

The ADHD Field Guide: Terms for the Things You Thought Were “Just You”

ADHD is often described from the outside: distractible, impulsive, disorganized, restless. Those words may be accurate, but they can feel strangely thin compared with the lived experience. They do not quite capture standing in front of a five-minute task while your nervous system treats it like a locked gate, losing an afternoon inside twenty minutes, loving someone dearly while their text somehow disappears behind an invisible curtain for nine days, or walking into a room with absolute purpose only to arrive there as a confused Victorian ghost.

This guide organizes ADHD language according to how ADHD may show up in everyday life. Some terms come from clinical and psychological language. Others emerged from ADHD and neurodivergent communities. A few come from particular educators, clinicians, or researchers. And some are simply memorable metaphors for experiences that are otherwise maddeningly difficult to explain.

Not every person with ADHD will relate to every term, and many of these experiences can happen outside ADHD too. This is not a diagnostic checklist. Think of it as a field guide: language for recognizing the terrain, finding your people in it, laughing at some of its stranger geography, and perhaps replacing “What is wrong with me?” with a much more useful question: “What is happening here?”

The goal is not to turn every quirk into a symptom or make light of experiences that can genuinely hurt. It is to give people better words for the weather they are already standing in.

Executive Dysfunction

The Start Button, Steering Wheel & Brakes

Executive functioning helps us turn intention into coordinated action: starting, sequencing, organizing, monitoring, shifting, and stopping. ADHD can create an especially maddening experience in which you know what needs to happen, want it to happen, may even know exactly how to do it, and still cannot reliably summon the internal machinery on command.

1. Executive Dysfunction

The broad umbrella for difficulties with self-management processes such as organizing, initiating, prioritizing, remembering, inhibiting, shifting attention, and following through. The brain has many departments. Unfortunately, management is sometimes working remotely.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

2. Task Initiation Difficulty

Knowing precisely what needs to happen while experiencing an enormous gap between intention and beginning.

3. Task Paralysis / ADHD Paralysis

Feeling unable to begin, choose, switch, or proceed despite wanting to. It can look like doing nothing from the outside while internally running a very stressful committee meeting.

4. Activation Gap

The mysterious canyon between “I have decided to do it” and the body actually moving.

5. Invisible First Step

When a task feels impossible because the brain cannot locate where “start” actually lives.

6. Too-Many-Steps Problem

When “clean the kitchen” secretly contains thirty-seven separate decisions and actions.

7. Task Fog

The task exists, but its sequence, boundaries, or starting point cannot be clearly seen.

8. Task Cliff

A task that looks perfectly manageable until you approach the point of actually beginning it.

9. Task Quicksand

The harder you internally shout at yourself to begin, the more immobilized you become.

10. Activation Threshold

How much stimulation, urgency, clarity, support, energy, or momentum the nervous system needs before intention becomes action.

11. Friction Point

The specific place where an otherwise manageable task repeatedly jams.

12. Friction Tax

The energy spent navigating unnecessary steps, decisions, transitions, interfaces, forms, passwords, menus, phone calls, or obstacles. Sometimes the task is not hard. The seventeen tiny gates surrounding it are.

13. Executive Drag

The invisible resistance that makes a five-minute task require forty minutes of psychic negotiations.

14. Threshold Brain

Functioning fairly well once inside an activity while struggling disproportionately at beginnings, endings, and transitions.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

15. Momentum Brain

Once moving, continuing is easier than stopping. Once stopped, starting is harder than continuing.

16. Invisible Load

All the remembering, sequencing, cueing, anticipating, planning, and self-prompting required before the visible task even begins.

17. The Start Button Problem

The machinery works. The start button is temperamental.

18. Task Temperature

Some tasks feel cognitively “warm” and immediately accessible; others remain cold until enough activation accumulates.

19. Functional Friction

The mismatch between what a task objectively requires and how many executive resources it subjectively costs.

20. Capacity Mismatch

When the task is technically within your abilities but not accessible under the present conditions.

21. Intention-Action Gap

Perhaps one of the most important phrases in the entire guide: *I intended to do it* and *I was able to initiate it* are not the same neurological event.

Attention Regulation

The Wandering, Sticky Spotlight

ADHD is often described as an attention deficit, but many people experience it more accurately as difficulty regulating attention. Sometimes the spotlight wanders. Sometimes it welds itself to one thing and refuses to move. Sometimes every sound, thought, notification, idea, and passing squirrel auditions for the lead role simultaneously.

22. Side-Questing

Beginning one task and accumulating increasingly distant auxiliary missions. You went upstairs for socks. Forty minutes later, the medicine cabinet has been alphabetized.

23. Side-Quest Cascade

When one diversion generates another diversion, which generates another, until the original quest has become ancient folklore.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

24. Hyperfocus

A period of unusually intense absorption in an activity, sometimes making switching attention, tracking time, or noticing bodily needs difficult.

25. Hyperfixation

Community shorthand for an unusually intense interest that can hold attention strongly over time. Yesterday you knew nothing about antique lock mechanisms. Today you have opinions.

26. Attention Tunneling

Attention becomes so tightly attached to one channel that competing information barely registers.

27. Attention Pinball

Attention ricochets rapidly between stimuli, ideas, tabs, sounds, tasks, sensations, and thoughts.

28. Rabbit Hole

A small question becomes an unexpectedly deep excursion into research, videos, articles, Wikipedia tabs, or obscure seventeenth-century folklore. The original email remains unsent.

29. Task Magnetism

The strange phenomenon in which one task pulls attention powerfully while another seems neurologically coated in Teflon.

30. Cognitive Velcro

Certain thoughts, interests, problems, or activities stick fiercely to attention.

31. Cognitive Teflon

Other tasks refuse to stick no matter how many times you redirect attention toward them.

