

What is

Executive Function?

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Science Definition: higher-level cognitive skills used to coordinate and control your other cognitive abilities and behaviors.

Plain English Definition: the mental processes/skills that help you manage everyday tasks.

Think of it as your brain's very own management system.

It helps you:

- figure out what needs to happen
- decide where to start
- remember what you're supposed to be doing
- estimate how long something will take
- ignore distractions
- switch from one thing to another
- manage emotions when things don't go as planned
- actually finish what you started



Executive function is not the same as intelligence.

Someone can be incredibly intelligent, capable, creative, and knowledgeable and still struggle to start an assignment, remember an appointment, estimate how long a task will take, or keep track of everything they're responsible for.

“If I can do it sometimes, why can't I just do it?”

Executive function isn't necessarily consistent.

- You may be able to focus for three hours on something you're deeply interested in but struggle to spend ten minutes answering an email.
- You may remember an obscure fact from six years ago but forget the thing you told them five minutes ago.
- You may finish an enormous project one day and struggle to brush your teeth the next.

Several things can affect executive function capacity:

Stress
Interest
Motivation
Environment
Sensory Overload

Sleep
Transitions
Emotional Load
Task Complexity
Unclear Expectations



Less Capacity
Available



More Capacity
Available

The Executive Function Skills

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1 WORKING MEMORY

Holding information in your brain long enough to use it.



When it's hard, it can look like:

Walking into a room and forgetting why you're there.

2 TIME AWARENESS

Understanding time, estimating how long things take, and knowing when to start.



When it's hard, it can look like:

"I have plenty of time."
Narrator: They did not have plenty of time.

3 TASK INITIATION

Getting your brain to move from I need to do this to actually doing it.



When it's hard, it can look like:

Sitting there thinking about the task for 45 minutes... but not actually starting it.

4 ORGANIZATION

Keeping track of information, belongings, tasks, and responsibilities.



When it's hard, it can look like:

"I KNOW I wrote that down somewhere."

5 PLANNING & PRIORITIZING

Deciding what needs to happen, in what order, and what matters most.

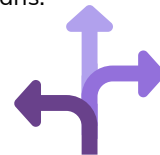


When it's hard, it can look like:

Having 12 things to do and no idea which one to do first.

6 COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY

Moving between tasks, expectations, ideas, and plans.



When it's hard, it can look like:

Someone changes the plan at the last minute and your brain goes NOPE.

7 FOCUS & INHIBITION

Filtering distractions and resisting the impulse to do something else.



When it's hard, it can look like:

Opening your laptop to do work and ending up in a rabbit hole researching a random topic.

8 EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Managing emotional responses enough to keep functioning.



When it's hard, it can look like:

A small problem feels overwhelming and hard to come back from.

9 FOLLOW THROUGH

Keeping tasks moving until they're actually finished.



When it's hard, it can look like:

Doing the work, but forgetting to turn it in.

What It Looks Like In Real Life

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At School

- Missing assignments
- Forgetting instructions
- Losing papers
- Starting homework late
- Not turning in completed work
- Difficulty taking notes while listening
- Getting overwhelmed by large projects
- Struggling with transitions between classes

At Work

- Missing deadlines
- Forgetting meetings
- Difficulty prioritizing
- Procrastinating
- Losing track during meetings
- Struggling when priorities change
- Starting lots of things without finishing them
- Finishing parts of an assigned task, but not all parts

At Home

- Laundry mountain
- Unopened mail
- Forgotten appointments
- Food going bad
- Half-finished hyperfocus projects
- Difficulty maintaining routines
- Walking into rooms and forgetting why
- "I'll do it later."

Don't rely on your brain to do something a system can do for you.

If remembering is hard → externalize it.

Reminders, calendars, written instructions, voice capture.

If prioritizing is hard → reduce the choices.

Choose your top three instead of staring at 27 tasks.

If starting is hard → make the first step smaller.

Don't "write the paper." Open the document.

If focusing is hard → change the environment.

White noise, headphones, fewer visual distractions, body doubling.

If time is hard → make time visible.

Timers, countdowns, alarms, visual schedules.

If transitions are hard → create warning time.

10-minute reminder → 5-minute reminder → transition.

If follow-through is hard → create checkpoints.

Don't wait until the final deadline to find out something fell apart.