



YOU'RE NOT BROKEN

UNDERSTANDING THE ADHD BRAIN

carriedavidson.com/coaching

EBOOK

“The Ferrari Brain with Bicycle Brakes”

If you have ADHD, you might recognize this feeling: your brain is incredibly fast, creative, and capable of making connections that others miss. You can hyperfocus for hours on something that lights you up. You notice details, feel things deeply, and when you're in your zone, you're unstoppable.

But then there's the other side.

The part where you can't seem to start the simplest task. Where time disappears or drags on forever. Where you walk into a room and forget why you're there, or you say "yes" to everything and then feel crushed by the weight of it all. Where you feel like you're letting people down, including yourself, over and over again.

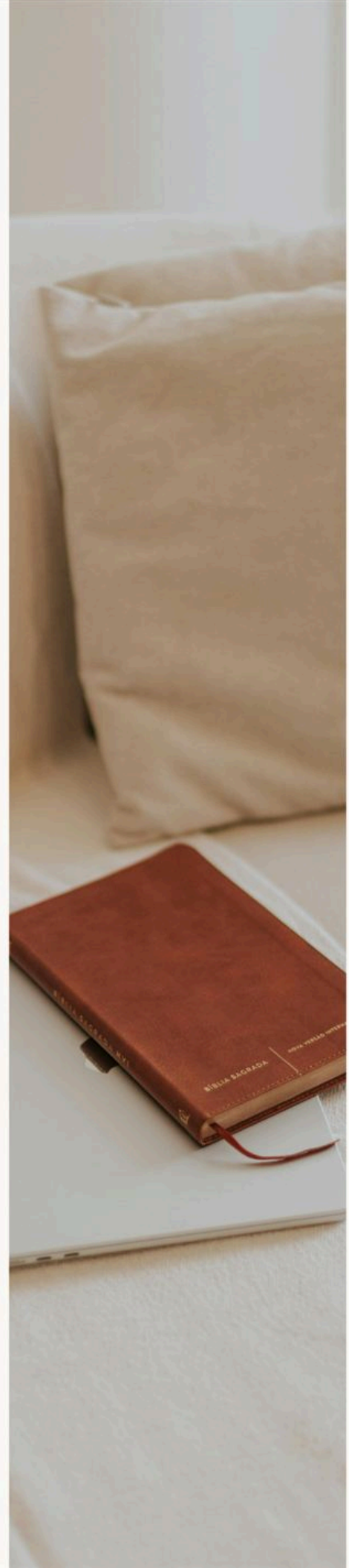
HERE'S THE TRUTH:

You're not broken.

You have what Dr Edward Hallowell calls a "Ferrari brain with bicycle brakes." Your brain is powerful, fast, and capable of incredible things. But the braking system, the part that helps you slow down, plan, prioritize, and stop when you need to, doesn't quite match the engine.

And that's not your fault.

It's not a character flaw. It's not laziness, carelessness, or a lack of discipline. It's a difference in how your brain is wired, particularly in the systems that manage dopamine (the brain chemical that helps with motivation, reward, and focus) and executive functions (the mental skills that help you plan, organize, start tasks, manage time, and regulate emotions).





ADHD Is Not a Moral Failing

For too long, people with ADHD have been told, directly or indirectly, that they just need to "try harder," "be more organized," or "stop being so sensitive." But ADHD isn't about effort. It's about brain chemistry and structure.

The ADHD brain has lower levels of dopamine and norepinephrine, which means that tasks that feel boring, unclear, or unrewarding can feel almost impossible to start or sustain. The parts of the brain responsible for executive functions, like the prefrontal cortex, develop more slowly and work differently in people with ADHD.

This means that things other people find "simple" can feel monumentally hard for you. Not because you're not smart or capable, but because your brain is working with a different operating system.

WHAT ARE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS?