32. Mental Velcro vs. Mental Teflon

Together, these capture one of the classic ADHD paradoxes: Why can I focus for six hours on this and not six minutes on that?

Hyperactivity & Internal Restlessness

The Outer Storm & Inner Storm

Hyperactivity does not always arrive wearing running shoes. It may be visible through movement, pacing, fidgeting, talking, or difficulty sitting still. It can also happen almost entirely inside: rapid thought, mental branching, relentless planning, imagined conversations, idea generation, internal narration, or a persistent sense that the brain has twelve radio stations playing simultaneously.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

33. Tab Brain

Twenty-seven mental tabs open, three playing audio, and the location of the music remains unknown.

34. Browser Brain

A variation of tab brain for minds that continuously open new cognitive windows without reliably closing the old ones.

35. Brain Smoothie

Thoughts, priorities, sensations, ideas, emotions, reminders, and unfinished tasks have blended together until the ingredients can no longer be separated.

36. Mental Popcorn

Ideas arriving rapidly and unpredictably, each briefly demanding attention.

37. Thought Traffic

Too many cognitive vehicles attempting to occupy the intersection simultaneously.

38. Open-Loop Hum

The low-level mental buzzing created by unfinished tasks you are trying not to forget.

39. Background Brain

The part of attention quietly tracking unfinished responsibilities even while you are doing something else.

40. Brain Static

When attention is technically online but too noisy to organize itself coherently.

Impulsivity & Novelty Seeking

The Brain That Moves Before the Committee Meets

Impulsivity is more complicated than “acting without thinking.” It can appear in speech, decisions, spending, novelty seeking, emotional reactions, switching tasks, or the sudden gravitational pull of whatever became interesting twelve seconds ago.

41. Dopamine Chase

Community shorthand for gravitating toward activities offering immediate novelty, stimulation, reward, or feedback.

42. Novelty Hunger

The powerful activation produced by something new, sometimes followed by an equally dramatic motivational disappearance once new becomes familiar.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

43. Dopamine Detour

Leaving an unstimulating task in search of something more immediately engaging.

Motivation & Reward Regulation

Why Wanting To Is Not Always Enough

One of the most painful ADHD misunderstandings is the assumption that difficulty acting means someone does not care. A person can care enormously. Importance simply does not always produce activation by itself.

44. Deadline Gravity

The closer a deadline gets, the stronger its motivational pull becomes.

45. Deadline Rocket Fuel

When urgency finally supplies enough stimulation to initiate the task that has been sitting untouched for three weeks.

46. Artificial Urgency

Creating a deadline, race, timer, challenge, appointment, or accountability structure because actual importance alone is not producing activation.

47. Interest-Based Nervous System

A framework associated with psychiatrist William Dodson describing ADHD motivation as especially responsive to interest, novelty, challenge, urgency, and engagement. Useful shorthand, not a formal diagnostic model.

48. Interest Cliff

The abrupt moment when fascination evaporates and an activity that consumed you yesterday suddenly becomes nearly impossible to access.

49. Dopamenu / Dopamine Menu

A preplanned collection of stimulating, enjoyable, or regulating activities, often organized into playful categories such as starters, sides, mains, and desserts. The “dopamine” part is shorthand, not literal dosing.

50. Motivation Bridge

Adding music, companionship, novelty, movement, a timer, reward, challenge, or another source of stimulation to help cross into a low-interest task.

51. Activation Energy

Borrowed from chemistry and used metaphorically for the amount of energy required to get a task moving.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

52. Low-Dopamine Day

Community shorthand for days when ordinary tasks feel unusually unrewarding or difficult to activate around. Useful as lived-experience language, not a literal measurement of dopamine.

53. Understimulation

A state in which available stimulation feels insufficient to sustain alertness, engagement, or attention.

54. Stimulation Seeking

Seeking movement, sound, conversation, novelty, pressure, fidgeting, multitasking, or other inputs to support regulation and engagement.

55. Deadline Dependence

Needing urgency before sufficient activation arrives.

56. The Dopamine Door

The entry condition that makes a task accessible: novelty, connection, urgency, competition, music, movement, curiosity, challenge, or something else.

57. Interest-Importance Gap

Understanding intellectually that something matters does not necessarily create the activation required to do it.

Time Perception

The Elastic Clock

For many people with ADHD, time behaves less like a ruler and more like taffy. It stretches, collapses, disappears, and occasionally reappears carrying a deadline.

58. Time Blindness

Difficulty sensing the passage of time, estimating how long something will take, or orienting behavior toward future time. ADHD researcher Russell Barkley is strongly associated with this way of describing ADHD-related difficulties with time.

59. Temporal Myopia

The future becomes fuzzier the farther away it is. Tomorrow morning may feel considerably more real than next Tuesday, even when next Tuesday contains something important.

60. Time Warp

Looking up after what felt like twenty minutes and discovering that two hours have escaped through a trapdoor.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

61. Time Accordion

ADHD time seems to compress and expand. Ten enjoyable minutes disappear instantly; ten boring minutes develop their own geological era.

62. Now / Not Now

A common ADHD framing for difficulty weighting the future appropriately. Something often feels either immediately relevant or strangely unreal.

63. Future Fog

Knowing intellectually that something is coming but having difficulty emotionally or behaviorally experiencing it as real yet.

64. Time Confetti

Having multiple little scraps of theoretically available time that never quite feel large enough to begin anything meaningful.

65. Waiting Mode

When one later appointment seems to occupy the entire day and makes beginning other tasks unusually difficult. Apparently 3:00 p.m. has annexed the entire calendar.

66. Future-Me Delegation

Assigning something to your future self without providing Future You the time, information, energy, or infrastructure required to accomplish it.

67. Time Optimism

The persistent conviction that leaving in twelve minutes is perfectly reasonable despite thirty-seven minutes of required preparation.

