A fact sheet about

Buffers between tasks

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Buffers between tasks

What attention residue is, why buffers may help, and how to close a task.



Key points

- When you move from one task to the next, part of your attention can stay on the last one. This is called attention residue (definition below).
- It may be stronger when the last task is not finished, and stronger again if you know you will have to rush back to it.
- A buffer is a short gap between two tasks. Ending the first task with one small closing action may help you leave it behind.
- One way to close a task is to write one line about where you got to and what comes next.

What attention residue is

You get home from an appointment and go straight into cooking. While you chop, your head is still in the waiting room, going over what was said. Then the phone rings, and you are still half in the kitchen while you are on the call. By the evening you have done everything, but none of it felt like you were really there.

A day with no gaps can feel like this. Each thing starts before the last one has let go.

Attention residue is the part of your attention that stays with the last task after you have moved on. You may keep thinking about it, wonder if you did it right, or plan what comes next for it. While that is going on, there is less of you for the new task.

Research with adults in general found that this matters. People did less well at the next task when part of their mind was still on the last one. This was more likely when the first task was not finished. Just finishing the first task was not always enough to let it go.

Why a buffer and a closing action may help

In later research, people were interrupted partway through a task. When they knew they would have to rush back to it, more of their attention stayed behind. But some people first took a moment to note where they were and how they would pick it up again. For them, less attention stayed behind, and they did better at the interrupting task too.

So a closing action puts the unfinished part somewhere outside your head, and that may make it easier to let go.

For some people, moving between tasks may cost even more. If your attention goes deep into one thing at a time, pulling it out and starting again somewhere new can take time and effort. You can read more about why switching tasks can throw your whole day here.

Research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: a buffer with one closing action

Look at your day and find two things that sit back to back. Then put a gap between them of about 10 to 15 minutes, or longer if you can. In that gap, do one small closing action for the first thing:

- write one line about where you got to and what comes next
- put the things you used back in one place, like a folder or a tray
- add any loose jobs to one list, so they are not left in your head
- send the one message you were going to send later

Then do something small that is not either task: get a drink, step outside or stretch. After that, start the next thing.

A buffer can fit anywhere in the day: after an appointment, a call with a relative, school pick-up or a busy trip to the shops. A buffer also gives the day some room, so one thing running late does not push everything else back.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for the start of your buffer. You can also keep your one-line notes there, so you can find where you got to when you come back.

The written note has been tested with adults in general. The buffer itself comes from what neurodivergent adults say helped them. This is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

A buffer can feel like wasted time, especially on a busy day. But if you spend the next hour half in the last task, the gap may give you more of that hour back.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with how your day is put together, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If your days have felt too full for weeks, and you feel worn out, it may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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