How to Support Executive Function (EF): The Basics

Minimize demands on working memory: Download everything possible out of working memory: fill out the “semester at a glance” handout and post it at eye level to keep track of big due dates; use calendars (paper and/or digital) to externalize deadlines instead of holding them in your head. Write yourself reminders. Set notifications to alert you when to begin working on big projects.

Create routines wherever possible: It takes less EF to perform a task that has been automatized, so when parts of your workload or self-care routine are predictable, plan to do them at the same time and in the same place each week.

Minimize decision making: Set aside some time each week to look at the work that is due in the next seven days (including projects due more than 7 days out which you need to start before then) and make decisions about when and where you are going to do it. If you get up each day and can move directly to executing a plan you already made, that will be easier than having to come up with the plan and then execute it. Hint: if you do this shortly before your weekend begins, you will be able to get the best use of your unstructured weekend time.

Take breaks: If you work without breaks, you will exhaust your attention span and your productivity will drop. Take regular breaks of at least 3-5 minutes where you are physically active (stretch in your chair and take deep breaths if you can’t walk around, drink water, eat a healthy snack) and where you change the form of input your brain is receiving: do not look at a screen or the page for at least 3-5 minutes.

Sleep is essential: Any bargain you make where you trade sleep to stay up and work is a terrible one. Your productivity will drop, and until you make up the sleep deficit, you will have measureable cognitive deficits which means that work you try to do under those circumstances will take longer and be of questionable quality. You must get sufficient sleep.

Protected time is also essential: In addition to using your project planner to map out your academic work, you need to map out places to have downtime, to socialize, to exercise in whatever form appeals to you. It’s not just that you are allowed to take time to do those things: it is essential that you do them. Your academic performance—and you (!)—will suffer if you don’t.

Work strategically, not more effortfully: See associated handouts for the most effective reading, note taking, and test preparation strategies.

Remember: In addition to EF issues caused by ADHD, EF can be affected by grief, trauma, mental and physical health issues, over-functioning, and many other factors. When something big and stressful happens, you may need extra executive function support to get your academic work done and to stay well. You are always welcome to contact Learning Resources by requesting to meet an ACE (Academic Consultant for Excellence) at go/ace.

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