

# How to Thrive with Adult ADD / ADHD

by

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## Class 3: Time Sense, Time Management

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### What is a “Time Sense?”

A Time Sense is an innate sense of time, which some people seem to be born with. Lack of a time sense is an important factor in contributing to someone’s chronic lateness with appointments and deadlines. Without a realistic time sense, you have great difficulty in planning a busy day and accomplishing what you set out to do.

A time sense operates in two ways:

- 1) Predicting Time – Knowing how long things will take
- 2) Estimating Time Passing – Knowing how much time is passing

### Predicting Time

An ability to accurately predict how long something will take plays a big factor in determining when to start – or how long it’s safe to put off starting! Someone with a good time sense about predicting how long things will take is usually thought to have good time management skills, IF he uses his time sense wisely. When you know how long it takes to do things, you can plan accordingly.

Knowing how long things take doesn’t involve ESP. This “knowledge” is usually based on past experience. People who have a good time sense have automatically incorporated what they have learned in everyday life, or in specific past experiences, to make quick judgments about

future events and activities. These judgments are made so instantaneously that they seem to be unconscious.

People with a poor time sense seem to:

- Not notice how long typical activities take, therefore, not learning from past experience; and/or
- Know how long things take, but don't take this knowledge into consideration

### **Lack of Time Knowledge**

If you truly have no idea how long it will take you to do something that is similar to activities you've done before, you have not been in the habit of paying attention to time. This is typical of many people with Attention Deficit Disorder.

**Example:** Melissa had a college assignment to write a 20-page paper about the effects of the Civil War on US / European relations. She had "no idea" how long this would take her. When her coach asked her to think through the steps involved, she came up with the steps of looking through her textbooks, doing library and internet research, organizing her notes, outlining her paper, and writing it. All of these steps were activities she had done many times before with previous school projects. Yet she had a very hard time guessing how long it typically had taken her to do each of these. Without this information, she was at a loss to know how much time she would need to complete this paper.

For Melissa to improve her time sense, she needs to start consciously paying attention to how long things take her, so that she can draw upon this knowledge.

### **Not Using Time Knowledge**

Many people are able to come up with the right answers about time when they think about it, but are not in the habit of using the knowledge they have. They have not incorporated time knowledge into their lives.

**Example:** *Jack was habitually late for appointments. He promised his wife he'd be back home from a sales meeting by 5:45 to get to a dinner engagement on time. Instead, he barely made it in the door at 6:30. His wife was upset, but not surprised. In relating the*

*incident to their coach, Jack was asked why he thought he'd be home by 5:45. He said the meeting was due to end at 5:00. When asked where the meeting was, he named a distant suburb, from which he said he could drive home in 45 minutes. The problem, he stated, was that he got held up with long lines at the toll booth on the highway, and then dense traffic as he neared their home in the city. Jack's wife pointed out that 5:00 was rush hour, when one could expect traffic and congestion. The 45 minutes that Jack claimed to be able to drive from the suburb involved going at nearly 75 miles an hour during off times.*

*If Jack had been given this time prediction as a logic problem to solve, he would have certainly come up with a correct answer. But he wasn't accustomed to thinking analytically about time when it came to his own life.*

For Jack to improve his time sense, he will have to consciously think through the assumptions he is operating under, regarding time. When he challenges these assumptions, he'll see they don't stand up to logic, and he can make better time decisions.

**Estimating Time Passing** - A second component of having a good time sense is the ability to "sense" how much time has just passed while you are engaged in an activity. This means having an intuitive feeling that is not based on knowledge such as seeing a clock or relying on outside cues.

This kind of time sense operates more like a sense of direction – some people are born with it. You may be able to develop it by paying more conscious attention to what time feels like.

If you are operating in a hyper-focus state of high interest in what you're doing, sometimes called being in a "flow state," time seems to pass very quickly. Conversely, when you are doing something tedious, time seems to slow down.

## THE TIME SENSE EXERCISE

I developed the Time Sense Exercise as a tool for my coaching clients to help them develop a time sense. If you're not one of the lucky few who were born with a time sense, you can develop one by working with the attached exercise for just a few weeks. It's very simple, but can make profound changes in your life and habits!

## How to do the Time Sense Exercise

**Use the attached template on the last page** to fill in the columns for a few activities throughout the day. You may use a notebook, spreadsheet, or any other piece of paper instead, but be sure to record all of the activities you measure in one place.

**Don't worry about recording everything!** If you just do one or two activities per day for a few weeks that will help you a great deal. The more activities you record, the faster your progress is likely to be.

**Choose a variety of activities both personal and work-related**, such as traveling to a destination, getting ready to leave in the morning, making dinner, specific work activities, running errands, organizing the desk, etc.

