

Quick Reference: Executive Functions

Executive functions are our brain’s “self management” skills. We all exhibit strengths and weaknesses in these skills, which overlap. However, sometimes chronic weaknesses in the skills impact your quality of life and productivity. With attention and strategies you can learn to recognize and manage the areas where you struggle.

SKILL	What Weakness In The Skill Looks Like: Adults	What Weakness In The Skill Looks Like: Children
<p>1</p> <p>Task Initiation <i>The ability to get started on a task without undue procrastination.</i></p>	<p>It’s very difficult for you to get started on projects or tasks even when you know you’re going to regret putting them off.</p>	<p>Kaylee is a 14-year old with an essay due in two days. After school, she decides to text her friends and spend time on YouTube. She hasn’t started the essay and is nervous about it, but plans to wait until the next night to do it, her usual approach.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Planning and Prioritizing <i>Being able to create a plan to reach a goal or finish a task.</i></p>	<p>You continually find it difficult to plan and carry out tasks or projects to their completion. Once you’ve started, it’s hard to stay focused on what’s important along the way, especially when there are distractions.</p>	<p>Daniel is a teen who wants to buy a new skateboard. He earns a weekly allowance and is paid extra for doing additional chores, but he has no idea how to set up a savings plan for the skateboard.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Flexible Thinking <i>The ability to revise a plan when obstacles are introduced.</i></p>	<p>You aren’t able to readily consider or make an adjustment to plans when something doesn’t go the way you expected.</p>	<p>Greer is a 13-year old who is heading up a small group project in her History class. She has definite ideas about how she wants the final product to look, and refuses to accept any ideas from the other group members.</p>
<p>4</p> <p>Emotional Control <i>Managing one’s emotions in order to achieve goals and complete tasks.</i></p>	<p>Your feelings often quickly spiral out of control during situations when others around you are able to remain calm.</p>	<p>Mike is a 16-year old who dreads doing his homework. It takes such a long time each night that he usually ends up putting it aside after about 20 minutes, exasperated and angry that he has to spend so much time on it.</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Impulse Control <i>The ability to think through the consequences of your actions before you act.</i></p>	<p>You often say or do what pops into your head and then have to deal with the consequences.</p>	<p>When eight-year old Andrew sees his mom wearing her new favorite necklace he doesn’t like it, so he blurts out that he thinks the necklace is “really ugly.”</p>
<p>6</p> <p>Working Memory <i>The ability to hold information in memory to help with performing complex tasks.</i></p>	<p>You’re often not able to remember important things, you tend to lose things, you make careless mistakes.</p>	<p>Ellen, a 15-year old, cannot remember her chore of feeding the family dog every evening. Her mom has suggested that Ellen put a reminder on the family calendar, but Ellen insists she’ll remember next time.</p>

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<p>7</p> <p>Organization <i>The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.</i></p>	<p>You allow clutter to build up, including stacks of unopened mail, papers that need to be sorted, or correspondence that's waiting for some sort of decision to be made.</p>	<p>Rosie is a ninth grader who has a hard time finding her study materials in her room because her bed is unmade, her clothes are strewn on the floor, a few dirty dishes lurk under her bed, and her study materials are never where she thinks she left them.</p>
<p>8</p> <p>Time Management <i>The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines.</i></p>	<p>You always tend to run late even when you work hard to be on time.</p>	<p>Andre rushes out the door to meet his school carpool every morning, usually a few minutes late. He struggles to get out of bed, to gather his stuff for school, and to pack his backpack, which he rarely is able to locate when it's time to leave.</p>
<p>9</p> <p>Goal-Directed Persistence <i>The capacity to have a goal and reach it without being put off or distracted by competing interests.</i></p>	<p>You get side-tracked when you're working towards a goal. Something always seems to get in the way.</p>	<p>Hannah is a high school junior who plans to attend college. She intends to maintain an "A" average in all her classes but after the mid-point of the semester, she always loses steam, becomes less motivated, and ends up with some C's and even D's.</p>
<p>10</p> <p>Metacognition <i>The ability to stand back and take a bird's-eye view of yourself in a situation so that you can observe what's happening.</i></p>	<p>You're so involved in everything you do, from work projects to chores at home, that you have difficulty seeing how you're doing from an objective viewpoint.</p>	<p>Sam is a high school senior who wants to maintain a "B" average this semester. With four weeks left, he is at a solid "C". However, Sam really believes he can pull it all together soon if he just keeps plugging away.</p>