage to stay on top of comms.

Inbox Zero

All inboxes should be at zero.

You have probably heard of inbox zero. It sounds like LinkedIn-tier advice. But if you struggle with

comms, with replying to people in a timely manner (or at all), inbox zero is a good strategy. There are two reasons, briefly:

- Inbox zero has no false negatives: if an inbox is empty, you know you've handled everything.
- Important communications have a way of “camouflaging” themselves among irrelevance.

And, like everything: before you make it into a habit, it feels incredibly time-consuming and labour-intensive. But once you make it into a habit, it's almost effortless.

So, I will give you an example. I come in to work, and read four emails. Three could've been archived outright, one needed a reply from me. And I said, oh, I'll get to it in a second. And then I got distracted with other tasks. And throughout the day I kept glancing at the email client, and thinking, yeah, I will get to it. Eventually I got used to those four emails: they are the “new normal”, and what's normal doesn't require action. I would think: if those emails are there, and I already looked at them, then it's probably fine. At the end of the day I looked at the inbox again and saw, wait, no, one of those emails was actually important. That's the failure mode of inbox greater-than-zero: the important stuff hides among the irrelevant stuff, such that a quick glance at the todo list doesn't show anything obviously wrong. Dually, with inbox zero, if you see a single email in the inbox, you know there's work to do.

Inbox zero removes ambiguity. If there's *anything* in the inbox, you know, unambiguously, you have a task to complete. If there is nothing in the inbox, you know, unambiguously, there is nothing to do. Inbox zero frees you from false negatives, where you think you've handled your correspondence but there's some important email, camouflaged among the trivial ones, that has not been replied to.

A problem with doing inbox zero is most communication apps (like Discord, Slack, iMessage etc.) don't have a concept of an inbox, just the read/unread flag on conversations. Since there's no separation between the inbox and the archive, it takes more discipline to ensure every conversation is replied to.

Inbox Bankruptcy

If an inbox is overwhelmed, archive it in a recoverable way.

By the time I started to become organized I'd already accumulated thousands of bookmarks, unread emails, files in my downloads folder, papers in my physical inbox, etc. It would have been a Herculean effort to file these things away. So I didn't. All the disorganized files, I wrapped them up in a folder and threw them in my `Attic` folder. Emails? Archived. Bookmarks? Exported to HTML, archived the export, and deleted them from the browser.

Ideally you should do this once, at the start.

And by archiving things rather than deleting them, you leave open the possibility that as some point in the future, you might be able to action some of those things. Triage the old bookmarks, sort your filesystem, etc.

Do It On Your Own Terms

Bring aversion-causing tasks into an environment that you control.

If you're averse to doing something, for emotional reasons, one way to overcome the aversion is to do it as much as possible on your own terms.

An example: you have to fill out some government form. You're averse to it because you worry about making a mistake. And just the thought of opening the form fills you with dread. So, take the boxes in the form, and make a spreadsheet for them. If fonts/colours/emojis/etc. if that makes it feel more personal, or like something you designed and created. Then fill out the form in the spreadsheet. And then copy the values to the form and submit.

This helps because instead of performing the task in this external domain where you feel threatened, you're performing the task in your own domain, in your own terms.

Another example: you have an email you have to reply to, and you're anxious about it. Just opening the email client gives you a bad feeling. Instead, try composing the email elsewhere, say, in a text editor. The change of environment changes the emotional connotation: you're not replying to an email, you're writing a text. You might even think of it as a work of fiction, a pseudoepigraphy.

Replace Interrupts with Polling

Turn off notifications, check comms as an explicit task.

“Interrupts” means notifications, which arrive at unpredictable and often inconvenient times. “Polling” means manually checking the source of the notifications for things to action.

The obvious benefit of replacing interrupts with polling is you don't get interrupted by a notification. The less obvious benefit is that when notifications are smeared throughout the day, it is easy for them to fall through the cracks. Something comes in when you're busy, and you swipe it away, and forget about it, and realize days later you forgot to respond to an important message. Polling is focused: you've chosen a block of time, you're committed to going through the notifications systematically. Instead of random islands of interruptions throughout the day, you have a few short, focused blocks of going through your notifications. Often I get an email while I'm on my phone and think, well, I can't reply, typing on mobile is horrible, I'm on a train, etc. Polling usually happens at my desk so I have no excuses: I'm in the right environment and in the right mental state.

