
Clear Clutter NOW in 6 Simple Steps



"Thrive with ADD" Guide
by **Bonnie Mincu, MA, MBA,**
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In 6 Simple Steps

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Note: The terms "ADD" and "ADHD" are used interchangeably throughout this Guide, without an intention to distinguish hyper-activity.

Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder often have a difficult time keeping a space organized and clutter-free. As an ADHD Coach who is ADD myself, I can relate! I often had avoided having visitors to my home because of the cluttered mess. Many with ADD say that the clutter reaches a point where even thinking about it is overwhelming.

After working with hundreds of ADD / ADHD adults on clutter-related problems, I have developed a six-step process for clutter-busting. Success in following through on this strategy requires a bit of up-front planning, and having a real intention – not to “try” – but to SUCCEED.

The 6 Essential Steps for ADD Clutter-Busting

1. **Strategy**
2. **Sorting**
3. **Small Steps**
4. **Specific Time Blocks**
5. **Stimulation**
6. **Support**

Let's look at these steps one at a time.

STEP 1: STRATEGY

If you're accustomed to a “ready, fire, aim” way of operating, you know charging in without a plan can quickly lead to an unexpected roadblock that makes you quit. Your roadblock might be your own distraction, an interruption from someone else, or the realization that you don't have anything to put things in that need to be given or thrown away, or set aside.

In order to be prepared to follow through on your intention, you'll need a strategy. Most importantly, you require a strategy that will work for YOU. You've probably read self-

help books about clutter, or gotten lots of advice from well-meaning people about how to address your clutter problem. Nothing has helped. The reason is that, for people with ADD / ADHD, if a strategy doesn't fit in with our own unique brain-wiring, we can't focus on it. Your strategy must fit in with your attention span, and provide just the right amount of structure.

PREPARATION

If you're not adequately prepared before you begin, you're likely to stop at the first roadblock. Here are some important up-front preparations:

Have the right materials on hand. When dealing with clutter, be sure to have plenty of garbage bags and /or boxes at hand before you begin. You don't want to simply move one pile on the floor to another. Much of your clutter, if it must be kept, should have a place to go.

- **For dealing with papers**, my essential supplies include lots of files, and binder clips of various sizes. I also love the 3" paper clips to group papers that I want to keep in sight, yet neatly confined.

Make a commitment. Consider your schedule and make a commitment around finishing sub-sets of the straightening task. For instance, you might say you'll complete clearing an entire shelf in a week, figuring it'll take two hours done in fifteen-minute stretches. Be aware of overly optimistic tendencies around time. Many people do best when they write specific times in their calendar when they'll work on stages of the project.

State your commitment or use a "clutter coach." Tell your commitment and deadline to another person who will help you hold the focus. You might think of this person as your clutter coach. This might be your spouse, friend, work colleague or an ADHD Coach.

GENERAL STRATEGY GUIDELINES

ADD strategies to manage clutter and disorganization usually revolve around flow, space, time and tracking. These are general guidelines for creating your specific clutter-busting strategy.

Get mentally in the flow. Before starting to tackle clutter, get your mind into a flow state where you feel energized and motivated. This could involve music, exercise, stretching or whatever ritual you may require to help feel ready.

Confine the space. As you consider the location that needs straightening (perhaps your whole house), begin with a smaller space. For instance, you might start with the entrance hall, or the first room you see when you walk in. It really doesn't matter where you start, as long as you'll be able to see your progress as you go. Then, limit your

initial focus to a particular area. It might be a pile, a corner, a table. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the entire clutter, think only of this limited area.

Set a timer. Determine that you will only commit to working on this for manageable blocks of time. This will be different for each person, depending on your attention span and schedule. Then set a timer to go off when the time block is over. It's better to be conservative than over-ambitious. You'll feel more motivated succeeding in a 15-minute block of time than feeling that you failed to focus on the task for an hour. If you find that you've gotten in the flow and are willing to continue more than fifteen minutes, simply reset the timer.

