



# Neurodivergent Women: Executive Functioning

Presented by: Taylore Mountain, LMFT



# Agenda

Traits

Autism

Behaviors

Interventions

ADHD

Behaviors

Interventions





# Autism and Executive Function for Taylore

*Taylore demonstrates relative vulnerabilities in executive functioning. Executive functions are the skills on her test results, and endorsement on self-report measures, Taylore demonstrates differences in the following:*

- Selective Attention: Taylore has trouble with consistently focusing on the most important information and ignoring distractions.*
- Sustained Attention: Taylore has a hard time paying attention over time to materials.*
- Shifting: Taylore has difficulty with adjusting to changes flexibly, such as changes in environment, plans, place, or demands.*
- Processing Efficiency: Taylore has trouble balancing speed with accuracy. Her performance speed was inconsistent during testing.*



# Autism and Executive Function for Taylore

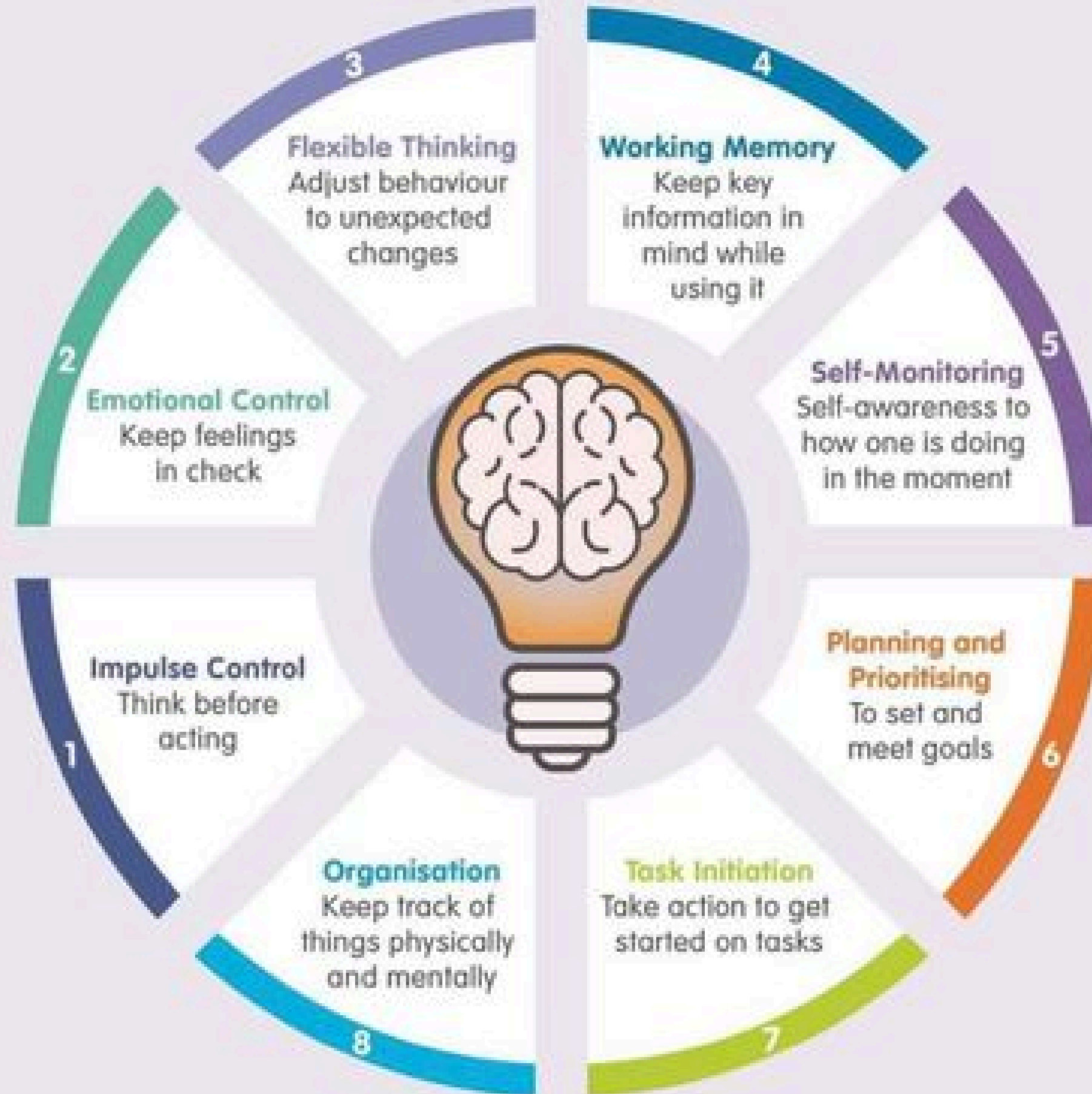
*Taylore's processing speed differences contributed to lower scores on timed tasks of executive functioning. While it is possible that Taylore's processing speed differences could be the result of an underlying attentional difference, Taylore's performance on testing do not indicate attentional differences.*

