

Dopamine Menu

A visual tool to support joy and focus for PDAers

What is a Dopamine Menu?

- Dopamine is the chemical messenger of the brain that supports pleasure, motivation and focus.
- A *Dopamine Menu* is a visual aid offering activity choices to help boost dopamine levels. Activities are categorized like a restaurant menu based on how much time, energy, and focus they take.
- These categories are:

Appetizers (5–15 minutes):

Quick activities that hold our attention briefly and build momentum to transition into other tasks.

Mains (~60 minutes):

Engaging hobbies or pastimes that require a dedicated block of time.

Sides: Low-demand additions paired with a challenging task to increase motivation without taking away focus from the main goal.

Desserts: Activities that feel great in the moment but can cause an energy crash, overstimulation, or transition difficulties if we "over-indulge." This section helps us build self-awareness around activities to use with intention.

Specials (2–4 hours): High-dopamine activities that take significant time, planning, and energy (e.g., weekend outings). They provide a big mood boost, but can leave us feeling drained afterward.

Why would I use a Dopamine Menu?

Neurodivergent brains often have lower baseline dopamine levels or less responsive receptors, meaning they require extra novelty, interest, or stimulation to trigger action.

A dopamine menu serves as a visual guide for PDA adults, teens, children, and caregivers to find joy and motivation. It helps by:

- Reducing decision fatigue from endless choices.
- Removing the cognitive demand of having to remember what you enjoy doing.

Key Reminders:

- Don't confuse joy with productivity. Activities don't need to be productive to be valuable—their sole purpose is enjoyment (though sometimes they overlap, like reorganizing a space).
- Menus are personal. Everyone experiences joy differently. What acts as a Dessert for one person might be a Main or Appetizer for another.
- *Lean into sensory input:* Tailor choices to your sensory preferences. If you love visual input, try puzzles or painting; if you enjoy auditory input, try humming or listening to music.

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How to use a Dopamine Menu

Making the Menu: Leave space under each category to list your chosen activities, using the provided activity bank for inspiration. Feel free to personalize it—use markers, stickers, and collages for a physical menu, or design a digital version in Canva or Word.

Tips for Parents & Caregivers: If using this tool with a child, model it by creating and using your own menu first. Build their menu gradually over time rather than in one sitting. Add activities as you observe what brings them joy (e.g., "I noticed you loved playing with chalk outside—should we add that to your Mains?").

Using the Menu: Keep your menu easily visible and accessible. Pin it to the fridge, frame it on your desk, or set it as your phone lock screen.

Note: Needs and energy change. What brings you joy today might shift as life demands change. Feel free to update your menu or create different versions for different seasons of life.

Dopamine Menu Example

Appetizers

- Listening to a podcast
- Cleaning a surface/wiping the counters
- Breathing exercise
- Make a coffee/tea

Specials

- Going to a museum
- Day trip to the beach
- Botanical Gardens
- Coffee with friends

Mains

- Going for a walk with the kids
- Organizing a space
- Watching a movie/show
- Reading a book
- Craft
- Going to the park
- Deep cleaning
- Working on a book/creative project
- Long shower
- Baking something healthy
- Cooking something delicious

Sides

- Listening to a podcast
- Sip on your favorite drink
- Eating a healthy treat
- Petting the dog

Desserts

- Scrolling on social media
- Deep research on a topic
- Indulging in chocolate

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Bank of Dopamine Activities/Items

Appetizers

- Take a short walk outside.
- Do a 15-minute yoga or stretching session
- Listen to a favorite song
- Try a quick breathing or mindfulness exercise
- Put on a cozy clothing item
- Water plants or tidy a small area
- Make a beverage or snack
- Watch a short funny video or clip from a favorite show
- Solve a puzzle
- Jump on a trampoline
- Cuddle a pet
- Stimm in your favorite way
- Dance to a song

Specials

- Go to a museum
- Take a day trip
- Visit the botanical Gardens
- Coffee with friends
- Deep clean a room
- Reorganize your furniture
- Volunteer in the community
- Go to a farmers market

Mains

- Going for a long walk
- Organize a space
- Watch a movie/show
- Read a book/magazine
- Craft
- Deep clean an area
- Work on a book/creative project
- Take a long shower
- Bake something delicious
- Cook something delicious
- Build with Legos/Magna Tiles
- Build a pillow fort
- Ride a bike/scooter
- Play an online/video game
- Deep-dive on a preferred topic
- Repot or water plants
- Take a nap
- Make a new playlist
- Play an instrument
- Do a wellness routine
- Paint your nails
- Journal
- Go thrifting
- Play in a sensory bin
- Play an obstacle course
- Make a play/show
- Play floor is lava
- Play a sport

Sides

- Listen to a podcast or audiobook
- Play instrumental or ambient music
- Squeeze a stress ball or use a fidget toy
- Chew gum or suck on mints
- Sip a favorite drink.
- Have a scented candle or essential oil diffuser running
- Use a weighted blanket or lap pad
- Perform simple stretches or use a balance ball as a seat
- Doodle, color, or sketch on the side
- Keep a pet nearby to cuddle or interact with

Desserts

- Scroll on social media
- Binge watch a show
- Online shop
- Plan an imaginary vacation

Content discussed and developed by Stephanie Arias, OTR/L for
Journeys of PDA Deep Dive "Dopamine Menu"
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