Sort and divide. Next, go through the clutter in your limited focused area, dividing it into "chunks" based on location of where things could go. These locations might be files, rooms, closets, cabinets or bookshelves. Don't physically take anything to these locations until you've completed going through that pile in the specific area.

Put away. The put-away stage comes after the entire pile has been sorted. Deliberately take each sub-pile to its proper location and go through the exercise again in that new location. For example, the "quilting project" pile may need further dividing before putting away.

Eliminate as much as possible. Make it a goal to throw away and give away as much as possible!. A big factor in ADD related clutter is the need to hold onto "stuff". Ask yourself ruthlessly if you really need each piece of paper or item. If you're not sure, put it in a big box. At the end of the month, give yourself five minutes total to go through that box and remove anything that you really know you'll need. Everything else gets thrown away or given away.

Track your progress. There are two good reasons to keep track of your progress in writing. One is to feel good about checking off each accomplished step. The second reason is to be able to look for patterns in what worked for you and what didn't. That way, you can modify your strategy as you go. You might keep a clutter journal in a notebook, or type your notes into your computer.

Now, let's talk about these steps more specifically. Here's where you'll need to tailor each step to your own needs.

STEP 2: SORTING

ITEMS THAT BELONG SOMEWHERE ELSE

Much of your clutter comes from items or papers being somewhere they don't belong. So, your first step when starting in a particular area is to segregate and remove all items that don't belong in that area. For instance, if you are clearing and organizing your desk, you might find many items that should be in the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom or bookshelf – but not on your desk.

Segregate all items that “don’t belong here.” Put all items that don’t belong in the area you are working on in one pile or box. Your goal at this stage is to not leave the area at all. So simply segregate the items that have to be moved. Then what remains on the desk are *only* items that belong on the desk.

Take these items to their proper location at the end of your de-clutter session.

Postpone addressing the pile of stuff that doesn’t belong to your area of focus until you are ready to stop your session for the day. Then, sort these items according to the location where they DO belong. Once sorted, take each item or location-related group to its proper place, one location at a time. Do NOT end your session leaving a new pile of miscellaneous items on the floor or on furniture next to your desk. That would simply create a new area of clutter!

THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL SORTING

For people with ADD / ADHD, a major challenge in attacking clutter is simply to stay on task and not get overwhelmed. So your sorting strategy should be very deliberate. Start with the broadest type of sorting, and then sort by more detail on only one thing at a time.

Do a top-level sorting of clutter by type. Take everything that’s cluttering your desk and sort it out in a way that is logical to you. Some examples of “types” are:

- Papers versus non-paper items
- Files by broad general topic (such as personal versus business)
- Business cards versus office supplies

You’ll end up with several general piles of “stuff” that belong on or near the desk.

Working on one pile at a time, sort the items further. Suppose one pile of items consists of papers. Quickly glancing through them, you notice that some are bills to be paid, some are papers to be filed, and some are notes to yourself to follow up on actions. Now you’d separate the pile accordingly. Next, drill down to the next level of sorting. For “papers to be filed,” you might separate them by type of file, actually file them, or clip them together to be filed at a later date.

Stick to the task. If you have a tendency to be easily pulled off task, be very intentional about what you want to accomplish at this stage. For a goal of clearing clutter off your desk in this session, avoid jumping in to filing before you’ve finished sorting and organizing your desk top. If filing will take more than five minutes, save it to become another step.

STEP 3: SMALL STEPS

Most people put off dealing with clutter because it can get so overwhelming. That’s why it’s necessary to think of the job in terms of small, visual areas. It’s certainly more

palatable to consider straightening the floor of one closet, or of just organizing the medicine cabinet, than to contemplate the whole house or apartment.

Divide the cluttered space into segments on paper. If your whole home is a mess, think of it in terms of rooms or areas. Write down each major area (living room, bedroom, kitchen, foyer, etc.) Or, if considering a confined space like a closet, you can list each aspect of the closet (clothes on hangers, shelves, floor space, door hooks).

