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keep track of your stuff

“I used to be terrible at losing stuff. Now when I leave home, I check my pocket for my phone, before I step out and again after I step out the door. This has become second nature after so much practice, and I very rarely forget it anymore.”

Keeping track of stuff and having the right stuff when you need it is often a struggle for adults with ADHD. “Stuff” includes digital documents and pieces of information that you need to track and organize as well. If you struggle with finding things when you need them or having what you need when you need it, you’ve come to the right place.

Self-Assessment and Roadmap

Read each statement on the next page and choose the best answer for you by putting a checkmark (✓) in the box. Use your answers to choose which sections to review.

- **A lot** like me!—Definitely review this section!
- Somewhat like me—Review this section if you need additional ideas.
- Not like me—This section doesn’t seem to apply to you, so skip it if you want.

	Not like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me!	Sections to review
I leave items somewhere in the house and then can’t find them.				A (page 72)
I leave items somewhere out in the world and can’t find them.				B (page 75)
I leave the house without necessary items.				C (page 76)
I lose important papers or pieces of mail.				D (page 77)
I have trouble finding important files on my computer.				E (page 78)
I’m a human, which means no matter what, I’m going to lose things sometimes.				F (page 79)

➤ **A: I leave items somewhere in the house and then can’t find them.**

If you spend way too much time wandering around the house looking for your phone (guilty!), wallet, laptop, gym bag, or other crucial items, here are some strategies to try.

- ☐ Use Home Bases.

Put a basket, bin, or set of hooks just inside your front door and dump your keys, wallet, or phone there as soon as you come through the door. Put a dish or shot glass next to the sink and put your rings there when you take them off to wash the dishes. Create similar spots in your work office, if you have one, or designate a spot in your bag or backpack where your keys, phone, or other object will “live.” Of course, you’ll need to get in the habit of consistently putting that object in that specific spot, but over time this will become an automatic behavior, and you’ll know where to look—or at least look first—when trying to locate important objects.

- ☐ Learn to use “find my device” features.

Apple’s Find My network and Google’s Find My Device networks can be a godsend if you’re a chronic phone loser. (Not that you’re a loser . . . you know what I mean!) You can use any device attached to your account to locate other devices on that account.

- ☐ Attach electronic tags to important nonelectronic objects.

AirTag (for Apple users), MotoTag (for Android), and lots of other brands of Bluetooth-enabled tags offer a handy system to locate lost nonelectronic objects like your gym bag, backpack, purse, keys, or wallet—including when you misplace things inside your house. My husband—in a not-so-subtle bid to get me to stop running frantically around the house looking for my Jazzercise bag—gifted me a set of Tile trackers and, as a Google person, I’m excited to try MotoTags, which integrate with Google’s Find My Device network.

- ☐ Keep a list of the places you find your missing items.

Get a sticky note and write down the places you’ve found your missing items in the past and put that on your bathroom mirror or someplace similar. Remember that time your phone fell between the mattress and the bed frame? It might happen again. Did you leave the phone on a little shelf in the bathroom because you were listening to

podcasts in the shower and then left it there? That's probably going to happen again. If you can give the You of the Future clues on where to look next time, you might reduce the time and frustration of the search.*

- ☐ Use what makes the missing object stand out from the environment to guide your search.

My colleague at the University of Richmond, Dr. Arryn Robbins, is an expert in the psychology of searching the visual environment and has shared some great ideas here (thanks, Dr. Robbins!). Based on her advice, before you start searching for an object, think about what makes it stand out from its environment in terms of size, color, texture, or other features. For example, if you're looking for a piece of jewelry on a carpeted floor, the shininess of the jewelry is something you can focus on as you scan the floor to make the object pop out of its environment.

- ☐ Act out the movements that probably took place when you lost the item.

What I mean here is to retrace your steps *and* retrace the actions that you might have taken when the item was lost. For example, if you can't find your phone but you know you had it when you pulled into your driveway, go back to the car, sit in it, and act out all the motions you would have gone through from that point forward. Putting yourself physically back in the environment and retracing your actions might help you identify possible spots where the item could be.

- ☐ Do a grid search.

If you are really in a missing item pickle, Dr. Robbins recommends mentally dividing the search space into a grid and systematically searching from the top row, sweeping downward. That way you will be sure you've looked everywhere, even in a messy environment. Be

*Also, check your car.

sure to take a deep breath first so that anxiety doesn't cause you to skip over anything!

» B: I leave items somewhere out in the world and can't find them.

Ugh! That time when your around-the-house search for an object leaves you with the sinking feeling that your item may be somewhere out in the world. Here are some strategies to prevent this from happening or help you locate items when it does.

- ☐ Use “find my device” features and electronic tags.

See the description in Section A (page 73). These electronic aids can help you locate important objects where you left them.

- ☐ Develop a checking routine for important items.

This idea came from one of my former clients. He cultivated the habit of running his hands over his front pants pockets every time he stood up so that he could verify that his phone or wallet was “on him.” The same could be done if you designate a Home Base (page 72) for key items in your purse or backpack. If you practice this physical motion that allows you to check for an item, it will eventually become unconscious and automatic.

- ☐ Buy only inexpensive versions of items you might lose.