Working Memory & Retrieval

The Thought That Was Here Three Seconds Ago

Working memory is the mind's temporary holding space. ADHD can make it feel less like a dependable sticky note and more like a note attached to a ceiling fan.

68. Calendar Amnesia

"I know I looked at my calendar. Apparently my brain considered that the conclusion of the matter."

69. Brain Buffet

So many interesting possibilities are available that choosing one becomes difficult.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

70. Working-Memory Drop

Information briefly held in mind disappears before it can be acted upon.

71. Doorway Amnesia

Walking into another room and losing access to the reason you went there.

72. Thought Evaporation

Having a fully formed thought and feeling it vanish seconds before expression.

73. Brain Buffering

The knowledge may be somewhere in there, but retrieval has stalled.

74. Retrieval Lag

Knowing something without being able to access it on demand.

75. Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Community shorthand for difficulty keeping something mentally active when it is no longer perceptually visible. This is more about attention and working memory than literal object permanence.

76. Reminder Wallpaper

When reminders have existed long enough that the brain stops perceiving them as meaningful information.

77. Alarm Blindness

Repeated alarms gradually become environmental noise rather than prompts for action.

78. Point Retrieval Failure

Reaching the end of an elaborate explanation and realizing the original point has gone missing.

Transitions & Switching

The Doorways Between Things

Sometimes Activity A is manageable. Activity B is manageable. The real trouble lives in the doorway between them.

79. Transition Tax

The cognitive and nervous-system cost of moving from one activity, environment, role, or state into another.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

80. Task Inertia

Difficulty changing one's current state, particularly beginning something new or disengaging from something already underway.

81. Attention Residue

Part of your attention remains attached to the activity you just left, making full engagement with the new task difficult.

82. Momentum Theft

An interruption breaks the cognitive state that was allowing the task to happen.

83. Restart Cost

The executive energy required to reconstruct where you were after being interrupted.

Planning, Prioritization & Decision-Making

Everything Is Important and Therefore Nothing Is

Sometimes the problem is not a shortage of ideas. The brain offers twelve options, eight variables, four possible consequences, and one unrelated grocery reminder at exactly the same volume.

84. Decision Paralysis

Too many options or variables prevent any decision from feeling accessible.

85. Decision Fatigue

Declining decision-making capacity after repeatedly making choices.

86. Choice Overload

More options somehow produce less ability to choose.

87. Decision Tree Explosion

One supposedly simple decision suddenly branches into fifteen subordinate decisions.

88. Microdecision Fatigue

Exhaustion from dozens of tiny choices embedded inside everyday tasks.

89. Priority Soup

Everything feels simultaneously important, leaving nothing meaningfully prioritized.

90. Everything Is On Fire

When prioritization collapses and all unfinished tasks acquire approximately the same emotional volume.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

91. Overwhelm Freeze

Too many demands produce less action rather than more.

92. Cognitive Traffic Jam

Several needs, tasks, thoughts, and decisions competing for executive processing at once.

93. Pressure Paralysis

When increasing external or internal pressure makes action harder rather than easier.

Completion & Follow-Through

The Last Ten Percent Has Teeth

Starting gets plenty of attention in ADHD conversations, but finishing deserves its own little haunted wing. Once the novelty, challenge, or interesting problem is gone, the final boring inch can somehow feel farther away than the first ninety feet.

94. The Almost-Done Graveyard

The collection of projects that reached 80 to 95 percent completion before novelty departed the premises.

95. Completion Drop-Off

Losing motivational traction when the interesting problem has already been solved but boring finishing work remains.

96. Last-Mile Paralysis

Being able to complete nearly an entire project while inexplicably struggling with the final email, upload, form, signature, cleanup, or submission.

97. Productive Procrastination

Doing many legitimate tasks while avoiding the one task currently carrying the greatest psychological friction. The refrigerator has never looked better. The form is still unsigned.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerditherapist.com

Emotional Regulation, Rejection & Shame

Big Weather, Fast Weather & Weather That Lingers

Emotional regulation relies partly on executive systems too. For some people with ADHD, emotions arrive quickly, intensely, or take longer to settle. Repeated criticism or misunderstanding can also layer ordinary executive struggles with shame until a simple task begins carrying the emotional weight of an ancient curse.

98. The Wall of Awful®

Brendan Mahan's model describing the emotional barrier that can accumulate around tasks after repeated experiences of failure, criticism, shame, anxiety, rejection, or disappointment.

99. Emotional Dysregulation

Difficulty modulating emotional intensity, duration, expression, or recovery.

100. Emotional Hyperarousal

Language used to describe especially rapid or intense emotional activation.

101. Rejection Sensitivity

Heightened emotional sensitivity to perceived criticism, rejection, failure, exclusion, or disapproval.

102. Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria / RSD

A phrase associated with psychiatrist William Dodson for particularly painful reactions to perceived rejection or criticism. It resonates strongly in ADHD communities but is not a standalone DSM diagnosis.

103. Shame Spiral

A mistake produces self-criticism, which increases avoidance, which creates additional consequences, which produces additional shame. Efficient only in its ability to make everything harder.

104. Should Storm

The mental barrage of everything you "should" already have done, remembered, finished, figured out, become, or handled better.

105. Failure Echo

A current task activates emotional memories of previous attempts, criticism, disappointment, or failure.

106. Anticipatory Shame

Expecting to fail, disappoint, or be judged before anything has actually happened.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

107. Demand Static

The background nervous-system noise produced by several expectations simultaneously hovering unresolved.

Organization & Daily-Life Systems

Every Object Is a Tiny Unfinished Decision

The physical environment can become an external map of executive functioning. A pile may not simply be clutter. It may contain thirty unresolved decisions, four unfinished tasks, two things that need to leave the house, one thing that belongs upstairs, and an envelope whose existence has become vaguely accusatory.

