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High Tech & Low Tech Solutions: Time Management Basics

During my constant search for coping mechanisms to manage my AD/HD, I have come across many tools that have proven effective in working around the way my brain is wired. They range from highly technical electronic gadgets to simple unsophisticated mechanisms. It is important to note that any mechanism I have used begins with a hard look at the problem itself, how it affects me, those around me, and most importantly, **WHY** it occurs. Serious introspection is the key to problem solving at any level.

The love of gadgets seems to be a fairly common thread among people with AD/HD, along with an impairment of the executive function of the brain that controls organization and time perception, among other things. I have sought to use my fascination with gadgets constructively by thinking of them as tools to work around my problems.

Time Management Basics

Chronic tardiness and poor organization skills plague most adults with AD/HD. This problem leads many toward traditional time management concepts. I believe that our problems are much more basic in nature. We share a deficiency in our perception of time itself, which must be addressed first as a foundation. There are probably many neuro-biological reasons for this problem. I believe that our minds race at speeds much faster than the world actually works, clearly distorting our perception of time. We are “big picture” as opposed to “detail” oriented, and consequently greatly underestimate time in real terms. Our natural tendency to “space out,” or get lost in our minds, further removes us from the reality of the nature and passage of time. Whatever the reason, it is imperative to develop the ability to capture abstract concepts, such as time, and make them tangible. This is the first step to managing these concepts.

Traditional time management rules such as “always wear a watch” or “keep a prominently displayed clock in every room” are sound principles. They are for most people. For people with AD/HD, however, they don’t address the whole issue. For instance, watches, clocks or calendars will do you little or no good if you space out and forget to refer to them. There are some tools that will **automatically** remind

and/or train you in the passage of time.

When they can’t wear a watch or refer to a clock boxers, for example, are trained to have a feel for two key time periods in the ring. These intervals are the length of time in a round (3 minutes) and the time to rest in between rounds (1 minute). In a boxer’s gym there are usually continuous audible signal sounds at alternating three and one minute intervals. This serves as a general timer, but more importantly, to train the fighters to get a feel for these intervals. There are several gadgets on the market that can accomplish the same type of training.

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Sport Watches

Almost every digital sport watch comes equipped with a timer, alarm(s), and most also have countdown timers that are automatically repeatable. Some models can be set to beep every hour as a chime. Try this experiment: Set a watch that has a chime function to beep every hour. Wear it for a day or two (preferably when you are alone). You will find that it is extremely comforting to know that an hour has passed without having to look down at your watch. Eventually, you will begin to develop a feel for the approximate time relative to the last chime. This can accomplish many things. First, if you fade out, use it as a reminder to get back on track because another hour has gone by. Second, if you have completely lost track of time and have to be somewhere you will have a regular reminder that will be automatic. Hopefully, over time, you will get a much better feel for how long an hour takes to pass.

Timers

Another inexpensive way to develop a feel for the passage of time is to get a small kitchen timer that includes an alarm. If you are going to allocate a time to a task, set the timer and it will alert you when the time has passed. There are many digital kitchen timers available for under \$10 in any housewares store. This is also a great way to make a

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game out of children getting dressed for school or to limit TV or video game time. In the absence of a timer, the countdown function on a sport watch serves the same purpose and is already attached to your wrist.

Vibrating Watches/Clocks

If an audible alert is embarrassing to you or those around you there are some alternatives available. Global Assistive Devices, Inc. markets a watch called Vibralite3™. It costs less than \$50 and looks like an ordinary sport watch that has all of the features that I discussed above with the option of a silent vibrating alert. I keep my Vibralite3™ watch for use on casual days and weekends. I have it set to vibrate every hour as a chime. In addition to the chime, the watch has two separate alarms. I use one alarm to wake me every morning, which is a lifesaver, as I wake up much earlier than my wife does (she would kill me if my alarm sounded audibly too early in the morning). I use the other alarm to remind me to take my final dose of medication before bedtime. The watch is water resistant and has two independent alarms, a chronograph and a repeatable countdown timer. The alarms can be audible, vibrating or both and are accompanied by a short flashing of the backlight.

If your dress code is not casual enough for a sport watch, there is another product available called Watchminder (TM), and marketed by a company of the same name. Watchminder (TM) is a large vibrating watch that can be modified to clip onto your belt. A bit more sophisticated and slightly more difficult to program, it is more a training device than an ordinary watch. It has a training mode in which you can program the device to vibrate at regular intervals with pre-programmed text messages. There is also a reminder mode that can be set to vibrate coupled with pre-programmed text messages to alert you to a variety of tasks. I use my Watchminder (TM) with the belt clip attachment when I am at work or in Court. Clipped onto my belt, it is a little smaller than a beeper. I have it set in training mode to vibrate to remind me of each passing half-hour (to keep me on track) with a pre-programmed message telling me to "Pay ATTN." I also have it programmed to vibrate in "reminder mode" twice during the day. The text messages "Meds1" and "Meds2" are a simple reminder to take my medication. The vibrating alert in reminder mode is noticea-

bly longer than the alert in training mode, so you can distinguish without looking at the unit. You will quickly develop the knack of knowing the time.

PDA's and Computer Alarms

For a more sophisticated tool to conceptualize time passage, I highly recommend the use of a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). I currently use the Visor Deluxe(TM), made by Handspring. On the back of the unit there is an open slot called a Springboard (TM) expansion slot that will accept various expansion modules. There are two inexpensive modules,

each for under \$50, that will add storage capacity and make all of the PDA's alarms vibrate -- the InnoPak/2V(TM) made by InnoGear and the Memory Access(TM) by Remote Solutions. These modules, coupled with varying time management software, can be tremendously useful in managing and quantifying time. Once you are comfortable with the passage of time, a PDA can be a useful tool in implementing traditional time management techniques which I will discuss in another article.

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Extremely Low-Tech

For those of you, like me, who think you may disregard these alarms or vibrations, you have to get creative. Don't be afraid to think low-tech. Think what will get you the result you need, and make it happen. For example, when my son was in day care, I had the responsibility of picking him up at a certain time. As the school was literally across the street, I often disregarded the buzzers and beeps of the various alarms, always thinking I had a "few more minutes." Finally at my wit's end, I got creative and found a low-tech solution. I noticed that my paralegal left my office promptly at 5PM every night. I went to her with an absolute directive. I told her she was not allowed to leave for the day unless she took me with her. She came into my office each day at 5 o'clock and literally pulled me out of the office with her. I never missed a single day after that. Don't be embarrassed about getting other people involved when all else fails. Think about

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how and why you have the difficulty that you do and find a way around it. Trust me, it is a lot easier than it sounds.

As with any coping skill, you must capture the abstract and make it tangible. When you make time a reality, you have made the first giant step toward managing it. The next step is to build on this foundation and develop a system to manage your schedule, and ultimately your life.

Unfortunately, the search for coping skills and tools never ends, but it is a great way to get to know yourself. Remember, the more you learn about yourself, the more you will be able to capitalize on your strengths and work around your weaknesses. Good luck and always remember there are a lot of us out there just like you.☀

Robert Tudisco

Robert M. Tudisco is a practicing attorney in New York. He is also an adult diagnosed with AD/HD. He is a member of the National Board of Directors of ADDA and is active in his local chapter of CHADD. He welcomes comments and questions at Robert@addcopingskills.com.