

TOOLKIT · VERSION 1

Executive Function Toolkit

Externalize the brain. Reduce friction. Protect attention.

How to use this toolkit

Skim once, then choose one practice to try this week. Toolkits are living documents — mark them up, share them with your team, and revisit as your needs evolve.

Overview

Executive function is the set of mental skills that help us plan, start, sustain, switch, and finish tasks. For many neurodivergent people, these skills are uneven — strong in some areas, fragile in others, and easily depleted by stress, sensory load, or unclear environments.

Why it matters

When environments demand sustained working memory and self-monitoring without external scaffolds, capable people look unreliable. Adding visible structure — timers, lists, checklists, body-doubling — often produces dramatic gains without changing the person at all.

Research summary

Meta-analyses across ADHD and autism populations consistently show executive function differences in working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Snyder, Miyake, & Hankin, 2015; Demetriou et al., 2018). Interventions that externalize cognition — visual schedules, implementation intentions, and environmental redesign — outperform willpower-based approaches.

Practical strategies

Start the task

- Shrink the first step until it feels almost embarrassing (“open the document”).
- Use a 2-minute starter timer; permission to stop after.
- Body-double in person or over video for activation energy.

Sustain attention

- Pomodoro 25/5 or 50/10 — pick what holds, not what looks productive.
- Single-tab discipline: close everything not part of this task.
- Pair boring tasks with a sensory anchor (music, fidget, walk).

Switch & finish

- Write the next first step before you stop — future-you needs the handoff.
- End-of-day brain dump to clear working memory.
- Weekly review: what landed, what slid, what gets renegotiated.

Ready-to-use scripts & worksheets

Daily anchor template

Morning: one priority • one meeting prep • one body care

Afternoon: one deep work block • one admin sweep

Evening: shutdown ritual • tomorrow's first step on paper

Recommended lessons & next steps

- Lesson: Executive Function Foundations — understandingneurodiversity.org/start-here
- Conditions: ADHD, Autism, Brain Injury — </conditions>
- Workplace Toolkit — </workplace>

Selected references & further reading

- Snyder HR, Miyake A, Hankin BL. *Advancing understanding of executive function impairments and psychopathology*. *Front Psychol*. 2015.
- Demetriou EA, et al. *Autism spectrum disorders: a meta-analysis of executive function*. *Mol Psychiatry*. 2018.
- Barkley RA. *Executive Functions: What They Are, How They Work, and Why They Evolved*. Guilford, 2012.

Ask the AI Companion

Visit understandingneurodiversity.org/companion to ask follow-up questions about **Executive Function Toolkit**. The Companion will recommend lessons, conditions, and research tailored to your role.