A fact sheet about

Task initiation and getting stuck

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Task initiation and getting stuck

Why starting is its own job, why caring makes it harder, and one first step.



Key points

- Starting a task is a separate job from doing it. This job is called ‘task initiation’ (definition below).
- It can get stuck even for things you love, so being stuck does not mean you do not care.
- Caring a lot can make the start feel bigger, and stress can make it harder again.
- What may help is making the first step one small physical action, and doing only that.

What task initiation is

You have a free afternoon and one thing you really want to do: paint, sort the photos, ring a friend or fill in a form. You sit down near it, and an hour later you have not started. You still want to do it, but the gap between wanting and starting does not close.

Other people may call this lazy, or tell you to try harder. But trying harder works on the doing, and the part that is stuck is the start.

Executive function is a name for the brain's planning jobs: choosing what comes first, holding steps in mind, keeping going and switching. Task initiation is one of those jobs, and it is the part that turns "I am going to" into the first move.

Many ADHD adults find this part hard. Experts in adult ADHD list getting started on tasks among the things that can take more effort. Autistic adults have a community word for something close to it: inertia.

In a study led by an autistic researcher, autistic adults said they found it hard to start, stop and change what they were doing. They said it was not under their control, so it was not a matter of choosing.

They said it also happens with things they want to do and enjoy, like reading, gardening or art. So you can be stuck at the start of something you care about a lot, and more willpower is not what is missing.

Why caring can make the start feel bigger

When a task matters to you, it can grow in your head. You want to do it well, so you think about the best way to begin, the best time and the right order. But in the same study, wanting to make the perfect choice made it even harder to start.

Some people find it hard to break a task into parts. Others break it into so many parts that they cannot see where to begin. Either way, there is no clear first move to make.

Stress can add to this. Research suggests that stress can quiet the part of the brain that plans. So a hard week may leave you more stuck, even with the things you love.

The study of autistic adults was small, with 32 people. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too. 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.

The one thing to try: make the first step small and physical

Pick the thing you want to start. Then ask what your body would do first, and make it small enough to take less than a minute. Choose something you can see or touch:

- put the form and a pen on the table
- open the laptop and the one document you need
- take the paints out of the cupboard
- find your friend's name in your phone
- put your shoes by the door

Then do only that step. If more follows, that is good, and if it does not, you have still started. Some autistic adults said they get going by telling themselves that all they need to do is one small step, and then the next.

It can help to pick the moment too. In research with adults in general, people who planned when and where they would start got going more often than people who only meant to. A plan like that can be short: "When I sit down after lunch, I will put the form on the table."

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for that moment. You can also keep a note there of the first steps that worked, so you do not have to think of them again.

All of this is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Some days even the smallest step will not happen. That can mean you are running low, not that you have failed, so you can make the step smaller still or let the task wait. You can also read more about what helps you start besides willpower here.

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 getting started and with planning your week, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If it has been hard to start almost anything for weeks, and you feel worn out, it may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here. Let your GP know too if nothing feels good, even the things you usually enjoy, because that needs its own conversation.

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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