**Activities don't have to be common for you**, though activities that are typical for you are the most useful. The purpose of the exercise is to see your pattern of predicting time, so that you can improve it.

**Activities should be short, ideally an hour or less.** For complex projects with many steps, break down each project into an activity that you can be specific about. For example, writing a long research paper might be better broken down into a) library research; b) Internet research; c) compiling notes; d) creating an outline; e) writing Section I; f) editing first draft.

**Activities should have a clear beginning and end.** If you're vague in your mind about what the beginning and ending is, your recording won't be accurate. For example, if you're measuring the time to get to work, be clear about whether you're talking door to door, or simply to the parking lot.

### **Column 1 - Activity**

Write a brief description and the date. You might also want to indicate what type of activity it is, such as "travel."

### **Column 2 - PREDICTION: How many minutes you think it will take**

Take a guess how much time this activity will take you, if you were to work steadily at it. (Include short expected breaks if those would typically be included as part of the time needed). Record the prediction in minutes even if you predict more than an hour. Write an hour as “60 minutes;” an hour and a half as “90 minutes.”

### **Column 3 – Time You Started**

Look at a clock and note the actual time you start the activity. Don't record this in advance, since you want the exact time you begin; not the time you *plan* to begin.

### **Column 4 – Time You Ended**

Look at the clock and write the time you actually finished the activity.

### **Column 5 – REALITY: How many minutes it really took**

Calculate how many minutes it really took you to complete the activity. (**HINT:** This can be easiest done by actually looking at a dial clock!)

### **Column 6 – Difference in Minutes**

Compare your prediction to reality by subtracting the predicted number of minutes in Column 2 from the actual number of minutes in Column 5. This difference represents the gap in your accuracy in predicting time.

**Example:** *You estimated 15 minutes, and it actually took 20 minutes. The difference is 5 minutes.*

In some cases, you may have over-estimated how long things will take. Then you would get a negative number, which you can indicate with a (-) sign, or in parentheses.

**Example:** *You estimated 10 minutes, and it actually took only 7 minutes. The difference is 3 minutes, which you can indicate as -3 or (3).*

### **Column 7 – Difference in Percentage**

You'll need to see your prediction gaps are in terms of percentage in order to make sense of the figures. Otherwise, you'll be comparing "apples and oranges" without seeing a meaningful pattern of results. You can get this quickly by dividing the number of minutes difference in Column 6 by your prediction in Column 2. This gives you the percentage by which you were "off." Be sure to remain consistent with Column 6 by indicating a positive or negative number!

**Example:** *Your gap shown in Column 6 was 5 minutes, and you had predicted 20 minutes in Column 2. So divide 5 by 20 to get the percentage by which your prediction was off. ( $5 \div 20 = .25$ , or 25%).*

### **Column 7 – Comments or Explanation**

This column is for anything that you feel is worth noting. You might want to make a note of unusual circumstances, such as a major interruption while you were engaged in the task. Or perhaps you would record an explanation if you felt you were inefficient, or if the activity took particularly longer than usual.

## **How to Use What You Learn**

### **Note Your Patterns**

**By Calculation** - It can be a real eye-opener to see how much you are off by in terms of percentage. Were your estimates 20% off, 50% off, or 300% off? Or did things take you "3 times" or "5 times" as long as you expected?

**By Activity Type** - Notice whether your accuracy differs by activity type. Perhaps you have a different accuracy rate for estimating travel than for writing. Or you may notice an accuracy difference based on the time of day.

### **What Your Patterns Mean**

You may be shocked and dismayed by how much you are off from your predictions. Actually, finding out that you are consistently highly inaccurate is GOOD news! Here's why:

If you are taking this class, chances are you have a problem with time management. You may wonder what it is that you're doing wrong, or why you can't get things done as fast as you should. This exercise may tell you that your main challenge is simply a poor time sense!

### **Assumptions About Yourself**

Discovering that you are highly inaccurate about predicting and estimating time allows you to challenge your negative assumptions about yourself. Instead of doing something wrong, it could be that you simply were going through life with an unrealistic expectation of what you "should" be able to do. Perhaps one reason you are chronically late is that you habitually try to fit more things in a period of time than even Superman could!

