**What Is Executive Function Disorder?**

**Executive function skills enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and manage multiple tasks. Up to 90 percent of kids with ADHD struggle with executive dysfunction, which impairs goal-directed behavior.**

By [Janice Rodden](https://www.additudemag.com/author/janice-rodden/) Medically reviewed by [ADDitude’s ADHD Medical Review Panel](https://www.additudemag.com/contact-us/adhd-specialist-panel/) on February 26, 2020



**What is Executive Dysfunction?**

Executive dysfunction is a term used to describe the range of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional difficulties which often occur as a result of another disorder or a traumatic brain injury. Individuals with executive dysfunction struggle with planning, problem-solving, organization, and time management.

Children and adults with executive functioning problems struggle to organize materials and set schedules. They misplace papers, reports, and other school materials. They might have similar problems keeping track of their personal items or keeping their bedroom organized.

**What Is Executive Functioning?**

Broadly speaking, executive functioning refers to the cognitive and mental abilities that help people engage in goal-directed action. They direct actions, control behavior, and motivate us to achieve our goals and prepare for future events. People with executive function disorder (EFD) struggle to organize and regulate their behavior in ways that will help them accomplish long-term goals.

**Executive Function Disorder Symptoms**

People with EFD may experience the following symptoms:

* time blindness, or an inability to plan for and keep in mind future events
* difficulty stringing together actions to meet long-term goals
* trouble organizing materials and setting schedules
* trouble controlling emotions or impulses
* difficulty analyzing or processing information

Executive functions allow people to do the following:

1. Analyze a task
2. Plan how to address the task
3. Organize the steps needed to carry out the task
4. Develop timelines for completing the task
5. Adjust or shift the steps, if needed, to complete the task
6. Complete the task in a timely way

1 Friedman, Naomi P., et al. “Individual Differences in Executive Functions Are Almost Entirely Genetic in Origin.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 137(2): 201–225., May 2008, doi: [10.1037/0096-3445.137.2.201](http://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.137.2.201).
2 Elliot, Rebecca. “Executive functions and their disorders: Imaging in clinical neuroscience.” *British Medical Bulletin*, vol. 65, no. 1, March 2003, pp. 49-59, doi: [10.1093/bmb/65.1.49](https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/65.1.49).

**What Does Executive Function Disorder Look Like in Adults?**

**People with executive dysfunction often experience time blindness, or an inability to plan for and keep in mind future events. If those symptoms sound familiar, keep reading.**

**Executive Function Disorder in Adults**

These seven executive function skills are critical in managing everyday life and long-term goals:

1. **Self-awareness:** Simply put, this is self-directed attention
2. **Inhibition:** Also known as self-restraint
3. **Non-Verbal Working Memory:** The ability to hold things in your mind. Essentially, visual imagery — how well you can picture things mentally
4. **Verbal Working Memory:** Self-speech, or internal speech that people think of this as their “inner monologue”
5. **Emotional Self-Regulation:** The ability to take the previous four executive functions and use them to manipulate your own emotional state. This means learning to use words, images, and your own self-awareness to process and alter how we feel about things
6. **Self-Motivation:** How well you can motivate yourself to complete a task when there is no immediate external consequence
7. **Planning and Problem Solving:** Experts sometimes like to think of this as “self-play” — how we play with information in our minds to come up with new ways of doing something. By taking things apart and recombining them in different ways, we’re planning solutions to our problems

When a person has [executive function](https://www.additudemag.com/what-is-executive-function-disorder/) disorder (EFD), he has trouble analyzing, planning, organizing, scheduling, and completing tasks. People with EFD commonly lack the ability to handle frustration, start and finish tasks, recall and follow multi-step directions, stay on track, self monitor, and balance priorities. Fixing the area of deficit is key to fixing academic or occupational difficulties. Common signs and symptoms of EFD in adults include:

* Forgetting to complete tasks
* Inability to keep track of personal items like keys and cell phones
* Trouble following conversations
* Losing train of thought
* Difficulty remembering steps in a multi-step processes
* Inability to remember names
* Often late
* Problems breaking big projects into steps
* Trouble meeting [deadlines](https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-productivity-deadlines-and-procrastination-no-more-all-nighters/)
* Unable to multitask
* Difficulty remembering abbreviations and acronyms

Identifying symptoms can help adults set up external supports to supplement areas where they struggle.

**Symptoms of Executive Dysfunction at Home**

These, and other common manifestations of EFD may be apparent at home:

* You have something you want to ask your friend, but she is on the phone and you must wait a few minutes before asking. By the time she is finished, you completely forget what you wanted to ask.
* When you are talking with a friend, you find it difficult to follow the conversation, forgetting what your friend said just moments before.
* When you are completing a task with several steps, such as getting the trash, taking it outside, and then putting a new bag in the trash can, you usually forget the last step.
* When you read something, you usually end up going back to re-read the prior section because you can’t remember it.
* You constantly misplace your cell phone. You feel like you waste time every day looking for your phone and other misplaced items like keys or glasses.
* You have difficulty finding a work-life balance. When you try to take on personal activities, it’s hard to figure out how much time to spend on what.

**Symptoms of Executive Dysfunction at Work**

These or similar manifestations of EFD may be apparent at work:

* In the morning, you rush around to get ready for work but still often end up being late.
* You plan to complete some work at home and pack up the items you need at the end of your work day. When you sit down to do the work, you realize that you forgot to bring home several critical items.
* You are often accused of not listening because you don’t follow through on tasks you are asked to do.
* You have a hard time remembering your co-worker’s names, even if you have met them multiple times.
* You have a hard time managing large projects. Even when you break them down into steps, you find you miss pieces or end up spending too much time on tasks that don’t have much importance.
* Even when you have a deadline, it’s hard to just sit down and get started on your assignments.
* Co-workers would describe you as ‘easily frustrated.’

**How to Treat Executive Dysfunction**

For people with EFD, it’s important not to just focus on teaching new information, but also on teaching the skills they need to better use the knowledge they have. For example, put time into helping redesign the environment to help people with EFD remember what they need to be doing.

Adults can compensate for working memory deficits by making information external — using cards, signs, symbols, sticky notes, lists, journals, and apps. Make time external by using clocks, timers, computers, counters, and other devices that track time intervals. Use external motivation, like points systems, being accountable to others at work and school, daily school report cards — anything that reinforces accomplishing goals.

Give yourself a problem-solving manual. Take the problem, and break it into pieces that are easy to tackle. Allow the self-regulatory system to pause and refill by giving rewards and positive emotions during tasks that are stressful to the executive functions system. For example, engage in positive self statements, encourage yourself to try harder and visualize accomplishing the goal. Take 3- to 10-minute breaks periodically to relax or meditate. Use physical exercise to help cope with symptoms. Sip a drink with sugar to keep blood glucose up and your brain running smoothly.

Children and adults with [executive function disorder](https://www.additudemag.com/what-is-executive-function-disorder/) have unique needs in the classroom. They might need extra help to understand assignments, get started, and stay focused. Accommodations along with games and technology can help compensate for an area of weakness.

* Post tasks on the board
* Read assignments out loud
* Have students repeat them
* Teach note-taking skills
* Use color and put different tasks on different color cards
* When loses focus and is easily frustrated, be active for a minute
* Use work stations so that students can get up and move between assignments
* Use fidget gadgeets
* Give students graphic organizers

The key to choosing successful accommodation is identifying the two or three most important deficits and picking accommodations that address them.