

“RITUALS TO CHANGE HABITS”

Telephone Class

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NOTE: Throughout this class, the terms "ADD" and "ADHD" will be used interchangeably to refer to Attention Deficit Disorder in general, without intention to specify whether or not hyperactivity is present.

Rituals are Essential for Changing ADD Habits

As ADD adults, we usually have a number of tendencies and behaviors that cause us difficulty in our lives. These tendencies come about a result of the way our ADD brains function when we're not paying very conscious attention to monitoring exactly what we do. Although they vary from person to person, the most common negative ADD-related tendencies result in:

- Inertia getting started
- Poor follow-through
- Feelings of overwhelm or paralysis
- Disorganization and clutter
- Chronic lateness
- Difficulty planning and prioritizing
- Inability to create structure or stick to a plan
- Inability to focus on performing mundane, routine tasks
- Over-promising and under-delivering
- Forgetting to take necessary actions
- Tactless speech or inappropriate behavior

These unfortunate outcomes come about because of our habits.

What is a habit?

Habits are behaviors that we engage in habitually. They are our default behaviors. Very likely, we do them without consciously thinking about it. Sometimes, we don't even realize that we're performing a habit.

Example: Kitchen clutter - Sarah has a habit of leaving food or dishes out after she's used them rather than putting them away. This is unconscious on her part. She never consciously said to herself, *"I'm going to leave out this carton of milk so that it will rot, and let the used*

dinner dishes sit out so that the food gets all hard and crusty and difficult to wash.” Rather, she has an inattentive habit of forgetting to put them back right away.

Example: Lateness – Malcolm is chronically late in getting anywhere on time due leaving his previous location later he they should. ADDers have a variety of reasons for doing this, but Malcolm’s reason is the common habit of trying to fit in “one more thing” before leaving. His habitual thinking is that this final activity will only take two minutes or five minutes. As an ADDer with poor time sense, he is not in the habit of learning to observe and remember how long the activity would *really* take (a lot longer than five minutes!) He also is not in the habit of setting a reminder mechanism such as a timer to warn him when he must leave. So these behaviors – coupled with the ADD tendency to get distracted and forget to stay on track and leave on time – results in Malcolm’s being constantly late.

The good news about bad habits

Although these kinds of negative habits may sound achingly familiar, it’s really a positive thing to be able to pinpoint precisely what habitual behavior arises out of your tendencies. That’s because **habits are behavior, and behavior can change!**

ADD adults typically have a harder time than other people in changing bad habits and creating new ones. This is because we are less likely to:

1. observe ourselves and our behavior in any kind of systematic or analytical way;
2. remember to sustain attention on a new desirable behavior long enough to let it become a habit.

This is where rituals come in.

What is a ritual

“Rituals,” as the term is being used in this course, are **activities that we engage in deliberately and habitually, in order to help us accomplish a purpose.** This purpose may be short or long-term. **For ADDers, rituals allow us to more easily flow into another necessary activity by providing serenity, pleasure, focus, or balance.** They often are created for their ability to be rewarding and motivating.

Why ADDers need rituals

Strategies of “conventional wisdom” help make most people more effective at life, but they often don’t seem to work for ADDers. This is not because the conventional strategies are wrong, but because they work against the flow of our brains.

A common example of this kind of conventional wisdom is the idea that you perform a duty *before* you get rewarded. As children, we’ve been brought up to hear, “eat your vegetables and *then* you can have dessert,” or “finish your homework and *then* you can watch TV.” The promised reward is thought to be the incentive for performing the less desirable duty.

But as ADDers, if we can’t get our brains into focus, we’re not able to perform the necessary task. So the reward state is often necessary to get our brains into flow, in order to focus.

