

Different Ways of Thinking

Understanding Attention and Focus

A 60-minute community conversation on adult ADHD, attention, neurodivergent experiences, and everyday strategies

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Today's 60-Minute Flow

One activity. Clear takeaways. Less clinical, more everyday life.

0–10 min

Frame attention as a human experience, not a character flaw.

10–25 min

Discuss ADHD, neurodivergence, executive functioning, and real-life examples.

25–40 min

Complete and debrief one large-group 60-second activity.

40–55 min

Connect the activity to practical supports: focus, time, organization, regulation, and strengths.

55–60 min

Close with reflection, questions, and one small action participants can try.

Goal: Leave with a more compassionate and practical way to understand attention and focus.

A Neurodivergent Lens

We are not asking “What is wrong?” We are asking “How does this brain work best?”

Instead of judging

“They are lazy.”

“They do not care.”

“They should just try harder.”

We get curious

“What is pulling their attention?”

“What support would help?”

“What environment fits them better?”

We notice strengths

Fast associations.

Creative connections.

Deep focus when engaged.

Problem-solving from unusual angles.

Attention Is More Than “Pay Attention”

Attention is a set of brain-based skills that help us select, hold, shift, and return to information.

Select

What do I notice first?

Sustain

How long can I stay with it?

Shift

Can I move from one task to another?

Return

Can I come back after interruption?

This matters because everyday life is full of interruptions, choices, pressure, noise, and time limits. The activity today gives participants a quick experience of how these skills can look different from person to person.

ADHD in Adults: A Brief Grounding

ADHD is not just a childhood issue; adults may experience inattention, restlessness, impulsivity, and organization challenges.

Adult diagnosis is common

CDC reported an estimated 15.5 million U.S. adults had a current ADHD diagnosis in recent national data.

Symptoms are contextual

NIMH describes ADHD symptoms as frequent, persistent, and showing up across more than one setting, such as home, work, school, or relationships.

Important framing

The goal today is not to diagnose anyone. The goal is to understand attention as a lived experience and identify supports that help people function better.

What Attention Challenges Can Look Like

Many adults describe attention challenges as uneven performance rather than constant inability.

Remembering one thing but forgetting another

Starting quickly but struggling to finish

Knowing what to do but not being able to begin

Losing time, misjudging time, or rushing at the end

Getting overwhelmed by noise, clutter, choices, or transitions

Focusing deeply on meaningful tasks while avoiding boring or unclear tasks

Key idea

Attention is not just about effort. It is affected by interest, environment, emotion, sensory input, urgency, and support.

One Large-Group Activity

The 60-Second Brain Search: Neurodivergent Lens Sprint

Activity writing time: 60 seconds

Share-out + debrief: 10–12 minutes

No grading. No shame. Just noticing.

Everyone receives a paper with three categories.

When the timer starts, list as many words, ideas, examples, or phrases as you can.

You may stay in one category or jump between categories.

Spelling, neatness, and “perfect” answers do not matter.

The goal is to notice how your brain searches, sorts, retrieves, shifts, and focuses under time pressure.

60-Second Brain Search

List as many as you can in each category. You may jump around.

1. Attention Helpers

Examples: quiet space, music, walking, reminders, body doubling, visual lists, deadlines, prayer, routine, timers...

2. Everyday Distractions

Examples: phone, noise, hunger, clutter, emotions, interruptions, unfinished tasks, worrying, bright lights...

3. Brain Reset Tools

Examples: breathing, stretching, stepping outside, water, music, prayer, cleaning one area, talking it out...

Timer: 60 seconds — write first, think later

Facilitator Script for the Activity

Use this wording to keep the activity light, inclusive, and strengths-based.

Before the timer

“This is not a test. It is a quick brain observation. Some people will write fast, some will pause, some will jump between columns, and some will get stuck. All of that gives us useful information.”

During the timer

“Keep going. Do not judge the answers. If one category gets hard, move to another one.”

After the timer

“Put your pen down. Notice what happened before we compare anything. Which column came easiest? Which one felt blocked? Did you stay focused or bounce around?”

Share-Out Questions

Ask for patterns before asking for totals.

Which category filled up fastest for you?

