

# Breezing into Summer with ADHD

MAKE THE TRANSITION



# N EASIER

by Terry Matlen, MSW, ACSW

## *Summertime, and the livin' is easy...*

or is it? One would think that a slower pace at work, while bosses and coworkers are taking their vacations or enjoying long weekends at the beach, would be just what the doctor ordered for the stressed-out adult with ADHD. Less chaos and office politics to deal with, a quieter environment, a slower pace, right? But for many, transitioning into the slow, quiet summer days at work or taking off on family vacations doesn't always equate with "easy" and often causes more anxiety, not less. How can that be? There are a number of reasons for this.

## TIPS FOR TRANSITIONING INTO Summer at Work

Here are some suggestions to help you ease into your summer routine at work.

- If your boss or supervisor is ready to head out on vacation, clarify with him/her what is expected of you while s/he's gone. If there are upcoming projects with deadlines, mark them in your planner.
- Make a visual schedule to give you additional structure. Post it where you can see it throughout the day.
- Use a checklist system to give yourself immediate positive reinforcement for tasks completed.
- Utilize electronic reminders to help you stay on track. Smart phones have beepers and messages you can program. Computers have software programs to help you stay on task.
- If you're comfortable, buddy up with a co-worker who can help you stay accountable.
- Schedule in physical activity such as taking a brisk walk three times a day.
- Use this time to get out and make new contacts or sales. Plan ahead to attend conferences, do "on-site" visits, networking events, or other activities that are structured and will enable you to interact with other people.
- Turn off the sound indicator ("ping") on your email and the ringer on your phone to cut back on distractions.
- Set specific times of the day to read email, such as morning, just after lunch, and at the end of the day so you don't get lost in the email/Internet abyss.
- Use a timer for tasks and give yourself a reward when you finish a task, such as taking a walk to the water cooler or having a short chat with a coworker. Just be sure that you don't become a source of distraction for others in your efforts to keep yourself stimulated!

A sudden change in the surrounding workflow can be unsettling to say the least, but planning ahead and feeling prepared can make all the difference.



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As an adult with ADHD, you may need the energy from those around you to help you stay charged, attentive and on track. It can be extremely difficult to stay focused on work-related projects and meet important deadlines without the routine and stimulus of having colleagues around you. Knowing your boss or supervisor is in close proximity and/or checking on your progress can help provide the accountability you need to keep plugging away until the job is done. But when the boss is away, the mice will play. Your ADHD brain needs structure and external expectations to hold you steady.

No two people with ADHD look the same or have the exact same symptoms. The person with the hyperactivity component might struggle more when things are too quiet and calm, whereas the person with the inattentive type of ADHD might find the calmness around her helpful in getting more work done, but there's still that need for accountability. Not having that stabilizing force around can leave you feeling lost at sea.

Summer also means family vacations, which are supposed to be relaxing. Camping trips, beach outings, a week in the woods... it's something you dream about all year, and as the time draws near, you're practically jumping out of your skin, raring to get out of the rat race and into your bathing suit. But jumping out of your daily routine into vacation mode can literally make you feel like a fish out of water.

Adults with ADHD have a notoriously difficult time dealing with transitions, even good ones. Going on vacation means switching out of work mode to days of nonstructured, free time. At work, you typically know what's expected of you, and at home, you and your partner keep the whole family on schedule and manage all the details of daily life. When you're on vacation, you're still trying to "manage"—but without the routine—and the change can be unnerving. What time should you wake up? When do you eat lunch? What do you do with all your free time? Read? Hike? Swim? Your hyperactive brain is searching, but it no longer has a roadmap to guide you.

Transitioning from work to play can be difficult for anybody, but for the adult with ADHD, the initial feelings of being lost can be more intense, and the adjustment period is often longer. It's ironic how the one thing you crave—time off—can actually backfire and cause you stress whether

you have inattentive ADHD (body in slow motion/brain in overdrive) or hyperactive ADHD (brain *and* body in overdrive). If you struggle with hyperactivity, relaxing might not be part of your makeup. When you're used to full days at home and at work, and then suddenly find that there are no demands, no places to go, no one to answer to, and you're suddenly "doing nothing" (such as reading or strolling the beach), it can feel like stepping off a cliff into a gaping void. The change is that drastic. This "free falling" can kick off some serious anxiety and/or depression.

Your ADHD brain needs to focus on *something*. It craves stimulation. If you're an inattentive type, you may go more inward, but you still need something to focus on outwardly, like writing, painting or some other quiet activity. If it doesn't find some sort of focus, it can succumb to negative thinking, such as ruminating, worrying, or obsessing.