For ADD adults, rituals can provide many critical functions. The most common types of rituals for ADD coaching clients are:

- Morning ritual to start working on time
- Grounding ritual to plan the day ahead
- Mid-day rituals to perform routine maintenance tasks
- End of work-day ritual to tie up loose ends and create next day’s plan
- Evening ritual to maintain order or clear clutter at home
- Before-bed ritual to prepare for leaving efficiently the next day
- Just-before-sleep ritual to reflect on success of strategies of the day

How Rituals Produce Habit Change

The carrot or the stick

Rituals work on the principle that “the carrot is better than the stick.” Imagine your ADD brain as a donkey that will work for food, but will dig in his heels and balk if he is beaten. Or consider it like a stubborn two-year-old who automatically says “no” when told what to do.

When faced with an activity that isn't interesting to us, trying to force our brains to focus simply doesn't work. Most ADDers need to somehow produce the brain chemicals that allow the neurotransmitters in our brains to shift and maintain focus more effectively.

Some of us require the pressure of a critical deadline to produce adrenaline that helps us focus. But relying on an adrenaline rush is a risky and stressful way to work. And it doesn't help maintain any kind of order or balance in a personal life.

Rituals that help our flow are far more productive in creating good habits.

How reading the newspaper every morning helped me build my business

Here's my own real-life example of how embracing a morning ritual turned my career around.

Before knowing I was ADD, I left a 20+ year career in corporate management to start my own business as a consultant, trainer and executive coach. Without structure for the first time in my life, I found myself floundering, unable to overcome inertia to start my workday. Although I knew many marketing techniques to start generating business, without clients or accountability to anyone else, I couldn't get myself galvanized to do what was necessary.

I increasingly found myself sleeping late, avoiding going to my desk, and generally feeling guilty, unmotivated and unproductive.

Then, quite by accident, I read about adult ADD and recognized my own symptoms. Sure enough, I discovered to my great surprise that I was ADD. If I had never left the structure of a corporation, I may have never found out. Learning that I was ADD, I decided to get trained to coach others like myself. That's how I found out about the importance of rituals in breaking through inertia and overwhelm.

It started with my key question to myself:

"What did I really want to do when I woke up in the morning?" *What I craved doing was reading the newspaper while leisurely having coffee and a bagel in the café across the street. But I had felt too guilty about my lack of productivity to do that. Instead, mid-to-late morning, I half-heartedly sat at my desk and tried to force myself to do marketing activities.*

I learned that an important "getting started" strategy for me would be to intentionally take an hour first thing in the morning to read the newspaper, have my coffee, and flow into my

workday. After I did that, I felt emotionally and mentally ready to start work. In fact, it felt so good that I had no problem waking up early in anticipation of doing my enjoyable ritual. Once I started getting clients, I began to deliberately scheduling them in the morning, and got up early enough to give myself that pleasant ritual hour.

This is how reading the newspaper, as a ritual and with full intention, helped me break through my barriers to build my business.

As ADDers, **we need to flow into our day instead of forcing ourselves into it.** This is especially true if you are not a “morning person,” or if beginning work feels abrupt and jarring.

Create Your Rituals Based on What You Need

ADDers have a variety of challenges that impede their effectiveness. Your ideal ritual should be designed to address your own particular challenges. Here are some examples:

Difficulty getting started due to inertia, not feeling motivated

Create a ritual around a flow activity that feels good to you.

This may be reading the newspaper, doing a crossword puzzle, listening to music or a morning talk show, checking a few specific websites, writing your blog, meditating or exercising. Performing this ritual will get your neurotransmitters operating at best efficiency, improving your focus for the next task.

Keep the ritual confined to a finite time or specific, limited activity. Since the point of this ritual is to get you started on another activity, you don’t want to pick something that will keep you hyper-focused on the ritual! Therefore, if your ritual involves reading, it should be something that has an end: a newspaper, article, or self-help book chapter rather than to continue reading a great novel that you won’t want to put down. If you’re watching TV, it should be confined to a specific show. Internet rituals should not involve general web surfing, but be tailored very specifically to visiting particular sites that won’t have you getting lost in cyber-space.

Avoid choosing a ritual activity that you like *too* much. If you find a certain activity to be addictive, or one that typically sends you into hyper-focus, it defeats the purpose of the ritual.