This is so trite. “Put your phone on Do Not Disturb and silence notifications”. And yet it works. For a long time I resisted this because I aspire to be the kind of person who gets a message and replies within minutes. But I didn't notice how much notifications were impairing my focus until one day I accidentally put the phone/desktop on DND and had a wonderfully productive, distraction-free day.

Accountability Buddy

Get someone to sit next to you while you work.

If you're struggling to work on something, work next to another person. Set a timer and tell them what you're going to accomplish and when the timer ends tell them how you did. Just being around other people can make it easier to overcome aversion. This is why coworking spaces are useful.

If you don't have a person around, you might try **Focusmate**. It works for **some people**.

Sometimes I'll start a conversation with Claude, lay out my plans for the day, and update Claude as I do things. If I'm stuck, or if I need help overcoming procrastination, I can ask Claude for help, and it's easier to do that in an on-going thread because Claude already has the necessary context, so I don't have to describe what I'm struggling with *ab initio*.

Plan First, Do Later

Separate planning from action, so if you get distracted while acting, you can return to the plans.

Separating planning from doing can be useful. Firstly because planning/doing require different kinds of mental energy. When you're too tired to do, you can often still plan. Secondly because by separating them you can look back and see how useful the plan was, how much you stuck to it, and then get better at planning.

Thirdly, and most importantly, because for ADHD people doing can be a source of distractions that impair other tasks. From ***Driven to Distraction***:

The first item on the list referred to a cough drop. As I read it, I asked her about it.

"Oh," she answered, "that is about a cough drop someone left on the dashboard of our car. The other day I saw the cough drop and thought, I'll have to throw that away. When I arrived at my first stop, I forgot to take the cough drop to a trash can. When I got back into the car, I saw it and thought, I'll throw it away at the gas station. The gas station came and went and I hadn't thrown the cough drop away. Well, the whole day went like that, the cough drop still sitting on the dashboard. When I got home, I thought, I'll take it inside with me and throw it out. In the time it took me to open the car door, I forgot about the cough drop. It was there to greet me when I got in the car the next morning. [...]"

*It was such a classic ADD story that I've come to call it the "cough drop sign" when a person **habitually has trouble following through on plans on a minute-to-minute, even second-to-second, basis**. This is not due to procrastination per se as much as it is due to **the busyness of the moment interrupting or interfering with one's memory circuits**. You can get up from your chair, go into the kitchen to get a glass of water, and then in the kitchen forget the reason for*

your being there.

Emphasis mine.

When I notice a micro-task like this, my instinct is not to do it, but to put it in the todo list. *Then* I try to do it immediately. And if I get distracted halfway through, it's still there, in the todo list.

A practical example is something I call the apartment survey. When I clean the apartment, I start by walking around, noticing everything that needs fixing, and creating a little task for it. Even something as simple as “move the book from the coffee table to the bookshelf”. But I don't start anything until the survey is done. And when the survey is done, I execute it. And if I get distracted halfway through cleaning the apartment, I have the tasks in the list to go back to.

Derailment

Introspect to find the things that ruin your productivity and avoid them.

Through **introspection** you can discover the behaviours that derail your productivity.

Lifting in the morning derails the day. Cardio is fine, but if I lift weights in the morning, the rest of the day I'm running on -40 IQ points. The most cognitively demanding thing I can do is wash the dishes. I'm not sure what the physiology is: maybe it's exhaustion of the glycogen stores, or fatigue byproducts floating around in my brain, or the CNS is busy rewiring the motor cortex. The point is that I try to do the cognitively-demanding things in the morning and lift in the evening.

Motion also does this. I suppose it's the H in ADHD: hyperactivity. I used to be a big pacer: put on headphones, pace my room back and forth daydreaming for hours and hours. Some days I would pace so much my legs were sore. To think, I have to be in motion. But sometimes I've thought enough, and it's time to do.

Music, too, derails me. If I start listening to music very soon I start pacing the room and it's over. Music is almost like reverse methylphenidate: it makes me restless, mentally hyperactive, and inattentive.

So, to be productive I have to not move too much, and be in silence, and not have fried my brain with exercise.

Using OCD to Defeat ADHD

If being organized makes you feel good, spend more on organizing your productivity system.

In a sense, having a really complex productivity system is like trying to use OCD to defeat ADHD, to use high neuroticism to defeat low conscientiousness. There's an element of truth to that, sure (see mastery of drudgery).

