

THE ADHD COGNITIVE CODEX

A systematic map of how the ADHD brain filters, activates, decides, and remembers



4 Core Challenges · 16 Subcategories · 64 Cognitive Patterns
Each pattern includes: why it happens + how to correct it

Modeled after the Cognitive Bias Codex | Prepared for DJ | April 2026

THE FOUR CORE CHALLENGES

Every ADHD cognitive pattern stems from one of these four brain-level problems

TOO MUCH STIMULATION

The brain can't filter incoming signals, so everything feels equally urgent

Attention Hijacking · Hyperstimulation Seeking · Parallel Processing Overload · Sensory Sensitivity

16
patterns

NOT ENOUGH ACTIVATION

The dopamine deficit means the brain can't generate enough fuel to start or sustain effort

Interest-Based Nervous System · The Activation Energy Gap · The Wall of Awful · The Energy Crash Cycle

16
patterns

NEED TO ACT NOW

Weak impulse control means the brain prioritizes immediate reward over long-term gain

Impulsive Action · Urgency Addiction · Emotional Reactivity · Blurt and Regret

16
patterns

WHAT WAS I DOING?

Working memory and time perception failures mean the brain can't hold context or track progress

Time Blindness · Working Memory Gaps · Context Switching Costs · Identity & Pattern Amnesia

16
patterns

TOO MUCH STIMULATION

The brain can't filter incoming signals, so everything feels equally urgent

ATTENTION HIJACKING

● Notification Magnetism

Every ping, buzz, or alert pulls your focus with the force of gravity. Your brain treats all notifications as equally urgent.

Correction: Turn off all non-essential notifications. Use scheduled check-in times (3x/day) instead of real-time alerts.

● Tab Hoarding

Opening dozens of browser tabs as each thought triggers a new search. Each tab represents an unfinished thought your working memory can't hold.

Correction: Use a 'tab budget' of 5 max. Capture ideas in a notebook instead of new tabs.

● Conversation Drift

Mid-conversation, a single word triggers an association that pulls you down an entirely different conversational path.

Correction: Write down the original topic before following a tangent. Practice: 'Let me finish this thought first.'

● Environmental Scanning

Constantly monitoring everything in your physical environment instead of focusing on the task at hand.

Correction: Noise-canceling headphones, back to the wall, minimal visual clutter. Work in the same optimized space.

HYPERSTIMULATION SEEKING

● Doom Scrolling

Endlessly scrolling feeds because each new piece of content provides a micro-hit of dopamine. Your brain found an infinite drip.

Correction: App timers (15 min max). Delete apps from home screen. Replace with Dopamine Menu activities.

● Drama Magnetism

Being drawn toward conflict or high-emotion situations because they provide the stimulation your understimulated brain craves.

Correction: Ask: 'Is this actually my problem?' Redirect to a healthy high-stimulation activity.

● Chaos Comfort Zone

Feeling oddly calm in chaotic environments while peaceful ones feel unbearable. Your brain needs background noise to function.

Correction: Use controlled chaos: background music, coffee shops, body doubling. Don't mistake needing stimulation for thriving in chaos.

● Sensory Overload Pursuit

Seeking intense sensory experiences because normal levels of sensation don't register as 'enough' for your dampened reward system.

Correction: Channel into productive activities: martial arts, rock climbing, cold exposure. These build your brain.

PARALLEL PROCESSING OVERLOAD

● The Multi-Tab Mind

Running 5-10 mental threads simultaneously. Each thread gets 10% of your capacity and nothing gets full attention.

Correction: Brain dump everything onto paper. Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.

● Thought Avalanche

One thought triggers a cascade of connected thoughts until the original is buried under associations.

Correction: Capture the first thought immediately. Follow ONE thread. Use 'parking lot' lists for the rest.

● Task Stacking

Starting task B before finishing A because something in A reminded you of B. You end up with 7 half-finished tasks.

Correction: The ONE THING rule: finish current task before starting another. Write new tasks down, then return.

● Input Overwhelm

Too many information sources creating a firehose your brain can't process. You feel 'busy learning' but retain little.

Correction: Limit to 1-2 active learning inputs. Apply before consuming more. Can you teach what you learned last week?

SENSORY SENSITIVITY

● Sound Sensitivity Spiral

Certain sounds become impossibly distracting, consuming all attention and triggering disproportionate irritation.

Correction: Noise-canceling headphones are non-negotiable. Communicate your needs. This is neurological.