108. DOOM Pile

A community term for piles of miscellaneous things awaiting organization. “DOOM” is popularly rendered as *Didn’t Organize, Only Moved*.

109. DOOM Box

The evolutionary successor of the DOOM pile. Guests are arriving, therefore the pile migrates into a container.

110. DOOM Closet / DOOM Room

When enough unfinished sorting decisions achieve architectural scale.

111. Clutter Blindness

When persistent visual clutter gradually becomes part of the background and stops registering consciously.

112. Clutter Threshold

The point at which manageable disorder suddenly becomes visually or cognitively overwhelming.

113. Horizontal Storage

The unofficial ADHD organizational system in which countertops, chairs, tables, stairs, and floors become filing cabinets.

114. Point-of-Performance Storage

A genuinely useful design principle: keeping the thing where the thing is actually used rather than where convention says it “belongs.”

115. Launch Pad

A designated place near the door for keys, bags, medication, paperwork, chargers, sunglasses, or tomorrow’s important object.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

116. Landing Zone

The place where frequently carried objects reliably go when arriving home.

117. Duplicate Infrastructure

Intentionally owning multiples of necessary objects where they are needed: chargers in several rooms, scissors upstairs and downstairs, toiletries in multiple bags. Efficiency occasionally looks suspiciously like owning six pairs of scissors.

118. Visibility-Based Organization

Designing storage around remembering what exists rather than maximizing visual minimalism.

119. ADHD Tax

The extra financial, temporal, practical, or emotional cost created by lost objects, missed deadlines, forgotten cancellations, late fees, duplicate purchases, wasted food, and similar ADHD-related difficulties.

120. Convenience Tax

Paying more for something because reducing steps makes it realistically usable.

121. Executive-Function Tax

The extra effort required to accomplish ordinary tasks when planning, initiation, sequencing, memory, or switching are expensive.

122. Laundry Limbo

Clothes are neither dirty nor sufficiently clean to rejoin civilization, so they inhabit The Chair.

123. The Chair

That chair. No explanation required.

124. Dish Threshold

The mysterious point at which washing three dishes is easy but encountering twenty dishes transforms the sink into an archaeological site.

125. Bag Archaeology

Finding receipts, medication, three pens, a rock, paperwork, a snack wrapper, and something you urgently needed six weeks ago.

126. Duplicate Purchase Phenomenon

Buying something because you cannot remember whether you own it or cannot locate the one you definitely own.

127. Open-Loop Clutter

Objects remain visible because they represent unfinished actions rather than merely untidiness.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

128. Halfway Home

An object has completed part of the journey back to where it belongs and will now remain there indefinitely.

Communication & Relationships

The Story Has Branches

Attention, working memory, time perception, impulsivity, and emotion all wander into relationships eventually. Sometimes ADHD communication is less a straight road and more an old forest path with several fascinating tributaries.

129. Verbal Traffic Jam

Knowing everything you want to say but struggling to sequence it into language.

130. Story Branching

Beginning a story, realizing three side stories are required for context, and somehow acquiring additional side stories inside those.

131. Parenthetical Speech

Talking in spoken parentheses because every piece of contextual information feels necessary.

132. Interrupt Urgency

Feeling pressure to say the thought immediately because holding it in working memory while continuing to listen feels precarious. The thought appears to be standing beside an open window.

133. Context Dumping

Providing large amounts of context because it feels necessary for someone to understand the actual meaning of what you are saying.

134. Friendship Time Blindness

Feeling emotionally connected to someone despite large intervals since the last interaction. The affection did not disappear. The calendar apparently did.

135. Out-of-Sight Relationship Drift

Not losing affection for someone, but losing spontaneous access to the cue that reminds you to contact them.

136. Reply Paralysis

Seeing a message, intending to respond thoughtfully, waiting until you have enough bandwidth, then acquiring increasing shame about how long you have waited.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerditherapist.com

137. Message Debt

Unanswered communications begin to feel emotionally “owed,” increasing the difficulty of responding.

138. Social Hangover

Depletion after sustained social attention, monitoring, stimulation, or masking.

139. Conversation Hyperfocus

Becoming deeply engaged in a stimulating conversation and losing awareness of time, surroundings, bodily needs, or planned stopping points.

External Supports & Co-Regulation

Sometimes My Brain Works Better Beside Yours

A great deal of ADHD support involves moving invisible demands out of the brain and into the environment. This is not cheating. Eyeglasses are also technically an external support, and civilization has survived them.

140. External Brain

Calendars, sticky notes, whiteboards, alarms, lists, visual systems, smart speakers, notebooks, apps, partners, and other structures that hold information the brain cannot reliably keep active.

141. Externalizing Executive Function

Moving memory, sequencing, accountability, planning, or decision-making outside the brain.

142. Visual Memory Scaffolding

Leaving information or objects visible because visibility acts as a reminder.

143. Body Doubling

Working in the presence of another person, physically or virtually, to support focus, initiation, or persistence.

144. Parallel Play / Parallel Working

Two people occupying the same space while independently doing their own activities. It overlaps with body doubling but does not necessarily involve explicit accountability.

145. Borrowed Regulation

Another person’s calm presence, structure, rhythm, momentum, or attention helps your nervous system access something it was struggling to generate alone.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

146. Borrowed Executive Function

When another person temporarily helps provide structure, sequencing, prompting, or accountability.

147. Accountability Spark

A small commitment to another person provides enough activation to begin.

148. Witness Effect

Something becomes easier to do simply because another safe person is present and knows you are doing it.

149. Thought Parking

Intentionally placing a thought somewhere externally so you can return attention to the current conversation without gripping the thought for dear life.

150. Borrowed Momentum

Using someone else's activity, music, timer, environmental energy, or presence to begin moving yourself.

151. Nervous-System Negotiation

Instead of asking, "Why won't I do this?" asking, "What does my system require in order for this to become doable?"

