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Lost in Time

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Let's Talk About Time

How Chronically Busy Therapists (and Clients) Can Learn to Manage Time, Stress, and Adult ADHD

Risa Williams, LMFT



Professional Exchange

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Do you often feel as if you don't have enough time to do the things you need to do? Do you sometimes get so focused on a task that you completely lose track of time? Do you tend to avoid doing things until the last minute? Do you frequently underestimate how long a task will take then feel as if you're racing to complete it?

These are common time-management challenges, and if you're an adult with ADHD it's possible that you experience similar issues on a more frequent basis.

These days, I spend most of my time talking to people about, well, time. I am a licensed therapist who specializes in adult ADHD and time management tools. I'm also the author of three books and the host of a productivity podcast called *The Motivation Mindset*.

We only have so much time each day. So it's incredibly important that we ask ourselves how we actually want to spend it. Not only are many of our clients feeling busier than ever in these post-pandemic times, many therapists are busier than ever and stressed about time, even more than they were a few years ago.

Talking to people about how they manage their time becomes a window into so many other areas of their lives: what they value, what they prioritize, what they wish they could do more of, what they want to do less of, and how they take care of themselves. This can lead not only to bigger conversations about future goals and motivation, but also to insight, inspiration, and action.

Whether you work with clients who experience time-management issues or deal with them in your own life, here are some helpful ways to think about how you spend your time and manage your time-related stress.

Time Management and ADHD

Executive functioning is a set of brain functions related to working memory as well as our ability to sustain focus, prioritize tasks, follow directions, and regulate our emotions and stress levels. These executive functioning skills influence how we manage time as well as our ability to gauge how much time is passing, order and prioritize things we need to do, and

figure out how long tasks will take us to finish. ADHD is often associated with executive function issues.

A 2021 study done by the teaching hospital at Charles University in Prague found “evidence that suggests that differences in time perception are a central symptom in adults with ADHD. Some of these differences include the feeling of time moving faster, which causes difficulties in prospective time tasks and inaccuracies in time estimation tasks” (Weissenberger, et al., 2021).

An ADHD diagnosis requires having five or more ADHD symptoms for longer than six months that can be assessed by a doctor or a psychiatrist. For people who have been given an ADHD diagnosis or who suspect they have ADHD, common executive functioning issues include difficulty controlling impulses or emotions, problems with organizing and planning, difficulty focusing on tasks and sustaining attention, losing objects and forgetting things, and difficulty prioritizing tasks.

In a study done at Waseda University in Japan, “Evidence also indicates that people with more serious ADHD symptoms experience *more procrastination as well as internalizing symptoms*” (Oguchi, et al., 2021). And in a study done at the University of Göttingen in Germany, researchers gave two participant groups—one with ADHD and one without ADHD—a stress test and discovered that “[c]onsistent with our assumptions in regard to the psychological stress response, the ADHD group experienced significantly greater subjective stress” (Lackschewitz, et al., 2008).

In other words, if you're an adult with ADHD, you may be experiencing time-management issues. You may also be feeling the accompanying stress more intensely than those without ADHD.

Our ability to measure time, track time as it's happening, and predict how long things will take is often directly related to how stressed out we're feeling. In a study done at UC Davis, researchers found that stress also “impaired working memory and cognitive flexibility.”

Perhaps this “stress load” on our brains is why we sometimes feel as if time is “shrinking” when we're stressed and “expanding” when we feel more relaxed.

Learning to navigate our stress each day can help us feel as if we have more time to do the things we want to do.

