

Tedium Management

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Executive Summary

The primary cognitive liability for people with ADHD is in the reduced capacity of their executive functioning. Having difficulty with planning, prioritizing, and tracking makes it especially difficult to tackle what are here called “tedious” tasks. Frequently the problems with tedious tasks are interpreted as time management problems or as procrastination. But I suggest that they should be addressed with strategies of “tedium management.”

Strategies are offered which can help you manage these tedious tasks when your executive functioning is not performing well. Understanding the *categories* of strategies also helps you re-conceptualize the problem and come up with your own approaches to make these tasks more manageable.

Tedium Management

My brain is about to explode, scattering the few contents that might remain within it across the computer screen in front of me.

Actually, it just got a lot better. I am putting down the task that was making me apoplectic in order to write. And writing is something that I usually feel comfortable with. This is particularly so if I allow myself to express my angst with a gruesome yet amusing metaphor. I feel much better now. Thank you.

The task which was aggravating my brain, and which I am now procrastinating doing, is an

extraordinarily tedious task. I'll spare you the details because I know that you have tasks just like this yourself. And you don't want me to even remind you of them. But I do want to tell you that your ideas about your problems with those tasks are probably incorrect.

Here's what happens: You have already been putting this off because you know it is going to be hard for you. You may even feel a bit foolish, given that when you've felt this way before the task was not really as impossible as you imagined.

You are also just a little bit anxious. You are only starting the task now because a deadline looms. Now you worry whether

you can finish on time. You are also anxious because you have little confidence that you can tackle this. You're not sure where you are going to begin, what is going to be involved, how long it is going to take, nor even if you are going to make some terrible mistake which you will only discover much too late.

Now you start to think of a few things that you should get out of the way before starting. After the dishes are done, the cat litter is changed, your socks are sorted, you make a cup of tea, and whatever else you might do first, you come back. And the task confronts you again, unrelentingly.

As the pressure builds, you wonder if there is any way you can get out of this. Maybe you wonder how you got into it. It's unattractive, but you start feeling sorry for yourself. (You do a few more chores.) If push comes to shove and you are still staring at your task, hopeless, you start to feel an incredible exhaustion overcome you. (You are curious why you feel tired even though you haven't done anything yet.) A nap won't help. You are not really sleepy. You are weighed down by the fact that you are asking your brain to do something it just can't do.

Are you lazy? It might look like it to somebody who wasn't seeing you sweat bullets like this. But you know you are not lazy. This is very hard work, even if you are not productive. Are you procrastinating? Well yes. But is it just to avoid anxiety? Not likely, since this process is making you much more anxious. Do you have a time management problem? Yes, but indirectly. You had enough time to do this work. You just couldn't get your head around how to proceed. What you failed at was "tedium management."

Tedium and Executive Functions

In the above scenario, you were literally overwhelmed. Actually there was a very specific brain function that was overwhelmed—your "executive functioning." Executive

functioning has many definitions but you can think of it generally as your ability to see the whole task, strategize, prioritize, and remember your plans as you execute them. In short, it is planning, prioritizing, and tracking. Consequently, executive functioning is core to your ability to get things done. If you have ADHD, you are not likely to have very robust executive functioning, and hence, you are not as strong as others at tedium management. (Some scientists, Thomas Brown for example, now consider poor executive functioning and ADHD as synonymous.)

But what is it that makes tedium so taxing on your executive functioning? Isn't beating tedium just a matter of overcoming boredom and slogging through? Although tedious tasks do feel boring, tedium is not just boredom. Tedium is different than not caring enough to resist distraction. I reserve the term "tedium" for precisely those tasks that overwhelm your executive functioning. Tedium is when the difference has been lost between the important parts of the task and the tangential ones. Or it's when you can no longer relate the parts of the task to the whole. No matter what your good intentions, the executive functions cannot sort out where to start. You can't plan, prioritize or track your activities.

On the possibility that my confusing rendition of these concepts is now becoming tedious to the reader, I'm going to insert a story here.

Imagine that your task is to find a pair of matching socks in your abundantly stocked sock drawer. If all of your socks are either white or black, you are not likely to have much trouble. This task is our analog of a not-very-tedious task. It is no strain.

