



REMEMBERING the FUTURE

How ADHD Affects Prospective Memory (and How to Work With It)

Daniella Karidi, PhD

Have you ever walked into a room and forgotten why you went in, or promised yourself you'd move the laundry to the dryer only to find it still wet the next morning? These moments show prospective memory at work, and for people with ADHD it can be one of the most persistent daily struggles. Often hidden, these challenges quietly erode confidence and strain relationships, leaving many feeling misunderstood or discouraged.

Prospective memory failures go beyond small annoyances. For people with ADHD, they're often wrapped in shame: the birthday call you meant to make, the bill you swore you'd pay on time, the medication waiting on the counter. Each slip can feel like proof you're careless or unreliable. But that story isn't true. Forgetting, when you have ADHD, is not about laziness or lack of intelligence. It's about how the ADHD brain manages memory for the future.

This matters because prospective memory shapes daily life and relationships. It's the difference between showing up on time, following through on promises, or remembering to care for your health. The good news? Prospective memory can be supported. With the right tools, habits, and a shift in how we talk about forgetting, it's possible to strengthen remembering the future without beating yourself up along the way.

Remembering to remember: what prospective memory is

Prospective memory is a type of long-term memory that helps us carry out our intentions in the future. Unlike retrospective memory, which helps us recall the past—events, facts, or knowledge (like remembering the capital of your state)—prospective memory is all about remembering to remember. It asks the brain to hold onto a plan and bring it back at exactly the right moment.

Prospective memory is also a more complex process than retrospective memory. While retrospective memory involves three stages (encoding, storage, and retrieval), prospective memory requires five:

- *encoding the intention*, forming the plan to do something in the future and storing it in memory
- *retention*, the delay period between forming the intention and the time to act

- *retrieval*, recognizing the cue to act
- *execution*, carrying out the action at the right time or event
- *evaluation*, checking whether the action was successfully completed

Every extra stage introduces another opportunity for the system to break down. This is part of why people with ADHD so often report struggles with remembering to do things in the future. Here's what that looks like in everyday life:

You hear your doctor's instructions to take the pill at 8 PM and remember it (encoding). You hold onto the plan while going about your work and errands (retention). Later, you notice that the clock shows 8 PM or see the pillbox, which brings the intention back to mind (retrieval). You get the medication, open the bottle, and take it (execution). Finally, you look at the pillbox to confirm and avoid later wondering, "Did I take my pill?" (evaluation).

And here's the kicker: prospective memory isn't always a straight line. We may loop back, realize we skipped a step, or catch ourselves halfway. For example, you might stop at the pharmacy to pick up medication but get distracted and walk out with only toothpaste. That forces your brain to again circle back through retrieval and execution later.

Prospective memory's weak link: working memory

ADHD is strongly linked to working memory challenges, which is one of the reasons why remembering the future can be so difficult. Working memory acts as the brain's short-term workspace, holding small bits of information for a few seconds to, at most, about a minute—and it is fragile.

Imagine your partner says, "Can you take the trash out?" In that moment, working memory is what lets you keep "take out the trash" in mind. If you get distracted, for example by a text message or by thinking about tomorrow's meeting, the trash plan can vanish.

When working memory gets overloaded, your future plan might not stick. Instead of transferring into long-term prospective memory (the "to be remembered later" file), it simply disappears. In the case of the trash, it stays right there in the kitchen. That is why people with ADHD often feel like the task was never stored in the first place, because in a very real sense it was not.

Clocks vs. cues: the two types of prospective memory

There are two types of prospective memory:

- *Time-based prospective memory*, remembering to do something at a specific time, like turning off the oven after thirty minutes or joining a 10 AM meeting; and
- *Event-based prospective memory*, remembering to act when a cue appears, such as handing your child their permission slip when you see their

backpack or watering the plants when you walk past them.

Both are challenging for individuals with ADHD, but time-based memory is often harder. Event-based memory gets a boost from external cues, like seeing the post office on the way home. Time-based memory, on the other hand, depends on monitoring the clock, a skill ADHD brains often struggle with.

Turning intention into action: supporting prospective memory

We've only skimmed the tip of the iceberg of prospective memory. Rather than diving deeper into the theory, let's turn to what matters most: strategies. What really makes a difference is having practical tools that support our brains in remembering the future.

Before we dive in, it's worth saying again: these challenges are part of how ADHD affects memory. You're not failing; you're working with a brain that needs different supports, strategies, and concrete techniques to make prospective memory more manageable in daily life.

- **Create strong associations.** The more connections you make, the stronger the memory becomes. Pair an intention with something visual (placing your lunch bag with your keys), emotional (thinking of how proud you'll feel finishing a task), or contextual (always doing bills at the same

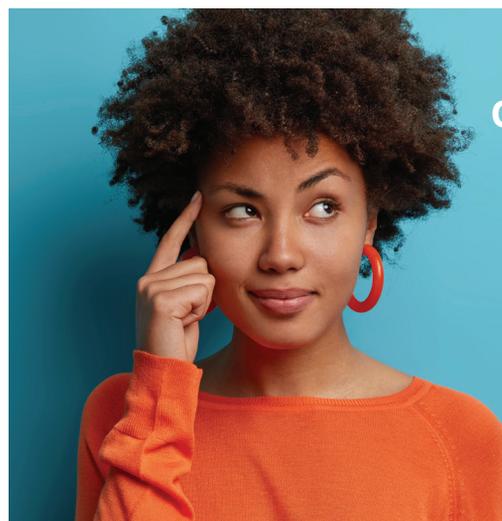
desk with the same playlist).

