I Can't Get Organized

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Achieving Success with ADHD: Secrets from an Afflicted Professor of Medicine* by David B. Sachar

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Created in the United States of America

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Organizational ability is not a rare gift of nature, and it does not take a miracle to acquire it. Organizational ability is just a fancy name for doing whatever it is that needs doing. No matter how bad our case of ADHD may be, we know perfectly well what needs doing; we just have trouble doing it.

Simple Rule #1:

Make a list.

It doesn't have to be a checklist. It doesn't have to be in any particular order—not priority order, not chronological order, not alphabetical order. Just make a list of whatever needs doing. Once it's down on paper (or a hard drive or whatever), it's off your shoulders. You don't have to carry it around in your conscious, subconscious, or preconscious mind. You don't have to worry about it ever again. All you have to do is look at the list, pick something off it, and sooner or later just do it.

Now let's talk about "sooner or later."

Simple Rule #2:

Transfer each item to a schedule.

The shape, size, and format of the schedule don't matter. Paper, electronic, digital, portable, desktop; it doesn't make any difference. It just has to be a schedule. My own favorites for schedules are 3x6" calendar books: the TIMEWISE® Pocket Memo System for daily two-page entries in a monthly calendar book and the TIMEWISE® Two-Year Calendar for future commitments.

If I don't do something on the day it's scheduled, no sweat; I just transfer it to another day. The point is, nothing ever gets forgotten and everything ultimately gets done.

Simple Rule #3:

Never mind the schedule if the item doesn't fit.

Some tasks, projects, or ambitions are too vague to be amenable to scheduling. Not to worry. Write them down anyhow.

In simplest format, I write these overarching aims in a list on one of the unmarked pages at the front of my monthly calendar books. Miraculously, by the end of the month, not too many of them remain incomplete; but for those that do, they just get transferred to the front page of the next month's book. Ultimately, they get done, or else become no longer relevant.

When I was nearly overwhelmed with responsibilities for a few years as Vice Chairman of my Department of Medicine, I resorted to a slightly more elaborate system called Exec-U-Scan®, which allowed me to put each job or each piece of responsibility on a 2x4" card and insert it into a slot in a slim 8 ½ x 11" fake leather folder that held 72 such cards in four neat columns. Another card holder I've used in other circumstances is called the Axcess T-Card system (www.npsg.com); it works just about the same way, with the added attraction that the cards come in five different colors. Still another system is called Memogenda (Norwood Products Co., Inc.)

These devices didn't actually do any of the work for me but they sure made me feel as though I were in control of my responsibilities, and even better, conveyed that impression to my colleagues and my boss.

The particular system you use doesn't really matter. All that matters is that everything gets captured in writing one way or another. Remember: *Whatever is written down automatically becomes finite and manageable.*

Simple Rule #4:

Capture every task in writing before you forget it.

I remember a lot of my to-do jobs when I'm in bed or in the car and find it inconvenient if not impossible to write it down immediately. Of course, if I don't write it down immediately, I'll forget it.

(ADHD, remember?) So I have a tiny dictating machine at the bedside and also strapped to the visor of the car, so that when the job pops into my head, I record it on the machine before it pops out again. From the machine, it's easy to get it somewhere onto one of the lists (if I don't forget to make the transfer).