

What is Body Doubling, actually?

When Someone Else Helps Your Engine Start

One of the most misunderstood aspects of ADHD is that the difficulty often isn't knowing what needs to be done. In fact, many people can spend hours thinking about a task, planning how they will approach it and even feeling increasingly frustrated that they haven't started. From the outside, it can look like procrastination or avoidance. From the inside, it often feels very different.

Many people describe it as feeling physically heavy. They know exactly what needs to happen next, but there seems to be an invisible barrier between intention and action. The task itself may only take ten minutes yet beginning it can feel almost impossible. This is one of the reasons ADHD is increasingly understood as a difference in executive functioning rather than simply a problem with attention. Executive functions are the mental processes that allow us to plan, initiate, organise and regulate our behaviour. When these systems are under strain, the greatest challenge is often not completing a task, but getting started.

This is where something known as **body doubling** can make an extraordinary difference.

Despite the name, a body double is not someone who does the task for you. They may not even help in any practical sense. Often, they are simply present. They might be reading a book in the same room, working on their own laptop, making a cup of tea or sitting quietly nearby. Sometimes they simply say, "**Come on, let's do this,**" before returning to whatever they were doing themselves.

To someone who has never experienced this, it can seem difficult to understand why another person's presence should make such a significant difference. Yet within the ADHD community, body doubling is a well-recognised strategy because it appears to reduce one of the greatest hurdles: task initiation.

I often think of it like starting a car on a cold morning. The driver knows where they are going. They know how to drive. There is fuel in the tank and nothing mechanically wrong with the vehicle. The difficulty is that the engine simply doesn't seem to want to turn over. The body double doesn't take the wheel or drive the journey for them. Instead, they provide just enough momentum for the engine to start. Once it does, the person is perfectly capable of continuing under their own steam.

This distinction is important because many people misunderstand body doubling as dependence. It isn't about borrowing someone else's ability. It is about borrowing enough momentum to access abilities that are already there. The individual remains capable



throughout; they simply find it easier to cross the threshold from thinking into doing when another regulated person is present.

As a psychotherapist, I find this particularly interesting because it echoes what we already understand about co-regulation. We know that human beings regulate one another emotionally. A calm parent helps settle an anxious child. A trusted partner can help us feel safe after a stressful day. A therapist offers a regulated presence from which difficult emotions can be explored. Perhaps body doubling is another expression of the same principle. Rather than borrowing someone else's emotional regulation, we may be borrowing a little of their executive regulation. Their presence provides enough structure, rhythm or momentum for our own nervous system to move into action.

This understanding can also transform relationships. Partners often assume they are being asked to take responsibility for tasks that the other person "should" be able to do themselves. Parents may become frustrated that their child only starts homework when someone sits beside them. Employers might mistake delayed task initiation for poor motivation. Seen through the lens of executive functioning, these situations tell a different story. The issue is rarely capability. More often, it is the difficulty of activating that capability independently.

The good news is that body doubling is only one of many ways of supporting executive functioning. Some people find that working in a café provides enough background stimulation. Others respond well to timers, structured routines, verbal prompts or working alongside colleagues. The aim is not to become dependent on another person, but to understand the conditions under which your own nervous system functions most effectively.

Perhaps the most important message is that needing support does not mean you are incapable. We all perform better under certain conditions. For some people those conditions involve quiet and solitude. For others, they involve the reassuring presence of another human being. Neither approach is wrong. They simply reflect differences in how our brains engage with the world.

When we stop asking, "Why can't I just get on with it?" and instead begin asking, "What helps my engine start?", we move away from self-criticism and towards self-understanding. That shift alone can be life changing.

While body doubling is widely recognised within the ADHD community and increasingly used by clinicians, the direct research evidence for body doubling itself is still emerging. Much of our current understanding comes from broader research into executive functioning, self-regulation, co-regulation and lived experience reported by neurodivergent individuals.

One way of thinking about body doubling is as a form of executive co-regulation. While this is not an established clinical term, it may help explain why another person's calm presence can support task initiation without reducing independence.

Keywords: body doubling ADHD, executive dysfunction, ADHD task initiation, executive functioning, adult ADHD, neurodiversity, ADHD support strategies, ADHD productivity, co-regulation, Bloom Room UK, Neurodiversity Hub.

Thomas E. Brown (2013). *A New Understanding of ADHD in Children and Adults: Executive Function Impairments*. Routledge.

Brown's work expands the understanding of ADHD beyond attention, describing difficulties with activation, organisation, working memory and emotional regulation.

Stephen Porges (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. W. W. Norton.

Useful when discussing co-regulation and the role of another regulated person in supporting nervous system functioning.

Daniel J. Siegel (2012). *The Developing Mind* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Explores interpersonal neurobiology, attachment and how human nervous systems regulate in relationship with one another.

John Bowlby (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. Routledge.

Provides the theoretical basis for understanding secure relationships and co-regulation.

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

CHADD provides evidence-informed resources on ADHD management, executive functioning and practical support strategies, including discussion of accountability and environmental supports.

Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA)

ADDA has published practical guidance on body doubling as an executive functioning support strategy for adults with ADHD.

Suggested further reading

- Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2018). *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
 - Brown, T. E. (2021). *Smart but Stuck: Emotions in Teens and Adults with ADHD*. Jossey-Bass.
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