

Attention

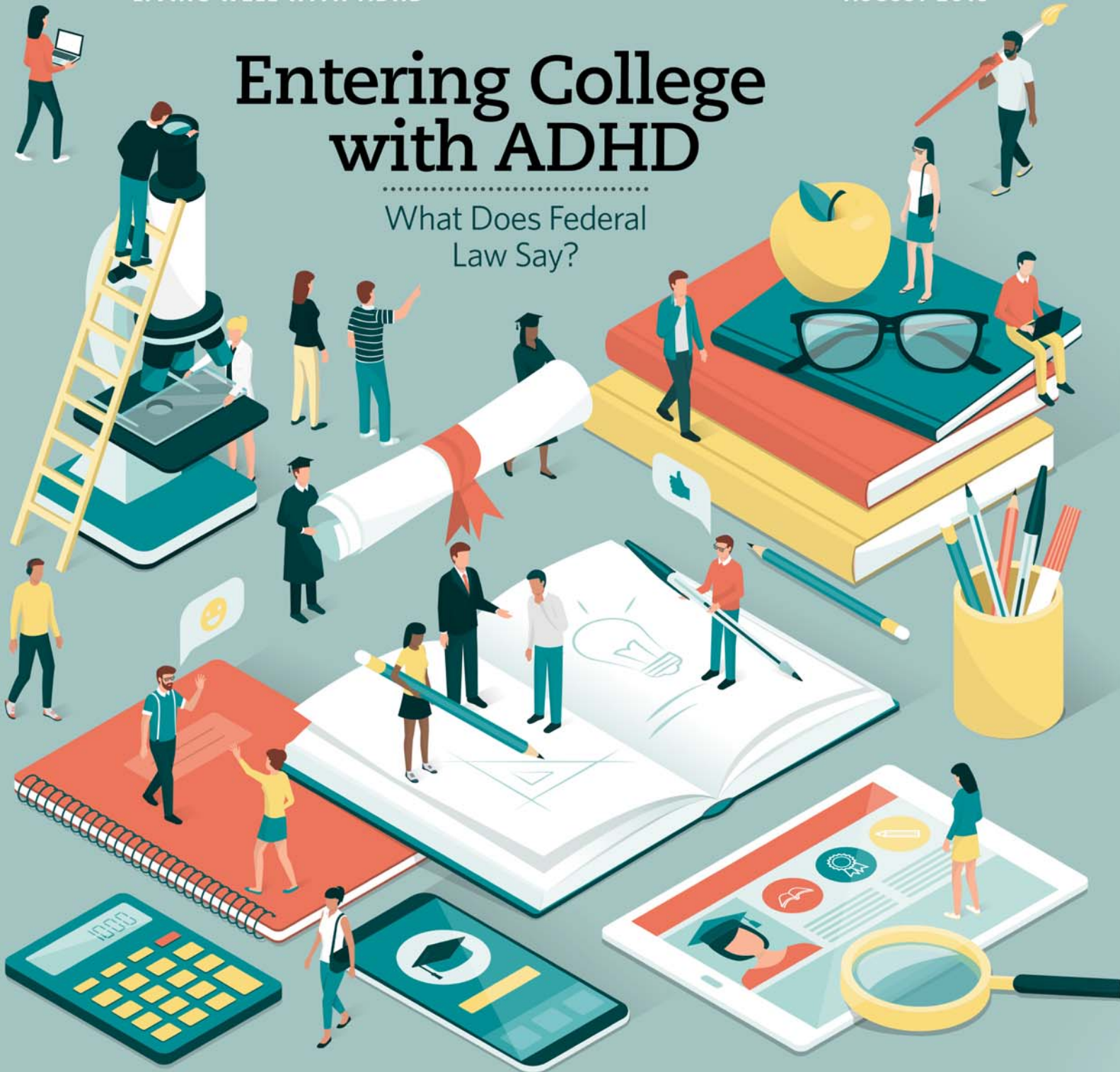
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AUGUST 2018

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It's Not Just About Time Management

BY SHARON SALINE, PSYD



ARE YOU ALWAYS LATE FOR EVENTS? Do you often turn in papers, reports, or projects after their deadlines? If so, you are not alone. Many adults with ADHD struggle with understanding and using their time well. Despite trying a million different tricks and techniques, they can't stop miscalculating how long things will take or procrastinating until the last minute. Sometimes It feels like you're stuck on a carousel of frustration and disappointment with no way off. Why does this keep happening?