*It is therefore, very likely that her executive functioning differences have another cause. Executive differences are inherent to Autism. Additionally, emotional symptoms can impact one's ability to*

- effectively control attention and managing executive functioning demands.*



# Harmony Unlocked





# Autism and Executive Function

*While many individuals with autism have incredible memories, especially for facts and minor details, they can struggle with executive functioning skills. These skills include the ability to manage emotions, organize and plan, pay attention, start tasks and remain focused on them, verbal reasoning, and inhibition.*

- *Adult Ability Center of Lifetime Learning*

<https://adulthoodcenter.org/blog/autism-and-executive-function/#:~:text=The%20Autism%20Awareness%20Centre%20reported,function%20difficulties%20persist%20into%20adulthood.>



# Executive (Dys)Function

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- The Autism Awareness Centre reported that up to 80% of individuals with autism suffer from executive function disorder
- Executive function difficulties persist into adulthood.
- Issues with flexibility, planning, and organization represent the most significant issues.
- Are great at seeing details clearly but have a hard time seeing the big picture and understanding which details are most relevant to that big picture
- Are good at following schedules and routines, but have a difficult time flexibly changing those schedules or routines
- Can understand and follow rules, but get upset when rules are broken or bent
- May have difficulty sustaining focus and motivation when engaged in something that isn't intrinsically interesting to them

<https://adulthoodcenter.org/blog/autism-and-executive-function/#:~:text=The%20Autism%20Awareness%20Centre%20reported,function%20difficulties%20persist%20into%20adulthood.> <https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-executive-functioning-deficit-in-autism-4017885#:~:text=Autistic%20people%20are%20more%20likely,%2C%20simplifying%20processes%2C%20and%20more.>



# Executive (Dys)Function

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- Have a hard time switching from one activity to the next
- Have a difficult time effectively communicating wants and needs to others
- May not imitate others' behaviors without being directly instructed to do so (for example, unlikely to look around, notice that everyone else is getting ready to go, and do the same)
- Have challenges with "working memory"
- Can work with concrete objects and expectations more readily than with abstract ideas
- Have difficulty with understanding that others do not know, share, feel, or understand what's inside your own mind

<https://adultautismcenter.org/blog/autism-and-executive-function/#:~:text=The%20Autism%20Awareness%20Centre%20reported,function%20difficulties%20persist%20into%20adulthood.> <https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-executive-functioning-deficit-in-autism-4017885#:~:text=Autistic%20people%20are%20more%20likely,%2C%20simplifying%20processes%2C%20and%20more.>



# Executive (Dys)Function

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Those in the autism community use the term executive function to describe the wide range of skills associated with one's cognitive function. These skills fit under three distinct umbrellas:

- Working memory – This mental skill is critical for learning and doing everyday tasks.
  - Ex: remembering a phone number you were just told
- Cognitive flexibility – This is the ability to switch between two separate concepts and think about something in more than one way.
  - may be impacted by anxiety and depression
- Inhibitory control – This is the ability to ignore distractions and resist impulsive behaviors

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# Interventions

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## Use a Visual System

- For many individuals with autism, being able to visualize their way through specific processes or tasks is incredibly helpful. This evidence-based intervention leverages the use of visuals, preferably actual photographs, to guide an individual through the steps of whatever it is they wish to achieve. For example, visualizing the steps involved in an individual's morning routine.
- These visual supports will allow you to:
  - Create schedules, displaying visual blocks of time
  - Show the sequential steps involved in a task
  - Make a to-do list
- Communicate successfully with those who are less or non-verbal

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# Interventions

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## Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) Therapy

- used to treat ASD
- The science of behavior change, whether changing undesirable behaviors or increasing skills such as academics. ABA utilizes a wide variety of strategies to support individuals with behavior change. It is most commonly thought of as a treatment for autism but has application with other populations and other settings.
- It uses motivation and constant feedback to help individuals know what is expected and when they are being successful.
- ABA is widely recognized as the only scientifically valid therapy available for treating behavioral issues associated with ASD.

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<https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisedu.org/what-is-aba/>

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# Interventions

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## Direct Instruction

- Certain aspects of executive function can be taught through ordinary instruction and drilling.

## Role Play

- By role-playing and talking through challenges, many autistic people can practice and become more skilled at planning and taking logical action.

