

# Seven (7) Tips for College Students with ADHD

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SAKALA SUCCESS CENTRE

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# Qualities of a Successful Student

[Sarah D. Wright](#), ADHD coach and author of "Fidget to Focus: Outwit Your Boredom—Sensory Strategies for Living with ADD," explains that successful students usually have four main qualities that help them achieve their goals:<sup>1</sup>

- Sticking with things even when the going gets tough (perseverance)
- Ability to delay gratification and focus on the big picture
- [Time management](#) and [organizational skills](#)
- Striking the right balance between fun and work

These particular skills, however, don't come easily to people with ADHD. One of the hallmarks of ADHD is problems with [executive functioning](#), which are the skills that allow people to control behavior. This means students with ADHD may struggle with staying organized, sticking to a plan, and managing time effectively.

## How ADHD Affects College Students

Poor executive function can result in several academic problems for students including:

- **Poor academic performance and achievement:** Students with ADHD frequently report feeling dissatisfied with their grades.<sup>2</sup> These issues are often caused by difficulties starting and completing tasks, disorganization, problems remembering assignments, difficulty memorizing facts, and trouble working on papers or [complex math problems](#).
- **Troubles with time management:** Students with ADHD often have irregular lifestyles that result from poor time management.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, they may have problems with being on time, preparing and planning for the future, and prioritizing tasks.
- **Difficulty regulating and managing emotions:** Students who have ADHD also often struggle with social problems, negative thoughts, and poor self-esteem.<sup>2</sup> Disruptive symptoms may make friendships and other relationships more challenging. Worrying about these problems can also play a role in poor self-image.<sup>2</sup>



# Succeeding in College When You Have ADHD

Luckily, there are several strategies you can use to help stay on track. Here's what Wright suggests for college students with ADHD.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Start the Day on Time

There are three main factors that contribute to being late in the morning: Getting up late, getting sidetracked, and being disorganized.

- **If Getting Out of Bed Is a Problem**

Set two alarms to go off in sequence. Put your alarm across the room so you have to get out of bed to turn it off. Put the second alarm where you know it will bother your roommates, which increases the consequences if you don't get out of bed and turn it off in time. Set the alarms to go off early so you can take your time getting ready in the mornings.

- **If Getting Sidetracked Is an Issue**

If certain things tend to derail you, like checking your email or reading the news, make it a rule that that activity has to wait until later in the day.

Figure out how much time you need to dress, eat, and get organized and then set alarms or other reminders to cue you that you need to have that task completed. Three ways to cue yourself to stay on schedule:

- **Use a familiar music mix as a timer.** For example, if you have 30 minutes to get ready, the schedule might look like this: wash and dress to songs 1 to 3, eat breakfast to songs 4 to 6, get your stuff together during song 7, and walk out the door by song 8. This works best if you use the same mix every morning.
- **Use your phone** or buy a programmable reminder watch so your alarms are always nearby.
- **Put a big wall clock in your room where you can easily see it.** If your room is part of a suite with a common room and bathroom, put wall clocks in those spaces as well.
- **If Being Disorganized Is the Issue**

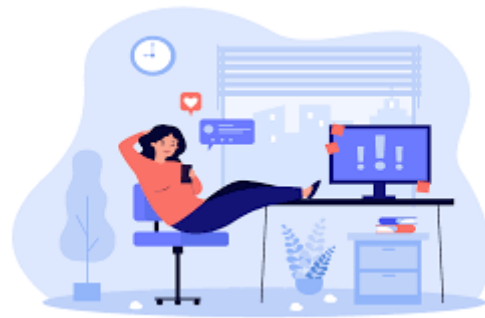
Create a "launchpad" by your exit door. Collect all of the things you'll need in the morning the night before (like your backpack, keys) and put them on the launch pad.

Leave yourself a note at the launch pad so in the morning you can "reprogram" your brain with what you need to remember that day (such as an appointment or a quiz). Then everything will be ready for you to grab as you run out the door.

## 2. Work With Your Urge to Procrastinate

Though this may sound counterproductive, if you feel the urge to [procrastinate](#), go with the feeling. When you have ADHD, sometimes the only time something gets done is just before it's due.<sup>1</sup>

At that point, nothing has higher priority, increasing the urgency and consequences if you don't do it now. Those qualities are what can finally make the task doable. So, work with that.



Plan to procrastinate, but stack the deck so you can pull it off. For example, if you have to write a paper, make sure you've already done the reading or research and have some idea of what you want to write.

Figure out how many hours you'll need to write it, block those hours out in your schedule, and then, with the deadline in sight, sit down and do it.

### Recap

Understanding your tendency to procrastinate can help you plan ahead so you won't be left scrambling to finish projects at the last minute.

## 3. Study Smarter, Not Harder

[Boredom](#) and working memory are both issues for most people with ADHD.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that multi-modal learning helps people learn and remember.<sup>4</sup> So, rather than trying harder to force the information into your head, get creative. Some examples of creative ways to study and remember what you studied include:<sup>1</sup>

- Highlight text with different-colored pens.
- Make doodles while you're taking notes.
- Record notes as voice memos and listen to them as you walk across campus.
- Use mnemonics to create funny ways to remember facts.
- Try standing up while you read.
- Try reading an assignment aloud to yourself using an expressive (not boring) voice.
- If you can, get the audio version of a book you need to read and listen to it while you take notes and/or exercise.
- Work with a study buddy.