Executive functions are the mental skills that help us navigate daily life. Think of them as the brain's management system. They include:

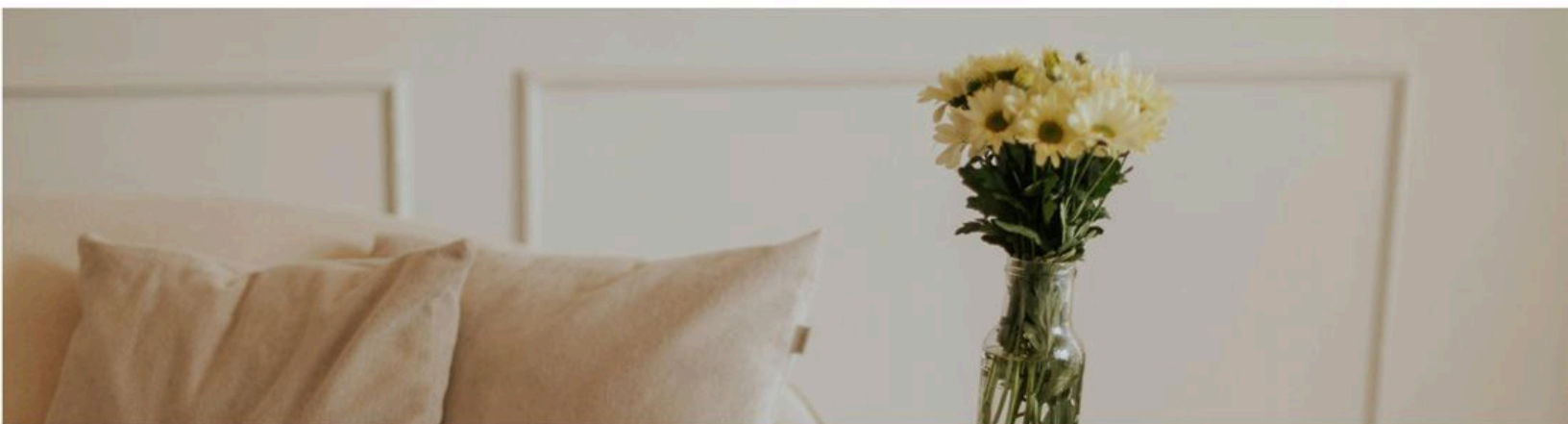
	Task Initiation	Starting a task, even when it feels hard or boring.
	Planning & Organization	Breaking big tasks into steps, keeping track of materials and information.
	Time Management	Estimating how long things will take, keeping track of time, meeting deadlines.
	Working Memory	Holding information in your mind while you use it (like remembering instructions or keeping track of what you're doing).
	Flexibility	Shifting between tasks or adjusting when plans change.

	Emotional Regulation	Managing your emotional responses, especially when things feel overwhelming or unfair.
	Self-Monitoring	Noticing how you're doing and adjusting your behavior accordingly.

When these executive functions are working smoothly, life feels manageable. You start tasks without too much resistance. You keep track of your commitments. You adjust when things change. You don't spiral when someone gives you feedback.

But for people with ADHD, these functions are often inconsistent. They work beautifully in some contexts, especially when there's urgency, novelty, or personal interest, and then completely disappear in others.

And that inconsistency can feel confusing and painful. You might think, "I can do this sometimes, so why can't I do it now?" But that's the nature of ADHD. It's not that you don't want to do things. It's that your brain's management system is unpredictable.



You Are Not Alone

If you've spent years feeling like you're "too much" and "not enough" at the same time, you're not alone. If you've been labeled as lazy, chaotic, over-sensitive, or unreliable, you're not alone. If you've internalized those messages and carry shame about who you are, you're not alone.

This ebook is here to help you understand what's actually happening in your brain, to give you language for your experience, and to support you in building strategies that work for you, not against you.

You're not broken. You're wired differently. And with the right understanding and support, you can work with your brain, not against it.



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EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS & EVERYDAY LIFE

Why It Feels So Hard

Now that we've introduced the idea of executive functions, let's break them down one by one. For each function, we'll explore what it looks like when it's working well, what it looks like when ADHD makes it harder, and how you can start to notice where these challenges show up in your own life.

This isn't about fixing yourself. It's about understanding yourself. And from that understanding, you'll be able to build strategies that actually work.

Task Initiation



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You think of something you need to do, and you just... do it. You don't overthink it. You don't wait for the "right mood." You start, even if it's imperfect



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

You know exactly what you need to do. You want to do it. But you just... can't. You sit there, paralyzed, scrolling your phone or staring into space. The task feels too big, too vague, or too boring. The longer you don't start, the more shame builds up, which makes it even harder to begin.