Break down each area into small, visible steps. The keys here are SMALL and VISIBLE. Small, because you don't want to feel overwhelmed or tax your attention span for each task. And visible, because it's important to see progress at the end of each session. You might do best to list each step on paper so that you can plan your progress (especially critical for large-scale clutter!)

Anticipate possible roadblocks. As you read over your steps, visualize yourself actually working on each step. What might stand in your way towards reaching the ideal state in each step? What might need to come first?

- Example: If your ideal closet floor has all the pairs of shoes neatly off the floor and lined up on shoe racks, be sure to have a shoe rack available before you begin the "closet floor" step.

List what you'll need to move forward, and commit to getting it. As you think through each step of your ideal state of non-clutter, write down what you may have to obtain, and how you'll get it (buy, beg, borrow, make yourself, etc.) Then commit to taking the action necessary – putting it in your calendar if necessary.

- ***Don't count on remembering to act!*** If dealing with clutter is a "necessary evil" that you've been putting off, chances are you will not spontaneously remember to do what is necessary. You'll need a reminder to buy those door hooks, shoe racks and storage boxes.

STEP 4: SPECIFIC TIME BLOCKS

HONOR YOUR ATTENTION SPAN

It's a good bet that waiting for "motivation" to start dealing with your clutter will be a long, long wait. So you'll need to make an intentional commitment with yourself, and be willing to stick to that commitment. The way you'll keep your commitment is to honor your attention span.

Set realistic time blocks. Most ADD / ADHD adults have a hard time staying focused on tasks that they don't enjoy. If this sounds like you, consider creating a strategy of planning to fulfill the various steps in your de-clutter plan in short time blocks. How long your time blocks are will depend on how you'll work best.

Some examples that work for different ADHD adults are:

- work one hour each evening
- work 15-minutes at a time, break 15 minutes, work again for 15 minutes
- work two hours, take one hour break, work two more hours work on a weekend

Plan for breaks. Expect that you'll want to take breaks after working awhile. Instead of feeling that this is a weakness, deliberately plan on taking a break to refresh and regain your focus. You might take a walk, take a rest, have a snack, or do something completely different for awhile. The key is to decide in advance how long you'll break, and use a timer to signal yourself to resume.

Good work/break strategies are:

1. Working through one or more complete small steps before breaking OR
2. Setting a finite work time in advance, setting a timer, and working until the timer goes off.

Set times when you won't be distracted by others. If you know that your children will be needing attention on a Saturday afternoon, pick a different time for working on your clutter steps. Likewise, if you know you'll eagerly pick up the phone whenever a friend calls in the evening – and jump at the excuse to go out – plan your de-clutter times accordingly. In this case, either 1) avoid planning to work on clutter for the evening; or 2) set aside an evening to work on it, but don't pick up the phone!

Track how long your steps are taking. Do you find that things take longer than you anticipated? It would be helpful for you to track how long you predicted each step would take, compared to how long it actually took. Then think about why there was such a big difference. Were you distracted, or working inefficiently? Or do you simply tend to be overly optimistic about time? Use your findings to modify your strategy and timetable for completion.

- ***You can dramatically improve your time sense.*** Visit www.thrivewithadd.com to find out about the next "Develop Your Time Sense" telephone class or "TIME SENSE EXERCISE"©.

STEP 5: STIMULATION

As an ADD - ADHD Adult, your brain needs stimulation to stay focused. You can find stimulation for de-cluttering in several ways.

Use a pleasant or energizing activity to "flow" into your de-clutter session. You can increase the dopamine in your brain by engaging in an activity that you find pleasurable or energizing. By engaging in this activity directly before your session, you'll be able to transition into the de-clutter task more easily, and your focus ability will be enhanced.

Exercise is excellent for stimulating your brain. Or you may prefer meditation, reading or listening to music. Remember, you want to use the activity to flow easily into the task. Don't pick an activity where you'll tend to hyper-focus and avoid starting your de-clutter session!

