

A Step-by-Step Guide to Managing Your Email

For Adults With ADHD



So You Can Stop Feeling Overwhelmed

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Introduction

Welcome, and glad you found this guide...

I designed this guide especially for you — an Adult with ADHD. All of the strategies you will encounter as you work your way through the guide are ones that my clients have used to successfully manage their email consistently.

Be forewarned, though. This is not a guide to get you to Inbox Zero. Though, if this is what you want, you can certainly use the tactics below to get there.

Rather, the goal of this guide is to help you be on top of your email well enough so you can be confident you are communicating the way you want.

More specifically, when you finish this guide, you will:

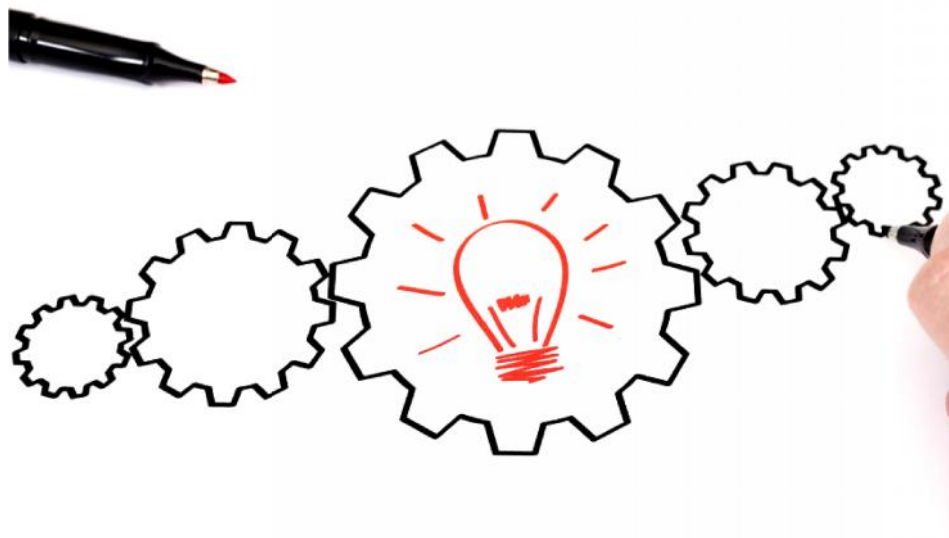
1. know what to do with each piece of your email.
2. recognize where you get stuck when processing your email.
3. have strategies to get unstuck.
4. have a toolbox of tips to help you efficiently process your email.
5. know which habit that will allow you to stay on top of your email.

Step by step you will learn strategies to process your email and tips for executing on that process with greater ease.

Suggestions For Using This Guide

Following are suggestions on how to get the most value out of this guide.

1. Share what you are doing with someone else so you can have some accountability. It is well known that sharing what you are doing makes you more likely to follow through.
2. Alternatively, do this along with an accountability partner.
3. Schedule time to work with this material when you are the most alert.
4. Work for as long as you can, and then take a break. Come back to it when you are ready.



5. If you are having a difficult time following through, ask yourself:
 - a. What is getting in my way?
 - b. What do I need to do to progress, and what kind of help do I need?
 - c. If I need help, who can provide that help?

I have provided questions in some sections so you have the opportunity to think about what you are reading. In other places, I have included ideas on how to implement the suggested strategies.

Recognizing that everyone's ADHD manifests itself in different ways, it is important to consider what would work best for you before adopting any suggestion.

You will find you get much more from the material when you take the time to connect the information to your own life. Throughout the guide are exercises and action items.

Doing these will help tailor the concepts to fit you, your life, and your own particular circumstances.

I wish you all the best on your journey.

Warmly,

Marla



Why a Special Guide For ADHD Adults?

Are you frustrated by your inability to keep up with your email, and has your failure to respond in a timely manner led to:

- missed deadlines?
- being called out by a colleague, client or boss?
- missed opportunities — maybe even prospective business?
- scheduling snafus?
- miscommunication?

If any of these are true for you, then you know how critical it is for your success to get a handle on your email. But keeping up with the constant onslaught of email is a challenge for many with ADHD.

And it is likely that your ADHD is contributing to your challenges with email. Being aware of the specific challenges can help you devise a plan to get a handle on it, rather than letting it control you.

