

Understand Your Brain, Get More Done

The ADHD Executive Functions WORKBOOK

Executive Functions Help You

Focus Attention

Control Emotions

Set Priorities

Manage Time

Plan Activities

Stay Organized

Improve Memory



Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA

This is a practical companion workbook to Dr. Tuckman's best-selling book:
More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD

FOREWORD BY EDWARD M. HALLOWELL, M.D.

What the experts are saying about this book!

Dr. Tuckman continues to do an exceptional job of distilling the essence of theory and science about ADHD into a very practical guide for the adult with ADHD.

*Russell Barkley, PhD
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
Medical University of South Carolina (Charleston)*

Dr. Tuckman's book *Understand Your Brain, Get More Done* provides realistic, practical, and useful information for those with adult ADHD. Not only is the book enlightening, but it is also fun to read. The exercises in the book are educational, easy to complete, and give great insight into the world of adult ADHD. I have recommended Dr. Tuckman's companion book *More Attention, Less Deficit* to my patients and clients, and I have listed it as a recommended resource in my books due to its straightforward nature and wealth of information. I will recommend *Understand Your Brain, Get More Done* for the same reasons. They are both outstanding books.

*Stephanie Moulton Sarkis PhD, NCC, LMHC
Psychotherapist
Author of 10 Simple Solutions to Adult ADD,
Making the Grade with ADD,
ADD and Your Money, and
Adult ADD: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*

Dr. Ari Tuckman's new book *Understand You Brain, Get More Done* is a great resource that clearly explains and illustrates how ADHD and executive function impacts the lives of adults with ADHD. He clearly explains what executive function is in concise and easy-to-understand language and presents excellent real-life examples to support each area of challenge.

What separates Dr. Tuckman's new book from so many of the other ADHD books on the market, are the practical exercises he presents for each of the main areas of executive function. He doesn't tell you what to do. He understands that your ADHD brain wiring is unique and you need to understand how it works so you can make it work for you. That's why Dr. Tuckman has created a WORK book; not just a book to be read and put on the shelf. He knows that for change to occur you have to work at it. If you do the work in *Understand Your Brain, Get More Done*, you will discover that your work will successfully work for you. It will significantly improve the quality of your life.

*David Giwerc, MCC
Founder & President, ADD Coach Academy
Author of Permission to Proceed: The Keys to Creating a Life of Passion, Purpose and Possibility for Adults with ADHD*

Understand Your Brain, Get More Done is a straightforward, jargon-free, refreshing workbook—a must for any adult with ADHD. Dr. Tuckman presents valuable scientific information in the most approachable way possible. Adults with ADHD will not be bored, but instead be challenged and enlightened by this structured, information-packed workbook. The book's tone is non-judgmental, empathic and even humorous at times. Most importantly, Dr. Tuckman gets it. He does not waste the ADHD reader's time with exercises that sound good on paper but in the real world are useless. This is the workbook I will use with my ADHD clients.

*Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D.
Clinical Instructor of Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School
Clinical Associate in Psychology, McLean Hospital
Private Practice, Belmont, Massachusetts*

Ari Tuckman has written a truly useful, insightful guide to working with, through, and even around (when necessary) your ADHD brain.

*Thom Hartmann
New York Times bestselling author of 23 books, including The Edison Gene and
ADD: A Different Perception*

This workbook provides a step-by-step guide to a new, more consistent future you may never have thought possible. Is there work involved? Of course! They don't call it a work-book for nothing. But Tuckman is right on target with his explanations and strategies—I can't wait to recommend it to my couples clients!

*Melissa Orlov
Author of the award-winning The ADHD Effect on Marriage: Understand and Rebuild Your Relationship in Six Steps*

Understand Your Brain, Get More Done

The ADHD Executive Functions
Workbook

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Cover Design: Michael Wall, Kall Graphics

Layout: Babs Kall, Kall Graphics

Specialty Press, Inc.