If you are up very early and it is still very dark, your task might be a bit harder, but you would probably manage. The light is your executive functioning—your ability to distinguish the difference between socks. And you have enough light to make these basic distinctions so you are not overwhelmed by the task. (A cup of coffee might boost your executive functioning enough to assure that you go to work with matching socks.)

So you have experienced a normal task under easy conditions and under conditions where your executive functioning was compromised. But in both cases you managed.

Now you want to know how the tedious task is different and why it causes you so much trouble. Fair enough: Imagine that your drawer is full of dozens of colors and shades of socks. This is going to be tedious. In the brightest light, (with adequate executive functioning), this substantially

more taxing task is still possible. But if the light is not good—if the executive functions are not able to make distinctions—the task is going to be very difficult. You can't pay attention to the colors of the socks because you don't have the light to make the appropriate distinctions. The salient differences between different shades all but disappear. Trying harder, concentrating and so on are likely to be of limited use. Accept it: You are heading to work today looking like a clown.

The word tedious comes from the Latin root for wearisome. It relates to those things that simply wear you out. Tedium is that experience of drowning in the detail and complexity of a task, where you can't hold all the pieces in front of you in order to sort out where to start, to see what's most important or to anticipate the consequences of different options. You have overwhelmed your executive functioning. You're in the dark.

If tedium is not the same as "boring", it is also distinct from "difficult." Writing actually calls on more intellectual functions than my now procrastinated tedious task. But writing this essay flows much more easily for me. Like most people, I enjoy engaging my intellect in a difficult task. Often the only part that is truly agonizing for me about writing is the getting started. In fact,

getting started is often the most tedious part of tedious tasks. At the start is when you have to engage your executive functions to grasp the entire plan of the task. It calls on all of your organizing abilities, your executive functioning.

One of the most popular strategies for tedium management, usually arrived at by accident, is to wait for the adrenaline of a dreaded deadline to fill your brain with the neurochemicals you need to sort out the important from the trivial. It is similar to the way that stimulant medications help. They actually increase the "light" at the neuronal level that makes you able to distinguish what is important. Prescription medications tend to have a more benign side-effect profile than adrenaline and the coffee you drink to stay up all night. But the reasons they ultimately help are similar. They turn on the light over your sock drawer—they support your executive functions.

Strategies

There is plenty written on how medications can help support executive functioning. But what other strategies do we have? Rather than enumerate the infinite number of possible tricks and techniques that could help with tedium management, I'd like to describe the general categories of approaches. Once you understand the categories, you may be able to invent some

specific strategies that work for you based on them.

If you look at some of the popular books on procrastination, (procrastination is usually a symptom of tedium), there are a few basic approaches. Unfortunately, many times these approaches simply advocate using the very executive functions that we are missing. They can be as useless as admonishing the distracted person to pay attention. But it is still helpful to review these first, because occasionally they are sufficient.

Logic

It's unlikely, but maybe you haven't considered that the way you are going about things is totally crazy. If this is news to you, applying some logic could help. It might help if you explicitly consider how much longer it is taking to balk at this task, to procrastinate, to make up excuses for why it's not already done. You can consider the unnecessary risk you are taking that this is going to be finished late. Sometimes this sort of logic (along with the cognitive discomfort it causes) lights a fire under you that makes getting started just happen. Sometimes not. But if it doesn't simply make you have contempt for yourself, it is worth a try.

Chunking

This is the favorite strategy for those who have less of a

problem with tedium management. “Just break up a big task into smaller tasks.” Right, and whistle while you work. Sometimes it helps. And sometimes you just stare at the task longer, trying to figure out where to slice the chunks. However, if you *can* find a way to take bits at a time, setting the rest aside so that it does not overwhelm you, this will be a winning strategy.

You already see the flaw in this strategy: Chunking ability is in fact one of the executive functions you don’t have a lot of. It requires seeing, all at once, the whole picture, the parts, how they interconnect, the result you can anticipate and so on. Chunking will always be a part of your overall strategy, but you may need more.

Optimize What You Have

Before jumping into strategies to work around your dearth of executive functioning, it’s helpful to make the most of what you have.

Over the course of a day, most of us have some variation in how well our executive functions are working. If you take medications, you may have times that they are helping more than others. It can help if you find your most tuned-in time of day and optimize how you use it. Often these times are at around 10 in the morning or after 11 at night. (The latter can lead to sleep problems, however.)