Masking & Compensation

How Nobody Knew

Sometimes ADHD becomes difficult to see precisely because an enormous amount of work has been built around hiding it. The person who appears meticulously organized may not have effortless executive functioning. They may have constructed elaborate scaffolding because dropping one ball once taught them never to trust gravity again.

152. ADHD Masking

Concealing, compensating for, or suppressing ADHD-related traits in order to meet social or environmental expectations.

153. Overcompensation

Developing extremely rigid systems, perfectionism, excessive preparation, or overwork to prevent ADHD-related difficulties from becoming visible.

154. Anxiety as Executive Function

Community shorthand for using fear, hypervigilance, or anticipated consequences as the

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

mechanism that keeps tasks organized and remembered. It can work impressively until the nervous system sends the invoice.

155. Perfectionism as Prosthetic

Using perfectionism as an external support for inconsistent attention, memory, organization, or follow-through.

156. Crisis Competence

The paradoxical experience of functioning exceptionally well during emergencies while struggling enormously with mundane maintenance. Metaphorical building on fire? Calm and efficient. Insurance form needs mailing? Apparently cursed.

157. Compensation Fatigue

The exhaustion that comes from constantly building conscious strategies around processes other people may perform more automatically.

Energy, Capacity & Recovery

Same Brain, Different Battery

One of the most confusing parts of ADHD can be inconsistency. Someone may accomplish an astonishing amount on Tuesday and struggle to make toast on Wednesday. Skill has not necessarily vanished. Access to the skill has changed.

158. Focus Hangover

Cognitive depletion after an extended period of intense concentration.

159. Productivity Borrowing

Accomplishing a huge amount under urgency today while effectively borrowing energy from tomorrow.

160. Boom-and-Bust Productivity

Cycles of enormous output followed by depletion or reduced capacity.

161. Sprint Brain

Functioning spectacularly in bursts while struggling with marathon-style consistency.

162. Brain Weather

A compassionate way of describing fluctuating capacity. Same person, same skills, different neurological weather.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

163. Capacity Weather

The recognition that executive capacity varies with sleep, stress, hormones, sensory load, interest, novelty, illness, demands, hunger, environment, and emotional state.

164. Good-Brain Day / Crunchy-Brain Day

Playful language for differences in cognitive accessibility without turning either state into a moral judgment. Some days the machinery hums. Some days every thought seems to be wearing a wool sweater.

Sensory Processing & Regulation

When the World Has Its Volume Turned Up

ADHD does not happen in a sensory vacuum. Research increasingly recognizes sensory-processing differences among people with ADHD, although sensory experiences vary enormously from person to person and are not unique to ADHD. Some nervous systems notice everything. Some go looking for more input. Some manage to do both before lunch.

A humming light, scratchy seam, overlapping conversation, strong perfume, or refrigerator compressor may barely register one day and feel astonishingly intrusive another. At other times, movement, music, pressure, texture, or repetitive motion may be exactly what helps the nervous system organize itself.

165. Sensory Sensitivity

Experiencing certain sounds, lights, textures, smells, tastes, temperatures, movement, or other sensory input more intensely than the surrounding environment seems to warrant. The fluorescent light is not merely *on*. It has become personally involved.

166. Sensory Overload

When incoming sensory information exceeds the nervous system's current capacity to comfortably process it. Thinking, speaking, deciding, regulating emotion, or remaining socially available may suddenly become much harder because the brain is already handling seventeen other things.

167. Sensory Seeking

Actively gravitating toward sensory input such as movement, pressure, sound, texture, chewing, fidgeting, music, strong flavors, or physical activity because the input feels regulating, organizing, pleasurable, or alerting.

168. Sensory Avoidance

Reducing or escaping particular sensory experiences because they are distracting, uncomfortable, painful, exhausting, or overwhelming.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

169. Sensory Filtering Difficulty

Difficulty automatically deciding which sensory information deserves attention and which can safely become background. The conversation matters. Unfortunately, so does the air conditioner, the person clicking a pen, someone's shoes in the hallway, and whatever electrical appliance has begun humming in B-flat.

170. Sensory Load

The total amount of sensory information the nervous system is processing at a given time. Sensory load can quietly consume capacity even when no single sensation seems dramatic enough to explain why you are suddenly finished with civilization.

171. Sensory Debt

A useful metaphor for what can happen when someone repeatedly tolerates uncomfortable sensory environments without enough opportunity to regulate or recover. The nervous system may appear to cope in the moment and send the invoice later.

172. Stimming

Repetitive movement, sound, touch, or other sensory behavior that may support regulation, attention, emotional expression, pleasure, or sensory needs. Examples can include rocking, pacing, tapping, humming, rubbing textures, bouncing a leg, twirling hair, or repeatedly clicking the pen everyone else has now confiscated.

173. Misophonia

An unusually strong emotional or physiological response to particular sounds, often human-generated sounds such as chewing or repetitive tapping. Misophonia is not specific to ADHD, but some ADHDers encounter it alongside broader sensory-processing differences.

174. Proprioception

The body's sense of where it is in space and how its parts are positioned and moving. Differences in proprioceptive processing may contribute to seeking pressure or movement, bumping into things, using more force than expected, or discovering mysterious bruises whose origin stories remain classified.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

Interoception & Body Awareness

Apparently the Body Has Been Sending Emails

Interoception is the nervous system's perception of what is happening inside the body: hunger, thirst, temperature, fatigue, heartbeat, muscle tension, nausea, bathroom needs, emotional activation, and other internal signals.

For some neurodivergent people, those signals may be faint, delayed, difficult to interpret, or drowned out by whatever currently has the brain's attention. This can create the peculiar experience of being perfectly fine until you are suddenly very much not fine.

175. Interoception

The ability to notice and interpret signals arising from inside the body. Interoceptive differences are not exclusive to ADHD, but they can intersect meaningfully with attention, hyperfocus, sensory processing, and emotional regulation.