300 Northwest 70th Avenue, Suite 102

Plantation, Florida 33317

(954) 792-8100 • (800) 233-9273

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN-13: 978-1886941-39-7

ISBN-10: 1-886941-39-4

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CHAPTER 6

WORKING MEMORY: THE BRAIN'S RAM

What Working Memory Is

Even though we often talk of memory as if there were only one kind, we actually have many kinds of memory. People with ADHD sometimes complain that they don't remember well. (And their family members probably complain more!) This is somewhat true, but not completely. Their *long-term memory* is fine—for example, the chemical formula for water is H₂O or my third-grade teacher was Mrs. Phillips. Although folks with ADHD may get distracted at times when trying to remember this information, their long-term memories actually work well.

Where they run into trouble is in getting information *into* that long-term memory. If something never gets into long-term memory then there is nothing there to remember, so it isn't really a memory problem at that point. Where things break down is in the *working memory*, which is the part of memory that holds information in the moment as it is being processed and then either generates a response and/or tucks some information away for later. It's the part of our memory that is doing the work—it's holding information on deck and/or doing something with it. Informally, you can think of working memory as what we commonly call attention because it holds information we're paying attention to.

To use a computer analogy, long-term memory is like the hard drive, and working memory is like the RAM. The hard drive holds information for long periods of time, while the RAM takes in new information, pulls information from the hard drive, processes it all together, and then generates an output and/or writes the new information to the hard drive. The information in RAM is constantly changing, whereas the contents of the hard drive change more incrementally. By the same token, our working memory is constantly taking in information, doing something with it, and then clearing it out to make room for the next incoming information. There is a constant flow of information through our working memory where information is held only while it is being used and then gets dropped or knocked out. Our long-term memory changes much more slowly as new information is added to what we already know.

The more RAM your computer has, the more it can process at once without dropping important pieces of information (i.e., getting distracted). Having a lot of RAM in your computer allows you to continue surfing the web smoothly while the virus software scans. Given the multitude of distractions in our current lives, we all feel like we could use a little more mental RAM to keep track of it all.

We use working memory whenever we do anything that involves holding or processing two or more pieces of information. For example:

- Remembering what we read at the start of a paragraph as we read the end of the paragraph and then putting it all together
- Remembering the first part of what someone said as we listen to the last part and then making sense of it
- Transferring information from our attention into long-term memory

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- Connecting a new piece of information with something from long-term memory, such as considering how a new task will fit into an existing schedule
- Keeping multi-step directions in mind, such as the next three steps in a recipe
- Holding some pieces of information while simultaneously paying attention to others, like keeping in mind that you need to do the laundry while you stop to answer a child's question

We use working memory constantly and in almost every aspect of daily life. If a person's working memory tends to blink and drop pieces of information, all sorts of problems occur, as you probably know far too well. So even if the rest of your brain works great and you are absolutely brilliant, a weak working memory will limit your ability to perform to your potential (something else you probably know too well). It will limit how much information you can get into your brain to process and then also limit how much you can generate, so it gets you on both the input and the output.

Identify Your Struggles

Good solutions begin with a clear understanding of the problem. We'll begin here by listing the ways that working memory weaknesses tend to affect someone's day to day life. You will then have some room to write other ways that your working memory affects your life. Having this all in one place will make it easier to prioritize which areas to focus on first when we get to the strategies section.

Fallout from Working Memory Weaknesses

To use a computer analogy, long-term memory is like the hard drive and working memory is like the RAM. So ADHD folks' hard drives work well, but their RAM is kind of glitchy. Just as when you try to do too many things at once on your computer and a program crashes, people with ADHD are prone to working memory dumps where something important gets pushed out by something new.

