Tips for Being on Time Despite ADHD

by CHRISTINE LEE

ADHD and Being on Time

I have not ever been the best of friends with time. I was not diagnosed with ADHD until I was in my 30s, so for many years I did not know that my perception of time and everyone else's were two different things.

Learning to tell the time in school was exceedingly difficult, because to me, time was a progression of certain events. I knew that in the morning, I had to get up, eat breakfast, and go to school. The afternoon was for getting off the bus and the commencement of homework battles. The evening brought dinner and a bath before bed.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Unless it was the weekend, then I was really out of whack. I loved the weekends for their lack of structure, but at the same time, I struggled with the what-comes-next part. It made me feel off balance and I was always relieved to see Monday morning roll around, even though that meant school and homework.

That was before understanding that people with ADHD have a totally different understanding of what time is. Some would say it is more of a misunderstanding, but let’s not split hairs. The point is that we have a nonlinear sense of time.

Now, and Not Now

This means we think in terms of "now" and "not now". It either is or it is not, there is no in between. Unless I have my planner in front of me and am looking at the 30-minute time intervals, "not now but sometime" is as good as my brain can function. It’s like my trying to do math in my head. It just does not work.

I need it in front of me to be able to visualize. My non-ADHD family, who knows my limitations with time intimately, giggled when I informed them I would be writing about tips for being on time. They giggled rather loudly.

“Ha,” my other half snorted over dinner. “Maybe you should list what not to do, in order to be on time. You know, because that list would be a lot longer — you have more experience with that angle.”

I love my other half very much, but he is wrong.

The strange thing about my perception of time and the relationship I have with it is that while I may be semi-pro at procrastination and forget there is such a thing as time when caught in a hyper-focus state, I am hardly ever late. And when I am late, everyone else is too, as it is due to a traffic accident or the never-ending highway construction projects. In other words, if I am late, it is the occurrence of events that are out of my control.

I’m almost always, without too many fails, early. I am more than qualified to help you out. Here’s my strategy for being on time.

Next page: getting to your destination with time to spare.

Getting to Your Destination with Time to Spare

Task: You have an important appointment across town. This is a big one and must not be late. What to do?

- **Break it down step by step. Do the math.** What do you have scheduled before the appointment? When making an appointment, try to remember to schedule yourself a 30-minute time cushion between the time you have to have everything wrapped up and the time you have to walk out the door to leave. Making sure you leave enough time to get in the car with everything you need and make it to your destination is crucial.
- **Do a quick estimate of the time you think it will take you to get there.** Go ahead and MapQuest the fastest route to double check any possible construction that you might not be aware of and may encounter. Then, double your time estimate, especially if it is during rush hour, and add in 15 minutes for flex-time, which can be used for a gas station stop or any other snafu you had not anticipated. This may sound goofy, but you never know when you may need that time because the other half forgot to tell you they ran out of gas and was not in the mood to stop and refuel. It happens.
- **Set out the items you will need to take with you.** Along with your keys, purse, and wallet, do you need to bring your planner and a notebook in case you need to write down dates, and more times? Put everything in plain sight, preferably right next to you so that you can gather it all up and head out the door.

- **Set a timer.** Yes, I love my timers. If you are feeling frisky and on top of things, set just one to alert you one hour before you need to leave. Or, if you are anything like me, set several timers to alert you at 15-minute intervals, starting from the one hour countdown.
- **Before you leave, do the pre-flight checklist.** Do you have your purse, keys, drivers license, cell, and everything you will need for this appointment in your hot little hand? Yeah? Then you should get there on time, possibly even a little early, but if the worst does happen and traffic is bad or you get caught behind a wreck, you will arrive, theoretically, with at least 15 minutes to spare so that you can transition over to the next step.
- **Breathe. Smile. Be prepared to focus.** You’re on time, right? Now make the best of it.