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Out of Your Head: Why Externalizing Is ADHD's Secret Weapon

You're Not Broken. You're Overloaded.

- If you have ADHD, think about your brain as juggling more than it can hold.
- If something is important and matters, get it out of your head: Externalizing is how we stop relying on our brain's mental counterspace, and start building systems that work.

Working Memory = Kitchen Counter Space

- Imagine baking cookies in the small kitchen of a camper. There's insufficient space to put your recipe, lay out the necessary ingredients, set up the mixer, and measure the flour or sugar. You have to stick the recipe between your teeth, and then as you measure out the sugar, you bump the egg carton, and it falls to the floor, breaking three of them wide open. Your daughter then comes in to ask a question and when you turn back to baking, you look down at the salt in your one hand and the measuring spoon in your other, but can't recall if you *actually* put the salt in the bowl yet or not. Ugh. Messy, inefficient, frustrating, error prone.
- Now, imagine baking those same cookies in a commercial kitchen, with clutter-free, stainless steel counters as far as the eye can see. Your recipe is propped up in a stand for easy reference, the ingredients are laid out in sequential order, and there is plenty of room for your bowls, measuring cups, and mixer. Nothing falls on the ground as you work, and you can pause and resume without losing track. It's smooth, efficient, and reliable.
- Folks with ADHD…… well, they're baking in a camper. There is not adequate mental counterspace to hold the ingredients in mind while manipulating them and holding the whole process in mind that they are even trying to follow. ADHD brains often feel like camper kitchens—trying to do too much with too little space.
- That's the difference externalizing makes. Externalizing expands and declutters your counter.

What Does It Mean to Externalize?

- Externalizing means moving important information out of your brain and into the world—where you can see it, hear it, touch it, and act on it. You don't have to hold it in your mind while you work – on your mental counter space. It is out there – where it won't fade away or get lost.
- It's not cheating. It's scaffolding.

Real-Life Examples: At Home

Time Awareness

Clocks/Timers in key places
Visual timers for transitions
Alarms labeled with actions ("Start dinner," "Leave for pickup")

Reminders

Sticky notes on the fridge or mirror
Whiteboards in the hallway
Voice memos triggered by location

Routines & Processes

Laminated morning/evening checklists (any repeatable process; templates)
"Sunday reset" checklist: laundry, groceries, bills, calendar sync
Pack you lunch bins for the kids (or yourself) in the pantry – one from each
Plan out outfits for the week
Travel a lot? Make and print out packing list (or in phone) – buy seconds and keep in kit

Real-Life Examples: At Work

Time Blocking

Color-coded calendar with alerts that say what to do—not just when

Project Steps

Trello boards, Notion templates, or paper flowcharts for repeatable tasks

Meeting Prep

Reusable checklist: "Review agenda, print materials, prep talking points"

Accountability

Share goals with a colleague or coach—turn motivation into a shared system
"Accountabilibuddy"

Real-Life Examples: In Relationships

Write it Down

Arguing? Planning? Use a white board or paper to stay on track and stay cool

Print Rules of Fair Fighting and Keep Them Visible

https://www.choosingtherapy.com/fair-fighting-rules/
https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/fair-fighting-rules

Develop Low-Stress Signals with Partner

Time to step away, time to breathe