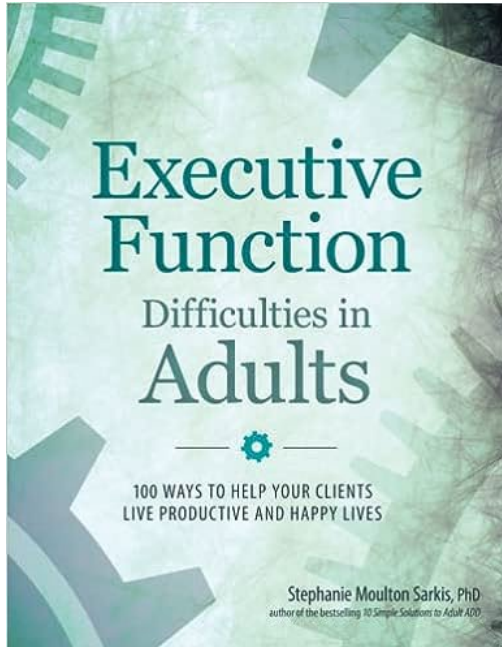


Executive Function Difficulties in Adults:

100 Ways to Help Your Clients Live Productive and Happy Lives

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Publisher : PESI Publishing, Inc. (2 January 2018)

Language : English

Paperback : 197 pages

ISBN-10 : 1683730984

ISBN-13 : 978-1683730989

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION TASKS

The main purpose of executive functions are to inhibit and self-regulate behavior.

These functions include:

- Working Memory
- Time Management
- Emotion Regulation
- Cognitive Flexibility
- Planning • Forethought
- Learning from Consequences

- Organization
- Reconstitution of Information

There are three types of memory: short-term, long-term, and working memory.

Short-term memory is used to remember where you parked your car at the grocery store. Once you locate your car after shopping, your brain dumps that information. You no longer need that information for any useful purpose. This is one of the reasons it is difficult to get accurate witness accounts after a crime – your brain dumps a lot of the details (Lacy and Stark, 2013).

Long-term memory is used to hold your families' names and your address – information you need to recall during your lifetime.

Working memory is where you hold, process, and manipulate information. When a person is engaging working memory, they are storing information into short-term memory and using it for a task.

It is also why it is important to break tasks down into bite-sized pieces for people with executive dysfunction – only giving one instruction at a time and writing the instructions down.

Difficulties with organization don't just apply to things and papers – they also apply to organizing your ideas for an outline. Outlines are all about categorizing and using a numbered system. You also use the concept of hierarchies to make an outline.

Indeed, some studies have found that individuals with ADHD exhibit significantly lower levels of omega-3 fatty acids in their blood.

Omega-3 may help neurons communicate more effectively, as seen on brain scans (Bauer et al., 2014; Gow and Hibbeln, The way a person thinks about something can change outcomes).

People can become aware of and change the way they think.

Changing one's thinking can change one's behavior.

Here is the process of "thought-stopping" broken into steps:

1. Recognize the negative thought. Become aware that you are being tough

on yourself and that it is not helpful or healthy.

2. Visualize a red stop sign popping up and blocking that negative thought. You can also say to yourself, “Stop,” “That’s negative, change that,” “That is not healthy or helpful,” or any other phrase that acknowledges the negative thought and reminds you to stay positive and in the present.

3. Create a positive phrase to replace the negative one. For example, if you are meeting a new group of people, turn the negative thought of “They’re going to think I’m weird” into the positive thought of “I’m confident, have good social skills, and I’ll enjoy meeting these new people.” Keep in mind that you want to avoid using “not” in the positive phrase. Turn it around into something more positive. For example, “I’m not going to screw this up” can be rephrased into “I’m going to do just fine.” The more you practice replacing your negative thoughts with positive ones, the more likely your mind will automatically go to a positive thought.

THINK:

1. It is Thoughtful?
2. Is it Helpful?
3. Is it Inspiring?
4. Is it Needed?
5. Is it Kind?

CATASTROPHIZING When you catastrophize, you are “making a mountain out of a molehill.” This means that you are making something into a much bigger deal than it actually is. An example of catastrophizing is being given a new assignment at work, and all of the sudden you are convinced that you will fail at the assignment, lose your job, and be living on the street. In reality, you were just handed the assignment five minutes ago.

MINIMIZING is the opposite of catastrophizing, but it is just as much of a distortion of thinking.

Instead of making a mountain out of a molehill, you are making a molehill out of a mountain. It is interpreting important things as not being a big deal.

In CBT, reframing involves taking a cognitive distortion and turning it into a

positive thought. If you don't know the reason for something, why not create a reason that is in your favor instead of having it work against you?

Very rarely in life are things absolute, all or nothing – they are shades of gray.

Working on Reframing For each of the following statements, come up with a positive reframe.

I'm never going to get this work done.

