A fact sheet about

Monotropism and switching tasks

UnderstandingZoe

https://understandingzoe.com

Copyright 2026

Understanding Zoe

Monotropism and switching tasks

What monotropism is, why switching costs so much, and one way to switch less.



Key points

- Your attention may gather into one deep channel at a time. This is called monotropism (definition below).
- If it does, the costly part of your day may not be the tasks themselves, but moving between them.
- A change you did not expect can feel sudden, and it can take time to settle into the next thing.
- Grouping your small jobs together, so the day has fewer switches, may leave you more for the rest of it.

What monotropism is

You are halfway through cooking dinner when someone knocks at the door. It is a parcel, and it takes less than a minute. But back in the kitchen you cannot remember what came next, and the rest of the meal feels like hard work. This can affect the rest of your evening.

Other people may say you need to be more flexible. But the cost came from leaving what you were doing and coming back to it, more than from the knock.

‘Monotropism’ is a way of describing how attention works. It came from autistic researchers, one of them drawing on their own life.

Some people spread their attention across many things at once, a little on each. Others gather it into one or two things at a time, and go deep. The second way is monotropism. You may notice more inside that focus, and much less of what is going on outside it.

It was first described in autistic people, but it may fit many ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent people too.

Deep focus is not a problem. For many people it is where they learn fastest, enjoy things most and feel most like themselves. You can read more about coming out of hyperfocus without crashing here.

Why moving between things costs so much

If your attention goes deep, getting into a task takes some time and effort. Once you are in, everything outside it can go quiet. So moving to something else means pulling your whole attention out, then building it up again somewhere new.

That is why a day of small jobs can leave you more tired than a day with one big job. Each move between things costs something, even when the jobs are easy: a quick text, a call from a relative, a trip to the letterbox. Six small jobs can mean six moves out and six moves back in.

A change you did not expect may cost the most: the researchers who named monotropism said that a change you did not see coming can feel sudden, and that you may need time to adjust. Being pulled out before you are ready can also be painful. So a ten-second interruption can cost far more than ten seconds.

This comes from how your attention works, so it is something you can plan a day around.

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: group your small jobs

Look at tomorrow and find the small jobs that tend to break up your day. Then put them together in one block, so you switch into "small jobs" once rather than many times. You could group:

- replies to texts and emails
- phone calls and bookings
- quick errands, like the post office or the chemist
- bills and other admin
- small jobs around the house

Pick a time for the block that suits you, like late morning, or straight after you get up. Then leave the longer things you care about in a stretch where you are less likely to be pulled away.

If other people break up your day, through caring, a household, appointments or a job, you can still group things a little. You could ask for one quiet stretch, like a morning with no calls, rather than asking to be left alone all day. You could also ask the people you live with to give you a heads up before a change, so it is less sudden.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for your small jobs block. You can also keep a list there of the small jobs as they come up, so they wait for the block.

This is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Some days the plan will not hold, and that is fine: grouping even two jobs means one switch fewer.

You may also want to leave some space between tasks. You can read more about building buffers into your day 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 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 every change has felt much harder than usual for weeks, and you feel worn out, it may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

Sources

Murray, Lesser and Lawson (2005). "Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism." Autism 9(2), 139-156. doi:10.1177/1362361305051398

Garau, Murray, Woods, Chown, Hallett, Murray, Wood and Fletcher-Watson (2023). "Development and Validation of a Novel Self-Report Measure of Monotropism in Autistic and Non-Autistic People: The Monotropism Questionnaire." Preprint, not yet peer reviewed. doi:10.31219/osf.io/ft73y

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.

for more information, you can contact

hello@understandingzoe.com

Copyright 2026