

WORKING MEMORY WITH ADHD



Real-Life ADHD Strategies

By Someone Who's Been There: **Shane Alan O'Connor**

I've Been Forgetting Things for 36 Years

The Mental Whiteboard That Wipes Itself

Imagine you've got a giant whiteboard in your head. It's where you jot down the stuff you need to hold onto in the moment — an address someone's telling you, the second step of a recipe, the punchline of a story you're about to tell.

Now imagine that every so often, a gust of wind blows through and erases it... while you're still writing. You're left standing there with the marker in your hand, staring at an empty board, wondering what just happened.

That's working memory when you've got ADHD.

Working memory isn't the same as long-term memory — it's not about remembering your childhood phone number or your first pet's name. It's about holding onto right-now information long enough to use it. It's the mental "clipboard" where you keep things temporarily so you can act on them.

When your working memory glitches, the results can be... entertaining, if you're in a good mood. You might:

- **Forget the brilliant point you were about to make.**
- **Lose track of which cupboard you were searching in and why.**
- **Find yourself holding an object with no idea where you picked it up from.**

The problem is, this isn't just about quirky moments. When your mental whiteboard keeps wiping itself clean, tasks take longer, conversations derail, and small mistakes pile up.

The frustration isn't only about forgetting — it's about losing momentum. It's like trying to build a Lego tower while someone keeps swiping the top pieces away.

But here's the thing: you can't stop the gusts of wind.

You can figure out how to write things down faster, keep spare markers, and put the whiteboard somewhere less drafty.

SMALL WIN

If the mental whiteboard keeps wiping itself clean, double-write important stuff: keep it in your head and in a quick physical form — a sticky note, your phone's notes app, even a scribble on your hand. That way, when the gust hits, you've still got a backup copy of the plan.

My working memory is like a Post-it note stuck to a damp wall — it's hanging in there for a bit, but eventually gravity wins and it flutters to the floor. Usually while I'm still looking at it.

Shane Alan O'Connor

How ADHD Tangles With Working Memory

Let's get this straight: having ADHD doesn't mean you don't have a working memory. You do. It just behaves like a clumsy intern — one who's juggling too many papers, keeps dropping them, and occasionally wanders off to make tea without telling you.

The ADHD brain loves stimulation. It's wired to chase novelty and jump between ideas. That's part of its charm — it's why you might be quick-witted, great in a crisis, or able to brainstorm a dozen ideas in five minutes. But that same fast-switching makes it harder to keep one piece of information front and centre long enough to finish what you started.

Here's the thing: working memory is tied to attention. If your attention shifts — because something more interesting, urgent, or shiny appears — the "active" memory you were holding can drop instantly. It's not lost forever; it's just out of reach in that moment, like a balloon slipping from your hand.

In practical terms, this means:

When your working memory glitches, the results can be... entertaining, if you're in a good mood. You might:

- **Start tea. Check phone. Kettle's cold**
- **Step 3 of recipe: "Did I add sugar? Or...?"**
- **Nodding along. No idea what was just said.**

This isn't about willpower. It's not that you're careless or lazy. It's that your mental filing system is being asked to handle rapid-fire interruptions without a backup plan.

The good news? You can build that backup plan — one that makes it harder for your brain to drop the thread, and easier to pick it up again when it does. That's where the real

SMALL WIN

Treat your brain like the clumsy intern it is — give it fewer papers to carry. Break tasks into micro-chunks and park each chunk somewhere visible: a sticky note, a kitchen timer, a single open tab. The less your brain has to juggle, the fewer "balloons" float away.

"My brain isn't disorganised — it's just running a very enthusiastic, badly managed circus"

Shane Alan O'Connor

Working Memory vs. Short-Term Memory Not the Same Thing.

Here's the thing — people love to tell me, "Oh, I forget stuff all the time too." Yeah... no. Forgetting where you put your keys once is not the same as your brain emptying the dishwasher halfway through and just walking off.