***Example:** Suzanne began working with the Time Sense Exercise when she did everyday errands. She was shocked to immediately discover that she had an inaccuracy rate of 300% -- almost everything she did took three times as long as she had thought it would. Errands that she assumed would take ten minutes took at least 30 minutes. She then applied logic and broke down an errand into steps:*

*Picking up a prescription at the pharmacy involved:*

- *Leaving the house and getting into the car.*
- *Driving to the pharmacy*
- *Parking and walking from car to pharmacy*
- *Waiting in line at pharmacy counter*
- *Waiting for pharmacist to find prescription and ring it up*
- *Returning to car*
- *Driving home and parking*

*Any one of these steps could easily take ten minutes! Suzanne realized that she automatically thought of "ten minutes" as her rule of thumb when scheduling errands. She was now forced to acknowledge that she was operating on faulty logic. Being a highly logical person in her professional life, once Suzanne became conscious of this contradiction, she could no longer tell herself that errands only take ten minutes. She now estimates 30 minutes for the typical errand.*

## Assumptions About Your To-Do List

Once you know the truth about how long things realistically take, take a fresh look at your To-Do List. This list might be one that you periodically write out, or just knowledge that you carry on your head of what you'll do today.

Does your list make sense? Can you possibly accomplish everything that you have set out for yourself today? Could anyone?

Try working with a modified To-Do List that reflects a sense of time reality. It's far better to accomplish a few things with a sense of satisfaction than to end each day with a sense of futility of everything left undone.

## Opportunities to Create Strategies

Another benefit of gaining a better time sense is it allows you to gain awareness of other issues. This, in turn, means you can create workable strategies to improve.

*Melissa discovered how long it really took her to write papers for her courses. This helped curb her tendency to procrastinate – she realized she needed to manage her time and couldn't wait until the last minute. However, talking to her teacher, she found that it took her longer to complete papers than the teacher had intended. She now needed to determine what stages were holding her up, and what tendencies took her so long.*

***Distracting tangents.*** *During the research phase, Melissa tended to discover interesting facts in her research that she would then spend time exploring. She hyper-focused on these tangents, often losing more than an hour pursuing interesting websites that were not relevant to the project at hand.*

- **Strategy:** Use a timer. *During her research, Melissa wore a vibrating watch that she set to go off every 15 minutes. This served to pull her mind back to what she was doing.*

***Perfectionism.*** *Once she began writing, Melissa worked on getting every sentence right, and perfecting the formatting of the paper as she went. This took her much longer to write, and she ended up having to rush at the end.*

- **Strategy:** Break it down into stages. *As a first stage, Melissa put down her thoughts without worrying about wording. Then, after the whole paper was laid*

*out, she went back over the wording and punctuation. Finally, she fussed with the formatting if there was time.*

## How to Improve Your Time Sense by Next Week

After only a few days of doing the Time Sense Exercise, you will begin making mental adjustments each time you predict how long things will take. All it takes is becoming conscious of what your patterns are telling you, and you'll improve your time predictions automatically.

*How quickly you improve depends how much you use the exercise.*

### Adjust Your Predictions Based on Your Patterns

Once you realize your tendencies in predicting, you can't help but modify your predictions accordingly. If you consistently find it is taking you twice as long to get anywhere door-to-door as you had guessed, break down the steps involved to figure out why. And, at the very least, start doubling your time prediction for travel time. Unless you consciously deny what the Time Sense Exercise is telling you – or ignore it -- you will automatically adjust your estimates to reflect what you now know is reality.

### Use a Timer to Improve Time Estimations

You may never be a natural at “feeling” how much time has passed while you're engaged in an activity. But there are tools to help you. A simple timer, pre-set to go off at regular intervals, will give you a better sense of time passing. If you set a timing device to go off every 15 minutes that you're doing something, your own internal clock will start to get a sense of what 15 minutes feels like in that activity. You can use an old-fashioned kitchen timer with a dial, a vibrating watch, set your clock in Outlook, or set your PDA or cell phone to ring. At home, you can use the timer on your oven, or your alarm clock.

- **Hint:** Look at the “Invisible Clock” timer at [http://www.thrivewithadd.com/products/useful\\_resources109](http://www.thrivewithadd.com/products/useful_resources109).

## How to Make Sure You DON'T Develop a Time Sense

1. Assume that just listening to the class will give you a time sense.
2. Forget to use the Time Sense Exercise or any variation of it.
3. Remember the Exercise, but don't have the template available when you need it.
4. Use the Exercise a few times, but don't make the calculations that will tell you anything.
5. Make the calculations, but don't look for patterns or use what you've learned for estimating time in similar activities.
6. Learn to estimate time realistically, but continue to behave as if reality doesn't apply to you.

## TIME MANAGEMENT

Gaining a better time sense is the critical first step in managing time. But the life skill of time management lies in applying your time sense to planning and scheduling.

### Getting Places on Time

Getting somewhere on time involves taking these four factors into account:

- **Understanding what “on time” means to the other party**
- **Knowing how long it takes to get there**
- **Knowing the time you must get out the door**
- **Having strategies in place to make sure you leave on time**

These factors will eventually become natural for you to consider automatically, the way people do who manage time easily. But to reach that level, at first you need to think them through deliberately and with full intention.