Always keep in mind that the purpose of the ritual is to help you get started on the obligatory activity to follow.

Use a timer to keep you from hyper-focusing or losing track of time. If the ritual doesn't have its own obvious cues to let you know when to finish, set a timer with a couple of transitional warnings for 10 minutes and 5 minutes before signaling you that it's time to quit. (Hint: The best timer for ADDers is the versatile "Invisible Clock." Check it out at http://www.thrivewithadd.com/products/useful_resources109 .)

Unfocused and inefficient work habits, not sure what to start doing

Create a ritual around planning and grounding your work day.

Depending on your own inclinations, this "planning" ritual may be first thing in the morning at your work site, last thing when you leave work the night before, or perhaps an evening activity at home. Your goal is to have planning out your workday become a regular habit! For your planning ritual, you'll need to have quick access to your daily calendar, a realistic "to-do" list, and a sense of how long various work activities are likely to take*.

PRE-STEP: Develop a time sense!** Without a realistic sense of how long things take to do, you'll never be able to create doable to-do lists or plan a workable schedule. So, the most important first step is to develop your time sense. You can do that by downloading the free ***Time Sense Exercise from: http://www.thrivewithadd.com/products/useful_resources109 .

Or, purchase the notes and recording of the "Develop a Time Sense" teleclass at:
http://www.thrivewithadd.com/tc_timesense .)

Create an environment conducive to planning. Meeting your daily work goals depend on how well you plan your day, so setting the stage is important. ADDers' ability to focus well is strongly influenced by factors such as environment, sound, visual cues, kinesthetic appeal, smell, sense of privacy, and sense of urgency versus relaxation. So think about the way *you* will most likely do best at planning out your day, in a way that you can do it ritually on a regular basis. Consider the following elements:

- **Location** – Do you think best in a totally quiet place, or in a public space such as a café, train, or waiting room? Many ADDers find they actually focus best when there is some activity going on around them, as long as they are not interrupted.

- **Food or drink** – You may do well with a particular snack or beverage as part of your ritual. If you do your planning in the morning, perhaps you'd want to do it over breakfast, or your morning coffee. When planning first thing in the morning at the office, you could incorporate the actual making of coffee, tea or espresso as part of your ritual. The aroma of brewing coffee may create a pleasant stimulation to get your mind flowing.
- **Music** – A certain kind of music may help you think better. If so, be sure to have it available and turn it on to "cue" your brain to get into planning mode.
- **Visual stimulation** – Some ADDers are very visual, and find they crave particular colors or types of pens to make notes with. Maybe there's a certain kind of notebook that you want to have as your daily planner. If this is important to you, indulge yourself and get what you need.

Chronic lateness leaving for work in the morning due to disorganization

Create a ritual to prepare what you need the night before.

Consider all the factors that go into delaying you in the morning. These can be broken down into:

- Decisions to make
- Items to locate
- Activities to perform

As you address each of these, think about what you can do as part of a preparation ritual the night before.

- **Make decisions about clothing** – Decide what you'll wear the next day, check to see if it's clean and unwrinkled, and place it where you can easily grab it without having to look for it in the morning. If you need to prepare children to get dressed, help them to do the same with their clothing. (This is a good habit to teach kids to get into at an early age!)
- **Pack your carry-able items** – Determine what you'll need for the next day, and prepare your purse, briefcase or backpack. As part of this ritual, keep your calendar handy to check your meetings and appointments you have the next day to make sure you'll have the right paperwork with you.
- **Place typically "misplaced" items in one spot** – Do you often have to search for your keys, glasses, cell phone, or wallet before leaving the house? Create one designated spot

near the door where you can habitually deposit these items – either when you come home, or as part of your nightly ritual. It can help to make a short check-list taped next to the spot to make sure you put everything there where you'll find it in the morning. This spot might be a small shelf, wall-basket, or place on a table. What matters is getting in the habit of placing your items there every night. You might also use this spot for letters to be mailed.