Learning to manage time capably involves more than applying great tools. It also depends on personal insight. We know that most ADHD brains have two switches: NOW and NOT NOW. Common executive functioning challenges related to planning, prioritizing, motivation, and organization make it especially tough to allocate time and effort appropriately. Both kids and adults with ADHD frequently tell me how they feel as if they are always behind or always catching up. It's a tough way to live.

Most of us would agree that effective time management means easily getting down to business, doing things on time, meeting deadlines, and correctly estimating how long something will take. It's directly related to:

- Initiation: getting started on something, often without direction and lots of reminders
- Sustained attention: directing attention and resisting distractions when faced with a task
- Goal-oriented persistence: setting a goal, staying focused on relevant tasks, and sticking with them over time; being able to returning to the task right after an interruption

Procrastination interferes with each of these elements. It's the dragon whose fiery breath of delay tactics prevents us from doing what's needed when it's supposed to occur. Procrastination encourages us to put off tasks that are unpleasant or overwhelming until we are panicked or disheartened or both.

ADHD & Rarely on Time?

Conquer the procrastination dragon

The first major step toward improving time management involves conquering this dragon. We all have our particular ways of putting things off. Taming the procrastination beast begins with breaking things down into small enough chunks so they don't feel daunting to do.

If you break a task down and you still can't start, then it's not little enough. Make it smaller. One client of mine likes to bake to avoid doing housework. She calls it "procrasti-baking." She especially hated doing her family's laundry. The clothes in the hamper overflowed onto the floors of everybody's bedrooms. We agreed that the smallest, doable step was carrying the laundry down to the basement once a week. Then she could make half a batch of cookies for her kids. Afterwards, the task was sorting

order. For instance, make a list of "have-to" tasks and then rewrite it in your preferred sequence, easy to hard or hard to easy. You'll get started sooner *and* be more efficient and productive.

Reducing procrastination also means boosting motivation and using incentives or rewards to do so. Many people with and without ADHD need to know that there's something to look forward to after doing a dreary task or meeting a challenge. Set yourself up for success by identifying activities that you really enjoy. Use these fun things as rewards for doing the tedious stuff. Watch your favorite television show *after* you empty the litter box. Schedule dinner with your friend *after* you turn in a big work project.

Shift your mind about time

These are all powerful techniques to beat back the procrastination dragon, but they're not enough to create lasting changes to the ways you manage (or don't manage) your time. To really improve these skills, you have to shift your mentality about your relationship to time and find something positive about it.

Like most people with ADHD, you've heard plenty of negative comments over the years about your time management skills. As time has passed, they've been transformed into your own internal voice. At this point, you're well accustomed to all of those persistent, critical conversations that run through your head about how poorly you organize your time. In fact, if you consider all of the negative feedback about time-related issues that you've received over the years, you'll quickly see how hard it is to find anything good about your skills or recall when you've managed well.

The stress and anxiety you've experienced about being on time also fosters amnesia. Repeatedly being late or struggling with due dates creates anxiety. This anxiety not only increases your panic about "messing up again" but also erodes your confidence in making effective changes. Now, on top of dealing with the time-related challenges in front of you, you're also lacking confidence that you'll overcome them. When you're feeling pressured about a half-completed report that's due tomorrow or an impending meeting when you're stuck in heavy traffic, it's almost impossible to remember previous, similar situations where you pulled things off and they went smoothly. But these past examples carry the solutions you need NOW.

The more people can reflect on past successes and recall specifics about how they happened, the easier it will be to use them as building blocks for their other, anxiety-producing dilemmas. You want to name those skills that helped you get through a tough moment *before* and apply them to what's happening in the *present*. As tough as it

clothes into two piles of lights and darks. Then the second batch of cookies. That was it for the laundry that day. The next day, she applied the same system to washing the clothes. By the end of the weekend, her family had clean clothes and delicious cookies, too.