**Be clear about your intention for “on time” arrival** – Different cultures and situations can ascribe different meanings to the concept of time. Generally, North American business norms would dictate arriving a few minutes early for an appointment as a courtesy. In meetings with colleagues you see often, strictness about time might be determined by the company culture.

For personal meetings, some people get highly offended when someone is habitually late, while others are more laid back about it. At parties and social gatherings, where it may be the norm to be “fashionably late,” you might have a totally different sense of time than in social plans with individuals,

If you are habitually late when dealing with people who have a strong sense of time, they may assume that you have a motive for being late, such as a lack of caring, a reluctance to be there, or general disorganization.

Have a clear and conscious intention about what time you want to be there, taking these factors into account.

**Know how long it takes to get there** – Getting someplace on time requires having a sense of time regarding all the factors involved. These can include walking to a train, waiting for a subway or bus, looking for a parking space, walking from a parking lot or waiting for an elevator. Neglecting to take even one of these key factors into account can make you late. That’s why it’s important to break down all the steps when doing the Time Sense Exercise on an activity.

**Know when you must be out the door** – Assume you’ve worked backwards from a) figuring you want to be there 5 minutes early, and b) determining you need 30 minutes to get there. So the time you must leave is 35 minutes before your meeting time. You now know exactly what time you MUST be out the door. **Suggestion:** Mark the time you must leave in your calendar!

**Use strategies to make sure you don’t get derailed** - As someone with ADD / ADHD, the extra component in managing time for you is to create solutions for your particular stumbling blocks. These must be solutions that you can count on time after time... so they become habits and rituals. (*We’ll talk about rituals in a future session.*)

## Planning: Getting Things Done on Time

Good time managers know they need to spend time at the beginning of a project planning it out. This is not something that is likely to become “unconscious.” It’s a deliberate, thoughtful activity. As you can see, without a good time sense, realistic planning is just about impossible!

Here’s what you need to consider when meeting time expectations on a project:

- **The deadline or deliverable date**
- **All the steps involved and how long they’ll take**
- **What input must be provided by others, and how long they’ll require**
- **Target dates for interim steps**
- **The time you have available to work on the project**
- **Potential roadblocks to anticipate and how to avoid them**

**Know your deadline** – It always helps to have a deadline in order to structure your time. If you have a project at work that’s open-ended, ask your boss or client about their expectations so you can set priorities. If no deadline can be given, then set a target date yourself so you can work backwards from it.

**Plan out all the steps** – It’s not possible to plan the timing of a project unless you figure how much time it takes to do all the steps. A mind-map is a great way to capture these steps. We’ll talk about how in a future session. Don’t forget “pre-steps,” which might include looking for a file or determining the status of something before you can begin.

**Consider others’ needs and inform them early** – It helps to send a “heads up” alert to people who will be required to add input to the project. If you know the deadline for their part of the project, tell them early. Also plan on sending them follow-up reminder notices at specific dates before their input is due. (HINT: One possible pre-step would be to check their availability.)

**Keep yourself on track by assigning target dates for milestones** – As you work backwards on the calendar from your deadline, mark dates along the way to have completed steps. You’ll then be able to manage expectations by showing progress on a status report.

**Block off time on your calendar** – You'll need to set aside blocks of time on your calendar to work on a significant project. Before doing that, make sure you've also entered all other commitments, so that you don't over-commit. Take personal commitments into account on your business calendar: you won't be able to work late on the night that you have theater tickets!

- **Remember “billable” time is not the same as real time.** If you require six hours of heads-down productive time to complete an activity, it will actually take far more than six hours on the clock. That's because in real life, you have interruptions, take breaks, deal with email and phone calls, have lunch, talk to colleagues, get coffee... these all add up to significant time. As someone with ADD, unless you're hyper-focusing on the activity itself, you probably will need more activity breaks to deal with your attention span.

**Anticipate potential problems** – It helps to build slack time into your schedule since few things go completely as anticipated. Don't be caught by surprise by events that needn't really be a surprise. If you've been experiencing computer problems, get your computer fixed so it won't crash the night before your project is due!

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## PRACTICE

These suggested assignments are optional. However, developing a Time Sense is critically important to being successful at planning, prioritizing, scheduling and fulfilling your intentions.

- **Use a Time Sense Exercise on at least one activity per day.** It doesn't matter if you use the template provided on the last page or create your own system in a notebook or on your computer. Just keep your time sense entries in one place so you can see patterns and improve upon them.
- **Create an Intention to get someplace on time.** Pick something you want to be on time for this week, and create an intentional strategy using the four factors on page 10. Consider:
  - What does “on time” mean in this situation?
  - How long will each step of getting there take? (*Verify these predictions on the Time Sense Exercise.*)
  - What time do you need to leave?
  - What would typically get in your way of leaving, and what will you do about it?