Create a stimulating environment while de-cluttering. You probably won't require intense brain concentration to work on most of your clutter. So you might prefer to have some sound going on in the background, such as TV, radio, or music. If you will be standing or moving during your task, fast music could be helpful to keep a brisk pace – you could even dance in place while sorting piles on a table!

Multi-task to help the time pass quickly. If the particular de-clutter task you'll be working on can be done without much intellectual thought, consider listening to a motivating or educational tape while your work. Or plan to talk to a friend on the phone while sorting laundry, filing, or straightening a room. A telephone headset would come in handy.

Work with someone else in the room. It's an interesting phenomenon that many people with ADD / ADHD focus better when someone else is in the room. (That's why so many of us like to do writing or paperwork in cafes like Starbucks!) If you're planning to get together with a friend, you could ask the friend to hang around with you for a short time while you straighten up a particular cluttered area. You might be surprised how quickly you work that way. You may find that you've put away all your clothes in ten minutes, when normally it would take you half an hour to do alone.

- ***NOTE: Not all of these stimulation strategies will work for everyone. It might require some trial and error to determine what works best for you.***

STEP 6: SUPPORT

You may feel that no one in your life understands how difficult it is for you to clear up your clutter. For someone with ADD / ADHD, de-cluttering can be an emotionally and physically draining experience. Support is an important success component for helping you stick to your intention. There are two kinds: support from other people, and supportive validation that you can provide for yourself.

SUPPORT FROM OTHERS

Support from other people can come in many forms, from professionals to loved ones; individuals or groups.

Work with an ADHD Coach. Coaches specially trained in working with ADD adults will help you plan your strategy, note your patterns, adjust your plan as needed, and spur you on. You'll learn from your ADD Coach how to create strategies that will help you in many more areas for the rest of your life. Most coaches work with people all over the country by phone, so you're not limited to your own area.

Ask a friend or family member to be your “clutter coach.” Tell them about your strategy and target dates. Let them know when you reach your milestones, and the completion of different steps. Ask for their support or advice when you feel overwhelmed and stuck.

Join or form a supportive group. Most cities have groups for ADD adults, such as ADDA (www.add.org) or CHADD (www.chadd.org). Here, you'll find others who will empathize with your clutter challenges. You could also form a group of clutter-challenged individuals yourself – perhaps a small group of acquaintances who meet or talk once a week to keep yourselves on track. You might enlist the services of a local ADHD Coach to facilitate your group, splitting the expense among the members.

Avoid negativity. What you don't need is someone reminding you of past failures, or commenting about how much you still have to go after you've completed a step. If someone in your life tends towards these negative remarks, don't bother mentioning your de-clutter plan to them.

- **If you live with a “nay-sayer,”** enlist his or her support from the beginning, and make it clear that negative comments are NOT helpful or supportive. Suggest to them what they could say instead that would help you succeed.

CREATE A MOTIVATING REWARD STRUCTURE

Reward yourself for keeping on track. “Announce” your progress to yourself visually, and set aside tangible rewards for each step.

Set up a visual reward system. Remember the little gold stars that teachers gave out in kindergarten for turning in good work (or any work at all)? The teachers realized those little gold stars were motivating. They were a sparkly visual cue that you DID it. Unfortunately, once we got a little older, the gold stars were replaced by grades and scores, and we began judging ourselves as “successes” or “failures.” Bring back your pleasure in acknowledging the simple act of accomplishment. You'll feel good looking at your listing of steps as they get starred.

- **Suggestion:** if you're going to chart your steps and mark your progress visually, try a wall chart or wall calendar, hung where you'll see it every day.

Tie your progress to a real reward. You could set aside a little money with each step, to go towards something you really want. If you put aside \$5 with each step accomplished, when you reach your goal, you could treat yourself to a special dinner or luxury that you might not have ordinarily purchased.

