

Understanding *ADHD*

Practical, evidence-based tools for focus, energy, and emotional balance.

ADHD is a brain-based difference in how attention, motivation, and impulse control are regulated — driven largely by the dopamine and norepinephrine systems. Medication helps, and so do the strategies below, which target those same systems. Used consistently, they make a real difference.

PART ONE

What ADHD is — and isn't

ADHD is not a lack of willpower or effort. It is a difference in brain wiring that makes certain things — starting tasks, sustaining attention, managing time and impulses — genuinely harder. Knowing that reframes the work: it's not about trying harder, but about building systems that fit how your brain actually works.



MOSTLY INHERITED

ADHD is one of the most heritable conditions in psychiatry. It runs strongly in families — you didn't cause it and neither did your upbringing.



A REGULATION DIFFERENCE

The challenge isn't knowing what to do — it's reliably doing it on time. Attention and effort are there, but harder to direct on demand.



VARIABLE, NOT ABSENT

Intense focus on the right task (“hyperfocus”) sits alongside difficulty with routine ones. Interest and urgency drive the system.



EMOTION IS PART OF IT

Many people with ADHD feel emotions intensely and react quickly. Emotional regulation is a core feature, not a side issue.

Work with your brain, not against it

Some of ADHD is fixed wiring. A lot of how much it affects your day is shaped by the systems and habits you build around it.

WHAT YOU CAN'T CHANGE

Fixed factors

- The underlying neurobiology of ADHD
- Genetic predisposition
- A brain that runs on interest and urgency
- Baseline working-memory limits

WITHIN YOUR INFLUENCE

Modifiable factors

- External structure (calendars, timers, lists)
- Sleep, exercise, and nutrition
- Removing friction and distraction
- Accountability and body doubling
- Medication, used consistently
- Catching emotional spirals early

ADHD brains struggle to hold structure internally — so you build it externally. The right column is that scaffolding.

Levers within your control

Each of these targets the same attention and regulation systems your treatment does. Start with one or two.



Exercise — the most powerful non-med tool STRONG EVIDENCE

Aerobic exercise releases dopamine and norepinephrine — the very chemicals ADHD medication targets. A single 20–30 min session sharpens focus for 1–3 hours. **Try it before your most demanding work.**



Sleep STRONG EVIDENCE

ADHD and poor sleep worsen each other. Protect a consistent bedtime, cut screens beforehand, and write tomorrow's task list tonight to quiet a racing mind.



Nutrition & blood sugar MODERATE EVIDENCE

Crashes wreck focus and mood. **Prioritize protein at breakfast and lunch** (15–30g), pair carbs with protein and fibre, and don't skip meals — especially if medication blunts appetite.



Mindfulness MODERATE EVIDENCE

Mindfulness builds the small gap between feeling something and acting on it — the exact gap that reduces impulsivity and emotional flooding. **5–10 minutes daily**, guided, anchored to an existing habit. Mind-wandering is the practice.



External structure STRONG EVIDENCE

Schedule tasks (not just appointments) on a calendar with start times. Write everything down the moment you think of it. Work in timed 25-minute blocks. If it isn't captured somewhere, it often doesn't exist.



Body doubling STRONG EVIDENCE

Working alongside another person — in the room, on a call, or a co-working stream — provides external structure that regulates attention and reduces avoidance. Try it first when you can't start.

What to try in the moment

WHEN YOU'RE...	TRY THIS
Can't start a task	2-minute rule · shrink it to one tiny next step · body double · exercise first if you can
Getting distracted	Visible 25-min timer · phone in another room · website blocker · lyric-free background sound
Overwhelmed / avoiding	Three slow breaths · name the emotion · pick one tiny action · text an accountability person
Afternoon crash	Protein snack · 10-min walk · skip simple carbs · review your top task
Emotionally flooded	Pause before responding · one mindful breath · name it to tame it · step away briefly
Wired, can't sleep	Consistent bedtime · no screens 30 min before · write tomorrow's list tonight · body-scan

THE PROFESSIONAL SIDE

Treatment and a medication note

These strategies work alongside your treatment — not instead of it.

Medication & therapy

For ADHD, medication is genuinely effective and often first-line — the lifestyle tools above amplify it rather than replace it. Skills-based coaching and CBT adapted for ADHD help with organization, time management, and the self-criticism that often comes along for the ride.

If you take a stimulant — one practical note

Vitamin C and citrus can cut the absorption of amphetamine-based medications (Adderall, Vyvanse, Dexedrine) by up to half if taken within an hour of your dose. Separate high-dose vitamin C or large amounts of orange juice from your medication by at least an hour.

These strategies work best when they're steady, not flawless. Building one habit at a time — and forgiving the off days — works far better than overhauling everything at once and burning out.

IF YOU'RE IN CRISIS

If you're thinking about suicide or harming yourself, you don't have to wait for an appointment. Call or text **988** (Suicide Crisis Helpline, 24/7), call or text the **Distress Centre Calgary** at **403-266-HELP (4357)**, or for health advice call **Health Link 811**. If you are in immediate danger, call **911** or go to your nearest emergency department.

Tailor Made Psychiatry
Dr. Sunny Kang, MD, FRCPC
Virtual Outpatient Psychiatric Care · Alberta, Canada

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