A fact sheet about

Catching thoughts before they slip

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Catching thoughts before they slip

What working memory is, why thoughts slip before the list, and how to catch them.



Key points

- Working memory (definition below) holds a thought for a short time while you use it.
- If yours holds less, or lets go sooner, you can lose track of a thing you meant to do before you reach your list.
- Many things are lost in the gap between thinking of them and writing them down, even things you care about.
- What may help is catching the thought in two seconds, in the room you are in, and moving it into one place later.

What working memory is

In the shower you remember the bill that is due. By the time you are dressed you have lost it, and it comes back at eleven at night, or after the late fee. Or you walk into the kitchen and cannot remember why, and you meant to text your sibling back three days ago.

None of this means the bill or your sibling do not matter to you. The thought was there, but it was lost on the way to being written down.

Working memory is the part of your mind that holds a thought for a short time while you use it. It keeps a phone number in your head while you dial it, or "get the milk out" in mind while you open the fridge.

It holds only a small amount, and it can let go when something new comes in: a noise, a question or the next thought. So a thought you are not using right now can be pushed out fast.

Experts in adult ADHD name working memory as one of the things that can be harder with ADHD. In research, autistic people as a group have also held less in working memory on tests than non-autistic people. Most of this research is with ADHD and autistic people. There is less with people who are neurodivergent in other ways. But people vary a lot, and a test score does not say how well you manage in your own day.

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.

Why the thought is lost on the way to the list

Most people have a place where things are meant to go: a calendar, an app or a notebook. But that place is often somewhere else, like a phone in another room or a notebook in a bag.

Every step between thinking of it and writing it down is a chance for it to slip. You go to find your phone and the kettle boils, or you unlock it and see a message. By the time you find your notebook, you have lost the thought.

So your list may be fine as it is. What may help more is making the distance between a thought and somewhere to put it much shorter.

The one thing to try: catch it in two seconds, where you are

Have a way to catch a thought in each place where thoughts come to you. It should take about two seconds, so the thought is caught before something new comes in. Some ideas to choose from:

- a pad and pen by the kettle, by the bed and by the front door
- a voice note on your phone or watch in an app like Understanding Zoe
- a text or email to yourself
- a whiteboard on the fridge
- a sticky note on the thing itself, like the bill

The note does not need to be neat. "Bill" or "text Sam" is enough, as long as you will know what it means later.

Then move what you caught into one place once a day, at a time you already pass, like making tea or dinner. One place matters, because notes in five places are easy to lose again. That place can be your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, where you can also set a reminder for anything with a date.

This way of catching thoughts comes from what ADHD, autistic and other neurodivergent adults say works for them. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. The first week may feel like extra work, but it often gets quicker once the pads are where your hands already are.

You can read more about choosing a system that holds things for you here.

If you have already dropped something

Dropping things is common, and it says more about how memory works than about how much you care. If a text has gone unanswered for days, a short reply like "Sorry I went quiet, I did see this" can be enough. If a bill is late, paying it now and asking about the fee is often the quickest way through.

Many people notice they drop more things when they are tired, unwell or stressed. So dropping more than usual may be a sign that you are running low, and that is a reason to go easy on yourself.

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 set up ways to remember that fit your life, 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 forgetting is new for you or getting worse. Tell them too if it comes with feeling flat, where nothing feels good, because that needs its own conversation.

Sources

Kooij, Bijlenga, Salerno, Jaeschke, Bitter, Balázs and colleagues (2019). "Updated European Consensus Statement on diagnosis and treatment of adult ADHD." European Psychiatry 56, 14-34. doi:10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.11.001

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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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