● Visual Clutter Paralysis

A messy environment actively degrades your ability to think. Every visible object is a competing stimulus.

Correction: Clear workspace to essentials only. Use closed storage. A clean environment is a cognitive tool.

● Emotional Contagion

Absorbing other people's emotions. Someone else's stress becomes your stress. Your emotional boundaries are porous.

Correction: Practice: 'Is this MY emotion or someone else's?' Create distance when overwhelmed. Mindfulness builds this filter.

● Texture/Comfort Fixation

An itchy tag or tight waistband occupies the front of your mind, draining focus until resolved.

Correction: Invest in comfortable clothes and ergonomics. This isn't being picky; it's removing cognitive interference.

NOT ENOUGH ACTIVATION

The dopamine deficit means the brain can't generate enough fuel to start or sustain effort

INTEREST-BASED NERVOUS SYSTEM

● Only-If-Interesting Filter

Your brain has a binary switch: fascinating (full power) or boring (no power). There's no middle gear.

Correction: Pair boring tasks with interesting elements: music, body doubling, gamification, novelty.

● Passion Dependency

You can only sustain effort on things you're passionate about. When passion fades, so does function.

Correction: Build systems that don't depend on passion: accountability, deadlines, financial stakes. Passion starts; systems sustain.

● Novelty Addiction

The beginning of anything is intoxicating because novelty floods dopamine. You mistake this high for genuine calling.

Correction: 72-hour rule: never commit in the first 72 hours of excitement. If it compels you after novelty fades, it might be real.

● Expertise Abandonment

Getting 80% good at something, then losing interest. Wide but shallow knowledge across many domains.

Correction: Choose ONE skill to push past 80%. The discomfort is the activation gap, not a signal to quit. Mastery = income.

THE ACTIVATION ENERGY GAP

● Task Initiation Failure

Knowing exactly what to do but being unable to start. Your prefrontal cortex can't fire the 'start' signal.

Correction: The 2-minute start: commit to only 2 minutes. Lower the bar until starting feels trivial. Momentum builds dopamine.

● Decision Paralysis

Too many options causing complete shutdown. Your brain can't rank priorities because executive function is offline.

Correction: Pick the first reasonable option, not the best. Use a coin flip to break ties. Mediocre decisions executed beat perfect ones unmade.

● Setup Overwhelm

The task isn't hard, but the setup is. Each micro-step is an activation barrier neurotypical brains skip automatically.

Correction: Prepare environment the night before. Leave documents open, materials out, tools ready. Eliminate every barrier.

● **Productive Procrastination**

Doing useful but non-essential tasks to avoid the ONE task that matters. Your brain finds just enough dopamine to feel productive.

Correction: Name it out loud: 'I'm cleaning because I'm avoiding the proposal.' Awareness breaks the spell. Then 2-minute start.

THE WALL OF AWFUL

● **Shame Accumulation**

Every past failure adds a 'brick' to the emotional wall between you and future tasks. The weight of history makes tasks feel impossible.

Correction: Name the shame: 'I'm afraid because I failed at something similar before.' Separate past from present capability.

● **Failure Anticipation**

Your brain fast-forwards to imagined failure before you start, then treats that as evidence you shouldn't try.

Correction: Ask: 'What's the ACTUAL worst case?' Write it down. On paper, it looks much smaller than in your head.

● **Perfectionism Paralysis**

If you can't do it perfectly, your brain decides not to do it at all. A protective mechanism against the shame of imperfect output.

Correction: Adopt the B-minus standard: aim for B-minus on first drafts. Shipping imperfect work beats perfecting nothing.

● **Avoidance Cycling**

Avoiding a task creates guilt, which makes it feel worse, which increases avoidance. The cycle compounds daily.

Correction: Break the cycle with the tiniest action. Reply with one sentence. Open the document. Any contact shrinks the monster.

THE ENERGY CRASH CYCLE

● **Boom-Bust Productivity**

Superhuman output followed by complete collapse. 14-hour sprints then 3-day crashes. Dopamine surplus then deficit.

Correction: Cap productive days at 6-8 hours even when unstoppable. Sustainable output beats sprint-and-crash cycles.

● **Afternoon Collapse**

A dramatic energy crash where your brain goes offline. Not laziness; a neurochemical dip that hits ADHD brains harder.

Correction: Schedule low-energy tasks for afternoon. Power nap 20 min or exercise 10 min. Never schedule important work here.

● **Weekend Paralysis**

Without external structure, your brain shuts down. No deadlines = no activation. Freedom becomes imprisonment.

