

Transition Difficulty

When moving from one thing to another uses more energy than people can see

A transition is not only the moment an activity changes. The brain may need to disengage from what it is doing, hold unfinished information, shift attention, understand what comes next, organise the next action and regulate the feelings created by stopping or uncertainty. That can make even an ordinary change feel disproportionately demanding.

People with ADHD may experience difficulties with attention regulation, organisation, time management and task switching. Transition difficulty is not a separate ADHD diagnosis, and it can also be relevant to autism, anxiety, sensory differences, stress and many other experiences.

Difficulty changing direction is not the same as refusing to cooperate. Sometimes the missing ingredient is not more pressure — it is enough warning, a clear next step and a bridge between the two activities.

1. Stopping an enjoyable task

Stopping can feel harder when attention is deeply engaged. The unfinished activity may continue to occupy working memory and the next task may offer less immediate interest. **Try:** give an advance cue, identify a natural stopping point and leave a visible 'restart note' so the brain does not have to fear losing the thread.

2. Leaving a familiar place

A familiar environment contains known sensory input, routines and expectations. Leaving it may mean travel, uncertainty, people, noise or decisions. **Try:** prepare essentials in advance, preview the destination and sequence, and build in a few minutes between leaving one environment and entering the next.

3. Plans change without warning

Unexpected change removes preparation time and can create a rapid need to re-plan. **Try:** state clearly what has changed, what has not changed, what happens next and whether there are choices. Allow time for the first emotional reaction before demanding immediate flexibility.

4. No transition time

Back-to-back demands can make the person carry the previous activity straight into the next. **Try:** create a buffer — even five minutes — for notes, movement, toilet, drink, silence, sensory regulation or simply orienting to the next task.

5. Moving from rest to action

Rest and activation require different states. Getting off the sofa, out of bed or away from a quiet activity can involve several hidden steps. **Try:** use a bridge action such as feet on the floor, drink of water, shoes on, one song, opening the curtains or moving to the room where the next activity begins.

6. Unclear expectations about what's next

Uncertainty adds decisions to the transition. 'Get ready' may require working out what ready means, what to take and when to leave. **Try:** make the next sequence visible: first shoes, then bag, then car; or first open the document, then read the brief, then choose one action.

NOTICE THE LOAD • PAUSE • REDUCE DEMANDS • RECOVER

Build a bridge, not a cliff edge

A transition bridge gives the brain information and time to change direction. It can be visual, verbal, sensory or practical. Different transitions may need different bridges.

Transition	Possible bridge	What it reduces
Enjoyable task → obligation	10-minute and 2-minute cues + restart note	Loss of momentum and fear of forgetting
Home → appointment	Bag by door + visible leave time + route known	Decisions and uncertainty
Meeting → focused work	5-minute buffer + write next action	Carry-over and cognitive clutter
Rest → action	One physical starter step + short countdown	Activation demand
Expected plan → changed plan	Say what changed / stayed the same / happens next	Uncertainty and re-planning
Work → home	Close-down list + brief sensory decompression	Mental spill-over

A practical transition sequence

- 1. Signal.** Give information before the change where possible.
- 2. Finish or park.** Identify what is complete and record what remains.
- 3. Buffer.** Allow a small space for movement, sensory regulation or orientation.
- 4. Preview.** State what happens next in concrete terms.
- 5. Start tiny.** Make the first action obvious and physically doable.
- 6. Recover.** After a high-demand transition, reduce unnecessary questions and decisions for a while.

For partners, parents and supporters

Repeatedly saying 'come on' may increase urgency without providing the information needed to switch. Try giving one clear warning, then a specific next action. When plans change, acknowledge that the change itself may be difficult even if the replacement plan seems better. Support can be firm and predictable without becoming shaming or confrontational.

At work or in education

Useful supports may include agendas in advance, written instructions, visible schedules, warnings before task changes, protected time between meetings, fewer last-minute changes where possible and clarity about priorities. These are practical ways of reducing avoidable executive and sensory load while keeping expectations clear.

A message from Maggie

Sometimes the hardest part is not the thing you are doing or the thing you are going to do — it is the space between them. You may need longer to let go, to understand the new plan or simply to get your body moving in a different direction. That does not mean you are being difficult. Build yourself a bridge: a warning, a pause, a clear next step and somewhere safe to leave what you have not finished. Small transitions deserve support too.

My Transition Map

Choose one transition that regularly becomes difficult. Look for the hidden load rather than judging the reaction.

The transition

What am I moving from, and what am I moving to?

What is hard about stopping?

Enjoyment, unfinished thoughts, fear of forgetting, interruption, sensory comfort, loss of control?

What is hard about what comes next?

Unclear expectations, people, noise, travel, decisions, effort, uncertainty, low interest?

What warning helps?

Would 15 minutes, 5 minutes, a visual timer, written cue or agreed phrase work best?

How can I park the current task?

Write the exact next step, save the page, take a photo, leave materials ready or add a note.

What buffer do I need?

Silence, movement, toilet, drink, outside air, no questions, a familiar song, a few minutes alone?

What is the first visible action of the next thing?

Make it concrete: stand up, shoes on, open file, pick up keys, walk to the next room.

If the plan changes unexpectedly

What information helps me reorient: what changed, what stayed the same, what happens now, what choices remain?

What can other people do?

Write one sentence explaining the kind of transition support that helps you.

Further reading and professional context

Transition difficulties can arise for different reasons. For one person the main load may be attention disengagement; for another it may be uncertainty, sensory change, anxiety or the loss of a familiar routine. Understanding the function of the difficulty is more useful than assuming one explanation fits everyone.

Book recommendations

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD — Russell A. Barkley. Practical, evidence-informed approaches to adult ADHD and external executive-function supports.

How to ADHD — Jessica McCabe. Accessible strategies for ADHD-related task switching, activation and everyday executive functioning.

Smart but Scattered Guide to Success — Peg Dawson and Richard Guare. Practical approaches to executive skills, planning and shifting between demands.

Looking After Your Autistic Self — Niamh Garvey. Useful discussion of sensory needs, predictability and regulation where autistic experience is also relevant.

Professional information

NICE NG87 — ADHD: diagnosis and management. NICE recommends individualised ADHD care and consideration of environmental modifications to reduce the impact of symptoms and support functioning.

NHS — ADHD in adults. NHS information describes difficulties with attention, organisation and everyday functioning and gives examples of reasonable adjustments including written instructions and help planning and structuring tasks.

NICE CG142 — Autism spectrum disorder in adults. Where autism is relevant, NICE guidance emphasises predictability, clear information, environmental needs and adapting communication to the individual.

This guide is psychoeducational. Transition difficulty is not a standalone ADHD diagnostic criterion and may occur in many contexts. Significant or new difficulties affecting daily functioning may benefit from appropriate professional assessment and individual support.

Space to Breathe Therapy