For example, your cell phone rings while you are walking back to your desk to get some information for your boss, and your attention goes to that, so your boss's request gets knocked out of your working memory. If you're lucky, some bits and pieces got recorded into your long-term memory so that you can remember it later, especially if reminded by seeing the requested paperwork sitting on your desk. (Oh right, the papers!) Other times the memory is completely gone, so even a lie detector wouldn't pick anything up when your boss asks why you didn't get her the information. (What information? You didn't ask for any information.) It's easy to get the feeling that other people enjoy making things up if you have no memory of things that others swear happened. This also makes for all sorts of fun arguments.

Weaknesses in working memory tend to create common and predictable struggles in daily life. For example:

- *Distractibility.* We use our working memory to hold in mind what we are doing and what our next steps are. We also use our working memory to hold those thoughts on deck when we're interrupted by a new stimulus or idea and then evaluate whether to stay on our original plan or switch to something new. People with ADHD are more likely to drop that original plan out of their working memories and get pulled off onto something else, even if they know better. When important pieces of information get

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dropped out of working memory, they don't do what they otherwise know they should do (e.g., put the milk back in the fridge before checking the weather report).

- *Imperfect or impulsive decision making.* Complex problem solving involves lots of working memory to keep multiple things in mind at once and then process them all together. For example, thinking about how a potential appointment fits into your schedule requires you to remember the rest of the day's commitments, think about what can get shuffled around versus what can't, factor in travel time, etc. People with ADHD are more likely to drop one or more important elements and thereby get themselves into trouble (e.g., forget about another meeting that will conflict with the new appointment). This looks like bad judgment, but their decision making process actually works fine; the real problem is that their weak memory causes them to not consider all the relevant information.
- *Misplacing things.* You're more likely to remember where you put something if you make a mental note of it at the time. Unfortunately, many people with ADHD quickly drop that thought from their working memory because they move too quickly to the next task so that it never gets registered in their long-term memory. For example, if you put your keys down on the counter but immediately focus your attention on checking the answering machine, you probably won't have much of a memory of where the keys are, especially if this isn't where they normally go. The next day will then be a scramble as you run around the house trying to find your keys since there isn't much to pull out of your long-term memory.
- *Forgetting what you are told.* If your working memory doesn't hold a necessary piece of information firmly enough, it gets knocked out by other information and lost before being transferred into long-term memory. This can make you look forgetful or even hard of hearing.
- *Reading is uninteresting.* Reading requires a lot of working memory to keep your attention on the page and hold all those words in mind so that you can understand what the author is saying. People with ADHD find their attention going in and out, so it makes it difficult to understand what they are reading when they missed half the page that came before it. This makes reading frustrating, boring, and confusing, causing them to have to re-read in order to understand everything. As a result, they tend to avoid reading. (You can explain this to others by asking how much they would enjoy reading if random sentences and paragraphs were deleted, so they had to try to make sense out of what was left.)
- *Experiential learners.* Many people with ADHD learn better by doing something than by reading or hearing about it. This is because actively engaging in a task requires less working memory than remembering what one was told, picturing oneself doing the task, and then applying it later. Unfortunately, few classrooms are set up this way (but some on-the-job training is).

Hang in There!

We've now identified some of the difficulties that can come from a weak working memory. It's important to identify the problems before getting into solutions. You may feel worse now because you're more aware of your struggles (and maybe even discovered some problems you didn't realize you had!). You may feel discouraged at this point if you feel like you have more problems than solutions. Hang in there! We'll get to the solutions next.

Identify Your Strategies

Let's now take a look at potential strategies to address these working memory struggles. This is where things begin to get better.

Some people have more struggles at work or school, while others have more challenges at home. Each of these parts of your life places different demands on you and also offers different supports, so you may perform really well in one but barely hold it together in the other. Because of this potential difference, you may find it helpful to practice new strategies more in one setting than in the other.

Or you may find that you have some of the same struggles in both situations. If this is the case, some of the same strategies may work in both places. This will provide some helpful carry-over benefit from practicing the same strategies throughout your day. You may also find that some strategies work better in one situation than in the other simply because the two situations are too different from each other. Do whatever works best.