Your thought: I'M NEVER GOING TO GET THIS DONE.

Turn it into a positive: I'AM SMART, CAPABLE, AND CAN GET THIS DONE ON TIME

- Say "no" at any time
- Say "no" without an explanation
- Change your mind at any time
- Feel safe, physically and emotionally
- Express your feelings
- Walk away from a situation

As humans, when we've invested our time and energy in something, we are much more likely to put in more time and energy than "cut our losses" and walk away. This is true of investing, of jobs, and of relationships. This is called the "sunk cost fallacy,"

Structure and Systems

- Setting up a structured schedule
- Establishing priorities for tasks
- Creating goals for work and home life
- Formulating realistic steps or objectives for goals
- Accountability for completing projects or assignments

Individuals who practice mind-body interventions on a regular basis, like “standard” meditation and mindfulness meditation, have a significantly lower level of cortisol in their system.

MEDITATION In essence, meditation involves focusing on your breathing. You either sit or lie down during meditation. Two types of meditation include “focused attention and “open monitoring” a decrease in levels of stress and anxiety, after meditation was practiced twice a day.

Mindfulness meditation is a form of “open monitoring” meditation in that you are aware of your thoughts, as opposed to standard meditation where you practice mindfulness, you are fully focused on your activity in the moment. Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to present experience Stop (or pause) for a moment.

Take a deep breath. Observe mindfully in the moment (notice your body sensations or what you are doing) P = Proceed with relaxation and awareness

Walk outside at a slower pace than usual.

Focus on how your body feels as you walk.

Focus on the sensation of your feet on the ground.

Focus on the feeling of the breeze on your face.

Focus on the temperature of the air.

Focus on your breathing.

Take three steps with each inhale and three steps with each exhale.

Say “in” to yourself when inhaling and “out” as you exhale, to help keep track of your breathing

If you see something beautiful, like a tree, while you are walking, stop and look at it while continuing to do steady breathing.

Yoga and martial arts are easily accessible and are relatively low-cost. They also, in part, focus on diaphragmatic breathing combined with movement, which is an important skill for people with executive dysfunction to employ in order to decrease stress

When an individual has executive dysfunction, sitting at a desk all day at work is like torture. Individuals with executive function difficulties need to move around while they work. When you move around, you are stimulating a part of the brain called the cerebellum. This part of the brain

helps with movement and balance. When your cerebellum is stimulated, your frontal lobes – the home of the executive functions – are better able to focus. This process of moving to help you focus is called concentrated distraction.

When a client has EF difficulties, they may benefit from a career with the following features:

- Fast-paced, with varied tasks each day.
- Ability to move around or travel during the work day.
- Intellectually stimulating and challenging.
- Firm due dates for projects.
- Frequent feedback and clear expectations.
- Flexible schedule.
- Immediate reinforcement for a job well done. Jobs such as firefighters, restaurant wait staff teachers, paramedics, emergency room physicians, trial attorneys, and military careers encompass many of the characteristics of ADHD-friendly jobs.

How do you know when you are good at something? It feels like time flies by. People notice your good work. You feel a sense of accomplishment when doing that activity or task. Even if you're getting paid to do the task, you'd do it for free. You are "in the zone" during the task.

DELEGATION. While you are with your client, help him come up with tasks at home that are important but that he doesn't necessarily have to do tasks that can be delegated to someone else.

Just like a CEO has support staff, your client needs support as well. A good way to help your client think of tasks to delegate is to have him write down any weekly tasks that he was doing which resulted in thoughts such as, "I really dislike doing this," "I'm not very good at this," "This is something I'm really wasting my time with," or "I could be using my time better elsewhere."

You've talked with your clinician about delegating or "farming out" tasks in order to reduce your stress and have a good quality of life. So how do you find a person to help you out? You have a few options:

Craigslist has the added benefit of being anonymous. In your ad, mention the following:

- Give a brief description of tasks – light cleaning, help with organizing, walking the dogs.
- Note if you have pets, including what kind - “two large dogs,” for example.
- State that the helper needs reliable transportation.
- State how many hours you need them to work – some people start out hiring someone for four hours a week and then increase the hours as needed.
- State what days you need them and what times. Even something like “Monday mornings and Wednesday evenings” is acceptable.
- State the hourly rate you will pay. Look at similar ads in your community to find out the “going rate.”

If everything checks out, welcome your new assistant!

CREATING A STRUCTURED ROUTINE If your client has difficulties with time management, sticking to a routine can be very helpful. When your client knows what to expect each day, it really improves his quality of life. Work with your client to set up a weekly schedule.

Using Gmail calendar or another type of interactive calendar, work with your client to block off times.

Use a different color for each task. For example, all studying times are in yellow, all exercise times are in green, and so on.

Color-coding is a great help to people with executive dysfunction, and especially for people who have a comorbid reading disability.