It seems obvious that you don’t want to use your best time to plow through unimportant e-mail or to wash dishes. You want to handle your most tedious tasks during that period. If your best time is in the morning, it will still be tempting to push the tedious tasks to later in the day. Don’t. You’ll be glad that you used your best time to make some progress and it will give you a lift that can last all day.

If you need to do some high level planning, get it done in this optimum period. Parse your task into chunks now. It will pay off in allowing you to do some slogging through with the rest of the tedious afternoon. Even if you have just a few minutes of this optimum time, use it for that difficult “getting started.” If you work effectively for just a few minutes, it will pay off in having broken through that “I haven’t even started” barrier. In fact, limiting yourself to just a few minutes can help pierce through the fear of being overwhelmed. Tell yourself that you are *not* going to spend more than ten minutes so that you take the pressure off and make a start. (This is really a “change the frame” strategy, as you’ll see below.)

Another strength you may be able to optimize is your visual processing. Many people who have poor executive functioning also have strong visual organizing skills. Find a place where you can spread out a

project on the floor and use your visual abilities to organize. Make sure you can use that space for the time that you need it and that you aren’t going to annoy others in that space.

A corollary of the idea of “optimizing what you have” is to actually increase your executive functioning. Besides medication, we know that it helps to get exercise, to sleep enough, to eat well and so on. Don’t neglect these just because they seem so simple. They are very high leverage tactics.

When You Are In the Dark – Externalization

Ultimately, working with insufficient executive functioning is like working in the dark. There are, however, ways to get around when the lights are off. Here are some strategies that amount to a white cane for tapping your way through the tedium. Like a cane, they help you use a tool *outside* of your brain to substitute for the executive functions that are underperforming *inside* your brain. Think of them as *externalized* executive functioning.

So what does it mean to externalize your executive function?

When I was younger, I could hear a phone number once, hold it in my head and dial it a few moments later. With age I had to use strategies like repeating it in my mind a few times and

holding it as a sequence of sounds. Now, I almost always have to write the number down as I am hearing it.

Writing on a piece of paper is a scheme to externalize your executive functioning. The larger and more complex your project is, the more pieces of paper you are going to be writing on. The prototypical strategies for externalizing executive functions are the calendar and the “to do” list. They are simply ways to write down what you would otherwise have to hold in your scarce and fragile short-term memory.

Curiously, your calendar and “to do” list would probably work much better if it were not for a serious flaw in the human interface: you. Errors are most common in the process of getting items into your externalized executive functioning tools and in getting them back out again. Having a list is easy. It’s getting information onto it and then using your list later that are bafflingly difficult.

You are probably already thinking that the remedy to this interface problem is to have good habits about using your calendar and list system. That’s next.

Executive Function vs. Habits

When I told you that you can only hold so much in your head at once, that was a bit incorrect.

It is true that you can only process so much explicit information with your executive function. When you overload that system, you black out. But there is another portion of your brain that is quite capable of providing structure for you in much the same way externalized executive functioning does.

Most adults don’t have to be reminded to brush their teeth at night. Nobody puts it on his or her calendar. Why? Because you have created a habit. At one time you didn’t have such a habit and you did need to be told each night to brush your teeth. But by consistently doing the same thing, night after night, it moved from something you had to remind yourself of, (or a parent had to remind you of), into being a function of habit.

The truth is that habit is an incredibly powerful structure in your life. Without habits, it is unlikely that you could even tie your shoe, (unless you recently taught a child and remember the explicit steps). The steps of such a task have been moved from explicit procedural knowledge, (that requires executive functioning to implement), into a deeply remembered habit. In short, it is automatic.

Wouldn’t it be helpful to automate some of the other tasks that are overburdening your executive functions? You

can do this by committing some common tasks to habit. You don’t have to think about them, remember them, or plan them. They happen by habit. An example of a very useful habit would be looking at your calendar at a regular time.

You don’t have a parent reminding you to look at your calendar everyday, the way you learned to brush your teeth as a child. You will have to create this habit yourself. There are a few very important principles to consider in how you do this. The perils of habits are in how you write them into your brain’s deep habitual memory. You can’t just tell yourself that you will have a habit. You have to *create* one. And the only real way to create a habit is with an enormous amount of repetition.

