A fact sheet about

Memory systems that last

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Memory systems that last

What cognitive offloading is, why systems fall apart, and how to pick one.



Key points

- Cognitive offloading (definition below) means putting memory into the world, like a list, an alarm or a note on the door, so your head does not have to hold it.
- In research with adults in general, setting a reminder helped people do the things they meant to do later.
- No single system suits every ADHD, autistic or otherwise neurodivergent adult, but the ones that last tend to be easy to see and quick to use.
- Pick one outside system, and give it a short look once a week.

What cognitive offloading is

You may have tried a paper planner, then three apps, then a notebook with coloured pens. Each one worked for a week or two and then stopped. The app sends reminders you swipe away, and the planner stays in your bag.

That does not mean no system will ever work for you. It often means the system did not fit how your days and your attention work.

‘Cognitive offloading’ is a name for putting a job your memory would do into the world around you. You write a shopping list, set an alarm for the bins or leave your keys on top of the bag you must not forget. Asking someone to remind you is offloading too.

Everyone does this, whatever their memory is like. In research, people set more reminders when there was more to hold or more chance of being distracted. Setting a reminder made it more likely they would do the thing later.

Research has looked at this more in ADHD adults than in autistic adults. If you are neurodivergent in another way, some of it may fit you too. In one study, ADHD adults did a 12-week group course on time, planning and getting organised. More of them found attention in daily life got easier than people in a support group.

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 some systems hold and others fall apart

A system has two jobs: to take a thought in quickly, and to give it back to you at the right moment.

Many systems are good at one job and not the other. A notebook in a drawer takes things in, but it does not come to find you. An app, like Understanding Zoe, may remind you well, but if adding a task takes six taps, you can lose the thought before you reach it. You can read more about catching a thought before it slips here.

A system also only works while you trust it. If you stop looking at it, your head quietly takes the job back, and things start to drop again. A list that only grows can get too heavy to open, so it needs clearing now and then.

Some people like paper because they can see it and there is no screen to pull them away. Others always have a phone on them, so it is the one place that is never in the wrong room. If an alarm feels like one more demand, or the sound is too much, a list you can see may sit better.

The one thing to try: pick one system that finds you

Choose one outside system to start with, and let the others go for now. Pick the one you will see without going looking. Some ideas to choose from:

- paper: a list on the fridge or a notebook that lives in one spot
- a phone: reminders that go off at a time, or when you get home
- a whiteboard by the front door, for the things you need on the way out
- voice notes, if writing or typing is slow for you
- a person, like a partner, friend or housemate who agrees to remind you of one or two things, if that suits you both

If a phone works for you, you can offload whatever's on your mind into the Understanding Zoe app, by voice or by typing, and it will set reminders for you automatically.

Then give your system a short look once a week. Tie it to something you already do, like Sunday breakfast or the bus home on Friday. Plans made this way, "when this happens, I will do that", helped adults in general follow through. In five minutes you can cross out what no longer matters and set a reminder for anything with a date.

All of those ideas and suggestions are anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

When a system stops working

Many people have built a system that worked for two weeks and then stopped. That is common, and it says more about the fit of the system than about you.

You do not need to start again from scratch. Start a new page with only the things due this week, and leave the old list where it is for a better day. If the same part keeps failing, change that part, like moving the list to where you will see it.

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 a system that fits 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.

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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