Time Management and Stress



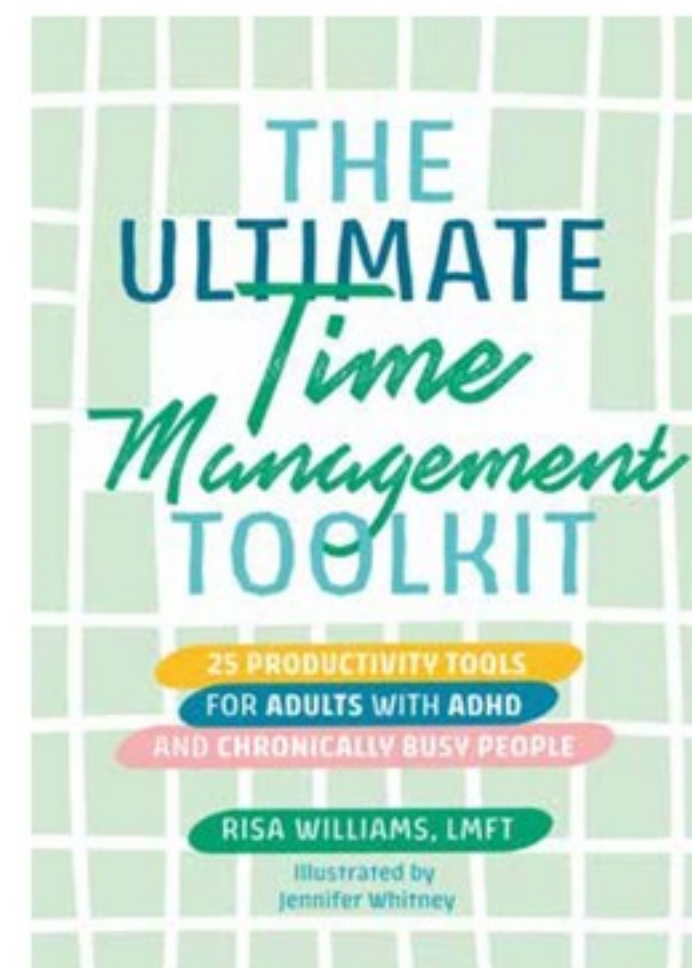
The Stress Ruler

Take a deep breath. Tune into your body and ask yourself, *What level of stress am I feeling right now?*

Our stress goes up and down each day. But we tend not to talk about it until it's already very high and it's become difficult to calm ourselves down. Often, clients will say, “I'm so stressed out, I'm freaking out!” or “My brain is totally fried, and I'm overwhelmed!”

In other words, it can be difficult for people to quantify how stressed out they are not just to others but also to themselves.

Here's a tool that will help you figure out how high your stress is right now. It's called the Stress Ruler, and it's from my book *The Ultimate Anxiety Toolkit*.



Imagine a ruler that goes from 1-10 (1 being the most calm, 10 being the most stressed). Right now, in this moment, what number are you?

Most people don't spend long periods of time at a 1 or a 10, they go up and down the ruler throughout the day. Clients will often say they are somewhere in the middle, where they feel some level of stress but can "brush it off" or "still stay focused" on what they need to do.

In using the ruler, start to notice what it feels like in both your brain and your body when your stress level is at different notches. Then think about how you appear on the outside when you are experiencing those different levels.

Some clients tell me that even when they're at an 8 they still look very "calm and quiet" on the outside while feeling "tense and uncomfortable" on the inside. Other clients will say at an 8 they're "very short-tempered" and visibly acting "stressed out." Different levels of stress look different from person to person.

In this way, people can use the tool to identify their stress level in the moment and communicate it to others more effectively.

From 5-10 is what I call "the red zone." Each person has a tipping-point number in that range where, if they catch their stress at that point, it's easier to bring themselves back down the Stress Ruler one notch at a time. Most people say their tipping point is 7 or 8, but others say 6. If they pass by this point, it becomes much harder to calm themselves down. That's why it's helpful to know where this tipping point is and what it looks and feels like, so they can catch themselves and take steps to lower their stress one notch at a time.

I ask clients to tell me how they know they're at their tipping point. Their answers range widely: "I get more frustrated with little things," "I skip meals because I'm racing through tasks," "I don't want to talk to people at all," and "I lose my sense of humor completely" are common responses.

Ask yourself right now: What do you look like at your tipping point, and how do you know

you're there? What do other people tend to notice about you when you're at your tipping point? And then, what can you do to bring yourself down one notch at a time?

This is when we can introduce stress-reduction strategies such as breathing techniques, grounding exercises, meditation, and mindfulness. We can also ask clients to write down the things they like to do that actively bring their stress down. For example, a client recently said, "When I got to a 7 yesterday, I remembered to do the box breathing you taught me a month ago." We can reinforce how the client can use these two tools together as a stress-reduction strategy going forward.

