A POCKET GLOSSARY

The Unofficial *ADHD* Dictionary

139 words for the things you thought only you did.

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How to read this book

Every word comes with a label, so you know where it comes from.

ESTABLISHED Used in psychology or clinical research.

COMMUNITY Widely used in ADHD and neurodivergent spaces.

PLAYFUL A coined or humorous name for a familiar moment.

Many of these moments happen to everyone some of the time. With ADHD, they tend to happen more often, more intensely, and with bigger knock-on effects. A word here describes an experience. A diagnosis comes from a qualified professional.

Read it front to back, or open it anywhere. Then show it to someone and say, “See? It has a name.”

01

Time and productivity

22 words

Time blindness ESTABLISHED

Difficulty accurately perceiving the passage of time.

Executive dysfunction ESTABLISHED

Difficulty with the mental skills that plan, start, organise, and finish tasks. The umbrella term for many of the experiences in this glossary.

Planning fallacy ESTABLISHED

Underestimating how long a task will take, even after past tasks overran. The research cousin of time optimism.

Delay aversion ESTABLISHED

Strongly preferring a smaller reward now over a bigger one later, or avoiding waiting altogether.

Time optimism COMMUNITY

Genuinely believing you can do an unrealistic number of things in a limited time.

ADHD paralysis COMMUNITY

Feeling mentally stuck despite knowing exactly what needs doing.

Task initiation freeze COMMUNITY

Being unable to start, even when you want to.

Wall of Awful COMMUNITY

The emotional barrier of past failures and dread that builds up in front of a task. Coined by ADHD coach Brendan Mahan.

Activation energy COMMUNITY

The disproportionate push needed just to start something, borrowed from chemistry.

Waiting mode COMMUNITY

Feeling unable to do anything productive before an appointment later that day.

Transition friction COMMUNITY

Struggling to switch from one activity to another.

Productive procrastination COMMUNITY

Accomplishing everything except your actual priority.

Deadline dopamine COMMUNITY

Finally finding motivation when a deadline becomes imminent.

The urgency trap COMMUNITY

Only feeling motivated once something becomes urgent.

Side quests COMMUNITY

Getting distracted by unrelated tasks while doing the original one.

Task hopping COMMUNITY

Moving between several unfinished tasks.

Revenge bedtime procrastination COMMUNITY

Staying up late to reclaim personal time despite being exhausted.

Hyperfocus hangover COMMUNITY

The drained, foggy, slightly dehydrated feeling after hours of hyperfocus.

The impossible five-minute task PLAYFUL

A tiny task you've been putting off for weeks.

Leaving-the-house tax PLAYFUL

The 20 minutes lost to keys, phone, wallet, back for the charger, back again for the water bottle.

Just-one-more-thing syndrome PLAYFUL

Squeezing in a final small task before leaving, which is exactly why you're late.

The time warp PLAYFUL

Looking up from "five minutes" of scrolling to find it's been an hour.

02

Attention and memory

20 words

Working memory ESTABLISHED

The brain's sticky note for holding information while you use it. Often stretched thin in ADHD.

Mind wandering ESTABLISHED

Attention drifting away from the task to unrelated thoughts.

Verbal processing COMMUNITY

Needing to talk through thoughts to understand them.

Brain dump COMMUNITY

Getting all your thoughts out of your head and onto paper.

Brain tabs COMMUNITY

Dozens of thoughts running at once, like too many open browser tabs.

Brain buffering COMMUNITY

Needing a moment to process information before responding.

Brain static COMMUNITY

Mental noise that makes it hard to concentrate.

Popcorn brain COMMUNITY

Thoughts constantly popping up and competing for attention.

Thought pinball COMMUNITY

Bouncing rapidly between seemingly unrelated ideas.

Mental rabbit holes COMMUNITY

Getting completely absorbed in researching something unexpected.

Info dumping COMMUNITY

Sharing an enthusiastic, extensive amount of information about an interest.

Conversational side quests COMMUNITY

Going off on several tangents before returning to the original point.

Conversational ping-pong COMMUNITY

Jumping between topics through rapid associations.

Thought evaporation COMMUNITY

Losing your train of thought mid-sentence.

Blurting COMMUNITY

Saying the thought the moment it arrives, often over someone else, because it might vanish otherwise.

The mental screenshot PLAYFUL

Thinking you'll remember something without writing it down.

The holding pattern PLAYFUL

Gripping a thought so hard while waiting for your turn to speak that you stop hearing the conversation.

The paragraph loop PLAYFUL

Reading the same paragraph five times without absorbing a word.

The doorway reset PLAYFUL

Walking into a room and forgetting why. Researchers have studied this as the "doorway effect".

Shower genius PLAYFUL

Your best ideas arriving only when you can't write them down.

03

Motivation and dopamine

18 words

Hyperfocus ESTABLISHED

Becoming so immersed that other needs and responsibilities fade into the background.

