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Executive Dysfunction

By Kelly Rabin

Have you ever seen a tweet or meme that completely hit home? One popped up for me the other day that had been tweeted by @A_Silent_Child and shared on Facebook by The ADHD Gift:

Executive Dysfunction looks like:

I sit down to do my homework. I decide I need water first. I go get water. While I'm drinking water I realize I haven't had breakfast. I stick toast in the toaster. I go to the restroom. I decide the dishwasher needs to be unloaded.

I unload three dishes, then notice dust on the floor. I sweep the entire floor. I notice the clean clothes hamper. I put away a pair of socks. While I'm putting away the socks I see my medication and remember I need to take it. I need food to do that. My toast is now cold.

I put it back in to warm. I remember I was supposed to do homework. I debate for the next 30 seconds if I should start now or after my toast is done. Then my toast is done. I spend the next 30 min eating. And then it's been two hours and I still haven't done any homework.

About halfway through reading this I realized that my life can at times bear some resemblance to Laura Numeroff's children's book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. Yet I'm a successful, competent professional. Here are some tips I have learned along the way that may be useful to you.

1. WRITE IT DOWN

You must make lists. I learned in a time management course a few years ago that it is better to have one master list for all things in your life, vs. one for work, one for home, and so on. I keep an "all-in to-do list" in a note on my cellphone. I have separate sections for home, work and volunteer activities, but it's still all in one document so that I can easily skim what I need to do. If



something pops into my head as a need-to-do, I quickly add it to the list. If something has a due date, I note that too. I'm sure there are fancier, app-based solutions for this, but this works for me because it's quick and simple. Otherwise, I can easily get sucked into the black hole of spending all my time getting perfectly organized.

2. PLAN YOUR DAY

At the start of each day, I look at my list and decide which items I am planning to work on that day. It's important to do this so that you are able to move items forward that are important but not urgent. Otherwise, you are likely to bounce from email to email and not move forward on tasks that require more creativity or longer focus (such as writing this article!). Schedule times for work on your calendar and specifically identify which tasks you are going to work on at those times.

3. DON'T LET EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STEAL ALL YOUR PRECIOUS TIME

Skim your email throughout the day for urgent items if you're in a role where that's the expectation (I try not to let client emails sit unread all day), but avoid reading and responding to most messages until a scheduled time if you can. I use my email software to flag emails that need responses or actions, and then I add them to my to-do list so that I don't let them slip through the cracks. I also filter on flagged items at least once a week to make sure I haven't missed something. I save social media for times when I need a brain break, but I set an alarm. This keeps me from finding myself still scrolling hours later.

4. GIVE YOUR BRAIN A LITTLE DISTRACTION

Sometimes when I am trying to focus on something, the endless chatter in my brain about all the other things I need or want to be doing can be challenging. I find that listening to music through headphones can help, but it has to be the right kind of music—nothing that will get me too sucked in! Various music streaming services offer playlists to encourage focus; those have been my go-to lately.

5. FIND AN ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER

Is there someone in your life to whom you can report out and talk through challenges? I have a coach I use for this purpose, but it could easily be a spouse, coworker or friend.

If your accountability partner is not a professional, I find it's helpful if it's someone who also could benefit from accountability. If your partner is someone to whom this all comes really easily, they are likely going to get frustrated with you and not understand why you can't "just do it." Professional therapy may also be helpful, even just a session through your company's employee assistance program, to help you develop tactics tailored to your needs.

6. DON'T LET PERFECT BE THE ENEMY OF GOOD

Most actuaries do high-quality work by nature, and the challenge is to turn off the perfectionistic tendencies that hold us back from even getting started. When I get stuck and it's hard to put pen to paper (or hands to keyboard, as it were), I like to use my phone's talk-to-text capabilities so I can get my ideas out of my head into a format I can work with. It's also important to think through your priorities. Which is worse, missing that deadline or handing in work that is B quality vs. the A-plus you

might prefer? Odds are, your stakeholders will have input for you to incorporate, so you are better off sharing a draft earlier in the process anyway. Give people something to react to.

7. WHEN DISTRACTED, BEGIN AGAIN

In the course of writing this article, my children have interrupted me at least three times (thank you very much, COVID-19 homeschooling). I used to get really worked up and frustrated when I would lose my precious focus, but the truth is, distractions are going to happen. Your boss may stop by your desk with a question. You may be in and out of meetings all day. The better you can get at resetting yourself and turning your mind back to the task at hand, the more productive you will be. It's just another form of mindfulness practice. I actually picture in my mind my eyes turning away from looking out the window back to my computer screen. It gets easier the more you do it.

8. GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

You are amazing and you can do this. Executive dysfunction may be your kryptonite at times, but you have other superpowers. I excel at keeping many balls in the air because my brain wants to do it all—I just have to harness that energy. Catch yourself doing something right. Celebrate checking that item off your to-do list, no matter how small. It's all about building mastery.

For the times when it isn't going well (because it won't always), learn to laugh at yourself. Learning that the challenges I've had my whole life actually have a name and that a lot of other smart people struggle too has helped me. When I find my life resembling the earlier tweet (most recent example being forgetting about piles of laundry because my husband asked me a question about our Hello Fresh delivery), being able to shake my head and say "Yup, there's that executive dysfunction again" helps me accept what is and move on to problem solving, rather than beating myself up about my deficiencies. Shame is not a solution!

Have a particular situation where executive dysfunction is tripping you up? I'm happy to be your sounding board. Email me at kelly@rabinadvisors.com. ■



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