

Procrastination

When knowing something needs doing is not enough to make starting easy

Procrastination is often described as simply putting something off, but that can hide the work happening underneath. Starting may require choosing a first step, organising materials, estimating time, tolerating boredom or uncertainty, remembering instructions and managing whatever feelings the task creates. Delay can temporarily reduce that discomfort — even when it creates more pressure later.

ADHD can affect attention, organisation, time management and task completion. Procrastination itself is not an ADHD diagnostic criterion and can occur for many reasons, but executive-function demands can make getting started particularly difficult for some people with ADHD.

Delay is information. Instead of beginning with “Why am I being lazy?”, ask: “What is making this task hard to approach right now?” The answer gives you something practical to work with.

1. The task feels boring

Low-interest tasks can be difficult to activate for, particularly when there is little novelty or immediate feedback. **Try:** make the first work period deliberately short, change location, add movement or music if appropriate, body-double with someone, or alternate a dull step with a more engaging one.

2. The deadline is not urgent yet

A distant deadline can feel abstract. The task may repeatedly lose against whatever is happening now. **Try:** create earlier visible checkpoints: research by Tuesday, first draft Thursday, review Friday. Use reminders that tell you the action to take, not just the final due date.

3. Perfection feels required

If starting means producing something excellent immediately, the first step becomes enormous. **Try:** deliberately create a rough version. Give yourself permission to write badly, sketch loosely or make an incomplete first pass. Editing requires something to edit.

4. The reward is too far away

Large projects can demand sustained effort while the benefit remains weeks or months away. **Try:** shorten the feedback loop. Mark visible progress, celebrate completed stages, pair a difficult step with something pleasant or create small meaningful rewards along the way.

5. Unclear instructions

Vague tasks create hidden decisions: what does 'sort this out' mean, where do I begin, how detailed should it be, and when is it finished? **Try:** turn the task into a concrete verb and object — email Sam, open the form, find three references, write the first paragraph — and clarify the expected finish point.

6. Starting brings uncomfortable feelings

A task may carry anxiety, shame, fear of failure, fear of success, resentment, grief or memories of criticism. Avoidance can become emotional protection. **Try:** name the feeling without making it a command. You may be able to feel anxious and still do two minutes of the task. If the emotional load is significant, support may be more useful than another productivity trick.

NOTICE THE LOAD • PAUSE • REDUCE DEMANDS • RECOVER

From 'do the task' to a startable action

A task can remain stuck because the instruction describes an outcome rather than an action. “Do my tax return”, “write the report” or “sort the house” are collections of tasks. A startable action should be small enough that you can picture yourself physically doing it.

Stuck instruction	Make it startable
Do the report	Open the document and write the heading.
Sort my emails	Set a 10-minute timer and archive obvious junk.
Clean the kitchen	Put five items back where they belong.
Prepare for the meeting	Open the agenda and highlight the three items involving me.
Do the application	Find the closing date and create the document.
Sort my finances	Open the bank statement and identify the first account to review.

Six ways to make starting easier

Shrink the entry point. Commit to opening, locating, naming or doing the first two minutes rather than completing the whole task.

Externalise the plan. Put the next action somewhere visible instead of expecting working memory to hold it.

Create gentle urgency. Use an earlier checkpoint, co-working session or timed start — not panic as the only activation system.

Bring reward closer. Make progress visible and build something pleasant into the process.

Reduce ambiguity. Ask for examples, written instructions or a definition of what 'finished' means.

Work with the feeling. If the task evokes discomfort, name it and choose a tolerable amount of contact with the task.

For partners, family and supporters

Repeated reminders can sometimes become another layer of pressure. Instead, ask what part is stuck: beginning, deciding, understanding, tolerating the feeling, estimating time or knowing when to stop. Support might mean sitting nearby while the person starts, helping turn the task into steps, agreeing one reminder, or removing an unnecessary decision.

At work or in education

Clear written instructions, priorities, examples, interim deadlines and help structuring tasks can reduce executive load. A quiet workspace and written information are among the reasonable adjustments described in NHS information for adults with ADHD. The aim is not to remove responsibility, but to make the route to completing the responsibility clearer.

A message from Maggie

There can be a huge amount happening between knowing and doing. When you have been staring at something for hours or carrying it around in your head for days, another demand to “just get on with it” rarely tells you how. Find the smallest honest beginning. Open it. Name it. Put one thing in place. You do not have to feel completely ready before you start, and you do not have to finish everything simply because you have begun.

My Procrastination & Getting Started Map

Choose one real task. The aim is not to judge why it has been delayed; it is to discover what would make contact with it easier.

The task I am avoiding

Write the task as it currently appears in your head.

What makes it difficult to approach?

Boring, vague, too large, perfection pressure, distant reward, fear, resentment, tiredness, too many decisions, something else?

What feeling appears when I think about starting?

Name it as specifically as you can. You do not have to solve the feeling first.

What is the smallest visible first action?

Something you could physically do in a few minutes: open, find, write, send, choose, place, ask.

What does 'good enough' look like?

Define the minimum successful outcome before perfection moves the finish line.

How can I bring time closer?

Choose one interim checkpoint, timer, calendar block or co-working start.

How can I bring reward closer?

What small, healthy and realistic reward or satisfying progress marker can follow the first stage?

What support would reduce the load?

Written instructions, body doubling, clarification, quieter space, fewer choices, help prioritising, emotional support?

My starting sentence

For example: "I only need to begin the first step; I am not agreeing to finish the whole thing right now."

Further reading and professional context

Procrastination is not unique to ADHD. It can also be influenced by anxiety, depression, perfectionism, stress, sleep, physical health, burnout, trauma, unclear expectations and ordinary human preference for immediate relief over delayed benefit. If procrastination changes suddenly or becomes severe, it is worth considering the wider picture rather than assuming ADHD explains everything.

Book recommendations

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD — Russell A. Barkley. Practical, evidence-informed strategies for adult ADHD and executive-function difficulties.

How to ADHD — Jessica McCabe. Accessible strategies for task initiation, motivation and designing supports around an ADHD brain.

Solving the Procrastination Puzzle — Timothy A. Pychyl. A concise, research-informed exploration of procrastination and practical ways to change the pattern.

Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now — Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen. Explores emotional and behavioural patterns that can sit underneath delay.

Professional information

NICE NG87 — Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management. NICE recommends holistic, individualised care and consideration of environmental modifications. For adults where non-pharmacological treatment is indicated, a structured supportive psychological intervention focused on ADHD may be offered and may include CBT elements.

NHS — ADHD in adults. NHS information describes adult ADHD and possible support, including talking therapies and reasonable adjustments such as a quiet workspace, written instructions and help planning and structuring tasks.

This guide is psychoeducational. Procrastination is not an ADHD diagnostic criterion and this resource should not be used to diagnose ADHD. If avoidance is associated with severe anxiety, persistent low mood, inability to manage essential daily activities or other significant distress, professional support may be appropriate.

Space to Breathe Therapy