

What Is Executive Functioning? by Valerie Long, Ph.D., HSPP

The theory of executive functioning has gained increased attention among psychologists and educators over the past 20 years. But what exactly is executive functioning? Definitions of executive functioning vary slightly as research in this area unfolds and the concept of executive functioning continues to evolve. Sheldon H. Horowitz, Ed.D., the director of LD resources at the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), offers the following description:

“Executive functioning involves activating, orchestrating, monitoring, evaluation, and adapting different strategies to accomplish different tasks....It requires the ability to analyze situations, plan and take action, focus and monitor attention, and adjust actions as needed to get the job done.”

Less formal descriptions of executive functioning have compared it to the conductor of an orchestra, the CEO of a company, and an air traffic controller. Similar to the role of executive functioning, these individuals are responsible for planning, scheduling, setting goals, organizing, focusing, prioritizing, remembering, persisting in the face of difficulty, and displaying impulse control in order to attain a positive result.

Executive functioning involves the frontal lobes of the brain. It is important for learning and academic success. Strong executive functioning allows an individual to make plans, organize, keep track of time, finish work on time, keep track of more than one thing simultaneously, evaluate one's actions and make adjustments on the spot if those actions are not achieving the desired goal.

[Signs](#) of executive dysfunction may include difficulty in the following areas: planning, initiating a task, figuring out how long a project might take, telling a story in an organized way (either verbally or in writing), memorizing, retrieving information from memory, and/or retaining information while doing something with it (also called “working memory”). Further, an individual with executive functioning difficulty may procrastinate, fail to learn from mistakes, have trouble editing his/her work, and display an inability to multitask. A student with executive dysfunction may exhibit disorganization, trouble starting and completing assignments, difficulty writing reports and essays, difficulty with multi-step math problems, trouble remembering what he/she has just read, failure to be on time, difficulty with long-term projects, difficulty focusing on the instructor and what is being said, difficulty shifting from one task to another, difficulty waiting his or her turn and difficulty managing frustration and other emotions.

Executive functioning can be assessed through various [tests](#) that measure an individual's ability to plan, shift from task to task, initiate tasks, problem solve, self-monitor and use working memory. Rating scales completed by the individual, a parent and/or a teacher are also used to evaluate executive functioning.

A person with executive dysfunction may feel overwhelmed, anxious and incompetent. However, there are many strategies that can be used to help individuals with executive

function difficulties. Among these include the following recommendations by the National Center for Learning Disabilities:

General Strategies

- Take step-by-step approaches to work; rely on visual organizational aids.
- Use tools like time organizers, computers or watches with alarms.
- Prepare visual schedules and review them several times a day.
- Ask for written directions with oral instructions whenever possible.
- Plan and structure transition times and shifts in activities.

Managing Time

- Create checklists and “to do” lists, estimating how long tasks will take.
- Break long assignments into chunks and assign time frames for completing each chunk.
- Use visual calendars to keep track of long term assignments, due dates, chores and activities.
- Use management software such as the Franklin Day Planner, Palm Pilot or Lotus Organizer.
- Be sure to write the due date on top of each assignment.

Managing Space and Materials

- Organize work space.
- Minimize clutter.
- Consider having separate work areas with complete sets of supplies for different activities.
- Schedule a weekly time to clean and organize the work space.

Managing Work

- Make a checklist for getting through assignments. For example, a student’s checklist could include such items as: get out pencil and paper; put name on paper; put due date on paper; read directions; etc.
- Meet with a teacher or supervisor on a regular basis to review work; troubleshoot problems.

Further, working with an ADHD coach is another effective tool for adolescents and adults to improve the life management skills that can be complicated by executive functioning issues. For more information, visit the [ADD Coach Academy](#) website. You can also read Dr. Parker’s article about this topic in this newsletter.