



Working Memory

Your mental scratchpad is small and the ink fades fast. You can't make it bigger – so get the information out of your head and somewhere it'll keep.

● What it is

Working memory is the mental scratchpad – where you hold a few things just long enough to use them: the rest of the instruction, what you walked in for, the next step. In an ADHD brain it's small and it fades fast. This isn't forgetting because you don't care; the note erases before you can read it back.

*The tell: "wait – what was the third thing?" Halfway up the stairs and you've lost why you went. You did step one perfectly and the other four are just gone. **Three-quarters of ADHD kids test below their peers here – it's the rule, not a character flaw.***

● Why it's harder for ADHD

This is one of the most reliable differences in the ADHD brain, and it sits under a lot of the rest. **The scratchpad holds less and clears faster – and the part that struggles most is holding something while you also do something with it.** Lose the thread and the task falls apart mid-step, which is why it feels like the problem is everything at once.

● The juggling part, not the holding part

The weak spot isn't storing one fact – it's holding it while you do something with it. The more you juggle at once, the faster it drops. That's why you nail step one and the other four vanish.

● Smart doesn't fix it

Working memory is a separate system from reasoning and vocabulary – and it predicts schoolwork better than IQ does. So you can argue like an adult and still lose a four-part instruction. Two different systems, not laziness.

● What helps

● Get it out of your head

The whole game. The second it's written down – paper, phone, your hand – the scratchpad doesn't have to hold it and can't lose it. Don't trust "I'll remember"; you've met you.

● One thing at a time

Take instructions one step at a time: do the first, then come back for the next. Don't load all five at once – the juggling is the exact part that's weakest, so stop asking it to juggle.

● Show it, don't just say it

Spoken instructions fade in seconds; a written list or a photo stays put. Ask for it in writing, or jot it as you hear it. A list you can re-read beats a memory that already erased.

● Make it automatic

A routine you don't think about doesn't touch the scratchpad at all. Same spot for the bag, the keys, the homework; same order every time – so memory never gets a chance to drop them.

● Skip the brain-training

Cogmed, n-back, brain-training apps: in the biggest trials they make you better at the game and nothing else – no gain to real memory, schoolwork, or ADHD symptoms once the raters are blind. You can't train the scratchpad bigger; you can only take the load off it. Don't spend the months or the money there.

▶ Action Card – Don't Trust the Scratchpad

Learn it when you're calm; keep it where you work.

CATCH IT · WHEN SOMETHING COMES IN

- 1 Write it down right then – phone note, paper, your hand. Don't trust "I'll remember."
- 2 One step at a time: do the first thing, then come back for the next. Don't take all five at once.
- 3 Say it back out loud to whoever gave it – that catches the part you've already dropped.

BUILD IT IN · SO MEMORY ISN'T NEEDED

- 4 One home for the things that go missing – bag, keys, homework. Same spot, every time.
- 5 Make a checklist for anything you do often (morning, leaving the house, packing up). Run the list, not your memory.
- 6 Kill distractions while you're taking something in – one interruption and the note erases.

You can't make the scratchpad bigger. You can stop asking it to hold what paper will hold for you.

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