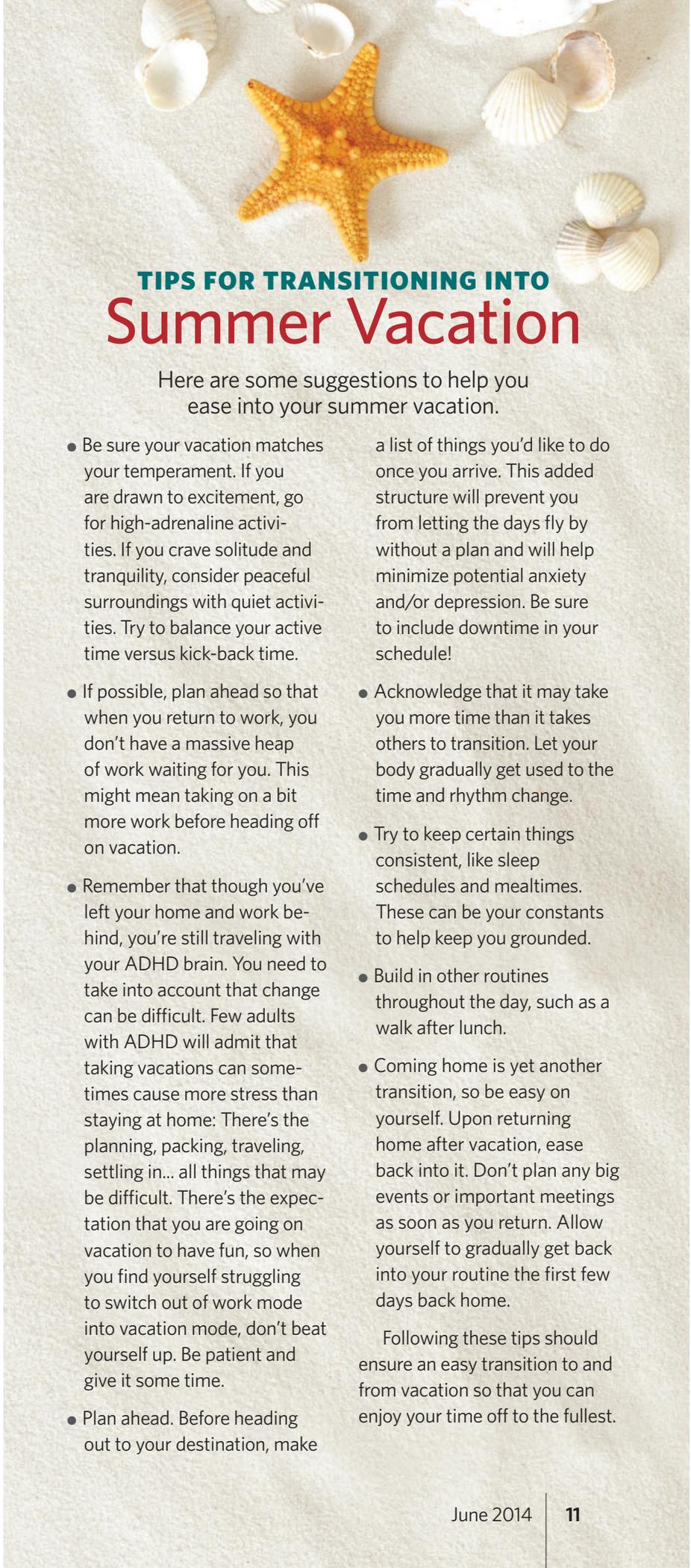
Then just as you've settled into vacation bliss, it's time to transition back to work and home, thereby stirring up the anxiety pot again. It seems that you just can't win. The good news is that there are a few things you can do to help make your transition into summer go more smoothly.

Though most people without ADHD jump at the chance to slow down during the summer, either at work or by going on vacation, it's not always easy for the adult with ADHD. Changing routines is often difficult, in general, and summertime is no different. Recognize that you will need to prepare ahead of time for these transitions so that you can maintain your productivity at work or enjoy a happy, carefree vacation. 🍓

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**Terry Matlen, MSW, ACSW**, is a psychotherapist, consultant and writer, specializing in ADHD. She has a special interest in women with ADHD and parenting the child with ADHD when one or both parents also has ADHD. She is the author of *Survival Tips for Women with ADHD: Beyond Piles, Palms and Post-its* and the upcoming book, *The Queen of Distraction: How Women with ADHD Can Conquer Chaos, Find Focus, and Get More Done* (October 2014) and is the founder and president of the popular website, *ADDconsults.com*. A nationally recognized speaker on ADHD, she served for many years on the board of directors of ADDA (and currently serves on the PAB), and is immediate past coordinator of the Eastern Oakland County CHADD chapter in Michigan. She is also the founder and moderator of the first and largest international listserv serving ADHD professionals.

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## TIPS FOR TRANSITIONING INTO Summer Vacation

Here are some suggestions to help you ease into your summer vacation.

- Be sure your vacation matches your temperament. If you are drawn to excitement, go for high-adrenaline activities. If you crave solitude and tranquility, consider peaceful surroundings with quiet activities. Try to balance your active time versus kick-back time.
  - If possible, plan ahead so that when you return to work, you don't have a massive heap of work waiting for you. This might mean taking on a bit more work before heading off on vacation.
  - Remember that though you've left your home and work behind, you're still traveling with your ADHD brain. You need to take into account that change can be difficult. Few adults with ADHD will admit that taking vacations can sometimes cause more stress than staying at home: There's the planning, packing, traveling, settling in... all things that may be difficult. There's the expectation that you are going on vacation to have fun, so when you find yourself struggling to switch out of work mode into vacation mode, don't beat yourself up. Be patient and give it some time.
  - Plan ahead. Before heading out to your destination, make a list of things you'd like to do once you arrive. This added structure will prevent you from letting the days fly by without a plan and will help minimize potential anxiety and/or depression. Be sure to include downtime in your schedule!
  - Acknowledge that it may take you more time than it takes others to transition. Let your body gradually get used to the time and rhythm change.
  - Try to keep certain things consistent, like sleep schedules and mealtimes. These can be your constants to help keep you grounded.
  - Build in other routines throughout the day, such as a walk after lunch.
  - Coming home is yet another transition, so be easy on yourself. Upon returning home after vacation, ease back into it. Don't plan any big events or important meetings as soon as you return. Allow yourself to gradually get back into your routine the first few days back home.
- Following these tips should ensure an easy transition to and from vacation so that you can enjoy your time off to the fullest.