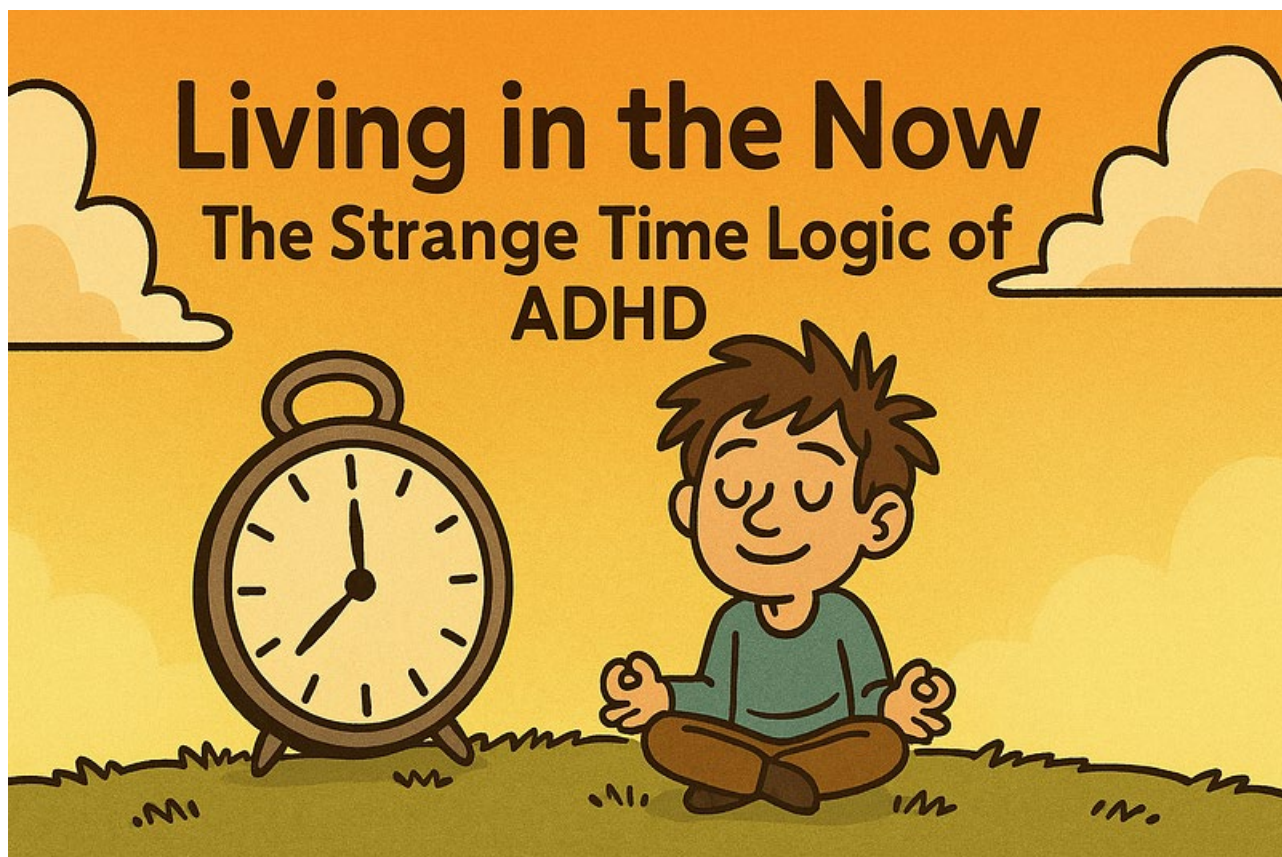


# *Living in the Now: The Strange Time Logic of ADHD*



## **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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