Correction: One anchor commitment per weekend day (gym, social plan, project). Your brain needs something to activate around.

● **Post-Achievement Void**

Completing a big goal leaves you empty. The pursuit dopamine evaporates and nothing feels worth doing.

Correction: Plan the NEXT project before finishing the current one. Expect the void. Don't make decisions during it (3-7 days).

NEED TO ACT NOW

Weak impulse control means the brain prioritizes immediate reward over long-term gain

IMPULSIVE ACTION

● **Cart-Fill Compulsion**

Buying before your prefrontal cortex can weigh in. The purchase provides instant dopamine; regret comes later.

Correction: Delete saved payment methods. 48-hour rule for purchases over \$50. Add friction between impulse and transaction.

● **Project Starting Addiction**

The dopamine hit of starting something new is irresistible. You accumulate projects because each new beginning feels like THE thing.

Correction: 'Someday List' for new ideas. Review monthly. ONE active project. New starts require finishing something first.

● **Over-Commitment Spiral**

Saying yes to everything because future-you seems infinitely capable. Then reality hits and you're drowning.

Correction: Default: 'Let me check and get back to you.' Never say yes in the moment. If not a clear YES after 24 hours, it's no.

● **Subscription Collecting**

Signing up for services you'll 'definitely use,' accumulating \$200+/month in forgotten recurring charges.

Correction: Quarterly subscription audit. Cancel everything. Re-subscribe only to what you actively miss after 2 weeks.

URGENCY ADDICTION

● **Deadline Dependency**

Can't start until panic floods your brain with enough adrenaline to activate. The crisis provides the neurochemical fuel you need.

Correction: Create artificial deadlines with real consequences: public commitments, penalties, accountability partners.

● **Crisis Manufacturing**

Unconsciously creating emergencies because your brain performs optimally under pressure. Procrastination as activation strategy.

Correction: Channel it: gamification, competition, time-pressure challenges. Create healthy urgency without real consequences.

● Last-Minute Sprinting

All work in a frantic burst before deadline. Output is surprisingly good, reinforcing the pattern.

Correction: Shift to 'draft early, refine later.' Even a rough draft 3 days early reduces crisis-mode health damage.

● False Urgency Response

Treating every request as urgent regardless of priority. A casual email becomes a fire drill.

Correction: Before responding: 'What happens if I deal with this tomorrow?' If nothing bad, it's not urgent. Batch responses.

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

● Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

Perceiving rejection or ambiguous signals as devastating attacks. A tone change triggers a full emotional crisis.

Correction: Label it: 'This is RSD, not reality.' Rate evidence 1-10. Wait 2 hours before responding. Most dissolve.

● Anger Flooding

Minor frustrations triggering disproportionate rage that hijacks your nervous system. You say things you regret.

Correction: STOP: Stop, Take 3 breaths, Observe, Proceed with intention. Leave the room if needed. Nothing sent in anger helps.

● Enthusiasm Overflow

Getting SO excited you overwhelm others, talk too fast, make big promises. Unregulated positive emotions can be as problematic.

Correction: 'Enthusiasm budget': share with 1-2 people max before acting. Write it down. Let the initial wave pass.

● Catastrophizing

A single negative event triggers a mental domino chain to the worst possible outcome.

Correction: Write the catastrophe, then 3 more likely outcomes. Your brain defaults to worst case; force alternatives.

BLURT AND REGRET

● The Interrupt Reflex

Blurring out thoughts because if you don't say it NOW, it vanishes from working memory. Compensatory, not rude.

Correction: Keep a notepad during conversations. Jot thoughts to release from memory. 'I want to come back to that.'

● Oversharing Cascade

Once talking about something interesting, dopamine keeps you going past social appropriateness.

Correction: Traffic light rule: Green (0-30s, go), Yellow (30-60s, wrap up), Red (60s+, stop and ask them a question).

● Impulsive Messaging

Firing off texts/emails driven by emotion without considering consequences. Feels urgent now; looks different an hour later.

Correction: Draft but don't send. Save to drafts. Review after 2 hours. Send a toned-down version if still needed.

● **Premature Commitment**

Verbally committing before thinking it through. Saying yes feels good and avoids discomfort of saying no.

Correction: Memorize: 'That sounds great; let me check my schedule and confirm.' Use it every time. No exceptions.

WHAT WAS I DOING?

Working memory and time perception failures mean the brain can't hold context or track progress

TIME BLINDNESS

● Now-or-Never Perception

Two time zones: NOW and NOT NOW. Anything not happening now doesn't exist until it suddenly becomes NOW (panic).

