



# The Top 5 CBT Skills for ADHD

Practical tools for focus,  
follow-through, and  
emotional balance



**COGNITO HEALTH**



# Introduction

## Why CBT for ADHD?

ADHD doesn't just affect attention, it influences how we manage our time, tasks, emotions, and motivation. CBT doesn't "fix" ADHD but it teaches tools to manage symptoms, build confidence, and reduce stress.

According to the Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA), a multimodal approach including CBT strategies, environmental adjustments, lifestyle routines, and in some cases, medication is considered best practice.

The 5 strategies in this guide are based on our CBT team's experience working with hundreds of clients with ADHD. These are the most practical, effective tools we've seen people use to support focus, reduce frustration, and build confidence.

**This guide is designed to help you work with your brain – not against it.**



# Top 5 CBT Tips

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To Do Lists

02

ABCD Prioritizing

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# 01. To Do Lists

## Offload Your Working Memory

### CBT Principle:

Use external tools to hold information your brain can't easily store or sort on its own. Seeing your tasks helps your brain engage and follow through.

**Think external brain—get information out of your head and into the world where you can see and use it.**

### Why Try This:

ADHD makes it hard to hold and manipulate information in your mind (your working memory). This leads to forgetfulness, overwhelm, and procrastination. If it's not in front of you, it's often forgotten.

### The Master To Do List:

- 1. One place:** Keep all your tasks recorded in one place, either digitally or handwritten.
  - If you prefer to track tasks on your phone, be sure to add these to your master list by the end of the day.
- 2. Write it down immediately:** Add to your list as soon as you identify or remember a new task
- 3. Chunk information:** Break tasks down into small steps (e.g., Instead of "Complete Assignment", write down "Write outline" → "Write intro" → "Edit intro")
- 4. Use Reminders:** Set a daily alarm to check your master to do list, keeping it front of mind



### Use it when:

You are managing multiple tasks, struggling to start something, or feel mentally cluttered.

## 02. ABCD Prioritizing

### A Simple, Visual Way to Triage Tasks

#### CBT Principle:

Prioritizing reduces overwhelm and creates clarity for action. It ensures that we are focusing our attention in the right places.



#### Why Try This:

ADHD can either make everything feel urgent or nothing at all. We may be drawn to easier, more interesting tasks, and whilst we may feel we are being productive, we may find we aren't making progress on the more important tasks. Prioritizing strategies can help you break through paralysis by sorting tasks into manageable categories.

#### Try these steps:

Label each task on your to do list with A, B, C or D:

- **A** = Absolutely Essential - Must be completed today, or there will be consequences; this can include emotional consequences!
- **B** = Better done today - Important, but not urgent
- **C** = Can wait - Low pressure, doesn't need to be completed today
- **D** = Delegate or Don't do - Remove from your list altogether

**Start with your As; only move on to your Bs and Cs, once your As are complete and if you have time remaining.**

#### Use it when:

Everything feels equally important, or you don't know where to start.

# 03. Environmental Engineering

## Design Your Space for Your Brain

### CBT Principle:

Behaviour is shaped by cues, triggers, and surroundings. You can change the environment to match your goals.

**Your environment can do the heavy lifting so your brain doesn't have to.**

### Why Try This:

Your environment plays a huge role in your ability to focus and follow through. ADHD brains are more sensitive to distractions—and more responsive to cues. CBT encourages adjusting your space, not just your mindset.



### Use it when:

You keep forgetting habits, are surrounded by clutter, or find transitions tough.

### Try these:

- **Remove temptation:** Leave your phone in another room or use an app blocker.
- **Create friction for distractions:** Log out of streaming sites or close tabs you are not currently using.
- **Designate zones:** A space for work, a space for rest, even if it's the same desk with different lighting or music.
- **Clear visual clutter:** Keep only what you need in sight.
- **Prep ahead with environmental cues:** Pack your bag the night before, place meds near your coffee mug, leave workout clothes on a chair.



# 04. Motivation Tips

## Before and During Tasks



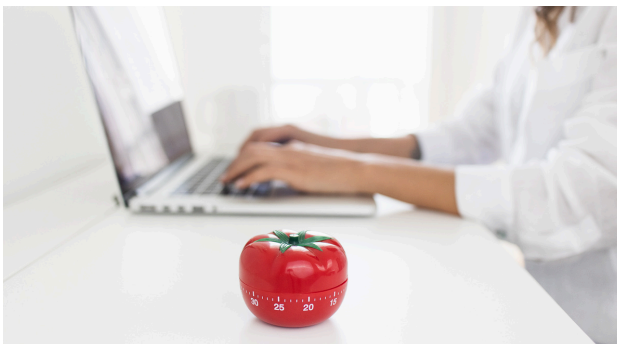
### CBT Principle:

You don't wait for motivation—you can build it by reducing friction and adding support.