- **Try "when-then" planning.** Instead of vague intentions like "I'll exercise later," turn them into specific cues: "When I finish my morning coffee, then I'll go for a walk." This kind of linking builds a mental trigger that makes prospective memory more automatic.

- **Make your cues distinct and personal.** One of the best ways to strengthen prospective memory is to use reminders that are impossible to miss and meaningful to you. A standard alarm might fade into the background, but what if it plays the tune of "Happy Birthday" on the day you need to call your mom? Headed to the hardware store? Drop a screwdriver in your shoe the night before. There's no way you'll forget what you came to buy. The key is to make the cue distinct, memorable, and relevant to your own life.

- **Convert time-based cues into event-based ones.** Instead of "Take my medication at 8 PM," try "I'll take my medication after I brush my teeth." Tying intentions to events makes them more concrete and less dependent on time awareness, which is often tricky for ADHD brains.

- **Use external supports.** Alarms, sticky notes, and habit stacking (linking a new task to an existing routine) reduce the brain's need to self-monitor. If we already know that working memory is a challenge



One of the best ways to strengthen prospective memory is to use reminders that are impossible to miss and meaningful to you.

in ADHD, then the smartest move is to substitute it with external reminders instead of relying on “I’ll remember.” For example, pair “pack lunch” with “make morning coffee,” so one routine automatically cues the other. Or place a brightly colored sticky note on the door so you literally can’t leave without seeing it. The less you depend on your internal scratchpad, the more reliable your prospective memory becomes.

- **Lean on body doubling and accountability.** Body doubling means working alongside another person, in person or virtually, to stay focused and follow through. Simply having someone present creates gentle pressure and reduces distractions. Accountability goes a step further: making your intentions visible so someone can help you follow through. That might be a text from a friend saying, “ready for our walk?” or a coworking session to tackle projects side by side.

These approaches can also be part of professional support. Working with a coach or therapist provides a structured space where tasks are planned, progress is tracked, and memory challenges are met with guidance rather than judgment. External supports like these don’t just improve follow-through. They replace shame with connection and encouragement.

- **Use technology wisely.** Smart assistants, repeating calendar events, and location-based reminders can act as external prospective memory systems. For instance, setting your phone to buzz when you drive past the pharmacy makes remembering less about your brain and more about your environment.

From shame to strategy: changing the language of forgetting

The words we use about memory matter. Harsh self-talk like “I have a terrible memory” only fuels shame. A more helpful shift is to use the vocabulary of prospective memory itself. Instead of “I just have a bad memory,” try “I need stronger cues” or “Retrieval is where I struggle most.” These phrases name the challenge more accurately and point toward solutions.

This shift also helps in conversations with others. Rather than apologizing with “I’m just so forgetful,” you might say “I’m working on improving my prospective memory” or “I need reminders to support my follow-through.” This kind of reframing takes the focus off blame and puts it on problem-solving.

Shifting the language we use, both internally and externally, acknowledges the reality of ADHD memory struggles while keeping the focus on growth and strategies.

Making prospective memory work for you

Because prospective memory is complex, the solutions that support it must also be flexible. What works for one person may not work for another, and what works today might not work tomorrow. Effective strategies depend on many factors: your environment, the kind of task, your age, your stress level, even

Quick Wins to Boost Your Prospective Memory

Shift the cue.

Instead of relying on only the clock, also tie the task to an event (for example, take your medication after brushing your teeth).

Make the cue noticeable.

Use a bright sticky note on the door or a bold phone alarm you can’t ignore.

Talk kindly to yourself.

If you forget, show self-compassion. Remind yourself, “This is how ADHD affects memory, not a flaw in me.”

Don’t rely on working memory.

Write it down, set reminders, and let tools do the remembering for you.

Use multiple cues.

Pair a reminder on your phone with a sticky note so the task shows up in more than one place.

your energy at the moment. There’s no single fix that will magically improve prospective memory for everyone. Instead, success comes from experimenting with different supports, noticing what helps in a given context, and being willing to adjust over time.

Memory struggles are real, and for people with ADHD, they can sometimes feel relentless. Yet prospective memory is not set in stone. With compassion, creativity, and the right support, remembering the future can become far more manageable.

The key is to start small. Choose one new strategy to try today, a distinct cue, a language shift, or a supportive reminder, and see how it changes your follow-through. Each successful step builds momentum, confidence, and hope. Prospective memory challenges may never disappear completely, but with the right support and strategies, they don’t have to define your days. 🧠



Daniella Karidi, PhD, is an ADHD and executive coach, memory researcher, and founder of ADHDtime. She helps individuals navigate life transitions such as college, career, and retirement with science-based strategies and compassionate support. Learn more about her work at ADHDtime.com.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Budson AE & Kensinger EA. (2023). *Why We Forget and How to Remember Better: The Science Behind Memory*. Oxford University Press.

Cohen A-L & Hicks JL. (2017). *Prospective Memory: Remembering to Remember, Remembering to Forget* (SpringerBriefs in Cognition). Springer.

Raskin SA. (Ed.). (2020). *Prospective Memory in Clinical Populations*. Routledge.

Rummel J & McDaniel MA. (Eds.). (2019). *Prospective Memory*. Routledge.

Talbot K-DS, Müller U & Kerns KA. (2018). Prospective Memory in Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Review. *The Clinical Neuropsychologist*, 32(5), 783–815.