Don’t Move the Furniture

If you can’t see, it helps to know where the furniture is located. If you are relying on the structure of habits, you can’t afford to change them all the time. (Newly updated habits are a contradiction in terms.) So, don’t succumb to the temptation to move the furniture every time you bump into it. You’ll never learn where it is, and if you did, you’d be expending way too much mental energy in keeping track of it.

Sometimes, even when your habits are set up wrong, it is preferable to stick with what is familiar than to stress your Executive Functioning trying to

update it. If you are accustomed to putting your bills in a particular place every time you pick up the mail, you are less likely to lose them. Yes, you thought that moving them to on top of the stove burner would remind you even better. But instead, they got moved again when you were too hungry to pay them, and now they are lost.

One of the risks of a creative mind is that you are going to constantly have spontaneous ideas on how to improve your system. But it is hard enough for these systems to become habits without their being constantly revised and updated in the process. Don't second-guess your intended habit until a really glaring flaw is absolutely obvious. Systems trump revisions, not the other way around.

Flying Blind

Strangely, there are times when the best strategy is not going to be using your executive functioning, nor your external systems, nor your habits. Now and then you are going to just say a quick prayer and fly blind. It is critical, however, to find ways to make these leaps of faith a little more reliable. Even though you can get around the need for executive functioning a bit, there are risks, and you have to be sensible in how you do this.

Nibble

Let's say that you hit the wall with trying to chunk the task. You just can't find those bite size bits that you can swallow. Can you just work at any part and make progress?

If you can be fairly confident that whatever you do on this task is going to advance you, then just start anywhere. Acknowledge that you don't need to measure your progress, or proceed systematically, or anything of the kind. After you nibble for a while, you know that the task will get smaller.

As you transform your tedium (executive function overwhelm) into mere boredom, you can detach from it. Play good music or something that you enjoy and just keep nibbling away. Don't try right away to back up and get the big picture. Establish your momentum.

Once you have nibbled at it awhile, you will realize that the hardest part was starting. After you can feel your progress, the pieces of the big picture may come into focus with less effort. Now you can see the bigger picture without the overwhelming ambiguity that you experienced at the beginning.

The danger with this strategy is that you may in fact totally lose sight of the big picture. Beware of misdirected hyperfocus. After four hours of color-coding the file folders, it's time to stop

nibbling and look again at the big picture.

If you find that you frequently get hyper-focused when doing a nibbling strategy, you may decide that nibbling is a risky approach for you. Likewise you may find that the tunnel focus of nibbling is such a relief from tedium that you can't bring your head up for air, even after you know it's time to. If it is a bit dangerous for you, just remember this about yourself.

Find the Melody Line

"Hum a few bars." Do you notice that when you hear the first part of a piece of music, you often automatically remember what comes next? Once you start in, many tasks have a natural structure to them that takes you effortlessly through to the end.

Once I start writing, each paragraph seems to be sponsored by the one just before it. I can generally trust that another idea will be waiting for me when I get to the place where I need it. It feels like a familiar melody, where you seem to remember the next note just as it is coming up.

Finding the melody is the hard part. It can sometimes pop up if you just start. Once you find it, keep going until it runs out. Then you can go back and do the evaluating and repairing of what you've done so far. But if you wait for the whole

symphony to come into your head, you'll be stuck.

Like with the nibbling strategy, the idea here is to get started. Focus on the starting of the task, not the task itself. Sometimes it's only the overly elaborate starting that overwhelms your executive function.

Change the Frame

Here is a whole different type of strategy. It's based on the notion that the meaning of the task is part of what makes it overwhelming. Often a tedious task has taken on overtones of past failures and a sense of doom. Or maybe it carries grandiose expectations that this time you will "show everybody", and it triggers your perfectionism. Those emotional overlays cast a shadow over any executive functioning you may have otherwise been able to muster.

You can't skip the task, but you can modify its meaning. These strategies are all based on the idea of playing, or just realizing, that the task means something else than you thought.

Right now I am attacking my tedious brain-splashing task by pretending that I am actually just testing the ideas I am writing down here for you. Most of the ideas are working, and the task is yielding quite a bit. Go ahead and attack your tedious job with the intention of

carefully documenting how none of my tips worked. Go now...