Short-term memory is basically storage. You grab something, you hold it for a second, and then it naturally fades away — like remembering a phone number long enough to dial it.

Working memory? That's the messy workbench in my head. It's where I'm holding onto something while using it. And my bench? Well... it's missing a few screws. I'll be trying to do one thing while holding onto another bit of info and — ping! — it's gone. Not because I wasn't paying attention, but because the whole bench tilted and all my tools slid onto the floor.

I've had 37 years of watching my thoughts vanish mid-action. I can start making a sandwich and somehow end up reorganising a drawer without ever eating. I'll remember the thing I was supposed to be doing three hours later, usually when I'm already in bed.

And this is the bit that most people don't get — it's not that the information isn't in there somewhere. It's that it doesn't stick around long enough for me to actually use it before it drifts off like a balloon I forgot to tie down.

If you've got ADHD, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about. If you don't, congratulations — you've just learned why I write everything down like my life depends on it.

SMALL WIN

When you're juggling steps in your head, externalise the sequence before it slips. Write it big, stick it where you can see it, and cross each step off as you go. It's not overkill — it's giving your brain a stable "now" so it doesn't have to keep chasing what's next.

"My brain's not lost — it's just taking the scenic route without telling me"

Shane Alan O'Connor

Why Working Memory Actually Matters

If working memory only messed with the occasional thought, it wouldn't be such a big deal. You'd forget why you walked into a room once in a while, laugh it off, and move on. But here's the reality — it's everywhere.

Working memory is in play when you:

- **Follow multi-step instructions without re-checking.**
- **Track where you are in a conversation while planning your reply.**
- **Hold a list in your head while shopping.**
- **Remember what you read long enough to get the next sentence.**

When ADHD scrambles this system, it's not just an inconvenience — it slows you down, makes you second-guess yourself, and can make simple tasks exhausting.

It's the reason you re-read the same line four times.

It's why you open your email, read a message, and instantly forget what it said. It's why following verbal directions can feel like trying to memorise a shopping list that's being shouted from across the street.

Over time, it can wear you down. You start avoiding certain tasks because you know they'll take more energy than they "should." You might start to think you're just bad at focusing, or worse — that you're lazy.

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**Working memory with ADHD is like
trying to hold water in your hands —
it's there, and then it's gone.**

Shane Alan O'Connor

The Real-Life Chaos It Causes

Here's the fun part — working memory glitches don't politely announce themselves.

There's no warning beep. No flashing light. Just poof — gone. One second you're on track, the next you're standing in a room wondering what you came in for.

It's why halfway through a task you suddenly start another one. It's why you walk into the kitchen for a spoon and leave with a snack... but no spoon. It's why you end up opening six tabs to "look something up" and can't remember what the first one was for.

When working memory misfires, it's not just inconvenient — it changes the way you move through the day. You spend extra time retracing steps, repeating actions, and rebuilding the train of thought you just lost.

And it's not just about tasks. Conversations can go sideways too. You forget the point you were making halfway through. You miss key details because your brain hopped tracks. You ask someone to repeat themselves — not because you weren't listening, but because the words fell out before you could hold onto them.

All of this adds up to a constant low-level drain. You're not just doing the thing — you're doing the thing and repairing the thought process while you go. No wonder you're tired.

SMALL WIN

When your brain hits the "poof" button, don't stall trying to remember anchor yourself instead. Touch the object you were using, jot one keyword, or say your last thought out loud. Anchors give you something solid to grab when the rest slips away, so you can climb back into the moment without wasting energy on panic-search mode.

"It's like walking into the kitchen for a spoon and coming out with a biscuit, two emails sent, and no idea what happened in between"

Shane Alan O'Connor

The Half-Built Bridge

You start with a spark — the idea, the plan, the first step.