- **Prepare food for the next day** – If you take lunch or snacks with you, make it up the night before and put it in a bag in the refrigerator. Put the water, coffee and filter in the coffee-maker so that you'll just have to push a button to make your coffee in the morning.

Choose a time to perform this ritual habitually in an unstressed manner. Time yourself in performing these activities to determine how long they take in the evening. Try to pick a time when you'll be able to get in the habit of doing this every night. Use a timer, or perhaps a particular TV program to cue yourself that it's time to do the ritual.

Create strategically placed check-lists. You may need visual reminders to make sure you cover all the bases. If so, write out check lists that you can keep taped to the refrigerator, closet door, front door, inside your bag, or wherever you need to.

Missed appointments and deadlines due to forgetfulness and disorganization

Create a ritual to organize your calendar.

Organized people do NOT rely on memory! People who appear organized and goal-oriented are usually meticulous about recording appointments and due-dates in a calendar, and checking their calendar regularly to stay on track.

Choose one calendar that appeals to you. If you are recording appointments in more than one calendar, unless you are synchronizing them at least once a day, you're almost guaranteed to miss something. Base your calendar decision on a few key variables:

- Electronic versus paper
 - Where you'll need and use it
 - What you'll use it for
- **Electronic or paper** – You've probably learned that unless a tool appeals to you, you won't use it. PDA's (Palm Pilots) are useful for carrying a great amount of information, but if you hate electronic devices, you'd be better off with an old-fashioned paper date book or week-at-a-glance calendar.

- **Where you'll use it** – If you make appointments when you're out of the office, size and weight may be a primary consideration of your calendar. If it's too heavy or inconvenient to carry with you, you'll never have it when you need it.
- **What you'll use it for** – You're probably already accustomed to writing down work-related meetings and appointments. How about doctor's appointments, social engagements, professional meetings, due dates of projects and assignments? Microsoft Outlook is a great way to get all of your appointments and meetings in one place, complete with reminder systems, and various ways to view your schedule. It syncs up with PDA's. You'll have to remember to sync it regularly with your PDA if you want to have an updated calendar with you away from your computer. It can be useful to use Outlook when you're at your computer, but print out the weekly calendar and carry it with you. Then you can just hand-write new entries and input them into Outlook when you're back at the computer.

Set a time when you'll put all necessary information into your calendar on a daily basis.

This is where your ritual comes in. It might be every evening, perhaps on a train ride home from work. Or when you're watching the evening news on TV. The key is to create a habit of checking all sources where you may have written down date-related or reminder information, and entering it into your calendar.

- **Enter personal promises to others into the calendar:** Consider family and personal commitments as "appointments" with yourself and enter them into the calendar too. For example, if you promised your partner that you would pick up something on the way home (and you typically forget to do so), enter the reminder in the calendar.
- **Organizing Hint:** Get a small, pocket-sized notebook to jot down ideas, reminders, and thoughts that should be put into your calendar. Make a point of always having this with you in your purse, pocket or car. Eliminate the habit of writing reminders on Post-It Notes, napkins, and miscellaneous scraps of paper!

Poor focus and careless errors on mundane tasks, due to short attention span

Create a ritual to boost your focus.

Give your focusing mechanism a boost when your attention is lagging by scheduling an intentional break in your daily work activity.

Schedule mundane or tedious tasks around a break time. Become attuned to your own attention span for particular kinds of work. Schedule a ritual that will increase your focus, such as meditation or exercise. Brisk exercise of even a few minutes will boost your adrenaline to improve focus. If you work in an office building and can't take get to a gym, perhaps you could run up and down a flight of stairs.

Use a timer to remind you when to take a break. You may not be aware that your attention has drifted. A timer can alert you to pay attention to what your mind was doing. You may find that you don't remember what you've just read, or that your mind was on something else in the middle of calculating figures. Time to take a break!

Mini-rituals for everyday life

Rituals need not always have multiple steps or be complex. They can be quick solutions to frustrating situations that you encounter throughout your day.