Which category was hardest to start?

Did anyone have a burst of ideas after the timer ended?

Did anyone jump between categories instead of finishing one column?

Did anyone think of many ideas but write fewer because time moved fast?

What helped you focus: examples, pressure, competition, interest, or structure?

Facilitator note

Avoid framing high totals as “better.” The point is to observe different pathways of attention, memory, retrieval, and focus.

Debrief: What Did This Demonstrate?

The activity makes invisible attention processes visible.

Retrieval speed

How quickly words, memories, and examples come to mind.

Task switching

How easily the brain moves between categories without losing momentum.

Working memory

Holding the instructions while generating and writing ideas.

Pressure

How a time limit changes performance, confidence, or focus.

Debrief Through a Neurodivergent Lens

Different output does not mean different worth. It often means different access to attention under the conditions given.

Uneven output

A person may know a lot but retrieve slowly under pressure, noise, or social comparison.

Interest-based attention

When a category connects to personal meaning, the brain may produce more, faster, and with more energy.

Support changes access

Examples, visuals, timers, movement, and permission to jump around can reduce friction.

This is why accommodations and strategies are not “special treatment.” They are tools that help people access skills they already have.

How This Activity Fits the Whole Presentation

The activity becomes the bridge between information and lived experience.

Before the activity

We define attention, ADHD, neurodivergence, and executive functioning in everyday language.

During the activity

Participants feel time pressure, choice, retrieval, focus, shifting, and possible distraction in real time.

After the activity

We connect the experience to real life: work, school, parenting, relationships, home tasks, and self-compassion.

Main takeaway: Attention is not fixed. Context changes performance.

Strength-Based ADHD Discussion

ADHD is often less about “no attention” and more about directing, regulating, and returning attention.

Some people can focus intensely when the task is meaningful, urgent, creative, relational, or stimulating.

The same person may struggle with tasks that are boring, unclear, repetitive, emotionally loaded, or too open-ended.

This can confuse families, workplaces, and even the person experiencing it: “How can I do one thing so well and struggle with another?”

A neurodivergent lens helps us stop moralizing and start designing better supports.

Real-World Examples

The activity mirrors everyday situations where attention has to work under pressure.

At home

Starting chores, remembering errands, sorting paperwork, managing clutter, getting out the door.

At work or school

Prioritizing tasks, finishing assignments, responding to emails, tracking deadlines, filtering interruptions.

In relationships

Listening while distracted, remembering plans, regulating emotions, explaining needs without shame.

Practical Supports That Help Attention

Strategies work best when they reduce friction and create cues outside the brain.

Externalize

Write it down. Use visual lists. Put reminders where the task happens.

Anchor time

Use timers, alarms, countdowns, and “start by” times instead of vague plans.

Reduce friction

Make the first step tiny. Put supplies out. Remove extra choices.

Add support

Body doubling, accountability, movement, music, breaks, and sensory supports.

Language Shift: From Shame to Support

The way we talk about attention affects how people ask for help.

Instead of...

“You are not trying.”
“Just focus.”
“You are too much.”
“You always forget.”
“You know better.”

Try...

“What would help you start?”
“Do you need quiet, movement, or a visual cue?”
“Let’s break it down.”
“What distracted you?”
“What support worked last time?”

Closing Reflection

What is one attention support you already use?

What is one judgment you can replace with curiosity?

What is one small change you can try this week for yourself, your family, your students, your clients, or your coworkers?

Final message: Different attention patterns need different supports, not more shame.

Printable Handout: 60-Second Brain Search

Use this as a worksheet or copy it onto paper.

Attention Helpers

Things that help focus

Everyday Distractions

Things that pull focus

Brain Reset Tools

Things that help reset

60 seconds — list as many as you can

Selected Resources

For continued learning and grounding.

CDC. Adult ADHD information and national adult ADHD diagnosis data.

NIMH. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: signs, symptoms, and adult ADHD overview.

Gabor Maté. Scattered Minds: The Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder.

CHADD. Adult ADHD education and support resources.

Facilitator reminder: this session is educational and not intended to diagnose or replace individualized medical or mental health care.

Thank You

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Questions • Reflections • One practical support to try this week