



ADHD & Executive Function

Why organising your thoughts, planning ahead and speaking up can feel impossible – and how to advocate for yourself with kindness and clarity

Executive function is the brain’s “management system”. It handles planning, prioritising, remembering, organising, problem-solving and starting tasks.

For many ADHD adults, executive function is the *hardest* part of daily life – and one of the biggest hidden barriers to self-advocacy.

This guide explains why executive function difficulties affect your ability to speak up, and what helps you advocate in a way that works with your brain, not against it.

Why Executive Function Matters for Advocacy

Speaking up isn’t just about confidence. It requires your brain to:

- remember what you want to say
- organise thoughts into a clear sentence
- stay regulated
- hold important details in mind
- respond to unexpected questions
- manage emotions
- plan what to say next
- stay calm under pressure

When executive function is overwhelmed, *all* of these break down.

That’s why advocacy can feel exhausting, confusing or impossible for ADHD adults – especially in pressured environments.

What Executive Function Difficulties Can Look Like

You might experience:

- **Struggling to organise thoughts**

You know what you want, but you can't get the words out clearly.

- **Forgetting important details mid-conversation**

Working memory drops with stress.

- **Overthinking and then shutting down**

Too many mental tabs open → overwhelm → freeze.

- **Struggling to prioritise your needs**

Everything feels equally urgent or equally confusing.

- **Avoiding conversations completely**

The planning feels harder than the conversation itself.

- **Going blank when questioned**

Stress blocks access to stored information.

- **Difficulty problem-solving in the moment**

Your brain needs time — but others expect instant answers.

- **Feeling embarrassed afterwards**

You realise what you *should* have said only later, when regulated.

These patterns are not personal failures — they are neurological.

Why Executive Function Struggles Happen

Working Memory Limitations

Your brain can't hold lots of information at once, especially under pressure.

Processing Delays

Your brain needs time to understand information and decide how to respond.

Emotional Flooding

Strong feelings "take over", making thinking and planning harder.

Overwhelm from Unclear Structure

If you don't know the plan, steps or expectations, everything feels too big.

Fear of getting it wrong

Rejection Sensitivity can shut down your ability to express needs.

Masking and perfectionism

Trying to appear capable uses up the mental energy you need for advocacy.

Once you understand your brain, these challenges make complete sense.

How ADHD Adults Can Advocate With Supportive Structure

Here are ADHD-friendly tools for communicating your needs when executive function is struggling.

1. Use Notes to Keep You Grounded

Write down:

- your points
- your questions
- any examples
- what you need
- what you're struggling with
- what feels unclear

Notes take pressure off your working memory.

2. Choose ONE Main Point

If everything goes blank, fall back on:

"The main thing I need today is..."

This anchors the conversation.

3. Break Advocacy Into Micro-Steps

Instead of "deal with everything", try:

1. Write the issue
2. Write what you need
3. Send one message
4. Ask one question
5. Follow up once

Tiny steps remove overwhelm.

4. Ask for Structure From Others

You're allowed to ask:

- "Can we go one question at a time?"
- "What is the priority here?"
- "Could you explain the steps from first to last?"
- "Can you summarise the plan in writing?"

Structure is not a luxury — it's accessibility.

5. Use Time to Your Advantage

Executive function collapses under pressure.

You can say:

- "I need time to think about this."
- "Can I respond later by email?"
- "I'll get back to you tomorrow."

Time helps your brain unfreeze.

6. Prepare Scripts Before Difficult Conversations

Examples:

- "I find it hard to organise my thoughts when I'm overwhelmed."
- "I respond better with written steps."
- "Can we break this down into smaller parts?"
- "I know what I want to say but I need time to gather my thoughts."

Scripts take the emotion out of advocating.

7. Reduce Sensory and Emotional Load Before Speaking Up

Try:

- grounding techniques
- gentle movement
- quieter environments
- deep breaths
- a drink of water
- one calming activity

A calmer nervous system = clearer thinking.

What Others Can Do to Support Your Executive Function

Supportive:

- giving written instructions
- breaking information into steps
- slowing down
- creating clear structure
- checking understanding gently
- providing reminders
- giving notice before changes
- asking, "What would help you here?"

Unhelpful:

- rushing
- pressure to answer immediately
- long explanations with no pauses
- assuming you're not listening
- criticising forgetfulness
- expecting neat, perfect speech
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Good support = accessible communication.

Takeaways

- Executive function affects your ability to plan, speak, decide and organise thoughts.
- You're not disorganised or difficult — your brain works differently.
- Advocacy becomes easier when things are broken down and slowed down.
- You are allowed to ask for structure, clarity and support.

- You deserve conversations that work with your brain, not against it.
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You Deserve Understanding, Not Pressure

If organisation, planning or speaking up feels overwhelming, it does not mean you're failing — it means your brain needs gentler conditions and clearer structure.

Unmasked is here to support you with advocacy, communication, planning and emotional regulation.

You don't have to do this alone.

CONTACT US

Unmasked Neurodiversity Network CIC

A lived-experience-led community organisation supporting neurodivergent adults and families across East Leeds and West Yorkshire.

If you need support, information, counselling, advocacy or a safe, neuro-affirming space, we're here for you.

Email Us

For general enquiries, referrals, appointments or support:

info@unmaskednn.org

Follow Us on Social Media

Stay updated with groups, events, workshops, blogs, and resources:

- **Facebook Page:** Unmasked Neurodiversity Network CIC
 - **Facebook Community Group:** Unmasked Neurodiversity Network CIC
 - **Instagram:** @unmasked_nn_cic
 - **LinkedIn:** Unmasked Neurodiversity Network CIC
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Phone Contact

If you need help getting in touch or cannot email, you can request a call-back via email or through our website contact form.

How We Work

Unmasked is led by trained neurodivergent counsellors and facilitators.

We offer:

- Low-cost and funded counselling
- Support groups and peer spaces
- Creative workshops and community cafés
- Advocacy and guidance (including Access to Work, benefits, workplace support and more)
- Training for organisations and professionals
- Resources designed by and for neurodivergent adults

All profits are reinvested into helping our community.

Accessibility

We are committed to making our services accessible — including communication support, written information, pacing, sensory consideration, and advocacy assistance. If you need adjustments, let us know and we'll do our best to meet them.

Final Note

You are welcome here — exactly as you are.
If you need support, guidance or just a safe place to talk, Unmasked is here for you.

Love Toni & Sarah x