Novelty seeking ESTABLISHED

A temperament trait: being drawn to new, varied, and intense experiences.

Interest-based nervous system COMMUNITY

A popular framework (from psychiatrist William Dodson) describing motivation driven by interest, novelty, challenge, and urgency.

Hyperfixation COMMUNITY

Becoming intensely absorbed in a particular interest.

Dopamine chasing COMMUNITY

Seeking stimulating, rewarding, or novel experiences.

Dopamine menu COMMUNITY

A personalised list of enjoyable, stimulating activities.

Dopamine dressing COMMUNITY

Wearing colourful or expressive clothes because they lift your mood.

Dopamine shopping COMMUNITY

Shopping for the excitement of buying something.

Boredom intolerance COMMUNITY

Finding understimulation particularly uncomfortable.

Hobby hopping COMMUNITY

Moving enthusiastically from one hobby to another.

Shiny object syndrome COMMUNITY

Abandoning a current plan the moment a newer, more exciting idea appears.

Doomscrolling COMMUNITY

Scrolling endlessly, long after it stopped being enjoyable.

Novelty honeymoon PLAYFUL

The initial excitement of a new project, routine, or interest.

The novelty cliff PLAYFUL

The sudden loss of motivation once something stops feeling new.

Hobby graveyard PLAYFUL

The supplies from previously abandoned interests.

The starter-kit trap PLAYFUL

Buying every piece of equipment for a hobby before trying it once.

The parcel high PLAYFUL

The delivery being more exciting than the thing inside it.

App honeymoon PLAYFUL

Downloading a new planner app with total conviction, then never opening it after day four.

04
Emotions and relationships

20 words

Emotional dysregulation ESTABLISHED

Difficulty managing the intensity and duration of emotions. Increasingly recognised as a core part of ADHD.

Emotional flooding ESTABLISHED

Feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of an emotion.

Impostor phenomenon ESTABLISHED

Feeling like a fraud despite evidence of competence. Often called impostor syndrome.

Justice sensitivity ESTABLISHED

Strong, lasting reactions to unfairness, whether done to you or to others.

Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD) COMMUNITY

Intense distress linked to perceived rejection or criticism. Not a formal diagnosis.

ADHD masking COMMUNITY

Concealing difficulties or behaviours to meet social expectations.

ADHD burnout COMMUNITY

Exhaustion from prolonged compensating, masking, and managing demands.

Overcompensation COMMUNITY

Working excessively hard to make up for perceived shortcomings.

Shame spiral COMMUNITY

One mistake triggering a cascade of negative self-judgements.

People-pleasing paralysis COMMUNITY

Struggling to decide because you're worried about disappointing others.

Social battery crash COMMUNITY

Suddenly running out of energy for social interaction.

Post-conversation replay COMMUNITY

Mentally dissecting everything you said after a social interaction.

Late-diagnosis grief COMMUNITY

Mourning the earlier life that might have been, after an adult diagnosis.

Penguin pebbling COMMUNITY

Showing affection by sending small things: a meme, a link, a photo that made you think of someone.

Parallel play COMMUNITY

Spending time together while each doing your own thing, borrowed from child development.

Emotional hangover PLAYFUL

Lingering exhaustion after an emotionally intense experience.

Friendship time blindness PLAYFUL

Feeling close to someone despite not contacting them for months.

The competence trap PLAYFUL

Being capable of something but not consistently, so others underestimate your difficulties.

The unread-message guilt pile PLAYFUL

Messages you read, meant to answer properly, and now feel too guilty to open.

"But you're so smart" PLAYFUL

The well-meant comment that makes the struggle feel like a character flaw.

05
Home and stuff

15 words

Object permanence (ADHD sense) COMMUNITY

The community use of a child-development term: if you can't see it, it stops existing for you.

Out of sight, out of mind COMMUNITY

Forgetting something exists once it's no longer visible.

DOOM piles COMMUNITY

Didn't Organise, Only Moved. Piles of things you'll deal with "later".

DOOM boxes COMMUNITY

The contained version of a doom pile, usually forgotten once the lid goes on.

Clutter blindness COMMUNITY

No longer noticing clutter because it's become part of your surroundings.

Organised chaos COMMUNITY

A seemingly disorganised system that somehow makes sense to you.

Procrasti-cleaning COMMUNITY

Cleaning everything except the thing you're supposed to be doing.

Clean-but-messy COMMUNITY

A home that's hygienic but visibly chaotic. Popularised by therapist KC Davis.

Everything-is-a-shelf PLAYFUL

Every flat surface becoming storage.

The floordrobe PLAYFUL

Clothes that live on the floor instead of the wardrobe.

The chairdrobe PLAYFUL

The chair holding clothes that are neither clean nor dirty.

The reset spiral PLAYFUL

Wanting to reorganise your whole life instead of one manageable task.