The goal here is to go through the process of identifying targeted strategies based on your strengths, weaknesses, and what you need to get done. Some strategies will just be a better fit for you. Like many other situations in life, you're more likely to arrive at the best solutions if you follow a good process of evaluating your options. This will take some work, but it will be worth it. Also, because you're going to do it step by step, it should feel more manageable and less overwhelming and be more productive.

Working Memory Strategies Key Concepts

Most of the strategies that make the most of your working memory will fall under one of these basic ideas. By simplifying all those other strategies down to three basic ideas, it's easier to learn the concepts and apply them later.

- Make important tasks and items stand out more to make it more likely that your attention will stay focused on them.
- The fewer distractions, the easier it is to stay focused on and remember what you should.
- Write things down rather than try to keep it all in your head.

Suggested Working Memory Strategies

Let's start things off with a list of strategies that tend to be helpful for working memory weaknesses so you can see where we're going. Some of these strategies may jump out at you—good!

Circle the **U** in the margin next to the strategies that you have used in the past and circle the **T** next to the ones that you haven't used before but think you might benefit from trying.

After each suggested strategy, write out:

1. If you've ever tried a particular strategy, how did it work for you? (past experiences)
2. What obstacles might get in the way of you using this strategy more often now? (obstacles)
3. How or where could you use this strategy more often? (use it more)

Key Concept: Make important tasks and items stand out more to make it more likely that your attention will stay focused on them.

U T *Do it right away.* Rather than hold a thought in working memory where it might get knocked out, do the task right away when it is still strongly held in your working memory (i.e., don't tell yourself, "I'll do that in a minute.").

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Use items as their own reminders.* If you need to do something with an item but can't do it right away, take it out and put it where you can see it so that it reminds you to do it. (This works only if you don't have a thousand other things out.)

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Take a reminder item with you.* If you get interrupted but want to come back to your original task, bring a reminder with you. For example, if you need to finish folding the laundry, bring a sock along with you when you answer the door.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Ask for a reminder.* If you're in the middle of something ask a coworker to remind you later, for example after the meeting or to send you an email rather than asking you for something while passing in the hallway. (You need to be careful not to over-rely on others, but this is a valid technique when used appropriately—see Chapter 4: Work as a Team for more information.)

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

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U T *Highlight important information.* Brightly color important items or pieces of information so they stand out more from everything else. For example, tag certain emails as urgent or scribble a big red star on an envelope that you need to do something with.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Put up a note.* Tape up a reminder about something you are working on, such as a reminder to drink more water. You can also use visual reminders such as a picture of a well-organized closet to remind you to hang things back up or a hanging a bathing suit somewhere conspicuous to remind you about your diet.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Key Concept: The fewer distractions, the easier it is to stay focused on and remember what you should.

U T *Reduce distractions.* The fewer stimuli and thoughts that are competing for your attention and working memory, the easier it is to stay focused on what you should. For example, turn off your cell phone, close your office door, ask not to be interrupted, use a whitenoise machine to block outside noises, etc.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Get rid of stuff.* The less stuff you have, the easier it is to organize and manage what's left. Usually the first step in getting organized is reducing the overall volume of stuff. Make some hard choices about what deserves to be kept and what doesn't—there's probably a lot more that you can live without than you will initially think.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

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- U T** *Bring less stuff in.* Related to the prior point, the less stuff that enters your life, house, or workplace, the less you have to deal with. Resist the temptation to acquire some new item by reminding yourself of the additional work later when you have to find a place for it and put it away.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

- U T** *Put things away.* The less stuff you have out, the easier it is to keep your attention on what you're currently working on, especially after an interruption. On your computer, close unnecessary windows and programs.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

- U T** *Remove yourself from mailing lists.* Whether it's email lists or listserves, unsubscribe from emails that you never really get around to reading. Don't ask for additional information to be sent to your house and don't renew magazines that you're not reading often enough. For emails, delete the junk right away. For mail, place a recycling bin near the door and quickly toss the junk.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

- U T** *Limit the activities you get involved in.* Whether at work or in your personal life, make good choices about what you add to your plate. Consider to what extent an activity adds value to your life compared to the additional stress it will create, at least at this time.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

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U T *Cross off/delete items from your to-do list.* Once you complete a task, get it off your to-do list so it doesn't slow you down in finding the next important task. You should also delete those tasks that you have come to decide won't be completed because they no longer make the cut.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Key Concept: Write things down rather than try to keep it all in your head.