It's exciting. You can see the other side in your mind. But somewhere along the way, a gap opens up. You've got the start of a bridge... and then nothing. You stand there staring at the missing planks, wondering how you got here.

You know there was a middle bit that made sense, but it's like it dissolved while you were walking on it. And now, the other side — the finished thought, the completed task — feels miles away.

So you backtrack, retracing your mental footprints, hoping the missing pieces reappear. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. And sometimes you rebuild them from scratch, only to realise they're not the same as before.

It's exhausting, building the same bridge twice. But you do it, because leaving it half-built isn't an option. Still... you can't help wishing you could just make it across the first time.

SMALL WIN

When the middle of your plan starts to vanish, say it out loud as you go.

Even if you're alone. Speaking your steps forces your brain to leave

a trail you can follow back — and if you can, record it so Future

You can rebuild without guessing.

“Your future self isn't lazy or forgetful —
they're just picking up where your past
self left breadcrumbs.”

Shane Alan O'Connor

Why It Feels So Frustrating

The worst part isn't losing the thought — it's how quietly it happens.

One second you're mid-sentence, mid-task, mid-whatever, and the next... blank. No "incoming distraction" warning, no mental countdown. Just gone.

It's like your brain changes the channel without telling you. You don't even notice until you look up and realise you're halfway through something else entirely.

The real sting? You often don't even know what you lost. There's nothing to chase because you can't remember what you're chasing. It's a void. And yet you know there was something there. That itch of an unfinished thought is maddening.

People who haven't lived with this think it's just being forgetful. But forgetting implies you had it long enough to lose it. This is more like never getting a proper grip in the first place.

Over the years, that quiet vanishing act chips away at you. It makes you second-guess yourself. It adds extra weight to every task because you're not just doing the work — you're trying to keep hold of it the whole time. And when it slips through your fingers yet again, it's hard not to take it personally.

SMALL WIN

When you feel the thought starting to fade, drop everything for 10 seconds and capture it — voice memo, text to yourself, scribble on your hand, whatever's closest. You're not "interrupting" the task — you're protecting it.

"It's like opening your mouth to say something and finding the words packed up and left without leaving a note."

Shane Alan O'Connor

The Clipboard Metaphor

Think of working memory like your brain's clipboard.

You can only fit so much on it at one time, and it's meant for right now stuff — the things you're actively doing, figuring out, or holding in mind.

The problem with ADHD is that the clipboard has a habit of wiping itself clean. Not when you're done with the task... just whenever it feels like it.

You might be mid-sentence and — click — blank page. You might remember you were doing something but not what it was. Sometimes you don't even notice it's gone until someone asks, "Weren't you in the middle of something?"

This is why you can be halfway through booking a flight and end up checking the weather for somewhere you're not going. Something else landed on the clipboard and shoved the first thing off before you could finish. Once you understand this, you stop blaming yourself.

for "losing focus" and start figuring out how to protect that clipboard space. The trick isn't to force yourself to hold more — it's to keep things from falling off in the first place.

SMALL WIN

When you start a task, jot down exactly what you're doing in the shortest words possible — book flight, reply to Sarah, make tea. Keep it visible so if something bumps it off your mental clipboard, you can reload it instantly.

"It's like writing an important note, then using the same page to jot down a shopping list and losing both."

Shane Alan O'Connor

What Actually Helps

This isn't about willpower. You can't bully your brain into holding onto more than it's designed to. Trust me, if "just try harder" worked, I'd have solved this back in school.

The trick is to stop relying on memory alone and start building a world where you don't need to hold everything at once. Think of it like lowering the weight you're carrying instead of trying to grow bigger muscles overnight.

Break big jobs into ridiculously small steps. "Do the washing" becomes "put clothes in machine," "add detergent," "press start." It sounds silly, but smaller steps mean fewer chances for the thread to snap.

Anchor your tasks to something you can see — a sticky note on the fridge, a bright calendar on the wall, your shopping list written where you'll actually look at it. If your brain can't keep it in mind, make sure your environment does the remembering for you.

