

ADULT AUTISM IN DAILY LIFE · 9.9

Autism and Executive Function: Yes, It Applies Here Too

A persistent misconception is that executive function difficulty is the ADHD problem and autism is about social communication. The research does not support this. Executive function difficulty is a substantial, well-documented part of adult autism.

FOR

Autistic adults

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Autism and Executive Function: Yes, It Applies Here Too

What the evidence shows

- **Decades of research and a large meta-analysis.** The 2018 Demetriou et al. Molecular Psychiatry meta-analysis pulled together over 200 studies and found consistent moderate-to-large differences between autistic and non-autistic groups across cognitive flexibility, planning, working memory, inhibition, generativity and fluency.
- **The real-world version matters most.** The 2016 Wallace et al. study in J Autism Dev Disord used everyday-life measures of executive function in autistic adults and found substantial difficulties that mapped onto reduced adaptive functioning and increased anxiety and depression. This is the executive function that affects daily life.
- **It gets missed.** Diagnostic attention has historically focused on social communication and sensory features. Co-occurring ADHD takes the credit when present. Many autistic adults present as capable in clinical settings because the appointment hides the daily executive load.

Where it actually shows up

- **Initiation difficulty.** The single most common pattern. The task is clear, the next step is clear, the energy is in principle available. The transition from 'knowing what to do' to 'actually starting' is what fails. Often described as inertia: not a lack of capability, but a difficulty engaging the gear that moves from rest to motion.
- **Switching cost and recovery after disruption.** Moving between activities is more expensive than for non-autistic peers. Interruptions can lose the thread for an hour or more. Unplanned changes, missed buses, unexpected guests: the recovery time after a small event can be substantially longer than the event itself.
- **Planning across a week and working memory in real time.** The single big task at the end of the week is easier to plan than the texture of a Tuesday afternoon. Multi-step verbal instructions leak; meetings without written agendas are particularly difficult.
- **Generativity and blank-canvas demands.** Generating options from scratch under social pressure ('what do you fancy for dinner?') is often harder than choosing between presented options. Many autistic adults perform better with a menu than with a blank canvas.
- **A different flavour of time blindness.** Time blindness in autism often shows up as difficulty estimating, sequencing and pacing rather than the impulse-driven loss-of-time pattern more associated with ADHD. The mechanism is different; the practical effect overlaps.

What helps

- **Externalise working memory as a default.** Calendar, written task lists, captured agreements after every meeting, visual reminders for routines that are not automatic yet. Trust paper or pixel over recall. Autistic versions often emphasise visual structure and predictability more than ADHD versions.
- **Use external initiators and plan in visual shapes.** A scheduled meeting, a coworking session, a body double. Visual time-blocking, kanban boards, calendar layouts work better for many autistic adults than flat to-do lists. The format that works is the one you will use.
- **Reduce switching cost and build in long ramp-back.** Batch similar tasks. Protect deep-focus blocks. Use a transition ritual between activities (a walk, making tea, a specific song). Allow longer recovery time after holidays, sick days or any significant disruption.
- **Address co-occurring ADHD where present.** AuDHD is common, and the executive function picture is often more severe. Where ADHD has not been considered, it is worth raising. Combined autism and ADHD assessment is available privately where the NHS routes are stalled.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if executive function difficulty is significantly affecting daily life, work or wellbeing, and autism has not been formally assessed. Private adult autism assessment with a CQC-registered provider is a legitimate parallel route where the NHS wait is not workable. Combined autism and ADHD assessment is available where both are being considered. For structured executive function support, an occupational therapist or autism-informed coach is appropriate; Access to Work is the usual UK funding route at work. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis or significant safety concern.

SOURCES

Demetriou et al. 2018 (Mol Psychiatry); Hill 2004 (Trends Cogn Sci); Wallace et al. 2016 (J Autism Dev Disord); Lancet Commission on Autism; DSM-5-TR; National Autistic Society

NEXT STEPS

Speak to NeuroFX

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
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