U T *Write yourself a reminder.* If you can't do something right away, capture the thought immediately on a to-do list, Post-It note, in your schedule, by leaving yourself a voicemail or email, or setting an alarm to remind you later.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Snooze your alarms.* If you're not able to respond immediately to an alarm, don't turn it off completely and try to hold the task in your working memory. Instead, snooze the alarm so it goes off again. If you really don't have time to do the designated task now, then set the alarm again for another time.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Write out complex problems.* Rather than try to keep everything in your mind, write out all the elements in a complex problem. Sometimes this is as simple as scribbling on the back of an envelope. For example, when planning how long something will take, write down each step and your time estimate, then add them all up. Or write out a shopping list of all the materials you will need for a project.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

U T *Write out or use notes for multistep directions.* Use notes to keep you from skipping steps. Refer back to your notes and check off completed steps. Perhaps jot down additional notes or reminders for later as you move along.

Past experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Your Own Working Memory Strategies

There's a lot to be learned from past experiences. If it worked once, it might work again. Perhaps you kind of drifted away from a habit that was actually pretty good. Maybe you got bored with it. Maybe your habit got interrupted and you never came back to it. It happens. So maybe you just need to blow the dust off and use it again.

Think back on your past experiences over the years. What strategies have you used that have been helpful in making the most of your working memory? Even though no strategy works perfectly, there had to be some that you used that were helpful and increased your batting average. And if they were helpful, they were probably consistent with the strategies that make the most of people's working memory. Understanding how that works makes it more likely that you can apply them effectively to future challenges.

So let's identify those good strategies, understand how they are based in how your working memory functions, and then apply them forward. It might be helpful to think about how a particular strategy fits into the key concepts for working memory strategies, so I've included them below, as well. We'll answer the same questions that we did above.

Under each key concept, write out:

1. What strategy did you use?
2. How did this strategy work for you in the past?
3. What obstacles might get in the way of you using this strategy more often now?
4. How or where could you use this strategy more often?

Key Concept: Make important stimuli stand out more to make it more likely that your attention will stay focused on them.

Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

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Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Key Concept: The fewer distractions, the easier it is to stay focused on and remember what you should.

Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Key Concept: Write things down rather than try to keep it all in your head.

Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Strategy: _____

Past Experiences: _____

Obstacles: _____

Use it More: _____

Apply Your Strategies

Choose Your Targeted Strategies

Look back at the suggested strategies and your own strategies from above. Choose one to three strategies to work on first—pick a manageable number so you can do it well. You may want to look back at the section on Fallout from Working Memory Weaknesses (page 40) and match your strategies to your struggles.

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Although it's tempting to jump headfirst into the deep end and start with the places that you're struggling the most, it may be worth getting your feet wet on some smaller and more manageable struggles first. These easier successes will teach you some helpful lessons that you can use when tackling the thornier problems. There's also nothing like success as a motivator.



Write down which strategies you are planning to try first:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

It's better to focus on just a few changes first. Once you have these down, come back and add in some other strategies.

4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Create Opportunities to Practice

Practice makes perfect. Or at least better. Although it's likely that your life will throw you plenty of opportunities to apply these new strategies, it can also be helpful to intentionally create or anticipate situations to practice these strategies.