Not everything works for every person, but try mixing up your strategies and see what happens. Taking study breaks every couple of hours and getting enough sleep are also part of studying smarter, not harder.<sup>1</sup>

Studying smarter also requires adequate sleep and sleep impacts learning in two main ways. First, sleep deprivation has a negative impact on [short-term memory](#), which is what you're using to learn the material when you study. Second, sleep is needed to move short-term memories into long-term memory, which is what you'll be relying on when it's time to take the test.

Sleep is important for both short- and long-term memory, so be sure to get enough sleep if you want to get the most out of your study time.

A great video to provide you with specific strategies to study SMARTER not HARDER is:

- [Study Less Study Smart: A 6 Minute Summary of Marty Lobdell's Lecture](#)

## 4. Schedule Your Study Time

Many students with ADHD are quite smart. They can often pull a passing grade in high school, or even a good one, just by cramming the night before the tests. Odds are that [strategy won't work in college](#). One good rule of thumb for college is two to two and a half hours of study time per week for every unit of course credit.

- [How to Organize your Calendar – The Ultimate Guide](#)

## 5. Plan Your Time: Assess and Prioritize

It may sound strange, but it's very important to actively plan time to plan. If you don't develop this habit, you'll find yourself always being reactive rather than proactive. It can be helpful to develop a high-level plan for the week on Monday morning, and for the weekend on Friday.

Then do a daily review of that plan over breakfast—possibly adding pertinent details—to make sure you know what's coming your way that day. When you can assess what you *need* to do versus all that you *could* do, then you can prioritize what needs to be done first and take care of it.

## 6. Stick to Your Plan

With ADHD, sticking to the plan is commonly the hardest part. If you like rewards, use them. For instance, you can tell yourself, "I'll read for two hours and then go to the coffee house." You can negotiate rewards for good grades with your parents too.

If you're competitive, use that. Pick some other student in your class whom you want to do better than and go for it. If you know you respond to social pressure, make plans with classmates to study together so you won't let *them* down.

Make appointments with tutors for the same reason. You may not need tutoring, but you may need structured study time. As these tips illustrate, there are all sorts of ways to help you stick with your plan.

Research suggests that focusing on skills related to time management, target planning, goal setting, organization, and problem-solving can be helpful for students with ADHD.<sup>5</sup>

### Having trouble procrastinating?

Watch this video for ideas to avoid procrastinating on those tasks that need to get done:

- [The Science Behind Why You Procrastinate](#)
- [6 Steps to Stop Procrastinating NOW](#)
- [My #1 Method for Stopping Procrastination](#)

## 7. Manage Your Medication

According to one study, only around 53% of college students with ADHD adhere to their medication plan.<sup>6</sup> Poor medication adherence can have serious consequences and contribute to poor academic performance and decreased graduation rates.

Some steps you can take to stay on top of your ADHD medications include:

- **Find a doctor:** Your medications need to be monitored regularly, so talk to your doctor or schedule an appointment with your university's health services.
- **Find a pharmacy:** Determine where you'll order and pick up your medication. Set reminders on your phone so you'll know when you'll need to refill your prescription. You may also be able to sign up for text reminders at your pharmacy.
- **Store medications safely:** Be sure to keep your ADHD medications in a safe location and never share your medication with others.<sup>7</sup>
- **Remember to take your medication:** If you are struggling to stick to a medication schedule, consider using a reminder app or setting reminders to go off on your phone.

# Succeeding Socially

Interpersonal struggles are also common for college students with ADHD. Being out on your own for the first time can be exciting and challenging, but students with ADHD often face additional difficulties when it comes to building and maintaining friendships.

Some tips that may help:<sup>8</sup>

- **Talk to people during orientation.** Remember that other students may be feeling just as excited (and a little overwhelmed) as you. Focus on being friendly and open-minded as you meet other people.
- **Look for chances to talk to other people.** You might make new friends in class, in your dorm, at the school cafeteria, or at other places on campus.
- **Find activities or clubs to join.** Colleges and universities are great places to explore hobbies and meet people who share your interest. Check out bulletin boards on campus or check your school's website to learn more about what options are available.
- **Stay in contact with your current friends.** Don't let your high school friendships fade into the background. While you're busy with new things and might not see each other every day, stay in touch by phone, text, social media, or email. Your current friends can be a great source of social support.

## ADHD Coaching for College Students

Sticking to your plan is also where a coach might come in handy. There is growing evidence, both research and anecdotal, that ADHD coaching can be a vital strategy in helping students learn to plan, prioritize, and persist (follow the plan).<sup>5</sup>

ADHD coaching has been described as a form of life-coaching influenced by [cognitive behavioral-type therapy](#) that involves helping people develop behaviors, skills, and strategies to better deal with some of the symptoms associated with ADHD. Coaching helps students develop greater self-determination and direction. It reduces overwhelm and anxiety and increases self-confidence and self-sufficiency.