Correction: Visual countdowns, physical calendars, progressive alarms (7 days, 3 days, 1 day). Make the future visible.

● Duration Misestimation

Consistently believing tasks take less time. A '5-minute' email takes 30. Your internal clock runs at a different speed.

Correction: Track actual time for 2 weeks. Build a personal 'time multiplier' (usually 1.5-2x). Apply to all estimates.

● Chronic Lateness Pattern

Can't backwards-plan from departure time. Underestimate prep, get absorbed in 'one more thing,' don't feel time passing.

Correction: Set 'departure alarms': 8:30 (start getting ready) and 8:50 (walk out NOW) for a 9:00 leave time.

● Deadline Surprise

Known deadlines arrive as a shock every time. NOT NOW just became NOW and the emotional impact hits like new information.

Correction: Weekly preview: every Sunday, look ahead and mentally rehearse. Create 'pre-deadlines' 3 days before real ones.

WORKING MEMORY GAPS

● Mid-Task Forgetting

Walking into a room and forgetting why. Your working memory buffer drops items without warning.

Correction: Verbalize intention: 'I'm going to get water.' Auditory encoding creates a second memory trace. Silly but works.

● Object Impermanence

Out of sight, out of mind. If you can't see it, it stops existing. Food in fridge, bills in drawers, tasks off-screen.

Correction: Make everything visible: clear containers, open shelving, whiteboard lists. If it needs doing, keep it in sight.

● Conversation Amnesia

Fully present in a conversation but unable to recall key details afterward. Others think you weren't listening.

Correction: Take brief notes. Repeat back: 'So what I'm hearing is...' Follow up with a written summary.

● The Vanishing Thought

Brilliant ideas that completely disappear within seconds because another thought displaced them.

Correction: Carry a capture tool ALWAYS. Rule: capture within 10 seconds or it's gone. Never trust 'I'll remember this.'

CONTEXT SWITCHING COSTS

● Task Re-Entry Failure

After interruption, can't remember where you were. Neurotypical: 23 min to refocus. ADHD: 45+ min or never.

Correction: Before any interruption, write ONE sentence: what you're doing and your next step. This breadcrumb saves hours.

● Flow State Fragility

Hyperfocus is productive but fragile. A single notification can shatter it and it may not return that day.

Correction: Protect flow: DND mode, closed door, headphones, phone in another room. Flow time is sacred and non-negotiable.

● Transition Paralysis

Getting stuck between tasks. Finished A but can't start B. The mental 'clutch' between gears is broken.

Correction: Physical ritual: stand, walk to window, 3 breaths, return, say next task aloud. Movement helps the brain shift.

● Mental Tab Overload

Every open loop occupies a 'tab' in working memory. By afternoon, 30 mental tabs are open and nothing works.

Correction: Close tabs: complete small tasks now (2-min rule), schedule others, or write them down to release from memory.

IDENTITY & PATTERN AMNESIA

● Mistake Repetition

Making the same mistakes because the lesson wasn't encoded strongly enough to override impulse in the moment.

Correction: Create a 'Lessons Learned' doc. Review weekly. Post corrections on index cards where you'll see them.

● Inconsistent Self-Image

Sense of self shifts with performance. Good day: 'I've got this.' Bad day: 'I'm broken.' No stable self-narrative.

Correction: Daily wins log (3 things, no matter how small). Review monthly. Written records stabilize identity.

● Skill Amnesia

Forgetting you've already learned something. Re-learning the same formula, re-watching the same tutorial.

Correction: Build a personal knowledge base: step-by-step docs. Your future self is your most important audience.

● **Progress Blindness**

Can't see how far you've come because you only see NOW. Feels like always starting from zero.

Correction: Track everything: income, habits, projects shipped. Review monthly with charts. See progress in data.

QUICK REFERENCE: THE 64 PATTERNS AT A GLANCE

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Hyperstimulation Seeking: Doom Scrolling · Drama Magnetism · Chaos Comfort Zone · Sensory Overload Pursuit

Parallel Processing Overload: The Multi-Tab Mind · Thought Avalanche · Task Stacking · Input Overwhelm

Sensory Sensitivity: Sound Sensitivity Spiral · Visual Clutter Paralysis · Emotional Contagion · Texture/Comfort Fixation

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Context Switching Costs: Task Re-Entry Failure · Flow State Fragility · Transition Paralysis · Mental Tab Overload

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