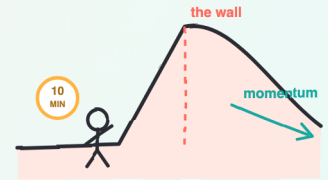


Cold Start

The expensive moment isn't the work – it's the threshold right before it.



● What it is

Cold start is the moment *before* a task begins – sitting down to homework, opening the assignment, picking up the instrument. Not the doing, the entering. For most people this transition is nearly free. For ADHD it's the single most expensive moment of the whole task. The work itself is often fine once you're in it; the cost is almost all at the threshold.

The tell: you can describe exactly what you need to do, agree it isn't hard, and still not start. That's not laziness or defiance. Starting is a separate function from understanding – and yours runs years behind your understanding.

● Why it's harder for ADHD

Starting a task means generating your own motivation for something with no immediate reward. The ADHD brain under-produces that internal "go" signal – it's tuned for interest, novelty, and urgency, not for "it's time, so I should." A boring or open-ended task gives your brain nothing to push off from.

Two things make the threshold worse:

● Open questions stack up

Every unanswered "where do I start / what exactly / how long" is a decision, and each decision is a place to bounce off. Five open questions = five walls before the first action.

● Emotion floods the gap

The longer you hover at the threshold, the more dread and frustration build, making starting even more aversive. It's a loop – and where cold start and emotional regulation overlap.

● What helps

● Habit

Make starting automatic so it stops needing a decision. Duhigg's loop – cue → routine → reward. Pick a stable cue (same time, same place: "after snack, at the desk") so the start fires on the cue, not on willpower. Spend the effort once building the habit, not daily at the threshold.

● Clarity

Cut the task to zero open questions *before* you sit down. Not "do homework" but "math worksheet, problems 1-10, calculator on the desk." Every decision removed is a wall removed. Do the setup while calm; if the task's unclear, get a parent to help you pin it down before you start.

● Start small

The commitment must survive even when you don't want it – 10 minutes, a timer, "just the first two problems." The point isn't the work; it's getting past the threshold. Momentum often carries you further. If not, you stop at 10 – and the deal held.

● Self-talk

You need one rational line to break the emotional hover, said fast, not dwelt on: "I don't have to like it, I just have to start." Acknowledge the feeling and step over it – don't argue or wait for it to pass. It won't; it compounds.

● Reduce distraction

Pull the competing pulls out of arm's reach before you start – close the other tabs, move the book, phone in another room. Not punishment – you're removing the easy dopamine your cold-start brain reaches for instead. Decide this during prep, not in the moment.

► Action Card – Cold Start

Print it. Stick it where the task happens.

PREP · WHILE CALM

- 1 Name the exact first task in one line. No open questions left.
- 2 Set up the space: materials out, distractions gone – tabs closed, phone out of the room, books away.
- 3 Set the cue: exactly **when** and **where** it starts.

START · THE MOMENT

- 1 Cue hits → go to the spot. Don't renegotiate.
- 2 Say the line: **"I don't have to like it. Ten minutes, then I can stop."**
- 3 Set a 10-minute timer.
- 4 Do only the first small chunk.
- 5 At 10 minutes: keep going if you're rolling, stop if you're not. Either way – the deal held.

Cold Start · Executive Function series

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