You might procrastinate until the last possible moment, when urgency finally gives your brain the dopamine hit it needs to move. Or you might avoid the task altogether and then feel terrible about it later.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where starting a task felt really hard?

What was I thinking or feeling just before I got stuck?

Planning & Organization



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You can break a big project into smaller steps. You know what materials you need and where to find them. You can keep track of multiple moving parts without losing the thread.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

Everything feels like it needs to happen all at once. You start ten things and finish none of them. Your space is cluttered because you can't figure out where things "belong." You lose track of important papers, keys, or appointments. You agree to commitments without thinking through what they'll actually require.

You might have a dozen half-finished projects scattered around your home, each one started with enthusiasm and then abandoned when something more interesting came along.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where planning or organizing felt overwhelming?

What would have helped me feel less scattered in that moment?

Time Management



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You have a realistic sense of how long tasks will take. You build in buffer time. You show up on time (or close to it). You don't feel constantly rushed or panicked.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

Time feels slippery. You think something will take 10 minutes, and it takes an hour. Or you have "plenty of time," and suddenly you're late. You either underestimate or wildly overestimate how long things will take.

You might hyperfocus on one thing and completely lose track of time, missing appointments or meals. Or you might spend hours doing "just one more thing" and wonder where your day went.

Deadlines feel either irrelevant or terrifying. You work best under pressure, but the pressure is exhausting.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where time felt confusing or unmanageable?

Do I tend to underestimate or overestimate how long things will take?

Working Memory



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You can hold information in your mind while you use it. You remember what someone just told you. You keep track of what you're doing, even if you're interrupted. You can follow multi-step instructions without needing to re-read them.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

You walk into a room and forget why you're there. Someone gives you instructions, and by the time they're finished, you've forgotten the first part. You start a sentence and lose track of what you were saying mid-thought.

You might forget to reply to texts, even when you care about the person. You might agree to something and then completely forget about it. You might have a brilliant idea and then lose it seconds later.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where my working memory let me down?

How do I usually cope when I forget something important?

Flexibility (Task Switching)



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You can shift smoothly between tasks. When plans change, you adjust without too much distress. You can let go of one thing and move on to the next.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

You either get stuck on one thing and can't shift away from it, or you bounce between tasks so quickly that nothing gets finished. Transitions feel jarring. Interruptions feel personally offensive. When plans change, it can feel like the whole day is ruined.

You might struggle to "switch gears" between work and home, or between different types of tasks. Or you might be so distractible that you can't stick with anything long enough to make progress.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where shifting between tasks felt hard?

Am I more likely to get stuck or to bounce around?

Emotional Regulation



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You feel your emotions, but they don't completely overwhelm you. You can pause before reacting. You can recover from disappointment or frustration without spiralling. You can hold space for complexity, feeling angry and understanding why someone did what they did.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

Your emotions feel huge and immediate. Small frustrations can feel like catastrophes. Criticism, even gentle feedback, can send you into a shame spiral. You might snap at people you care about, or shut down completely. You might feel things so intensely that it's hard to think clearly.

You might also struggle with boredom, which can feel almost painful. Or you might feel emotions so deeply that you avoid situations where you might feel vulnerable.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where my emotions felt overwhelming?

How did I respond in that moment? What do I wish I could have done differently?

Self-Monitoring



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S WORKING WELL

You notice when you're getting tired, hungry, overstimulated, or off-track. You can check in with yourself and adjust. You notice your own patterns and learn from them.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ADHD MAKES IT HARDER

You don't notice you're hungry until you're starving. You don't realize you're overwhelmed until you're melting down. You keep pushing through exhaustion until you crash. You struggle to notice when something isn't working and adjust course.

You might also have a hard time noticing how you're coming across to others, which can lead to misunderstandings or social friction.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where does this show up in my life?

What is one situation this week where I didn't notice something about myself until it was too late?

What are the early warning signs that I'm getting overwhelmed or depleted?



Why This Matters

Understanding executive functions helps you see that your struggles aren't personal failures. They're predictable challenges that come with having an ADHD brain.

And here's the important part: the strategies in the next sections are not one-size-fits-all. They're a menu. You'll pick and choose what works for your specific executive function patterns. You'll experiment, adjust, and build your own system.

You're not trying to become someone else. You're trying to understand yourself well enough to work with your brain, not against it.