Try to follow this rule: *Don't take items out of the house that you can't afford to lose.* Think \$5 sunglasses and \$10 umbrellas. And—for crying out loud!—skip the AirPods and buy vastly cheaper versions that won't set you back hundreds of dollars if you lose them. (I don't have ADHD, and I'm 100% certain that *I cannot be trusted* with AirPods.) Consider getting cubic zirconia versions of your precious gemstone jewelry for everyday wear. You can keep the genuine articles in a safe place, and you'll have gained some additional peace of mind.

» C: I leave the house without necessary items.

Here are some strategies if you keep forgetting to take what you need along with you.

- ☐ Use a Home Base (page 72) in your home or at your office.
- ☐ Add the needed item to the title of the appointment in your calendar.

For example: “**Bring gift:** Lunch with Angie” can help you remember to grab that random gift you bought for Angie before you leave the house instead of just relying on yourself to remember. Better yet, add an alarm to this calendar event for 10 minutes before you’re supposed to leave the house, and it becomes a reminder message that will literally pop up in front of your face.

- ☐ Use a Go Bag (or Box).

This is a riff on the idea of the Home Base. Get a cheap reusable grocery bag and hang it on the doorknob of the door you always leave the house from, *or*, if it’s a box, place it directly in front of the door so that you have to move the box to open the door. Put anything in the Go Bag/Box that you need to take with you the next time you leave the house. **Important:** *Don’t actually take the bag/box with you, just its contents* so that the Go Bag/Box stays by the door to use next time.

- ☐ Use a Go List.

Stick a cheap whiteboard at eye level on the inside of the door you leave by. Write any items or reminders you need before leaving the house there, right in your face.

» D: I lose important papers or pieces of mail.

Where *did* you put that permission slip for your kid's field trip? Or that Bath & Body Works coupon you really wanted to use? While many documents have moved to digital in the past several years, we're still far away from that paperless society I've been hearing about since the 1980s. Here are some tips to prevent the losing of papers.

- ☐ Take pictures of all important documents with your phone immediately after acquiring them.

Then add the photos to a digital folder or album titled something like "Important Papers," so you have those images all in one place. Even if you can't fill out the forms electronically, you may be able to print them out or write and sign a note—in the case of a permission slip—covering all the information. If they're clear enough, photos of barcodes from coupons will scan just like the real thing.

- ☐ Have one and only one "dump spot" for all mail and papers you need to review.

Get a basket or document tray for mail and any documents you haven't yet taken a picture of or reviewed. On a regular basis—schedule it in your Calendar System (page 16) or use Rewarding Consequences to motivate yourself (page 29)—go through the things in the tray and either throw them out, take a picture of them, or do what you need to do to respond to or process the item.

- ☐ Stick important papers to your Household Events Calendar (page 152).

In Chapter 5 (page 67) we suggested using a large magnetic wipe-off calendar to display important events for the week or month as a reminder to everyone in the household about what's coming up. If you have one of these, you can stick important documents related to

calendar events—for example, a permission slip—to the calendar, so you'll have them when you need them.

» **E: I have trouble finding important files on my computer.**

If you find yourself constantly on the hunt for an important PDF, email, or .doc file you really need, here are some ideas for preventing document misplacement or finding documents efficiently.

- ☐ Don't dump—create a *simple* file structure.

Try to avoid just dumping everything on your desktop or downloading to your Downloads folder and leaving everything in there. Create a simple file structure for the categories of documents you use most frequently. You can add subfolders, but don't make an overly complicated structure that is too clunky and complicated to use. Instead, let your needs guide the structure—that is, when you find you *need* a new folder or subfolder for an actual document, create it then rather than trying to make a structure you *think* will be useful.

- ☐ Name files so that they're easily searchable.

The experts refer to this as having *naming conventions*, and the point is to create file names that will help you identify and locate files later. Instead of “receipt17.000236624,” name your files using more specifics such as, “Knouse gas receipt 7.22.24.” In particular, the date can be very helpful in retracing your digital steps.

- ☐ Learn the search features for your email, computer, or cloud storage platform.

These days your computer, email program, and file storing and sharing platforms like Google Docs or Dropbox probably all have robust search features. Take time to teach yourself how to use them and you'll prevent future frustration. Thinking of likely words in the file title and limiting the search by dates or file type can help you locate things faster.

» F: I'm a human, which means no matter what, I'm going to lose things sometimes.

If you have ADHD, there are just going to be times when you lose things. And that can be pretty frustrating. As mentioned earlier, consider reducing the potential impact of misplacing things by buying inexpensive versions of items you might lose. In other words, don't take items out of your house that you can't afford to lose. Some more ideas for reducing the impact of losing electronic devices follow.

- ☐ Set up syncing of your phone contacts, calendar, and task list information.

That way, if you misplace your phone, you won't lose access to this key information.

- ☐ Set up syncing of files on your device to a cloud storage platform.

This is a best practice for preventing data loss in general, and it can also save you headaches if you lose your phone or laptop. And finally:

- ☐ It's ultimately just stuff. Take it easy on yourself.

Being an adult in the “modern world” involves managing so many physical objects and pieces of information that it's no surprise that folks with (and without) ADHD struggle to manage it all. If you lose something important, try your best to approach yourself with compassion and good Self-Coaching (page 40).