



Your Dopamine Menu: An ADHD-Friendly Way to Get Unstuck

An explainer and personal "menu" of motivating activities · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- ADHD brains often need more interest, novelty, or urgency to get going.
- A "dopamine menu" is a ready-made list of activities that boost energy and engagement.
- Having choices planned in advance makes it easier to pick something helpful instead of scrolling.

Why ADHD brains seek stimulation

Research suggests differences in the brain's reward and motivation systems in ADHD. In everyday terms, tasks that feel boring or distant can be very hard to start, while interesting, urgent, or novel activities feel easier. This isn't laziness. It's how the brain prioritizes.

When understimulated, many people reach for the fastest reward available, often their phone. A dopamine menu offers healthier, intentional choices.

A note on the name: "Dopamine menu" is a popular, simplified term. Motivation involves many brain systems, not just dopamine. The idea is practical: plan rewarding activities in advance.

How the menu works

Course	What it is	Examples
Appetizers	Quick, 1–5 minute boosts	Dance to one song, cold water, stretch, step outside
Mains	Longer, deeply satisfying activities	Exercise, a hobby, cooking, time in nature
Sides	Add-ons that make dull tasks better	Music, podcasts, a fidget, body doubling
Desserts	Fun but easy to overdo; use mindfully	Scrolling, gaming, TV, online shopping
Specials	Occasional treats	A concert, a day trip, a new class

What the research says

Brain imaging research has found differences in the dopamine reward pathway in adults with ADHD, which may relate to motivation difficulties (Volkow et al., 2009).

A meta-analysis found that physical exercise improved attention and other symptoms in children with ADHD (Cerrillo-Urbina et al., 2015).

Strategies that add structure, external motivation, and immediate rewards are core to ADHD self-management (Barkley, 2015).

Tool: My Dopamine Menu

Fill in options that genuinely energize you. Keep it on your fridge, desk, or phone lock screen.

Course	My options
Appetizers (1–5 min)	
Mains	
Sides (for boring tasks)	
Desserts (enjoy mindfully)	
Specials	

Weekly check-in

Day	Menu item I used	What it helped me do	Energy after (0–10)
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			

Day	Menu item I used	What it helped me do	Energy after (0–10)
Sun			

Strategies to try

- **Make it visible.** Out of sight is often out of mind with ADHD.
- **Update it.** Novelty fades. Refresh your menu every few weeks.
- **Use it before tasks.** An appetizer can help you start a hard task.
- **Notice desserts.** Not "bad," just easy to overdo. Set a timer.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Do a "menu swap."** When you reach for your phone, pick an "appetizer" from your menu instead, like a 2-minute dance, a cold drink, or a quick walk.
- **Pair a "side" with a boring task.** A podcast while folding laundry or music while doing paperwork can make low-interest tasks more doable.
- **Move first.** Even brief exercise before focused work can help with attention for some people with ADHD.
- **Use novelty on purpose.** Change where you work, use a new pen, or race a timer. A fresh element can spark interest.
- **Plan "desserts" deliberately.** Schedule enjoyable, high-stimulation activities (like gaming or scrolling) for set times, instead of letting them take over the day.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

When do I most often feel stuck or understimulated?

What activities reliably lift my energy?

Which "desserts" tend to take over my time?

How might I use this menu on my hardest day of the week?

When to reach out for support

If attention, motivation, or organization challenges affect your work, studies, or relationships, or you wonder whether you have ADHD, a therapist can help you build strategies and connect with assessment if needed.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Barkley, R. A. (Ed.). (2015). Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: A handbook for diagnosis and treatment (4th ed.). Guilford Press.

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Volkow, N. D., et al. (2009). Evaluating dopamine reward pathway in ADHD: Clinical implications. *JAMA*, 302(10), 1084–1091.

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