So now that we have a general way to quantify our stress levels each day, how can we apply this to our time management?



The Task Intensity Meter

I have a tool called The Task Intensity Meter that people can use to rate tasks based on how stressful they are to complete. It works especially well for clients with ADHD, but I find it's an effective tool for most people these days, as many of us are chronically busy and juggling many tasks and responsibilities.

Imagine a meter that has three settings—Low, Middle, and High—that correspond to how intense it feels for you to do a task right now. As an example, let's use a task that you have to do each week, such as doing the laundry. How stressful is this task for you? Thinking right now about doing laundry, are you at a low level of stress, a middle level of stress, or a high level of stress? Where are you on the meter?

When I teach this tool at workshops, I use something like doing laundry as an example and ask people what level of stress that weekly task holds for them. The answers are typically all over the place. Many people rate it a high-intensity task and then are surprised to learn that many others in the room find it stressful, as well. In this way, the Task Intensity Meter helps normalize how stressful everyday tasks are for many of us.

We should never assume how stressful tasks are for other people, we have to ask them to find out. Stress levels are different for each of us, and different each day, depending on how much mental and physical energy we have and our other responsibilities.

Start out by rating small everyday tasks and then move on to bigger tasks and projects you want to complete. Where on the Task Intensity Meter would you rate writing client notes or doing other work-related tasks? Using this tool asks people to think about how the tasks they're doing each day affect their stress levels and emotional states, and to order them in a less intense way.

Too Many Tasks in a Row

The order of tasks is just as important to consider as their intensity. After using this tool for many years, I've found that people tend to have a very unrealistic expectation of the number of high-intensity tasks they can accomplish in a day. For clients prone to hyper-focusing, this expectation can be extreme, as going into "hyper-focus mode" makes them feel as if they can push through a large quantity of stressful tasks. But when we "push through" a series of high-intensity tasks, it can have a negative impact on our body and our emotional state. And if we're doing this on a chronic basis, we can feel burned-out, overwhelmed, and exhausted.

When we stress ourselves out by putting too many high-intensity tasks on our plate, we may also release cortisol and adrenaline into our system. These stress hormones can stay in our body for several hours (Hannibal & Bishop, 2014), which means it may then take hours to bring ourselves back down the Stress Ruler.

So how do we avoid doing this to ourselves?

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Planning Our Days

Start by using the Task Intensity Meter to rate the tasks you have to do today. Then look at the high-intensity tasks ahead. Can you order them or space them out in a way that will reduce the stress load on your brain? Can you add in long enough breaks between the high-intensity tasks to bring your stress down?

Here are some example situations:

If you're a busy parent who has just raced your kids from school to activities all afternoon, can you allow yourself some downtime to reset before you launch right into cooking dinner?

If you're a professional with many projects due, can you space out working on them by putting some low-intensity tasks in between the blocks of high-intensity tasks you need to do?

If you're a therapist who has just had a long day of back-to-back clients, what break can you take to lower your stress before you begin to tackle your responsibilities at home?

Using these two tools, the Stress Ruler and the Task Intensity Meter, helps us predict our future levels of stress and prioritize our daily tasks in a less stressful way. They help us figure out how much energy we have and how we can make adjustments accordingly to lighten the stress load on our brain and our body.

This is how we can show more kindness to ourselves throughout everyday life. Each week, we can give ourselves the feeling of "stretching out" time rather than the feeling of "shrinking" it with stress. ☯



Risa Williams is an award-winning author and a licensed therapist who specializes in time management tools. Her self-help books, The Ultimate Anxiety Toolkit, The Ultimate Time

Management Toolkit, and The Ultimate Self-Esteem Toolkit (JKP Books), have been published in five different languages. Risa is also a psychology professor in Los Angeles,

“ We should never assume how stressful tasks are for other people, we have to ask them to find out. Stress levels are different for each of us, and different each day, depending on how much mental and physical energy we have and our other responsibilities. ”

she runs online stress-reduction workshops for therapists and health care professionals, and she is the host of the podcast The Motivation Mindset. You can learn more at risawilliams.com or [@risawilliamstherapy](https://www.instagram.com/risawilliamstherapy).

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