Well, you're back. So you want more help on this. Remember that "Changing the Frame" strategies play to your strength as a divergent thinker! So use it. The more you are having fun turning your task inside out, the more you'll be able to access your executive functions to tackle it.

Here's an example. By now it has occurred to you that this is a rather long article. You may be dreading the amount of time that it is sucking out of your day. Here's a way to reframe that so you are not so overwhelmed by the task of getting to the end of this. Know that this is not actually a long article. It's really a very short book. (Admit that you've read entire books that said less.) Now you can congratulate yourself for absorbing an entire book's worth of ideas in just a short time. Not so dreadful, is it?

Eat Chocolate

The secret of a "change the frame" strategy is that it always leads to a sense of "lightening up" on yourself. So I mention the strategy of eating chocolate as a frivolous example of how just being a bit more kind to yourself can make a huge difference.

Have you noticed that when you amuse yourself, distract

yourself, or even just show kindness to yourself, you don't notice the tedium so much? Music can help. Finding something funny about your boss's wardrobe choices may do it. (Try to be kind!) Working in a café or pleasant new place helps. Schedule in recreation time, since you are going to take it anyway.

The idea is to distract yourself from the oppressive feeling of tedium. Just get out of "suffering mode" and everything will get easier.

Borrow an Executive Function

This is probably the most complex strategy. It combines the strategy of externalizing your executive functioning and also changing the frame.

Here's the idea. Most people find that it is easier to do another person's tedious task than their own. When you are personally worried about consequences, your executive function gets strangled in anxiety. So use someone else's executive function—someone who is not going to be emotionally involved. They don't have to make your decisions, but they can help a lot by asking you the right questions. The role of an ADHD coach is often to act as this borrowed executive function. Notice that the reason that borrowing an executive function works is that it is a way to change the frame. You

see the task through somebody else's eyes instead of your own.

Sometimes your borrowed executive function can just be a "pair of eyes." If they watch you, it helps you watch yourself. I really mean it. Have someone sit in the room and just watch you. (They can bring a book or something, so long as they don't distract you or stop watching.) If you get past the silliness of it, this works some great magic. Alternatively, have them ask you the questions that they think you should be asking yourself at any particular moment. All you have to do is answer them to yourself.

If you can't find anyone to cooperate in this, pretend that you are your friend watching yourself do this task. It'll help you get a new perspective that will liberate your executive functioning. Remember to throw in a helpful idea or supportive comment from time to time. (To avoid embarrassment, try not to let anyone catch you talking to yourself!)

Run The Other Way

Here's the strategy that most people don't think of. You've got nothing to prove. So just make your life work for you. If you can avoid getting into tedious tasks in the first place,

by all means do so. Now that you understand tedium a little better, you are going to get better at recognizing it, and avoiding it.

If you can't purge tedium completely, reduce its impact. Simplify your life. Just give yourself fewer decisions that you are going to have to make. If you don't accept rebate coupons, you won't have to remember to send them in. If all of your socks are the same color, it won't be hard to find a pair. There are a million places to apply this principle.

Maintain Your Grace

This is not a tedium management principle itself, but it connects with the idea of lightening up on yourself.

The goal is to stop buying into the notion that you should be a completely different person than you are. Just stop being defensive.

You will frequently have to make it up to somebody for something you feel you really had almost no control over. Accept that. Nothing aggravates the people around you like your explaining to them that it is their fault that you caused them a problem. Even if it is partly true, it is certainly not worth it to you to win that argument.

I believe that you should apologize and make amends where you have to. Then, let it go and move on. But don't apologize for being who you are. Apologize only for the burden that it causes others.

It comes down to a fashion strategy—a way to manage how other people see you: Just buy makeup and clothing that matches the egg on your face. The most compelling force toward other people accepting you as you are comes from you deeply accepting this yourself.

Experiment

Ok, these tedium management strategies are not as clean and neat as the "time management" seminars where they preach that you should be able to find 30 hours in each day. Tedium management is untidy stuff. There are no easy answers or systems, just a handful of strategies that may help you out.

Try some of these. Remember that these are categories and you can fill in with an infinite number of specific tricks and strategies that you make up. Remember also that having some fun with it is an end in itself.

In the mean time, I am going back to approach my tedious task again...