Picking a meaningful order for completing tasks also weakens the beast. Do you prefer working from easy to harder things—getting on a roll and feeling a sense of accomplishment early on? Or, would you rather tackle the hard stuff first and get it over with—coasting toward the finish line with the easier tasks? There's no right choice. Just notice how you work best and approach things in that



may be, I encourage you to identify moments when you felt like you overcame obstacles related to time management. Whether you keep this on your phone or post it in a visible place in your home, the goal is referring back to it when you're stressed. Part of learning the tools for time management is believing that you can. Silencing that internal negative voice plays a key role in applying any useful techniques about time management that you may try. Reminders of when you managed time successfully build this confidence.

Acknowledging when you manage time well also builds this belief in yourself. Most of us forget that the positivity to negativity ratio is 3:1. For every critical or judgmental thing you say to yourself, ideally there should be three positive comments. Instead, people live with an active committee in their heads that makes loud, frequent, and negative pronouncements about what they're doing or not doing. Paying attention to what you've done well reduces the volume and power of this committee.

Once again, the key is to start small. Notice when you leave your house within five minutes of your goal and pat yourself on the back by saying "This is the right direction." If you start an important meeting on time, commend yourself for it. Don't belittle your efforts by saying, "Well I'm just doing what I'm supposed to" or "It's not a big deal; everyone else does this normally." What everyone else does isn't important. It's what you've done differently here that matters. You're looking for little accomplishments to grow into larger ones, and this is how you start. Initially aiming for big changes that require a vastly different way of being will lead to failure. It's too much, too soon.

Improving time management skills takes practice, tweaks along the way, and lots of patience. But it also depends on self-compassion and celebration: Go for small wins first and notice your successes. Soon enough, they'll grow into the long-lasting changes you desire. 

Sharon Saline, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, is an expert in how ADHD, learning disabilities, and mental health issues affect children, teens, and families. She has worked extensively with schools on mental health issues in the classroom, interpreting psychological evaluations and improving teacher/parent communication. Her unique perspective, namely growing up in a household with a sibling who wrestled with untreated ADHD, combined with decades of clinical experience, assists her in guiding families as they navigate the confusing maze of information, emotions, stress, and conflict related to ADHD. She funnels this expertise into her forthcoming book, *What Your ADHD Child Wishes You Knew: Working Together to Empower Kids for Success in School and Life* (TarcherPerigee, August 2018). A part-time lecturer at the Smith School for Social Work, Dr. Saline has conducted trainings around the country and abroad for educators, psychologists, parents, and students.

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Four tips for flipping your perspective

WHETHER YOU'RE IN THE MIDST of facing a crisis related to time management or want to improve your skills, follow these four tips to help you flip your perspective from feeling panicked and incompetent to steady and capable.

- 1. Slow things down.** Step aside from the looming tasks and get centered. You won't get anywhere good when you're worked up. Whether it's breathing techniques, drinking a glass of water, calling a partner or friend, or taking a walk, do something to jump off the frustration carousel. Calming your anxiety and getting some perspective will allow you to think more clearly about possible solutions.
- 2. Recall a similar situation.** Reflect on the last time you were in the same pickle. Ask yourself: "How did I get through? What tools did I use? Who or what assisted me? How can I apply any of them to what's happening right now?" Following my earlier suggestion, write these down so you can glance at it when necessary.
- 3. Practice backwards design.** Starting with your end goal, work backwards and allocate your time accordingly. This means reviewing what needs to be accomplished and honestly assessing how long things really take. Let's say your plane leaves at 9 AM and it takes an hour to drive and park at the airport than you're now at 8 AM. Then subtract the hour and a half to get through security and be at the gate, that's 6:30. Then you want to take a shower, get dressed and feed the cat which takes another 45 minutes. This means you have to get up a 5:45 AM. Not ideal, but that's what you have to do to avoid the unpleasant feelings of panic or guilt about being late. You can apply backwards design to writing papers, creating presentations, or doing household chores.
- 4. Use incentives.** Set these up in advance and when you've reached a goal, do one of them. It's really important to celebrate your positive steps without judging them as being insignificant or unimportant. Whether it's going for a run, surfing the net, playing a computer game, or taking a bath, treat yourself. You've earned it!