176. Delayed Body Signals

Not consciously registering a bodily need until it has become considerably more urgent. Hunger apparently submitted several polite requests before escalating directly to emergency proceedings.

177. Hunger Blindness

Difficulty noticing hunger early enough to respond comfortably, sometimes followed by suddenly becoming ravenous, irritable, shaky, nauseated, or mysteriously furious at an innocent household appliance.

178. Thirst Blindness

Realizing at 4:00 p.m. that the headache may have something to do with having consumed coffee, determination, and approximately four molecules of water.

179. Bathroom Cue Delay

Not noticing or responding to bathroom signals until the body abandons subtlety.

180. Fatigue Lag

Difficulty recognizing tiredness while activity or stimulation is still carrying you, followed by the body's abrupt announcement that operations have concluded.

181. Body-Needs Blindness

A broader community-style description for losing awareness of hunger, thirst, temperature, pain, fatigue, posture, bathroom needs, or other physical signals while attention is elsewhere.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

182. Hyperfocus Body Dropout

Becoming so absorbed that bodily signals temporarily lose the competition for attention. Eventually the task ends and the body returns carrying a clipboard full of complaints.

Demands, Autonomy & Access

When “I Have To” Changes the Entire Task

Sometimes a task becomes harder not because the task itself changed, but because it acquired the feeling of a demand.

Demand avoidance is a broad descriptive phrase rather than one single explanation. It can arise from overwhelm, anxiety, executive dysfunction, previous experiences of control, perfectionism, burnout, autonomy needs, sensory load, or other factors. It should not automatically be equated with Pathological Demand Avoidance, or PDA, a separate and debated profile discussed primarily in relation to autism.

The useful question is not simply, “Why are you refusing?” Sometimes it is, “What happened inside the nervous system when this became something you *had* to do?”

183. Demand Avoidance

Resistance, distress, or reduced access that appears when something is experienced as a demand, expectation, obligation, or loss of autonomy. The reaction may be stronger than the practical difficulty of the task itself.

184. Self-Demand Avoidance

When even a demand you created for yourself begins provoking resistance. Apparently the nervous system has reviewed the organizational chart and does not recognize you as authorized management.

185. Demand Accumulation

The cumulative burden created by many expectations, decisions, transitions, social obligations, sensory demands, and unfinished tasks stacking across the day.

186. Demand Saturation

The point at which available capacity for additional expectations has become extremely limited. One more perfectly reasonable request may receive a wildly disproportionate internal response because it has unknowingly arrived as Demand Number 847.

187. Autonomy Friction

The resistance that appears when a task begins to feel controlled, imposed, micromanaged, or stripped of meaningful choice.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

188. Choice Restoration

Making something more accessible by returning genuine options around when, where, how, in what order, or with what support it happens.

189. Demand Reframe

Changing the internal framing of a task from coercion toward choice, purpose, experimentation, invitation, or collaboration. The task itself may remain exactly the same while the nervous system experiences it differently.

Cognitive Flexibility & Context

The Brain Has Changed Tracks. Please Allow Three to Five Business Days.

Executive functioning is not only about remembering and beginning. It also helps us shift mental sets, update plans, adapt expectations, transfer information between contexts, and reorganize when circumstances change.

Some ADHDers are highly spontaneous in one domain and astonishingly resistant to changing gears in another. Human brains remain committed to making simple categories inconvenient.

190. Cognitive Flexibility

The ability to shift perspectives, strategies, expectations, or approaches when circumstances change.

191. Set-Shifting Difficulty

Difficulty disengaging from one mental rule, strategy, topic, or cognitive mode and moving into another.

192. Context-Switching Cost

The executive energy required to move between different roles, environments, projects, conversations, or kinds of thinking.

193. Plan Disruption Lag

The period of cognitive or emotional recalibration after an expected plan changes unexpectedly. You may understand the new plan immediately while the rest of your nervous system is still standing at the abandoned train platform holding the original itinerary.

194. Cognitive Gear-Stick

A metaphor for brains that may move beautifully once in gear but require more deliberate effort to shift between modes.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

Emotional Continuity, Connection & Being Seen

I Know You Care. My Nervous System Would Like Recent Documentation.

Relationships depend partly on our ability to carry a felt sense of connection across absence, silence, ambiguity, and time. Neurodivergent communities have developed language for experiences in which the intellectual knowledge that someone cares remains intact while emotional access to that knowledge becomes less reliable.

These experiences are not formal ADHD diagnostic constructs, and attachment history, anxiety, trauma, autism, depression, and other factors may also matter. Still, the language can help people describe something surprisingly difficult to put into words.

195. Emotional Object Permanence

Community language for difficulty maintaining a felt sense that someone still cares, loves, values, or feels connected to you when they are not actively present, communicating, or offering signs of connection. Unlike literal object permanence, this is not a developmental-cognition term.

196. Connection Cue Dependence

When the felt experience of connection becomes easier to access through recent contact, affection, reassurance, shared activity, or another visible relational cue.

197. Reassurance Half-Life

A playful metaphor for reassurance that feels completely real when received but becomes progressively harder to emotionally access as time passes.

198. Being-Seen Activation

The strong emotional response that can occur when someone accurately recognizes, understands, appreciates, or names something important about you.

199. Recognition Responsive Euphoria / RRE

Community language sometimes presented as a positive counterpart to RSD, describing an especially intense emotional response to genuine recognition, praise, acceptance, or feeling deeply seen. Unlike RSD, which is itself not a formal diagnosis, RRE has even less established clinical or research standing. It is best understood as community shorthand rather than a recognized ADHD construct.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

Stress Load, Burnout & Recovery

Nothing Happened Today, Except Everything That Came Before Today

Capacity does not reset neatly at midnight.

