

Beating Time Blindness

by Zara Harris, MS, OT



***I'm late! I'm late!
For a very important date!
No time to say Hello! Goodbye!
I'm late! I'm late! I'm late!***

IN 2002, a small research study on how adults with ADHD performed in the workplace was part of my master's degree in occupational therapy. My examiner commented, "An interesting study on a little-known condition!" The study confirmed that adults with ADHD do indeed have more job changes than adults in the general public, and significantly for those who lost their jobs, time keeping was the number one cause. In 2015, the "little-known condition" is much better understood and recognized, but time management continues to affect and disable many adults with ADHD.

Russell Barkley refers to it as time blindness. Most adults grow up to develop an innate sense of time. We rarely let the tub overflow; we know how long it takes to boil water before adding the pasta. Most people wake up and go to sleep without the need of alarm clocks and always know what day of the week it is. Not so for many adults with ADHD, however. During my pilot study I asked an interviewee, "Where were you working on 9/11?" Everyone knows where they were on those big historic events, don't they? Not so, for my interviewee, an intelligent father of two. His response was, "Does September come before or after August?"

The timetable that drives so much of the world is often completely baffling to someone with ADHD. To a greater or lesser extent they tend to live in "*time present*"—or NOW. "*Time past*" rarely enters their thinking, which is why "cause and effect" is not a useful disciplining tool with children who have ADHD. Neither do they let "*time future*" interfere with their *now time*, making them fun people to hang out with, as they are not burdened by the problems of tomorrow.

Those who are aware of their time blindness learn to compensate with lists, agendas, smartphones, and alarms. There are plenty of options out there in our digitized world. One of the best-tried solutions is finding the right deputy or partner who keeps one on time and does not get lost.

For many, however, time remains a mystery. Many high schoolers with ADHD cannot tell time. They can read a digital phone or clock, but they do not understand the analog watch, which shows us *time present* set in *time past* and *time future*. Without this concept, they must make a mathematical computation to work out if they are early or late for something. After all, we rarely need to know the actual time when looking at a watch, but rather, whether or not we are on time. The old-fashioned analog clock gives us that information with just a glance.

Social effects of time blindness

People who don't have ADHD do not understand why those with ADHD time blindness are always so late. Thinking that the person with ADHD is doing it on purpose can make them angry ("if they really cared, they would not be late.") In the workplace, time can be measured. People who are chronically late for work can be documented and fired. People who constantly show up late for meetings begin to get stereotyped. People who do not hand in their reports on time are no longer trusted or thought reliable. Nowadays, when it is hard to fire a worker for incompetence, time keeping and time management behavior can be recorded and the complaints stand up in an appeal.

So, why are these adults always late? They tend to have many excuses:

- I didn't write down the appointment. I thought I could rely on my memory.
 - I took on too many commitments.
 - I didn't calculate travel time from one appointment to the next.
 - I find it hard to leave one meeting/person/place to get to the new one.
 - I thought I could squeeze "just one more task" into the time available.
 - I got distracted en route.
 - I forgot/lost my watch/phone/agenda.
- I was hyperfocused on a task that needed to be abandoned.
 - I can only start when the pressure of being late is on.

Here are ten suggestions to help adults with ADHD cope with time blindness.

- Make sure you can tell (and understand) **analog** time.
- Make sure you carry/wear a timekeeper **ALL** the time.
- Learn to use alarms, pagers and buzzers.
- Write down your appointments, addresses, etc. (not on a piece of paper or a post-it that gets stuck to the wrong thing in your bag). Use an agenda.
- Use digital calendars that synchronize over multiple platforms.
- Use a GPS to save you from getting lost—but be careful about details. There may be more than one Maple Street in your area!
- Read/watch DVD/attend a course on Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- Read *ADD in the Workplace* by Kathleen Nadeau, PhD.
- Try to enjoy the experience of *being on time* so that you do not need an adrenaline rush to get you out the door.
- Don't expect others to tolerate your lateness. Make sure they are aware that you are working on your punctuality. 🗓️

Pediatric occupational therapist **Zara Harris** is based in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Licensed in both the United States and the United Kingdom, she has had over thirty years of experience. Harris has worked with international schools on three different continents.

Build Your Own Strategies

ALWAYS RUNNING LATE?

- Endorse the motto, "On time, *ALL* the time."
- Plan "getting-ready time."
- Plan to arrive early.
- Resist the impulse to use extra time. Don't do "just one more thing" before leaving.

OVERCOMMITMENT

- If you add a commitment, subtract one.
- Make a new habit of saying, "Let me check my other commitments first."
- Resist the impulse to squeeze something else into an already busy schedule.
- Believe (Your) TIME is FINITE.

PROCRASTINATION

- A good job fit will be challenging, interesting, engaging—not repetitive, routine, boring, or overwhelming and exhausting.
- Streamline job to avoid paperwork.
- Invest in a good filing system. Keep it simple, accessible, and color-coded.
- Do tedious tasks regularly; don't let them pile up.
- Reward yourself when the job is done!

PAPERWORK

- Review whole project to assess time required to complete each stage and write it down.
- Set realistic timelines and make them visible.

- Divide projects into bite-size tasks with deadlines and rewards.
- Prioritize and plan with others.
- Use agenda/smartphone/tablet calendar slavishly.
- Be accountable to others, regularly.

SOCIAL SKILLS

- Don't expect others to tolerate you. Putting *things* off puts *people* off.
- Create short-term goals and ask others to help you keep to these.
- Remember your motto: *On time, ALL the time!*
- Make sure others know that you are working on improving your time keeping.