A fact sheet about

Coming out of hyperfocus

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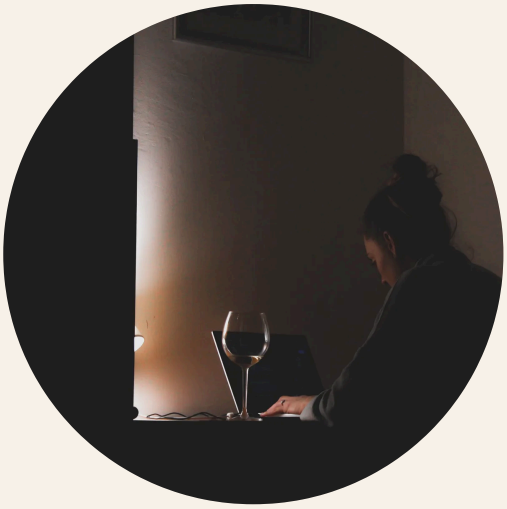
Coming out of hyperfocus

What hyperfocus is, why stopping can feel like a crash, and how to land softly.



Key points

- Hyperfocus (definition below) is focus so deep that it can hold you for hours.
- While you are in it, the clock and your body can go quiet, so hunger, thirst and tiredness may all land at once when you stop.
- Being pulled out suddenly can add a jolt, and that is part of the crash.
- Deciding before you start how you will come out, with a cue from outside yourself and a gentle first thing to do, may help you land more softly.

What hyperfocus is

You sit down to sort one folder of photos, read one chapter or fix one small thing. When you look up it is dark, your neck is stiff, you are very thirsty and you have missed a call. Or someone calls your name halfway through, and for the next hour you feel rattled and cannot settle to anything.

Neither of these means the focus was a mistake. What was often missing was a plan for the way out.

Hyperfocus is a name for focus so deep that you notice little else around you. Many ADHD adults describe it, and it can last for hours. It often happens with something you really like: a game, a hobby, a project or a book.

In research, adults with more ADHD traits said they went into hyperfocus more often, and it happened in hobbies, in study and on screens. When ADHD adults were asked what they value about how their mind works, hyperfocus was one of the strengths they named. So the aim here is to keep it, and to land more gently when you come out.

More broadly, 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.

Many autistic adults know deep focus through monotropism, where attention goes deep into one thing and what sits outside it goes quiet.

If you are AuDHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may know this kind of focus too. You can read more about monotropism here.

The way out on this page may help with that kind of focus too.

Why coming out can feel like a crash

While you are deep in something, the things outside it get very little of your attention. That can include the clock and your own body: hunger, thirst, needing the toilet, a stiff neck or sore eyes. Those signals may have been there for hours, but they did not reach you.

So when you stop, they can all arrive at once. And the rest of the day is waiting too: messages, chores or the meal you meant to cook. If your body signals are often quiet, you can read more about the sense that tells you what is happening inside your body here.

The way you come out matters as well. When something cuts in before you are ready, like a knock or a question, you can lose your place and stay half in the task. Autistic writers have described being pulled out of deep focus with no warning as painful, and the jolt can stay with you for a while. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may know this jolt too.

So the crash often comes from two things. Your needs piled up while you could not feel them, and the exit came as a shock. You can plan for both before you start.

The one thing to try: plan your way out before you go in

Once you are deep in, it is hard to choose to stop, so decide while the choice is still easy. Some plans take the form "when this happens, I will do that". In research with adults in general, people who made plans like this were more likely to follow through.

Before you start, decide three things:

- when you will come out, as a time rather than "after this bit", because there is always one more bit
- what will tell you, using a cue from outside yourself
- what you will do first, as a soft landing

A cue from outside yourself can reach you even when you are deep in. Some ideas to choose from:

- a kitchen timer or alarm across the room, so you have to stand up
- an alarm on a different device from the one you are using
- a person at home who agrees to come and tell you
- something in the day that will not move, like feeding a pet or a bus to catch

If an alarm feels like one more demand, a softer cue may suit you better: a playlist that ends or a lamp on a timer. Some people find two cues help, one to find a place to stop and one ten minutes later to stand up.

The soft landing is a small thing you do with your body first: a drink and a snack, a stretch or a few minutes outside. You can set the reminder in the Understanding Zoe app. You can keep a note there of

where you stopped too, so leaving the task does not mean losing it.

This way out comes from what ADHD, autistic and other neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. Some days the alarm will go and you will keep going anyway, but a plan that works half the time still means fewer crashes.

If you are already crashing

If you have just come out and feel wiped out, start with your body before anything else. Drink some water, eat something easy and go to the toilet. Then leave the next task for a little while, because the jolt usually settles once your needs are met.

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 you plan your days around how your focus works, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if deep focus often keeps you from eating, drinking or sleeping for long stretches, because that needs its own conversation.

Sources

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