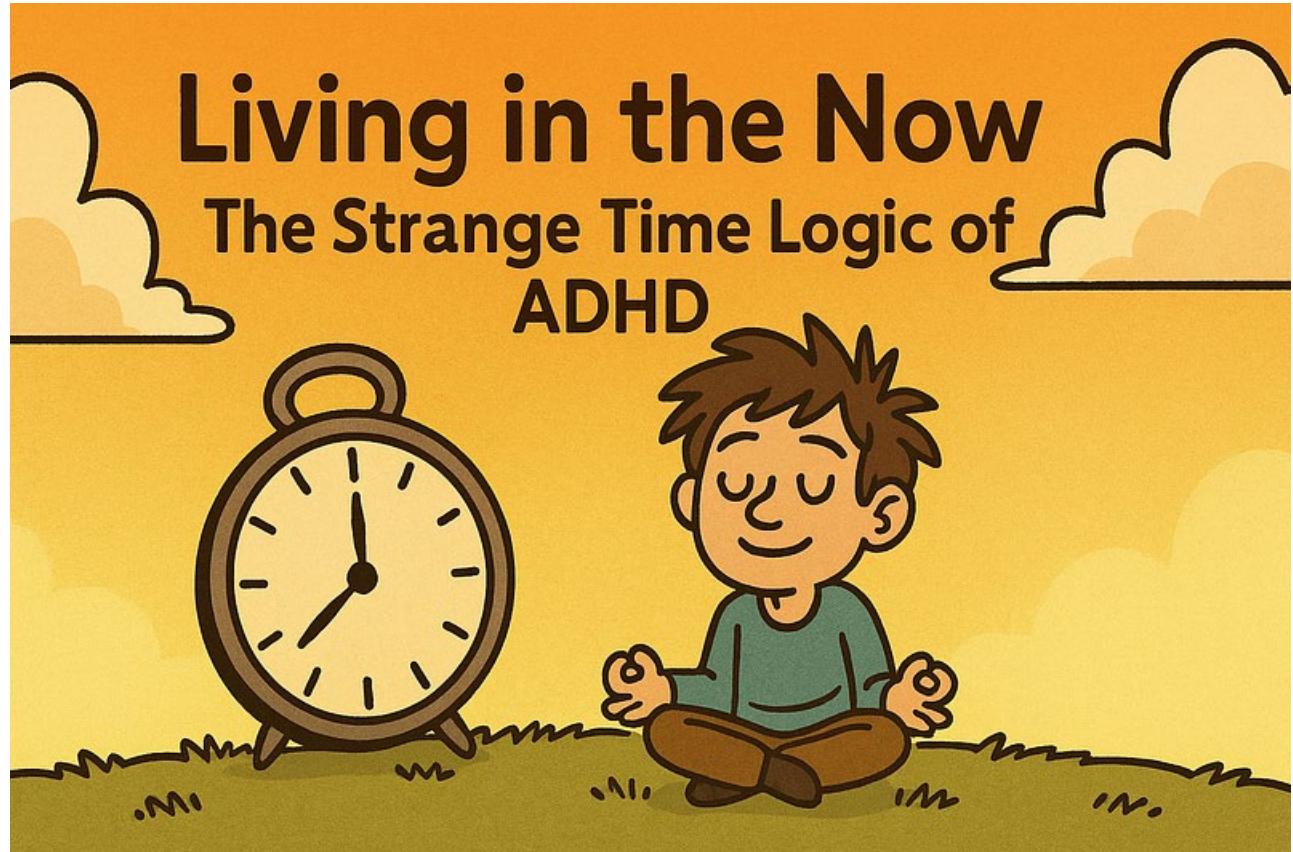


Living in the Now: The Strange Time Logic of ADHD



When Time Isn't Linear

For some people, time flows like a river.

For others , especially those with ADHD , it drops like a rock. One moment, then the next. No smooth transitions. Just sudden shifts between *now*, *not yet*, and *oops, too late*.

If you've ever lived with ADHD, this might sound familiar:

- You only feel motivated when a deadline is hours away.
- You forget things you cared deeply about five minutes ago.
- You promise to get started soon... but “soon” never arrives unless someone turns on the pressure hose.

It's not a character flaw. It's how your brain experiences time.

Three Time States

People with ADHD often experience time in three core states:

1. **Now**—What's happening right this second.
2. **Before Now**—The past. Sometimes vivid, sometimes blurry.
3. **After Now**—The future. Abstract and weightless—until it becomes urgent.

That's it. No smooth sequence. No gentle build-up. Just these blunt-edged zones of awareness.

The result? Everything outside of *Now* tends to lose weight. Until it crashes into *Now* at full speed.

