

**ADD Coaching: Growing a Person's Executive Functioning Skills**  
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The field of personal/life coaching has gone through tremendous growth over the past 15-20 years. Along the way, many coaches around the country have developed the [specialty](#) of coaching adolescents and adults with ADHD. This article will provide a brief overview of ADD coaching, contrast it with other services available at CRG and elsewhere, and discuss how ADD coaching can help clients strengthen their executive functioning skills.

### **What Is ADD Coaching?**

Coaching emerged over the past two decades to help adults create more fulfilling, balanced lives. It is a wellness model, meaning that coaches focus on people's strengths and resources rather than their weaknesses, disability, or emotional pain. Coaches [believe](#) that people are creative, resourceful, and whole. This viewpoint drives coaches to elicit ideas from clients whenever possible, rather than telling clients what to do. Coaches help people clarify goals they want to accomplish, then collaborate with them to develop and carry out realistic action plans to achieve desired outcomes.

Like therapists/counselors, coaches are trained to ask questions. In fact, coaches use questions as their primary form of communication. These inquiries are often brief and open ended. Coaches call them "powerful" questions. Some examples include:

- What outcome would be helpful?
- What are you willing to do to achieve that?
- How can you learn more about that?
- What's getting in the way?
- What would you gain by starting today?
- Do you see any pitfalls with that plan?

Identifying goals and creating action plans are important first steps. Many people with ADHD, however, encounter great difficulty [following through](#) on plans. This is caused by many factors, such as difficulty remembering the plan, intense boredom with the minutia of executing a great idea, getting overwhelmed by unexpected complications once the person takes action, or the need for a looming deadline to marshal enough energy to act. The word "procrastination" is often used to describe this pattern. Many people with ADHD experience embarrassment or shame due to lifelong patterns of procrastinating until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour propels them into a frenzy of activity.

People who do not have ADHD often find it hard to understand why so many individuals with ADHD "choose" to wait until the last minute to start working on a goal. As it turns out, there is a neurochemical [explanation](#) for this. Many people with ADHD under-produce the neurotransmitters (serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine) in their frontal lobes that help regulate goal-directed behaviors across time. When a looming deadline is upon us, our brains naturally produce more of these chemical agents that

make sustained focus/effort possible. Thus, it is suddenly easier for the person to get started and stick with a task until it is completed.

ADD coaches understand this. That's why they also help clients take action on the goals identified during a coaching session. This is referred to as "holding the client accountable." Accountability, in a coaching relationship, occurs without judgment. It helps clients make progress without adding to their insecurities about following through. Coaches often use emails, phone calls, texts, or other forms of communication to briefly check in with a client in between sessions. Like everything else in a [co-active](#) coaching relationship, this occurs only after the coach and client agree that doing so would help the client. Coaches and clients constantly "design the alliance" by openly discussing what the client needs and wants from the coach in order to thrive.

For example, a client might meet with her coach on a Tuesday and decide that she will stop at an office supply store on the way home to buy a pack of manila envelopes. Once home, she will label the envelopes *Home, Office, Travel, Charities, Medical, and Other*. She plans to start working on her tax return by sorting a box stuffed with receipts into the appropriate manila envelope. On Thursday, the client will photograph these envelopes and send the picture to her coach. The coach agrees to email the client back by Thursday evening to ask about her progress if he hasn't heard from her.

### **How Does Coaching Differ from Other Services?**

As mentioned, coaches ask lots of questions, just like counselors/therapists do. But these questions are usually posed for different reasons. Therapists are interested in helping clients understand aspects of their past and healing traumas or "unfinished business" that can cause emotional distress. Coaches tend to focus on a client's future goals and the steps needed to get there. Rather than ask *why*, coaches tend to ask *what* and *how* and *when*. In other words, a coach's focus is action-oriented rather than insight-oriented. None of this is to say coaching is better or worse than therapy. They are simply different services and many people benefit from both. Read a thoughtful [discussion](#) of this topic to learn more.

Many high school and college students today work with ADD coaches. Schools and college campuses provide various types of academic support services. Some of the most popular are content tutoring and study skills/learning strategies instruction. Coaching seems to be a unique addition to this range of options. Tutoring and strategy instruction are both "didactic" models in which the tutor or strategy instructor tells - or teaches - the student how to do a certain type of academic task. The student listens and watches while the tutor or strategy instructor explains and demonstrates how to solve a problem, take notes a certain way, choose the correct answer on an SAT test item, etc. Again, content tutoring and strategy instruction are wonderful models for many students. But they are not the same as coaching. Coaches do most of the listening after asking powerful questions. The goal in coaching is to elicit *from the client* what he or she wants, thinks would work, and/or is willing to do to reach a goal.

## How Does Coaching Enhance a Person's Executive Functioning?

Remember that EF is all about self-regulating one's behaviors and emotions. In the past few years, a number of researchers have studied college students with ADHD and/or learning disabilities to determine how ADD coaching affected their EF. In general, this research has found that college students who are coached become better organized and less stressed when they are coached; in short, more self-regulated. The [largest study](#) to date worked with 127 students on 10 different campuses across the U.S. The researchers employed a control group design to randomly assign students to either the "coaching" group or the "no coaching" group. Field, Parker, Sawilowsky, and Rolands (2013, pp. 67-81) found that students who were coached scored [significantly higher](#) on both the Self-Regulation cluster of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI; Weinstein & Palmer, 2002) and the College Well-being Survey.

Both findings support the conclusion that coaching helps people enhance their EF skills. In addition, this line of research has reported another positive finding that helps explain *how* ADD coaching does so. Students who have been coached begin to hear their coaches' questions in their mind, which strengthens their ability over time to "coach" themselves with positive self-talk. Self-talk refers to our ability to talk to ourselves (silently or out loud) when we have to problem solve or manage negative emotions like stress or worry. All of us use self-talk, often without even being conscious of it. People with ADHD, however, frequently take longer in life to develop the ability to use self-talk effectively. Unfortunately, many people with ADHD have also been found to only use negative self-talk, which has been referred to as our ["gremlin"](#) of doubts and worries. Coaching helps people pause and ask themselves the right kinds of questions that trigger effective decisions based on solid EF. This, in turn, gives the person a sense of hope that things will turn out well.

*Dr. Parker now offers coaching services to high school, college students and adults out of school who would benefit from this new approach.*