I AM EDITOR: ADHD and Productivity

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I enjoy my job. I’m grateful to have the connections I do. Working in academic publishing satiates my endless curiosity and ensures I have access to a steady stream of new discoveries and information. I also count myself lucky to work entirely from home. It definitely has its perks. I love having the flexibility for appointments and the early COVID years helped me realize I have no desire to return to an office. *Ever.* But to do my desk job entirely remotely, I’ve become my own manager, and for a younger version of myself, that would have been a tall order.

I was diagnosed with ADHD at a young age. My symptoms were typical for girls, being easily distracted, daydreaming at inappropriate times, and being generally forgetful. To this day my brain is like a hummingbird, flitting around from one topic to the next. Other times, it’s like a dog who found the most interesting bone in the world. I’ll refuse to let go and lose track of time. I’ll gnaw on that bone without getting bored and tune out the rest of the world. I only stop when my body exhausts itself.

I don’t remember the exact moment I was officially diagnosed, but I do remember being ushered to many doctors’ appointments and behavioral specialists to find out how to best manage it. It was frustrating to be aware that I was wired differently and sometimes I would feel that I was doomed to fail. It was especially easy to feel alienated when a doctor’s note would allow me extra time for tests, which would often be in separate rooms from my classmates. And so began the era of therapy, self-management, timers, planners, and sticker sheets. Some of these techniques and tools were more effective than others. The ones that worked, I’ve carried with me into adulthood.

Being overwhelmed is a great way to stop anyone in their tracks, but especially in my case. My brain has a habit of repeating a list of things I need to get done over and over out of fear that I’ll forget. If it’s more than 5 things at a time, I’ll enter panic mode. To manage this and relieve some of the stress, I’ve found it helps to have guardrails for tasks that have priority over everything else. Outlook’s Calendar setting for alerts and reminders for recurring reports and meetings have saved me more times than I can count. I’m also a huge advocate for the snooze button to gently remind me of an upcoming event so I can adequately plan around it. It’s like having my own personal guardian angel.

However, forcing myself to work on something I’m not interested in remains challenging, and there’s always the temptation to procrastinate. If you’re a procrastinator (like me and many others), you’re a master at avoiding tasks that give you anxiety. To combat this, I’ve been told to make a to do list. A list can help, but usually for me, this isn’t enough. Sometimes even when I see all the tasks laid out in front of me my brain would still rather U-turn and find something else to focus on instead. To combat this, it helps to break things
down even further into action items. For example, the goal “Manage Inbox” can be broken down into the following actions:

0. Open and read every message up to today’s date and determine its priority.
0. Mark priority items with a flag.
0. Go back and take care of the priority emails first and file them away as they are answered.
0. Take care of the remaining emails oldest to newest.

Any reluctance I have usually evaporates by the time the first step is complete, and by then I’m motivated to keep going.

I’ve also learned that ADHD interferes with the ability to identify my emotions. You know, emotions! Those things everyone has. For me though, it’s so easy to cast them aside and think about literally anything else. The best thing I can do before starting a major task is to stop, breathe, think, and check in with myself. Am I hungry? Fatigued? Bored? Stressed? Depending on the answer, I can address that need. I’ll grab a snack, step away for a breathing exercise, find some good music to listen to, or take a 5-minute tea break/pet my cat. If I’m too stressed to even get started, it’s extremely helpful to write down the top 3-5 emotions I’m feeling, and then do a quick guided meditation. I’m a big fan of Chel Hamilton’s Meditation Minis, which run around 10 minutes per episode. Once a session is done, I’ll revisit my list and write down the new top 3-5 emotions I’m feeling. Almost always, acknowledging my feelings will shift my mood completely, and I’ll be in a much better mental state to work.

Unfortunately, ADHD often goes hand in hand with anxiety and depression. My case is no different. Years of therapy have helped me identify and assign terms to the roadblocks I experience. I’ve learned to identify distortions such as all-or-nothing thinking. “I’ll never be able to get this done!” can be reframed as, “I feel like I won’t be able to get this done. Why do I think this?” From there I can better plan and break down the problem. It could be something as simple as recognizing my current workload is too high or realizing that I don’t have the training/background information to take on this task to the best of my ability. From there, I can reach out to my manager and my team to communicate my concerns and to help resolve the problem.

Nevertheless, there will always be setbacks. Learning disabilities and mental illnesses make one hell of a combination. Another part of ADHD is time blindness. I’m not a reliable judge for how long tasks will take. For that reason, planning with a schedule doesn’t work for me. Nothing stresses me out more than a fully booked calendar with back-to-back events. It’s easy for me to get ahead or fall behind, making the schedule useless. My brain imagines tasks I don’t want to do as taking an enormous amount of time. For example, in my mind washing the pile of dirty dishes feels like it would take 30 minutes or more. My ADHD will want to procrastinate the task and I’ll hyper focus on something unrelated. Inevitably when this happens, I start to internalize my inability to get things done. That’s when the anxiety and depression step in: “What’s wrong with me? I can’t even start cleaning. I’m just as worthless as this pile of dishes. This gross pile is a reflection of
myself and the state I deserve to live in.” Of course, this way of thinking is false and does me no favors. When I finally do calm down and motivate myself to wash them, I’m shocked and relieved to see that the entire process only took 5 minutes.

Keeping myself productive and accomplished is an endless cycle that requires maintenance and a modest amount of caffeine. There are times when I lie in bed and think nothing will get any better, and in my lowest state, it’s easy to believe. If I remain in bed the voice is correct, nothing will get better. Mustering an effort and battling your inner demons takes courage and has become a muscle I need to constantly flex. I like who I am but there’s no cure for ADHD, anxiety, and depression. I can manage them all to the best of my ability, but I’ve accepted they will always be a part of me.

I value my sanity and setting hard boundaries from work and the rest of my life helps me tap into my inner peace. I’m no longer a religious person but I do feel a divine connection with the natural world. I’ve come to really love nature and treasure my breaks from human civilization. We weren’t born to sit hunched in front of screens. It’s so nice to take a breath of fresh air while being surrounded by greenery that’s just as alive as we are. Taking a stroll on the trail behind my neighborhood, grinding my sneakers in the gravel, seeing the sunshine through the leaves above, and hearing the turtles plop into the pond as I approach triggers a reset that revitalizes my spirit. It’s a nice act of self-compassion to just say, “Hey, you’re trying, and a part of something bigger. Life is stressful, beautiful, and complicated, and it’s fine to breathe and recognize the absurd wonder of being alive.”

I was fortunate that my parents, teachers, and mentors adapted to ensure I was organized and motivated to succeed. Practicing self-compassion is key. I’m not perfect and never will be. When I inevitably stumble and fail, I have to forgive myself. We are all our greatest ally and our worst critic. I’m not alone, and I’m still here and fighting to survive.