Studies by Smith et al. (2002) have shown that individuals with ADHD consistently misestimate time intervals, particularly under tasks requiring sustained attention and working memory. This highlights a fundamental difference in how time is internally processed.

Why the Future Feels Distant

This isn't about not caring. People with ADHD care *deeply*. But caring doesn't always translate into *action* if the brain can't hold the future in focus.

This distortion in time perception is part of what psychologists call **temporal discounting**—a trait found consistently in individuals with ADHD. Studies (Patros et al., 2019) show that people with ADHD are more likely to devalue future rewards, making long-term planning harder, even when those rewards matter deeply.

Unless the future is emotionally or physically *immediate*, it stays in the background. And the background gets forgotten.

That's why:

- Deadlines don't feel real until the last minute.
- Promises to yourself don't always stick.
- Plans made during moments of clarity dissolve in the fog of daily noise.

Barkley's (1997) work further reinforces that a core impairment in ADHD is the inability to effectively manage time—leading to poor foresight, hindsight, and planning.

The Power (and Risk) of Now

For a deeper dive into the experience of time distortion and how it can shape attention, urgency, and task transitions, see [this companion article on dyschronometria](#).

This theme also ties into broader ideas around internal resonance and the tension between emotional truth and structural expectations. See [The Invisible Gap in Leadership](#) for how these internal states often get overlooked in logic-led workplaces.

And for a strengths-based view of how ADHD and neurodivergent traits reshape team dynamics, read [Not Broken, Just Different: How to Lead Neurodivergent Teams](#). of time distortion and how it can shape attention, urgency, and task transitions, see [this companion article on dyschronometria](#).

There's a flip side to this.

People with ADHD can be extraordinarily *present*. When we *are* in the

now, we're fully there. Feeling, reacting, connecting with intensity and focus (even if it looks chaotic from the outside).

This hyper-focus or emotional attunement can be a gift—but it also makes it hard to transition out of one state and into another.

You might:

- Get stuck in a task or thought loop.
- Struggle to stop one thing and start another.
- Lose all sense of time during deep focus (hello, dyschronometria).

Why ADHD Brains Are Good in a Crisis

This acute relationship with the *present moment*—the “now”—also explains why many ADHDers thrive in crisis situations.

Urgency = Clarity

ADHD brains often need tasks to feel emotionally immediate. A crisis creates instant clarity, stripping away abstraction and making priorities obvious.

Dopamine Spike

Crises come with novelty, urgency, and emotional intensity—all of which drive a dopamine surge. For a brain wired to chase stimulation, this creates focus, energy, and motivation.

⌚ Less Executive Demand

In a crisis, there's no need for elaborate planning or multi-step processing. You react, adapt, move. That's where many ADHDers shine.

Emotional Match

The intensity of a crisis can feel more aligned with an ADHDer's internal landscape. It doesn't feel overwhelming—it feels familiar.

So while daily routines might feel impossible, emergencies bring a strange calmness, focus, and clarity.

Building Bridges Between Time Zones

So how do you work with this?

Here are some practical tools that can help connect “after now” to “right now”:

Visualize Time

- Use countdown clocks or visual timers.
- Break the day into color-coded blocks.
- Represent tasks visually (sticky notes, timeline sketches).

Narrate Time Out Loud

- “It’s 2pm. I need to leave at 3pm. That’s one hour.”
- Time becomes more real when spoken.

Storyboard Your Calendar

- Treat your schedule like a story, not a spreadsheet.
- What happens before, during, and after each task?

Reward the Pre-Work

- Don’t just celebrate finishing. Reward starting.
- Create micro-rewards for beginning the prep phase.

Talk About It

- Explain how your brain works (when it's safe to do so).
- Ask for time cues, nudges, or visible plans.
- Normalize flexible time perception in teams.

Closing Thought: You're Not Broken. You're Just Telling Time Differently.

Living with ADHD time means always catching up, but also always discovering.

You might not remember what you meant to do, but when you show up—*really show up*—you bring something powerful.

The world might run on clocks.

But not everyone keeps time the same way.

References & Further Reading:

- Barkley, R. A. (1997). *Behavioral inhibition, sustained attention, and executive functions: Constructing a unifying theory of ADHD*. Psychological Bulletin.
- Smith, A., Taylor, E., Rogers, J. W., Newman, S., & Rubia, K. (2002). *Evidence for a pure time perception deficit in children with ADHD*. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.
- Patros, C. H. G., Alderson, R. M., Kasper, L. J., Tarle, S. J., Lea, S. E., & Hudec, K. L. (2019). *Choice-impulsivity in children and adolescents with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): A meta-analytic review of the delay discounting literature*. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.

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