A nervous system carries history forward: inadequate sleep, sensory strain, masking, emotional effort, uncertainty, deadlines, caregiving, conflict, work demands, executive effort, chronic stress, and the thousand tiny adaptations required to keep functioning in environments that may not fit particularly well.

Sometimes today's capacity makes more sense when we stop looking only at today.

200. Allostatic Load

A research-based concept describing the cumulative physiological burden associated with repeated or chronic stress and the body's ongoing work of adapting to it. Allostatic load is not an ADHD-specific concept, but chronic executive, social, sensory, and environmental strain can make it particularly relevant to neurodivergent lives.

201. Cumulative Stress Load

The combined effect of stressors accumulating over time, including stressors that may seem individually small.

202. Masking Load

The cognitive, emotional, and physical effort involved in continuously monitoring, suppressing, compensating for, or altering natural behavior to meet expectations.

203. Recovery Debt

A metaphor for what accumulates when periods of high output, stimulation, stress, or masking repeatedly occur without enough recovery afterward.

204. Capacity Crash

A sudden or delayed drop in accessible functioning after sustained effort. The person who "handled everything beautifully" may discover that beautiful handling was not free.

205. Neurodivergent Burnout

A term used in neurodivergent communities, especially autistic communities, for profound exhaustion and reduced capacity associated with prolonged stress, masking, sensory strain, unmet support needs, and sustained adaptation. It should not be treated as synonymous with ordinary occupational burnout or as uniquely caused by ADHD.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

206. Shutdown

A state of reduced responsiveness, communication, movement, decision-making, or engagement that can occur when a nervous system becomes overwhelmed. Shutdown has especially strong roots in autistic community language and is not an ADHD-specific symptom.

207. Restraint Collapse

The release or collapse that can happen after someone has spent substantial energy regulating, masking, performing, complying, or holding themselves together in a demanding environment and then reaches a place or person that feels safer. The nervous system may finally stop maintaining the public version of “fine.”

Emotion Identification & Processing

The Feeling Exists. Naming Department Is Experiencing Delays.

Emotional regulation requires more than having emotions. We also have to notice them, differentiate them, interpret them, connect them with context, and sometimes translate a complicated body-state into language while another human waits expectantly for an answer.

That process is not equally automatic for everyone.

208. Alexithymia

Difficulty identifying, distinguishing, or describing one’s own emotions. Alexithymia is not specific to ADHD and is particularly discussed in autism research, but it can occur across neurotypes and conditions.

209. Emotional Granularity

The ability to distinguish between more specific emotional states rather than experiencing them only as broad categories such as “good,” “bad,” or “overwhelmed.”

210. Delayed Emotional Processing

Understanding what you felt only after the event has passed and the nervous system has had enough time and space to process it.

211. Emotional Buffering

A metaphor for knowing that something is happening emotionally while the meaning or language has not finished loading yet.

212. Body-First Emotion

Experiencing the physical components of an emotion before consciously identifying the emotion itself. Tight chest first; realization that you are anxious may arrive in the sequel.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

Overlapping Neurodivergent Experiences

Not Everything in the Neighborhood Belongs to ADHD

The internet has made it wonderfully easy to find language for neurodivergent experiences. It has also created a neurological junk drawer in which ADHD, autism, trauma, anxiety, sensory processing, attachment, depression, burnout, and ordinary human variation occasionally get labeled as though they are interchangeable.

They are not.

People with ADHD may experience the concepts below, sometimes quite commonly, but these terms should not be presented as defining ADHD features. They belong in the Field Guide because many ADHDers encounter them, particularly people with multiple neurodivergences or co-occurring mental-health experiences, and because knowing what *isn't necessarily ADHD* can be just as useful as knowing what might be.

213. Monotropism

A theory of attention developed primarily within autism scholarship describing attention as tending to concentrate deeply within a smaller number of highly engaged channels or interests. ADHD and autism can overlap, but monotropism should not simply be relabeled as an ADHD trait.

214. Double Empathy Problem

Damian Milton's theory that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people can arise from mutual differences in experience and understanding rather than from an empathy deficit located solely in the autistic person. This is an autism framework, not an ADHD construct, but it may be relevant to AuDHD readers.

215. Hypervigilance

Persistent scanning for threat, problems, criticism, changes, or signs that something may go wrong. Hypervigilance is more strongly associated with anxiety and trauma-related processes than ADHD itself, although years of criticism, unpredictability, masking, or compensating may complicate the picture.

216. Derealization

An experience in which the environment feels unreal, distant, dreamlike, foggy, or strangely disconnected. Derealization belongs to the dissociation family and should not automatically be attributed to ADHD.

217. Depersonalization

Feeling detached from oneself, one's body, thoughts, or experience, sometimes with a sense of

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

observing oneself from a distance. Like derealization, this is a dissociative experience rather than an ADHD feature.

218. Anhedonia

Reduced ability to experience pleasure or interest in activities that would ordinarily feel rewarding. Anhedonia is particularly associated with depression and other conditions and should not be casually equated with ADHD understimulation, boredom, or an interest cliff.

219. Functional Freeze

Descriptive language for appearing outwardly functional while parts of the nervous system feel immobilized, disconnected, or unable to initiate less urgent needs. It can overlap with executive dysfunction, stress responses, burnout, anxiety, trauma, or several processes at once.

220. Neurodivergent Restraint

A useful descriptive frame for the ongoing effort of containing impulses, movement, sensory responses, emotional reactions, communication style, executive difficulties, or other natural responses in order to meet environmental expectations. It overlaps with masking but emphasizes the *holding-in* itself and the physiological effort that holding can require.