YOU'RE NOT BROKEN

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COACHING THROUGH THE BIG FEELINGS

Emotional Regulation & RSD

Let's talk about something that doesn't always make it into ADHD conversations, but is one of the most painful parts of living with ADHD: emotional regulation and Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD).

If you've ever been told you're "too sensitive," "too emotional," or "overreacting," this section is for you.

Emotional Regulation Is an Executive Function

First, let's be clear: emotional regulation is not a character flaw. It's an executive function, just like task initiation or time management. And like all executive functions, it's harder for people with ADHD.

Emotional regulation is your brain's ability to:

Notice and name what you're feeling.

Pause before reacting.

Match your emotional response to the situation (rather than going from 0 to 100 instantly).

Recover from big feelings without spiraling or shutting down.

For people with ADHD, emotions often feel more intense and harder to manage. That's because the same brain differences that affect focus and organization also affect how you process and respond to emotions.

Your nervous system might be more reactive. Your brain might have a harder time "putting the brakes on" a big emotional response. And because of years of criticism, misunderstanding, and shame, you might have learned to either suppress your feelings or feel completely overwhelmed by them.

WHAT IS REJECTION SENSITIVE DYSPHORIA (RSD)?

RSD is a term used to describe the intense emotional pain that many people with ADHD feel in response to perceived or actual rejection, criticism, or disappointment.

It's not just "feeling bad" when someone criticizes you. It's a visceral, physical, overwhelming response that can feel like your world is ending.

RSD can show up as:

- **Intense shame or self-loathing** after making a mistake or receiving feedback.
- **Rage or defensiveness** when you feel criticized, even if the criticism is gentle or constructive.
- **Shutdown or withdrawal** when you think someone is disappointed in you.
- **Over-pleasing or people-pleasing** to avoid any possibility of rejection.
- **Avoidance** of situations where you might fail, be judged, or let someone down.

RSD can make relationships, work, and daily life feel exhausting. You might constantly scan for signs that people are upset with you. You might replay conversations over and over, looking for evidence that you did something wrong. You might avoid taking risks because the fear of failure feels unbearable.

WHY DOES RSD HAPPEN?

We're still learning about the exact mechanisms of RSD, but we know a few things:

The ADHD brain is more sensitive to emotional stimuli, especially negative ones.

Many people with ADHD have experienced years of criticism, misunderstanding, and feeling "not good enough," which creates deep wounds around rejection.

The brain's dopamine system, which is already different in ADHD, is also involved in how we process social rewards and punishments.

In short: RSD is not you being "too sensitive." It's your brain responding intensely to something it perceives as a threat to your social or emotional safety.

HOW NERVOUS SYSTEM DYSREGULATION SHOWS UP

When your nervous system is dysregulated, when it's stuck in "fight, flight, freeze, or fawn" mode, it's hard to think clearly, respond calmly, or feel safe.

Here's what dysregulation can look like:



FIGHT

You snap at people.
You feel rage. You argue or defend yourself intensely, even when the situation doesn't call for it.



FLIGHT

You want to escape.
You leave the room, avoid the conversation, or distract yourself with something else.



FREEZE

You shut down. You can't speak, can't think, can't move.
Everything feels heavy and impossible.



FAWN

You over-apologize, over-explain, or over-please to try to make things okay again.

None of these responses are wrong. They're your nervous system trying to protect you. But they can make it hard to navigate relationships, work, and life in a way that feels good.

THE GOAL ISN'T TO STOP HAVING BIG FEELINGS

Here's what we're not trying to do: turn you into a calm, unemotional robot. Your emotional intensity is part of who you are. It's connected to your empathy, your passion, your creativity, and your ability to care deeply.

The goal is to help you:



- Feel more safe in your own emotional experience.
- Build more self-trust that you can handle difficult feelings without being destroyed by them.
- Create more choice in how you respond, rather than feeling hijacked by your emotions.

Coaching Questions for Emotional Regulation & RSD

These questions are designed to help you start noticing your patterns and experimenting with small shifts.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PATTERNS

How do you usually respond when you think someone is disappointed in you?

What does RSD feel like in your body? (e.g., tight chest, hot face, sinking feeling, etc.)

When you're emotionally overwhelmed, do you tend to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn?

What situations or types of feedback tend to trigger the biggest emotional responses for you?

BUILDING SELF-COMPASSION

What would a 2% kinder response to yourself look like in those moments?