And here's the key — you've got to catch thoughts as they land. The second something pops up — an errand, an idea, a thing you meant to say — get it out of your head. Write it down, type it, voice record it. It doesn't matter where, as long as it's somewhere you can find again.

The less juggling you do up there, the fewer balls hit the floor.

SMALL WIN

Before starting your next task, write down three tiny steps it involves. Complete the first one and cross it off — not for productivity's sake, but to keep the chain from breaking halfway through.

It's like swapping a dozen spinning plates for one sturdy bowl,
way fewer crashes.

Shane Alan O'Connor

Brain Dump It

Your head is not a filing cabinet. It's more like a desk covered in loose papers — if you keep adding to the pile, the important stuff slides off the edge.

That's why brain dumping works. It's not about creating some perfect, colour-coded productivity system. It's about getting thoughts out of your head before they vanish. Anything counts — a notebook, an app, the back of an envelope, even a scribble on your hand.

Think of it like clearing the runway before you try to land a plane. If your brain's already crowded with half-finished thoughts, there's no room for new ones to come in and actually stick.

A brain dump doesn't need to be organised when it lands. You can sort it later. The point is to free up mental space so you're not burning energy trying to hold everything in place.

The more you practise offloading, the faster it becomes. You stop wrestling to remember and start trusting that your thoughts are safe somewhere outside your head. That's when things stop slipping through quite so easily.

SMALL WIN

Set a 5-minute timer tonight and write down every single thing on your mind — important, silly, random, all of it. Don't filter. Just unload. You'll be surprised how much lighter you feel after.

It's like emptying your pockets at the end of the day — suddenly you realise you've been carrying three pens, a receipt from 2019, and a half-melted sweet.

Shane Alan O'Connor

Shrink the Task

Big tasks are like blurry photos — you can't see where to start, so your brain just... doesn't. That's why shrinking them down works. You're not making the work smaller, you're making the starting point smaller.

When you tell yourself "clean the kitchen," your brain immediately sees every dirty dish, every cupboard to wipe, every crumb under the toaster. It's too much. But if you start with "put dishes in sink," it's suddenly manageable.

ADHD brains thrive on momentum. Once you're moving, it's easier to keep going. The problem is getting moving in the first place — and nothing kills momentum faster than an overwhelming, undefined job.

Shrinking the task is giving your brain a stepping stone instead of a cliff face. You're still doing the same work, but you're tricking your brain into starting before it has a chance to panic.

And yes, sometimes the first step really is "open laptop" or "find pen." If it feels too small to count, you're probably doing it right.

SMALL WIN

Take something you've been putting off and write down the first step so small it feels ridiculous. Do just that step today. If you want to stop after, fine — but you probably won't.

It's like telling yourself you're just going to the shop for milk... and somehow coming home with dinner sorted.

Shane Alan O'Connor

Set It and Forget It

Relying on your brain to remember everything is like trusting a shopping bag with a hole in it. You'll lose things without even realising they're gone.

Instead, build reminders into your life that don't depend on memory. Alarms, timers, sticky notes on the door, a calendar alert that pops up at the exact moment you need it — these aren't crutches, they're tools.

The goal is to move important stuff out of the mental "I'll remember later" zone and into a system that interrupts you at the right time. That way, even if your attention drifts, the plan doesn't.

The magic isn't in setting the reminder — it's in trusting it enough to let the thought go. Freeing that space means your brain has more room for the thing you're actually doing right now.

You're not giving up control — you're giving your brain the backup it needs to stop running on panic mode.

SMALL WIN

Pick one thing you usually forget — taking meds, leaving on time, sending that email — and set a reminder for it right now. Let the system remember so you can get on with your day.

It's like outsourcing your memory
to a personal assistant who shouts at
you right when you need it.

Shane Alan O'Connor