## Developing Social Stories for Flexibility

- Social stories are narratives written to help autistic kids go through the steps for accomplishing a task in the context of a story that they can relate to their own lives.

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-executive-functioning-deficit-in-autism-4017885#:~:text=Autistic%20people%20are%20more%20likely,%2C%20simplifying%20processes%2C%20and%20more.>



# Interventions

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Use apps to manage time

- Alarms, visual timekeepers, and other tools can keep autistic people on track, even when they are not thinking about time.

Use visual reminders and schedules.

- What are the steps required to get that laundry done? A laminated photo-based step-by-step poster in the laundry room can keep you on task.

Break down tasks into manageable parts

- Instead of "get ready for school," consider breaking tasks into smaller chunks such as "brush teeth," "get dressed," and so forth.

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# Interventions

Harmony Unlocked

## Simplify the process

- You probably should separate before you wash, and fold after you dry. However, if you wash everything together and just keep your clean undies in the laundry basket, you can cut two steps out of the process and still arrive at the same goal (clean, dry undies).

## Utilize Calming Techniques

- Learn what it feels like when you are starting to experience sensory or emotional overload, then:
  - Taking a deep breath
  - Counting to a favorite number
  - Taking a walk outside
  - Listening to music
  - Playing with a fidget toy
  - Dancing or jumping up and down
  - Eating a crunchy snack

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# ADHD and Executive Function

*ADHD affects executive functioning*

- *the cognitive abilities needed to achieve goals.*
- *A person with ADHD may have trouble organizing, remembering instructions, staying on track, and following through with a task.*
- *These are signs of executive dysfunction, in which the brain struggles with memory, attention, and self-regulation.*
  - *Attention Deficit Disorder Association*

<https://add.org/executive-function-disorder/#:~:text=A%20person%20with%20ADHD%20may,attention%2C%20and%20self%2Dregulation.>



# Executive (Dys)Function

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A person with executive dysfunction may note the following symptoms:

- Struggle to plan and organize activities
- Difficulty prioritizing and sequencing steps to complete a task
- Failure to meet deadlines
- Difficulty staying focused
- Trouble regulating emotions
- Late to appointments, events, meetings, or social activities
- Lose important items and forget details
- Struggle to switch between tasks
- Problems with motivation
- Impulsive and make poor decisions
- Difficulty multitasking
- Mentally rigid and/or inflexible

<https://add.org/executive-function-disorder/#:~:text=A%20person%20with%20ADHD%20may,attention%2C%20and%20self%2Dregulation.>



# Executive (Dys)Function

Harmony Unlocked

Some overlaps between ADHD and executive function disorder include:

- Getting distracted when completing tasks
- Struggling to organize a schedule, activities, and work materials
- Forgetting important dates, meetings, or appointments
- Showing up late to meetings and appointments
- Losing essential items needed for work or daily activities
- Lacking the motivation to do certain tasks

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# Interventions

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## Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

- is another non-drug option for managing executive function disorder
- CBT empowers you to identify unhealthy thinking patterns and habits and replace them with helpful ones that get you closer to your goals.
- This form of therapy may help improve your time management, organization, prioritization, and other executive functions.

Use visual schedules or work flow aids (to-do lists, journals, Google Calendar, etc.)

Break bigger projects into smaller chunks

Request written instructions for complex tasks

Mindfulness practices for improving focus and attention

Coaching or support to motivate behavior

<https://add.org/executive-function-disorder/#:~:text=A%20person%20with%20ADHD%20may,attention%2C%20and%20self%2Dregulation.>

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/adhd-executive-function#management>

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# Interventions

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- using a checklist to tick off tasks or smaller steps toward a goal
- creating an agenda that details how to submit work
- using clearly labeled folders or notebooks for different subjects or work areas
- imagine or visualize the necessary steps to complete a task, including when, where, and how to meet the deadline
- create systems, such as using sticky notes as reminders, to help stay on track with task
- using a whiteboard to list all activities and to use as a schedule.
- using a planner to write down all tasks and deadlines
- establishing a routine for getting tasks done

<https://add.org/executive-function-disorder/#:~:text=A%20person%20with%20ADHD%20may,attention%2C%20and%20self%2Dregulation.>



# Interventions

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- creating a quiet environment with no distractions to work in
- creating checklists or schedules for activities that prove challenging, such as getting out of the house on time and setting time limits for each step
- using a reward system as motivation, such as a star chart for children, or plenty of encouragement
- planning and preparing for the next day the evening before to help reduce the amount of decision-making
- learning the reason behind organizational strategies may make people more likely to stick to them
- trying out new learning methods, such as visual or tactile methods

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# Harmony Unlocked

