



Mind Mapping

A Tool for Enhancing Executive Functions

by Bob Hathcock, ACG

A GOOD ARGUMENT CAN BE MADE THAT ADHD should be renamed executive function disorder.

Mind mapping is a superior tool for not only filling in for our executive function deficits but also for enhancing our extraordinary abilities—such as creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and being able to “see” the big picture in our minds. So how does mind mapping help us to overcome the deficits that are common with the ADHD brain? Let’s start with an introduction to mind mapping and its evolution, and then discuss common traits that often hold us back and how they can be mitigated with this practice.

The goal of mind mapping is to get a clear picture of the subject in question by writing down your ideas in a graphical representation. Leonardo da Vinci is credited with being a pioneer in using mind maps, but it was not until the 1960s, when a set of rules was created, that mind mapping became widely used in high school, college, and business. Now, with evolving computer software innovations such as TheBrain 7, mind mapping can be useful for everything from organizing complex thoughts and collaborating with coworkers to revolutionizing computer file storage and retrieval. (You can download a free version of TheBrain 7 at thebrain.com.) An Internet search for *mind mapping* will yield seemingly endless style examples, software reviews, and advice on how to get started.

By mapping out your thoughts in the following five-step process, you can better utilize the capabilities of your brain and some of its extraordinary but seldom-used capacities.

Step 1 **Choose an interesting topic and draw an image to represent it.** Let your ideas break out freely and write them down without editing. Some ideas that may seem absurd now could be the key to the best solution later.

Step 2 **Now create a new mind map from these ideas** by categorizing them and begin to draw connections between the thoughts.

Step 3 **Take a break.** The brain will often make sudden unexpected realizations when you are at rest, running, meditating, or sleeping.

Step 4 **With your fresh perspective, add a new burst of ideas.** This time integrate all of the thoughts and try to create the final comprehensive mind map.

Step 5 **With the comprehensive mind map completed, look for realizations, clarity, and superior solutions.**

So how can this process make significant inroads into problems associated with a deficit in executive function? Let’s look at a few of the more problematic traits associated with ADHD.

› **Working memory deficits:** Some excellent studies have shown that in people with ADHD, working memory is impaired by an insufficiency of neuroreceptors and neurotransmitters resulting in what Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA, calls “blinky working memories which leads to a variety of problems in their daily lives.” By downloading all of our “mind’s RAM” onto the mind map, we assure that ideas are not forgotten, thereby resulting in better solutions and choices.

› **Impulsivity:** Russell A. Barkley, PhD, contends that being able to pause rather than automatically react to stimuli is the key to making good decisions. Because people with ADHD have trouble creating that pause and have trouble filtering out external and internal stimuli, they often react in unpredictable ways, which can lead to what looks like bad judgment. The mind mapping process adds the “pause to reflect” back into the decision, leading to more optimal decisions.

› **Organization:** Mind maps can be used to create weekly or daily to-do lists which can be drawn or printed out and checked off so that things that you wanted to do don’t get pushed aside by distractions. For instance, you could create a checklist of all the things that keep you healthy and then keep score each day to chart your progress. By reminding yourself of things you want to do, it helps establish good habits that create order in your life.

› **Interrupting:** This process helps maintain focus on the person speaking rather than feeling the need to interrupt because you fear that you will lose the thought before you get a chance to speak.

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So, how can this boost the positive aspects inherent with the ADHD brain?

Mind mapping can be a boon for kinesthetic learners. By using colored pencils and doing mind maps on paper or a whiteboard, they create a very pleasing format that appeals to their tactile sensitivities.

Mind maps that are built to encourage collaboration in the workplace or at a family meeting can give the person with ADHD an opportunity to visually explain, in a nonlinear way, how he or she reached a conclusion and avoid being misunderstood.

Creative thinking is significantly enhanced by the five-step process delineated above because it engages the entire mind. It encourages the creative, open-minded perspective of the right side of the frontal cortex and facilitates pausing in order to allow the rational left side to consider the consequences of the decision. People with ADHD need additional time to connect with the various parts of the brain where memory is stored, so by institutionalizing a time to reflect, the mind map facilitates the use of the whole brain.

The beauty of adding this tool to your bag of tricks is that you can ease into it. Start by using it for one purpose, such as facilitating a meeting or working with an ADHD coach. You can then experiment with it to find additional ways to enrich your daily life. The step-by-step process of finding these additional uses could, one day, result in your realizing what many of the people I interviewed for this article meant when they said, "I can't imagine how my life would be without mind maps. I simply couldn't function without them." ●



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From brainstorming on a napkin to organizing thoughts, files, and bookmarks, mind maps enhance executive function abilities.