If a friend came to you feeling the way you feel right now, what would you say to them?

What's one small thing you could do to remind yourself that you're safe, even when you feel criticized?

Grounding & Regulation Practices

Here are some simple, low-barrier practices you can experiment with when you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed:

BREATHING

Try "box breathing": breathe in for 4, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, hold for 4. Repeat a few times.

SENSORY ANCHORS

Hold something cold (like an ice cube), smell something strong (like peppermint oil), or wrap yourself in a weighted blanket or soft fabric.

MOVEMENT

Shake your hands, stretch, go for a quick walk, or do a few jumping jacks to help release the physical tension.

SCRIPTED SELF-TALK

Have a few go-to phrases ready, like "I'm safe," "This feeling will pass," or "I'm allowed to make mistakes."

EXTERNALIZE IT

Write down what you're feeling, voice-memo yourself, or text a trusted friend. Getting it out of your head can help.

AFTER THE STORM

What did I need in that moment that I didn't have?

What helped, even a little bit?

What do I want to remember for next time?



A Note on Repair

If you've snapped at someone, shut down, or responded in a way you regret, that's okay. You're not a bad person. You're a person with a nervous system that sometimes gets overwhelmed.

Repair is possible. You can come back later and say, "I was overwhelmed and I didn't respond the way I wanted to. I'm sorry." You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be willing to come back.





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THE CORE *ADHD* STRATEGY TOOLKIT

Now that we've explored why things feel hard, let's talk about what can actually help.

These are not rigid rules. They're tools you can experiment with, adapt, and personalize. The goal is to find what works for your brain, your life, and your patterns.

STRATEGY

01

The Dopamine Menu



What It Is

A Dopamine Menu is a pre-made list of activities that give your brain a small, quick hit of dopamine, the neurochemical that helps with motivation, focus, and reward.

Think of it as a menu at a restaurant. When you're stuck, bored, or need a little boost, you don't have to figure out what to do in the moment (which is hard when your brain is already low on dopamine). You just pick something from the menu.



Why It Works for ADHD Brains

ADHD brains are constantly seeking dopamine. That's why you might find yourself scrolling your phone, snacking mindlessly, or jumping between tasks. Your brain is trying to find something that feels rewarding.

A Dopamine Menu gives your brain intentional options for getting that dopamine boost, rather than relying on habits that might not serve you (like doomscrolling or impulsive spending).



HOW TO USE IT

You can use your Dopamine Menu in two main ways:

- **To get unstuck before a task:** If you're struggling to start something, pick a quick dopamine activity first to "prime" your brain.
- **To reward effort (not just outcomes):** After you do something hard, even if you didn't finish it, pick something from your menu as a reward.



BUILDING YOUR DOPAMINE MENU

Your menu should include:



QUICK WINS

(UNDER 2 MINUTES)

A favorite song, stretching, a quick walk around the block, texting a friend, petting your dog, making a cup of tea.



MEDIUM ACTIVITIES

(5-15 MINUTES)

A favorite YouTube video, a puzzle, drawing, tidying one small area, a shower or bath.



LONGER TREATS

(WHEN YOU HAVE TIME)

A favorite show, a hobby, time with a friend, a walk in nature, a workout.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

What small things reliably make you feel 5% better?

What could you put on your menu that takes less than 2 minutes?

When was the last time you felt a little boost of joy or energy? What were you doing?

What do you currently do when you're stuck that you'd like to replace with something more intentional?

Body Doubling



What It Is

Body doubling is when you do a task alongside another person, either in the same room or virtually. You don't have to be working on the same thing. You just need another person's presence to help anchor your focus.



Why It Works for ADHD Brains

For many people with ADHD, the presence of another person provides just enough external structure and accountability to help them start and sustain focus. It's not about pressure or performance, it's about creating a gentle container for your attention.

Body doubling can also help reduce the feeling of isolation that often comes with ADHD. You're not alone in the hard thing. Someone else is there, doing their own hard thing, and that can feel surprisingly supportive.



DIFFERENT FORMATS FOR BODY DOUBLING

- **In-person co-working:** Meet a friend at a café, library, or each other's homes and work side by side.
- **Virtual co-working / focus calls:** Set up a video call with a friend or join an online body doubling group. You can stay on mute and just have each other's presence.
- **Asynchronous accountability:** Text a friend and say, "I'm going to work on X for the next hour. I'll check in with you when I'm done." Knowing someone is expecting an update can help you stay on track.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

Who in your life feels safe enough to body double with?



