

While at university, Suzie Murray received support and funding through the DSA. Now working as a freelance writer, she is currently based in Paris.

# ADHD AND EXTERNAL STRUCTURE

by **Suzie Murray**

It's sometimes said that ADHD is named after the trait most noticeable to non-ADHD brains: regulating attention. However, difficulty focusing is just part of the executive function problems which can characterise ADHD.



Executive function is a blanket term for 'brain circuits that prioritise, integrate, and regulate other cognitive functions'. More simply, it's the part of your brain that works out how to do things. And for a lot of ADHD brains, these executive functions are impaired. Simply put, doing things – such as staying on top of laundry, breaking down large tasks, or focusing on something boring – are harder.

People without impaired executive function sometimes fail to recognise these challenges for what they are. But you don't tell a wheelchair user to get themselves up a flight of stairs by 'improving their willpower', or 'trying harder'. Not only would it be wildly offensive – it's also a waste of their time. You install a ramp, or a lift, or you move to a more accessible environment.

Studies on ADHD brains have identified strategies which can support and reinforce executive functions. Three key principles are planning, demand, and regulation:

Planning	Demand	Regulation
Making plans itself uses executive functions, including ordering and prioritising information, and time management skills. Planning isn't really optional, but if you don't plan in advance, you have to plan on the spot – or 'reactively'. By planning beforehand, you get a headstart on those executive functions.	With ADHD, it can be extra difficult to focus on tasks that feel too big, or overwhelming. But once tasks are broken down, they can feel boring. Increasing the demands on your attention span without increasing the task itself can really help – for example, playing music while you work, using a standing desk, or increasing the time pressure.	Planning and demand are important steps, but they really need systems which help you enforce and execute them, by providing structure, consequences, and rewards. Pina Varnel's webcomic has a great explanation of how self-regulation can be difficult, and how external support can really help.

## What are some solutions?

The principles of these strategies can be helpful for developing practical tools. These might include:

- **Making in-person appointments**
  - Going grocery shopping with a friend or housemate
  - Meeting someone for coffee near the pharmacy, so it's on your route
  - Stopping by the library on the way home from a rehearsal or training session



## INDEPENDENCE AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTION **WHAT'S THE POINT OF DISABILITY SUPPORT?**

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- **“Body doubling”**
  - Study dates at a cafe or library, with a friend to keep you on task
  - Working over a video call
  - Using something like a pomodoro timer: set goals, work for 25 minutes, then check in with a 5 minute chat.
- **‘Phone a Friend’**
  - Some things don’t need a body double, just a second pair of eyes. Eg:
    - Asking a friend to help fill out a form or proofread an email
    - Scheduling a phone call before an important deadline or meeting
- **Joining a club!**
  - Making regular time for a social hobby can give your week some structure
  - Relieving the pressure of remembering to individually plan periods of rest and self care

ADHD can make it harder to get things done when you’re working solo, but nobody does everything completely by themselves. Working with others is a valuable skill! And it’s not just that group work is important for a lot of people – studies have shown that ADHD brains are a huge asset to group work!

Support doesn’t need to benefit neurotypical brains in order to be valuable. But especially when ADHDers are targeted with shame or resentment for seeking out external support, two things can be true:

**1** ADHD is a disability, which deserves specific help and support.

**2** Two heads are often better than one.



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