Plan an event at home. Many with ADD / ADHD do better following through on commitments when they have a real deadline. If your goal is to have visitors to your home, why not create an event at home to give yourself a deadline – and to celebrate.

Plan a party or meeting at your house, enough ahead that you'll have time to straighten the mess – but not so far ahead that it allows you to procrastinate.

FOR THE FUTURE... Keeping Clutter Away

Using this 6-step strategy on a regular basis will clear up old clutter. But, what about after that? Are you afraid that once your clutter is cleared up, you'll just clutter everything up again? If your habits don't change, you will!

Pay attention to your habits. You need to pay attention to what created the clutter in the first place, and start forming new habits or you'll be back to clutter again. Remember, habits will not form overnight. It takes a lot of repeat and repeat and repeat before a habit really takes form.

Change your habits. Think of a part of your house that's disorganized or cluttered. What exact habits of yours contribute to creating the clutter? And what small change of habit or behavior can you do right away to minimize the clutter? Take a moment and write it down. Then, even as you work on clearing up the existing clutter, be consciously aware every day of performing your new habit to avoid making more.

Create a ritual. Your new habit will become part of you more easily if you create a "ritual" around performing it every day. It might be a particular way you walk through the house every night, looking for items that are out of place. Perhaps you'll chant a reminder in your head as you pause and observe every area. Or maybe you'll set a timer 30 minutes before leaving your desk every evening, to use that time to file and organize what you've worked on that day.

Rituals will only work if they're designed for YOU, and if you practice them with repetition. If you are likely to forget performing your ritual, create a reminder system. This might consist of a note posted on your bathroom mirror or a message in Outlook. An ADD Coach can help you determine a reminder strategy and rituals that you'll find effective for your own particular patterns.

Consider a Professional Organizer. Professional Organizers (PO's) can be excellent for helping you create an organizing system for your home or office. There are PO's that specialize in closet organizing, or those that create filing and computer organizing systems. Some are best at dealing with handling paper, and can help you to create the optimal way to do that.

Unlike Coaches, PO's need to work with you in person. If you can, find someone who specializes in working with ADD Adults, and who won't try to impose their way of organizing on you. Try contacting your local chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.NAPO.net). PO's usually charge around \$70 an hour.

Hire an ADHD Coach. ADD / ADHD Coaches know how to work with your particular ADD traits, tendencies and personality to guide you in creating workable strategies for high effectiveness in all aspects of your life. Working with a coach for just a few months can have enormous life-long impact. Unlike regular coaches, those who have trained to work with ADDers understand how distraction and focus challenges affect every aspect of their clients' lives. They know how to create customized approaches for ADD / ADHD Adults. ADHD Coach fees usually range from \$400 - \$900 a month, and work is often done by phone.

Visit www.thrivewithADD/coaching for more information, and contact Bonnie Mincu for a free coaching consultation about her services.

About the Author...

Bonnie Mincu is a **Senior Certified ADHD Coach**, trainer, speaker and expert who works with ADD / ADHD Adults on business, career and personal matters. As the founder of the “**Thrive with ADD**” program, she helps her clients thrive and become highly effective in reaching their goals, and in day-to-day life. Bonnie has created workshops, telephone classes, audio learning resources, newsletters and e-books dealing with the specific challenges of Adult ADD/ ADHD. She was the “Ask the Coach” columnist for The AD/HD Challenge, is a regular presenter at the annual ADHD Virtual Conference, and has taught her "Thrive with ADD at Work" full-day seminar at New York University since 2004. She has an MBA and a Masters degree in Organization Development, and is a graduate of B-Coach and ADD Coach Academy.



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Before starting her private coaching business, Bonnie was an executive coach, manager and consultant, and a marketing entrepreneur. She is based in the New York Metropolitan Area and coaches clients all over the world by phone. Contact Bonnie Mincu for a free phone consultation about ADHD Coaching for yourself.

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*See the 5-minute online video on Adult ADD / ADHD that has circled the globe:
"The Attention Movie" at <http://www.TheAttentionMovie.com>.*