**ADHD brains crave novelty, urgency, and reward—so build those in on purpose.**

### Why Try This:

ADHD often brings challenges with task initiation and low motivation, especially for boring, unclear, or overwhelming tasks. CBT helps you experiment with tools that activate the brain's reward and momentum systems.



### Before you start a task:

- **Chunking:** What's the smallest step? (e.g., open the doc, write 1 sentence) – Chunk the task down into bitesize steps.
- **Create a Deadline:** Increase accountability by setting an external deadline, e.g. Invite a friend for dinner to motivate you to tidy the kitchen.

### During the task:

- **Body Doubling:** Work alongside someone (in-person or virtually) to stay accountable.
- **Time Block:** Try the Pomodoro method; 25 minutes of focused work, followed by 5 minute break.

### Use it when:

You are stuck in procrastination, waiting to feel motivated, or anxious about getting started.

# 05. Thought Catching

## Reframe Unhelpful Self-Talk



### CBT Principle:

Thoughts impact feelings and behaviours. Catching and reframing unhelpful thoughts helps you shift from self-blame to self-support.

**ADHD is not a character flaw. Reframing builds self-respect and momentum.**

### Why Try This:

Living with ADHD may mean years of criticism, missed deadlines, and feeling “behind.” You may have experienced thoughts like “I should’ve done this already,” or “Why can’t I just get it together?”. This harsh self-talk can drain motivation and fuels avoidance.

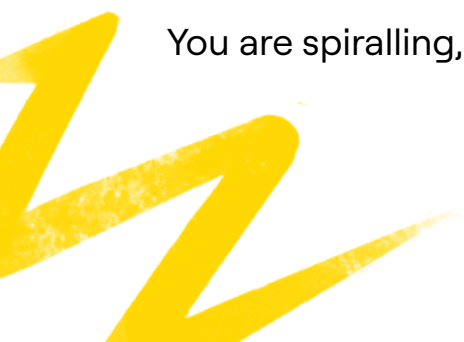


### Try this:

1. **Catch it:** Notice the thought; “I never follow through.”
2. **Check it:** Evaluate the accuracy and helpfulness of the thought;
  - “Is this a fact or opinion? What’s the evidence?”
  - “Is this thought helpful?”
3. **Change it:** Reframe it to be more supportive and helpful; “It’s hard for me to follow through sometimes, but I’m learning new tools.”

### Use it when:

You are spiralling, procrastinating, or feeling discouraged.



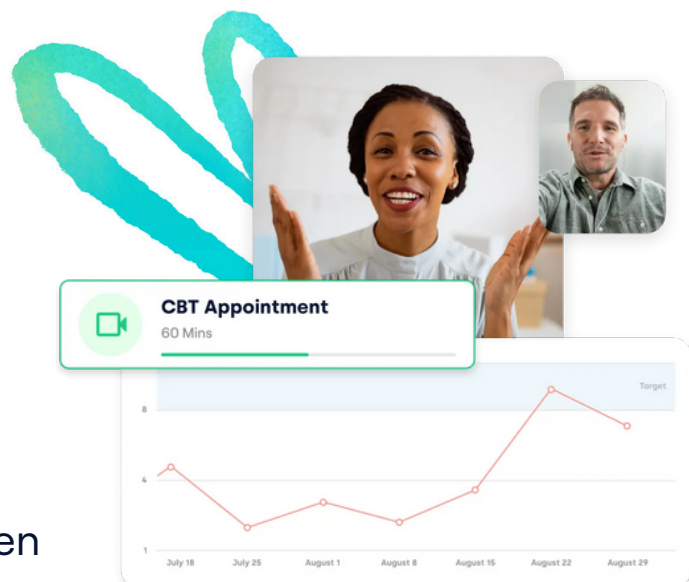


# Cognito Health's CBT Program Can Help You

**Managing ADHD is not about “trying harder”... it’s about learning to work with your brain, not against it.**

At Cognito, we provide structured CBT-based support to help you build systems that stick, so you feel more in control. Following a positive diagnosis, our monthly ADHD subscription includes:

- ✓ Two 1-on-1 virtual CBT sessions
- ✓ Tools tailored to your challenges and strengths
- ✓ Supportive, non-judgmental guidance
- ✓ The option to access medication support if chosen



Learn more or get started at:  
[www.getcognito.ca](http://www.getcognito.ca)

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