The laundry loop PLAYFUL

Washing the same load three times because you keep forgetting it in the machine.

The fridge of good intentions PLAYFUL

Vegetables bought for a new healthy-eating era, quietly liquefying in the crisper drawer.

The tidy-up relocation PLAYFUL

Putting something somewhere "safe" and never finding it again.

06
Money and admin

9 words

ADHD tax COMMUNITY

Money lost through forgotten subscriptions, late fees, misplaced belongings, or expired food.

Impulse spending ESTABLISHED

Unplanned purchases made in the moment. Studied as part of ADHD impulsivity.

Paperwork paralysis COMMUNITY

Being unable to face forms, letters, or official admin, even simple ones.

The admin avalanche PLAYFUL

One ignored letter becoming three reminders, a fee, and a phone call you're dreading.

Phone call dread PLAYFUL

Putting off a two-minute call for weeks.

The unopened envelope shrine PLAYFUL

Official post you're too anxious to open, stacked somewhere visible.

The free-trial trap PLAYFUL

Signing up "just to try it" and paying for a year.

The return window PLAYFUL

Buying something to return, then missing the deadline to return it.

The renewal surprise PLAYFUL

Discovering your passport, licence, or prescription expired at the worst possible moment.

07

Senses and body

15 words

Sensory overload ESTABLISHED

Becoming overwhelmed by sounds, textures, lights, or other stimuli.

Sensory seeking ESTABLISHED

Seeking out stimulating sensory experiences.

Interoception difficulties ESTABLISHED

Struggling to notice internal signals such as hunger, thirst, or needing the toilet.

Stimming ESTABLISHED

Repetitive movements or behaviours that help with regulation.

Misophonia ESTABLISHED

Strong emotional reactions to specific sounds, like chewing or tapping.

Delayed sleep phase ESTABLISHED

A body clock that runs late, so falling asleep before the early hours feels impossible. Common alongside ADHD.

Understimulation COMMUNITY

Feeling restless or disengaged because an environment isn't engaging enough.

Tired but wired COMMUNITY

Physically exhausted but mentally unable to switch off.

Auditory clutter COMMUNITY

Difficulty concentrating when several sounds compete for attention.

Safe food rotation COMMUNITY

Repeatedly eating the same preferred food, sometimes until you suddenly lose interest.

Brown noise COMMUNITY

Deep, steady background noise many people use to quiet a busy mind.

The silence paradox PLAYFUL

Needing some background noise to focus, while being unable to bear the wrong noise.

The sock seam crisis PLAYFUL

A day derailed by one tiny, unbearable texture.

The 4pm hunger ambush PLAYFUL

Realising you haven't eaten since breakfast only when you're suddenly shaky and furious.

Leg-bounce mode PLAYFUL

The knee that bounces all through meetings.

08

What helps

20 words

Point-of-performance support ESTABLISHED

Placing reminders and tools exactly where they're needed. A phrase from ADHD researcher Russell Barkley.

Executive function scaffolding ESTABLISHED

Creating external structures to support planning, organisation, and follow-through.

Implementation intentions ESTABLISHED

"When X happens, I will do Y" plans, which make follow-through more likely.

Temptation bundling ESTABLISHED

Pairing a task you avoid with something you enjoy, like a podcast only for washing up.

Task chunking ESTABLISHED

Breaking overwhelming tasks into smaller steps.

Decision fatigue ESTABLISHED

Becoming mentally drained from too many decisions.

Body doubling COMMUNITY

Working alongside someone for focus and accountability.

External brain COMMUNITY

Using calendars, notes, and reminders to support memory.

Habit stacking COMMUNITY

Attaching a new habit to an existing one.

Closing loops COMMUNITY

Finishing unresolved tasks that occupy mental space.

Minimum viable day COMMUNITY

Identifying the bare essentials for a low-capacity day.

Spoon theory COMMUNITY

Picturing daily energy as a limited number of spoons. Coined by Christine Miserandino for chronic illness, now widely borrowed.

Launch pad COMMUNITY

One spot by the door for keys, wallet, bag, and anything leaving the house tomorrow.

The two-minute rule COMMUNITY

If it takes under two minutes, do it now. From productivity writer David Allen.

Visual timers COMMUNITY

Timers that show time shrinking, making it something you can see.

Care tasks, not chores COMMUNITY

Reframing housework as caring for your future self, not a moral test. From KC Davis.

Transition rituals COMMUNITY

A small, repeated action that signals the switch between activities.

Permission to half-ass PLAYFUL

Doing something imperfectly rather than not at all.

The ugly first draft PLAYFUL

Starting badly on purpose to get past the blank page.

Side-quest parking PLAYFUL

A notepad for distracting thoughts, so you can return to them later instead of now.

a note from Andrea →

Words matter. A name for an experience makes it easier to talk about, laugh about, and plan around. If you found yourself in these pages, you're in good company.

More free tools, guides, and printables at andreaantal.com

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