Strategy: Put up a note

When and where can I apply this strategy? Write big work deadlines in marker & tape up next to desk

How do I know that this strategy is working? By being more aware of deadlines, I plan my time better and have less to do at the end

Strategy: _____

When and where can I apply this strategy? _____

How do I know that this strategy is working? _____

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Strategy: _____

When and where can I apply this strategy? _____

How do I know that this strategy is working? _____

Strategy: _____

When and where can I apply this strategy? _____

How do I know that this strategy is working? _____

Make the Commitment

Once you have your targeted strategies identified, you need to make a commitment to apply them. A strategy is only as good as your commitment. Because this is a workbook, you only have yourself to answer to (which is ultimately all you have even when someone else is involved). I can guarantee that the strategies in this book, and probably most of the strategies you come up with, are good ones. They will get the job done. It all comes down to using them.

So I encourage you to take the pledge below. But don't do this lightly—think about it. Maybe take a day or a week to think about it. If you're going to do this, give it your best effort. You deserve it.

My Pledge

I want a better life, so I commit to:

- Taking chances and trying something new.
- Doing my best to use these strategies diligently, even when I don't feel like it.
- Being open to learning from these experiences.
- Being flexible when a strategy isn't working.
- Only abandoning a strategy when I can replace it with another strategy that may work better.

Signature

Date

See the Rewards

We're more likely to start and maintain behaviors that are being rewarded, so let's talk about those all-important rewards. They come in a number of different shapes and sizes, so let's not miss any—the more rewards, the better.

Automatic Rewards

Some rewards are directly tied to our behavior. For example:

- *Inherent feelings of satisfaction/pride.* Even if no one else notices, we notice and feel good about having done something well.
- *Natural consequences.* These are rewards that come from the world around us, like when someone offers a compliment. Or getting a good seat at the movies by showing up early.

It may be helpful to make a point of looking for and noticing these rewards. The hectic pace of life makes it easy to miss them—which then makes it easier to drop off from those good habits, even when they're working. Since you're more likely to find what you're actively looking for, let's identify what these rewards would be.

If I used these strategies diligently, I would feel:

If I used these strategies diligently, I would expect these natural consequences:

SECTION II Make Your Life Better

Reward Yourself

Sometimes the inherent rewards and natural consequences aren't enough to push us over the edge to do something. This is when self-administered rewards come in handy. For example, "I will let myself do some actual woodworking after I clean up my shop." Or "I can check the sports scores after I finish these work emails."

Sometimes the reward is a good thing, whereas at other times the reward is just less bad than the first task. For example, "I will read this magazine article after I finish that technical report." Starting with the less desirable task creates an incentive to get to the more desirable task.

Think about some rewards that you can put in place for using your strategies. The reward needs to be good enough that it is actually motivating (but not so good that you'll skip the work and just take the reward).

If I use these strategies consistently, I will earn these rewards:

Fine-tune Your Approach

Learn from Setbacks

You may find that it's much harder than you thought to apply your targeted strategies and make progress on the struggles that you first decided to focus on. This is normal and often expectable. Life is a constant process of trying things and learning from the feedback. If you get stuck, take a few moments to think about it and learn some valuable lessons.

Why was this harder than I expected?

What obstacles are getting in my way?

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What lessons have I learned from this?

What would need to change in order to make it worth attempting this again?

How can I apply these lessons to my next efforts?

Based on these lessons, what would be a good area to focus on next?

The Big Picture: Refine Your Approach

As we talked about in Chapter 3: Reality-Based Motivation, we learn from our experiences and apply those lessons forward. Life is a constant learning process. Now that you've been applying your targeted strategies for a few days or weeks, what lessons have you learned? If you take a few moments, I guarantee you will come up with some productive ideas, even if you've already done this a few times in other chapters. As you keep moving through the workbook, you will continue to figure out new things.

Lessons learned about my strategies:

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Lessons learned about how my brain works:

Lessons learned about how I motivate myself:

Working Memory: The Brain's RAM

Lessons learned about my workplace:

Lessons learned about my home life:

Lessons learned about using this workbook:

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