How the Domains Overlap

Because ADHD Rarely Stays in Its Assigned Drawer

These categories are not meant to suggest that each experience lives neatly inside one neurological filing cabinet. ADHD rarely behaves so politely. Waiting Mode may live primarily under time perception, but it can also involve task initiation and transition difficulty. Reply Paralysis can involve working memory, shame, time blindness, executive functioning, and relationships all at once. Hyperfocus intersects attention regulation, reward, transitions, interoception, bodily awareness, and recovery. The Wall of Awful® lives somewhere between executive functioning and accumulated emotional experience. Demand avoidance may involve autonomy, executive access, anxiety, burnout, sensory load, previous experiences of control, or several of those arriving for the same meeting.

The newer domains make those intersections even easier to see. Sensory overload may make executive functioning less accessible, while reduced interoceptive awareness may mean someone does not realize that hunger, fatigue, pain, or overstimulation is contributing to emotional dysregulation. Masking can add to cumulative stress load, cumulative stress can reduce available capacity, and cognitive inflexibility may become much more pronounced when that capacity is already depleted. A person experiencing alexithymia may know that *something* is happening emotionally without being able to name it yet. Emotional object permanence may intersect with working memory, attachment, anxiety, previous relational experiences, and time.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

What looks like one experience from the outside may actually be several systems bumping into one another backstage.

Sometimes all of this gathers inside an extremely ordinary-looking moment. You see an email. You know it matters. You intend to answer. It requires more thought than expected, so you decide to return to it later. Later does not become sufficiently “now.” You remember it three days afterward and feel embarrassed. The embarrassment makes reopening it harder. Six days later, a four-minute email has acquired lore. From the outside, someone may see procrastination. From the inside, working memory, time perception, executive functioning, emotional history, and shame may all have participated in turning four minutes of correspondence into a small haunted estate.

Or perhaps you arrive home after a day of fluorescent lights, overlapping conversations, transitions, unfinished tasks, social monitoring, decisions, and keeping yourself reasonably composed. Nothing objectively terrible happened. Someone you love asks an entirely innocent question about dinner, and your nervous system responds as though they have requested that you negotiate an international treaty before removing your shoes. The question about dinner may be the visible moment, but sensory load, demand accumulation, masking, hunger you did not notice, transition cost, decision fatigue, and cumulative stress may all be standing behind it.

This is why language matters. Naming an experience does not mean reducing a person to a collection of symptoms, and it does not mean every experience belongs exclusively to ADHD. It gives us more ways to become curious about what is actually happening. Instead of stopping at *Why can't I just do this? Why am I reacting like this? Why am I so inconsistent?*, we can begin asking better questions: *Is this an attention problem, an activation problem, a sensory problem, a capacity problem, a transition problem, a demand problem, an emotional problem, or several things arriving at once?*

Sometimes the answer is several things arriving at once.

ADHD, it turns out, remains stubbornly uninterested in respecting the filing system.

A Note About the Language in This Guide

Some phrases in this guide are established psychological, physiological, or cognitive concepts. Others are commonly used in ADHD, autistic, and broader neurodivergent communities. Some are associated with particular clinicians, researchers, theorists, or ADHD educators. Still others are metaphors because sometimes a metaphor gets us closer to the lived experience than another paragraph of clinical vocabulary ever could.

The Wall of Awful® is associated with ADHD educator Brendan Mahan. **Interest-Based Nervous System** and **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria** are language associated with psychiatrist William Dodson. **Time blindness** and **temporal myopia** are strongly connected

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

with ADHD researcher Russell Barkley's descriptions of ADHD and difficulties organizing behavior around future time. **The Double Empathy Problem** comes from autistic scholar Damian Milton, while **monotropism** developed within autism scholarship and should not be presented as an ADHD-specific framework. **Allostatic load** is an established stress-physiology concept rather than a neurodivergence-specific one.

Other phrases, including **Brain Smoothie**, **Task Cliff**, **Priority Soup**, **Deadline Gravity**, **Cognitive Velcro**, **Brain Weather**, **The Dopamine Door**, **The Chair**, **Sensory Debt**, **Reassurance Half-Life**, **Cognitive Gear-Stick**, **Recovery Debt**, and **Emotional Buffering**, are not diagnoses. They are memorable ways of naming recognizable experiences.

Some community terms occupy a particularly fuzzy middle ground. **Emotional object permanence** uses developmental language metaphorically rather than describing literal object permanence. **Recognition Responsive Euphoria**, or **RRE**, appears in neurodivergent community language but does not have an established clinical or research status and should not be treated as a recognized counterpart diagnosis to RSD. **Demand avoidance** can describe a real experience without automatically meaning PDA. **Neurodivergent burnout**, **shutdown**, **monotropism**, and the **double empathy problem** have particularly strong roots in autistic experience and scholarship and should not be casually converted into generic ADHD terminology.

That distinction matters, but it does not make the language less useful.

Sometimes *executive dysfunction* is exactly the phrase someone needs. Sometimes it is *interoception*. Sometimes someone discovers that the experience they had been calling ADHD may be better understood through sensory processing, anxiety, trauma, autism, burnout, depression, attachment, chronic stress, or the glorious neurological group project created when several of these overlap.

And sometimes it is, "I have been staring at this form for forty minutes because my start button has apparently left the premises."

All of those can tell us something useful.

This guide is not meant to diagnose ADHD, autism, trauma, depression, anxiety, or anything else, and no person needs to recognize themselves in every entry. Experiencing one or many of these things does not establish a diagnosis. Many occur across neurotypes, and context matters.

Instead, this is an invitation to notice patterns with curiosity instead of judgment, to find language for experiences that have been difficult to explain, and perhaps to loosen a few old stories about laziness, carelessness, inconsistency, irresponsibility, being dramatic, being "too sensitive," or simply not trying hard enough.

Jen Hyatt, LMFT

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #99355

www.stormhavenwellness.com | www.thenerdietherapist.com

Because sometimes the first relief is not fixing the experience. It is finally being able to say, "There. That. That is what happens to me," and having someone else understand what you mean.