But here's the thing: you have to play to your strengths. You have to. If you are very OCD and you like

order and systems and planning but you struggle with doing, then, yeah, it might work, for you, to spend more energy on the trappings of productivity (ensuring your todo list is properly formatted, organized, etc.) if that bleeds over into making it easier to do the real, meaningful things.

For example: I like emojis in my todo list. The chores have a 🧹 emoji, the comms tasks have an ✉ emoji. That kind of thing. Makes it easy to see at a glance what kind of things I have to do, to group them by category. But Todoist doesn't support emoji icons on tasks, unlike Notion, so adding the emojis takes a bit more effort: I have to open **Raycast** and search for the emoji I want and paste it into the task title. It adds a little friction each time I create a task, but the benefit is I enjoy using the todo list more.

The Master of Drudgery

Avoid spending too much productive time on worthless chores.

A productivity antipattern: indulging too much in “quick wins”.

There's this running joke, or meme, online, about the kind of person who has this huge, colossal productivity system, but they get nothing done. They have five todo list apps and everything is categorized and indexed and sorted, but their material output is zero. They complete a hundred tasks a day and when you interrogate what those tasks are they are “brush my teeth” or “reorganize my bookshelf”. There's a lot of truth to that.

Every task falls into one of two categories: the quick wins, and everything else. Life is not made of quick wins. Creative, generative, open-ended work requires long periods of focused work. A lot of unpleasant, aversion-causing things have to be done. But the quick wins are infinite: there's always some micro-chore to do around the house, for example.

I don't have advice specifically on avoiding this. But you should notice if you're doing it and course-correct.

Thrashing

Don't let procrastination on one task derail everything else.

A bad failure mode I have is: I have a task T that I have to do, but I can't, because of some kind of aversion. But when I try to work on other things, the alarms are going off in my head, telling me to work on T because you've been putting this off for so long and life is finite and the years are short and all that. The end result is that because one thing is blocked, everything grinds to a halt. It's a very annoying state to be in.

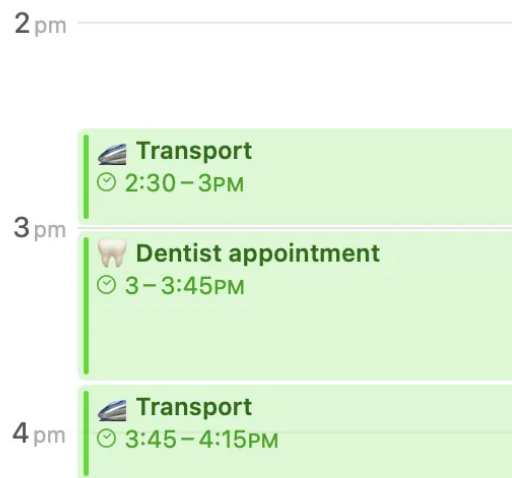
And I don't have a perfect solution, but I try to manage it by applying a sense of proportionality, “render unto Caesar” etc. You can't ignore T forever, dually, you probably won't solve it in the next ten minutes. But you can timebox T : allocate some block of time every day to try to advance it, or at least to work around it, e.g. to ask a friend for help, for example. And the rest of the day you can dedicate to

moving other things forward.

Put Travel in the Calendar

Calculate travel time ahead of time to avoid being late.

I am chronically late. So if I have a calendar event like a party at someone's home, I will go on Google Maps and measure the travel time (from my home or wherever I'm likely to be) to the destination, and make a time block for that. e.g., if it takes 30m to go to the dentist and back, this is what my calendar looks like:



This ensures I leave my home on time. If it's something especially important I often add 15m to the travel block as a buffer.

Choice of Tools

Use tools that are effective and you like.

What productivity app should I use? Reminders? Linear? Todoist? A bullet journal?

Use something that feels good and works. That's all. Personally I use Todoist. A lot of people think todo list apps are commodities, but when you have an app open for 98% of your screentime, the little subtleties really add up. I've tried using Reminders, Linear, as my todo lists, and building my own. My productivity always suffers and I always go back to Todoist.

One app is better than two: the more disjoint things you have to pay attention to, the worse it is.

If you're a software engineer I strongly advise against building your own, which is a terrible form of procrastination for creative types.

Resources

- *How To Do Things* describes an ADHD-friendly version of the Pomodoro method. It's a 50 page PDF with no fluff, so it's worth buying to support writers who don't waste the reader's time.
- *Getting Things Done* has a lot of good advice (e.g. dump your entire brain into the todo list) but it's somewhat neurotypical in that it's assumed you won't have any problems actually *executing* the tasks.

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