There are a number of typical ADD challenges that we face as part of everyday life. Developing customized quick, mini-rituals to address your particular needs can incorporate better habits to overcome your challenges.

Here are a few rituals that worked for some of my ADD coaching clients. You may want to try them as they are, or tweak them to make them most effective for you.

Rituals to overcome the problem of:

- **Leaving things behind when you leave a room** – Create a quick chant to say to yourself automatically as you leave a location, to remind yourself to stop, turn around, and check where you've been sitting to see if you've left anything behind.
- **Cluttering your home or office** – Do a "quick sweep" with your eyes of each space and surface of a room you've been in before going to bed, or leaving your office. Take ten minutes to put back what you've taken out, or return items to their place. This might be performed to fast music to make it more stimulating.
- **Leaving a messy kitchen after cooking or eating** – Put on your fast music, set a timer, and play "beat the clock" to get the dishes washed before the timer goes off. Or listen to books on tape or educational tapes while washing the dishes. Or multi-task: Why not try

learning the basics of conversational French by listening to language tapes 15 minutes every night while washing the dishes!

- **Over-promising to your friends and family** – If you tend to say “yes” to every request, and are then unable to follow-through, develop a ritualized response to counter-act this tendency. Instead of automatically volunteering or saying YES, use a phrase like: *"This is a busy time. I'll check my calendar and get back to you."*

Advice from the coach...

Count on some trial and error as you develop your own perfect ritual for different challenges.

Realize that it takes time and deliberate attention for a ritual to become a habit, so don't be discouraged if you forget to perform the ritual at first. Just create a system to remind yourself to perform the ritual.

If you find that you are not performing the ritual you designed, don't automatically assume the ritual was wrong. It may simply need some simple tweaking in timing, environment, reminder system or structure to work better for you.

Example: Frank decided on a ritual of preparation steps the night before, in order to get out of the house more quickly in the morning. He wanted to start his ritual at 11:30 at night, since he went to bed at midnight. But after a week, he had only performed the ritual once. In thinking back to what got in the way each of the other nights, he realized that he was really too tired at 11:30 to want to do the preparation. He also had not set any reminder to begin at 11:30. So instead of abandoning the ritual, he moved the timing forward to 10:00 PM, and used the 10:00 Evening News on TV as his cue to begin his preparations.

Creating the right rituals are the most important strategies can have for developing successful habits!
Consider working with a coach who specializes in working with ADD Adults, to get your rituals right and working for you.

I offer a **special coaching promotion** for my “Ritual” teleclass members. Contact me to discuss it, if you want to really turn your life and habits around.

Good luck!

Bonnie Mincu

Thrive with ADD Coach

www.thrivewithadd.com

About Bonnie Mincu



Bonnie Mincu, MBA, MA
Senior Certified ADHD Coach

Bonnie Mincu specializes in coaching people who have the toughest time getting started: adults with Attention Deficit Disorder. She has a national and international clientele whom she coaches over the phone.

After working 20 years as a **Fortune 500 corporate manager** and consultant, Bonnie started her own practice as an executive coach, consultant and trainer. She found herself attracting individual clients who had the traits of ADD ADHD, smart and creative people with challenges in sustaining and shifting focus. Bonnie pursued advanced training to coach ADD adults, graduating from **ADD Coach Academy**.

Bonnie now coaches a wide variety of people of all ages and professions. In addition to private coaching, she has created a program called "**Thrive with ADD**," which includes telephone classes, workshops, audio recordings, an e-mail newsletter and strategy-oriented publications. Her "Thrive with ADD" interactive training is available for self-study as a complete "Self-Coaching Workshop."

She has been featured in segments on Adult ADD on Public Broadcasting Stations, on Channel 11's 10:00 News in New York City, in New York's *Newsday* newspaper and has been interviewed on numerous radio talk shows around the country. She was the "Ask the Coach" columnist for *The AD/HD Challenge* Journal, is an annual presenter at the annual "ADHD Virtual Conference" and has been giving her full-day seminar, "Thrive with ADD at Work" at New York University since 2004.

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