What's one small task you could try body doubling on this week?

Do you prefer in-person, virtual, or asynchronous body doubling? (Or a mix?)

What would make body doubling feel less intimidating for you?



The 10-Minute Micro-Start



What It Is

The 10-Minute Micro-Start is a way to break through overwhelm and perfectionism by committing to work on something for just 10 minutes.

You're not committing to finishing the task. You're not even committing to making significant progress. You're just committing to starting, and seeing what happens.



Why It Works for ADHD Brains

ADHD brains often struggle with task initiation because tasks feel too big, too vague, or too boring. The gap between "not doing it" and "doing it perfectly" feels impossible to cross.

The 10-Minute Micro-Start lowers the stakes. It makes the task feel more manageable. And once you've started, you might find that you keep going, or you might not, and that's okay too. The point is that you've broken the paralysis.



HOW TO USE IT

Here's a simple 3-step script:

- **Step 1:** Pick one task. Ideally something small and concrete. (Not "get my life together," but "reply to one email" or "put the dishes in the dishwasher.")
- **Step 2:** Decide on a 10-minute version of it. What would it look like to work on this for just 10 minutes? Set a timer if that helps.
- **Step 3:** Celebrate starting, regardless of how much you got done. Did you work for 10 minutes? That's a win. Did you work for 3 minutes and then stop? Still a win. You broke the paralysis.

COACHING REFLECTION PROMPTS

What task have you been avoiding that could get a 10-minute micro-start?

What thoughts or feelings come up when you think about "only" working for 10 minutes?

How did your body feel before and after those 10 minutes?

What would help you remember that starting is enough, you don't have to finish?





Summary & Next Steps

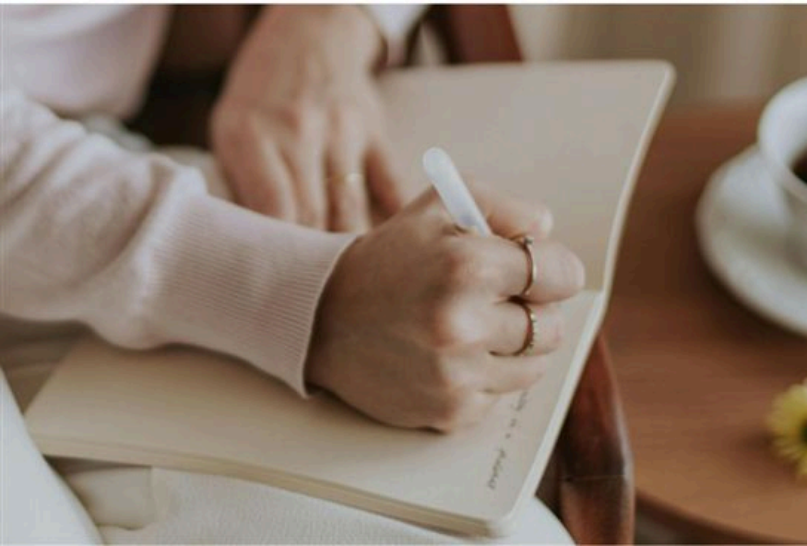
This ebook has walked you through three big ideas:

- ① **You're not broken**
Your ADHD brain is wired differently, especially around executive functions and emotional regulation.
- ② **There are reasons it feels hard**
Once you name the executive function challenges and the impact of RSD, your struggles start to make sense instead of feeling like personal failure.
- ③ **You have tools now**
With the Dopamine Menu, Body Doubling, and the 10-Minute Micro-Start, you've collected practical ways to work with your brain.

You do not have to implement everything at once. In fact, please don't.

Instead, choose:

- ✓ One executive function you want to understand better.
- ✓ One strategy from the toolkit to experiment with.
- ✓ One small energy adjustment you can make next week.



Let this be a living resource you return to, not a test you pass or fail. The goal is not perfection. The goal is a kinder, more spacious relationship with your own brain.

You are allowed to move at your pace. You are allowed to design systems that fit you. And you are allowed to believe, even if just a little bit to start with, that nothing about you has ever been beyond repair.