Executive function, *explained.*

The behind-the-scenes skills that help us start, remember, plan and adjust — and why they can work differently in neurodivergent brains.

Think of it as your brain's *air-traffic control.*

It decides what lands first, keeps track of what's circling, and reroutes when the weather changes. It's not about intelligence or effort.

THE CONTROL PANEL

Six skills on the dashboard

Every brain's dials sit at different levels — and they can shift with sleep, stress and interest.



DIAL 01

Task initiation

Getting started on a task — even one you actually want to do.

Can look like: staring at an email for an hour, then answering it in two minutes.



DIAL 02

Working memory

Holding information in mind while you're using it.

Can look like: walking into a room and forgetting why, or losing your place mid-sentence.



DIAL 03

Time sense

Feeling how much time has passed or is left. When it's hard, many call it **time blindness**.

Can look like: "five more minutes" quietly becoming an hour.



DIAL 04

Planning & prioritizing

Breaking a goal into steps and choosing what comes first.

Can look like: a big project feeling like one huge wall with no handholds.



DIAL 05

Shifting & flexibility

Moving between tasks, plans or ideas when things change.

Can look like: one surprise change of plans throwing off the whole day.



DIAL 06

Emotional regulation

Noticing a feeling and bringing it back to a size you can work with.

Can look like: a small frustration landing big and taking a while to settle.

Worth knowing: many ADHD, autistic and other neurodivergent people describe dials that work brilliantly under interest or urgency — and stall under boredom, overload or pressure.

Continued on back →

MYTH VS. FACT

Can't vs. won't

WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME	WHAT'S OFTEN GOING ON
"They'd start if they really cared."	The start button is stuck. Caring can make the freeze even heavier.
"They could focus on games, so they can focus on this."	Interest and urgency fuel many ND brains. Boring tasks run on a much smaller tank.
"They forgot, so it didn't matter to them."	Working memory dropped it. Forgetting isn't the same as not caring.
"They did it yesterday — why not today?"	Capacity changes with sleep, stress and sensory load. Inconsistent isn't lazy.

STRATEGY MENU

Build supports outside your head

IF YOU STRUGGLE WITH…		TRY…
Getting started	→	**Body doubling:** work alongside someone, in person or on a call. Or shrink the first step to "open the file."
Holding things in mind	→	**External memory:** sticky notes where you'll see them, voice memos, one list that lives in one place.
Feeling time pass	→	**Visible timers:** a timer you can see counting down, alarms with labels, a clock in every room.
Planning & prioritizing	→	**Visual schedules:** put the day on paper or a whiteboard. Pick just three priorities and circle one.
Switching gears	→	**First–then:** "First finish this page, then a snack." Add a heads-up warning before changes.
Big feelings	→	**Name it, then pause:** a calm-down spot, movement or a sensory tool before problem-solving.

YOUR TURN

My hardest skill right now:

_____

One tool I'll try this week:

_____