

Adult ADHD Skills Library:

How to Start a Task When Your Brain Feels Completely Stuck

Skills Practice Sheet

LESSON: The Five-Minute Activation Exercise

SL-001

Many adults with ADHD know exactly what they need to do but feel unable to get started. This is not a problem of laziness or motivation—it is a common challenge related to executive functioning. The Five-Minute Activation Exercise is a simple, evidence-informed strategy designed to help you overcome that initial barrier by focusing on one small, manageable step. The goal isn't to finish the task; it's simply to begin.

Use This Skill When...

- ☐ I know what I need to do but can't get started.
- ☐ I keep putting it off.
- ☐ I feel overwhelmed before I begin.
- ☐ I'm waiting until I feel motivated.
- ☐ I'm thinking about the task more than I'm doing it.

How to Do It...

Step 1. Choose one specific task.

Task: _____

Step 2. Break it into the smallest possible first step.

First step: _____

Step 3. Set a timer for five minutes.

- ☐ Timer started

Step 4. Begin immediately. (No planning. No waiting.)

Step 5. When the timer ends... what happened?

- ☐ I kept going
- ☐ I took a short break
- ☐ I stopped after five minutes

Success?: ☐ I started. (*Success is simply getting started—not finishing everything.*)

(Continue to next page)

Practice Log

Did I start? ☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Difficulty getting started today: (easy) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (difficult)

What helped? _____

What got in the way? _____

What will I try next time? _____

Weekly Practice Log

	Task	Started	Continued
Monday		☐	☐
Tuesday		☐	☐
Wednesday		☐	☐
Thursday		☐	☐
Friday		☐	☐
Saturday		☐	☐
Sunday		☐	☐

Evidence-Informed Resource

This practice sheet was developed by Peace & Prosperity Psychiatry, APNC using evidence-based principles from research on adult ADHD, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), executive functioning, and behavioral activation. The Five-Minute Activation Exercise is a clinical application of these research-supported principles. For a complete discussion of the evidence, see the companion lesson SL-001.

References

- Barkley, R. A. (1997). Behavioral inhibition, sustained attention, and executive functions: Constructing a unifying theory of ADHD. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121(1), 65–94.
- Isaac, V., Lopez, V., & Escobar, M. J. (2023). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1336040.
- Lopez, P. L., et al. (2018). *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2018(3), CD010840.
- Olagunju, A. E., & Ghoddusi, F. (2024). *American Family Physician*, 110(2), 157–166.
- Volkow, N. D., & Swanson, J. M. (2013). *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 369(20), 1935–1944.