- Unless the tide is stemmed, email can be a constant source of stimulation / instant gratification for adults with ADHD. It can get in the way of attending to other important tasks, if your attention is constantly drawn to your inbox.
- As transitions can also be a challenge for adults with ADHD, scanning and responding to email as it comes in can also make it hard to fluidly transition back to working on your other tasks.
- What causes, perhaps, the most anxiety for many is the necessity of making a decision about what to do with each email. You may, instead, ignore the emails, allowing them to pile up causing you more overwhelm.

As you already know, the key to turning this around and feeling like you are in control of your email is to establish systems, habits and rules for managing it.

So, let's get started!

1

Create a Path For Success

I know you are probably expecting to see the process for tackling your email first. After all, that is why you opened this guide, right?

"I hope there is something new that will finally help me get a handle on my email" was one of your first thoughts when you opened this.

But wait.

Maybe you've already tried out tips for processing you email. But they have not stuck, and you have not been able to follow through on them.

Not yet, anyway.

So, let's start by setting you up for success so you have a better chance of following through.

Right now, as you go about your day, you may scroll through your emails on your phone or glance at them as they pop up on your computer.

And you think:

- "I'll have to get to that, soon..."
- "Right, I forgot to reply to him..."
- "Uhh, I don't want to deal with that..."
- "I wish I would stop getting those emails!"

But because of your challenges with working memory, the thoughts just fly away as you transition to something else.

And, because of your challenges with time, your intention to get to it soon becomes well...later.

One of the ways to work around these challenges is to create a daily habit of setting aside time to process your email.

While I know time is a precious commodity for you, time to think is also critical to your success. So, it will be important to adopting this new habit to trust this will be time well spent.

Experimenting With The Time

The first step is to set aside 1-3 times each day to process your non-urgent emails from the last 24 hours which will entail:

- putting each email in the appropriate container. You will find suggestions for how to do this in "Part 2 - Identify and Decide."
- respond to emails that take 2 minutes or less.



You will probably need to experiment a bit before you hit on the:

- amount of time needed.
- number of times each day.
- whether the times are fixed or vary day to day.



Your Turn

1. What time of day is best for me to do this?

2. How much time will I need? Consider the time you need to ramp up — get into the task.

3. When am I going to process my email each day?

Estimating Time Needed



One of the challenges for adults with ADHD is estimating time. So, you may have no idea right now how much time you need to process your email each day to keep on top of it.

To can get an accurate estimate of how much time you will need going forward set a timer each time you process your email for the first 2 weeks or so.

In the beginning, when you are learning how to process your email, you will likely need much more time.

Though, of course, I have no idea how much time you will eventually need, you can try an hour total to begin.

Your Turn



How much time do you think you need each day to process your email?

The Right Space

You also know, as an adult with ADHD, it is hard to make decisions in the midst of a lot of noise.

So, working in a space that is most conducive to focusing and making decisions is an important part of processing your email easily.

Avoiding processing your email on the run, if possible, will minimize the chances of making mistakes and overlooking important emails.



Your Turn

If I have a choice, where is the best place to do this?
Consider the noise and activity level.

Decide - Needs Immediate Attention



Ok, I know you probably have certain emails that because of the nature of your work or your workplace culture need immediate attention.

Decide, as much as possible, in advance which emails fall in the urgent category so you will need to make fewer decisions in the moment.



Your Turn

Which emails (maybe ones from certain active clients or your boss) will you respond to as soon you receive them?

Decide - Can Wait to be Processed



Avoiding looking at and trying to deal with non-urgent emails as they arrive in your inbox will help ensure you:

- are not distracted from your essential work.
- do not have to transition back and forth between your email and other tasks.
- are not overwhelmed by needing to make decisions on the spot.

The key is to address non-urgent emails during your processing time each day.

Hopefully, when you have a time to process your email, you will be confident you will get to it, and will not feel compelled to address / think about each email as soon as it comes in.

Dealing With Your Backlog



I know. Like many on this journey to taming your email, you probably have a back log. And you can't possibly deal with it during your regular processing time.

A work around for this challenge is to:

- treat your back log as a project.
- schedule time over a period of a couple of weeks to complete it, but try not to use "prime thinking time," as it is fairly rote (aka boring).
- acknowledge that it will take a fair bit of time so you are not prompted to give up.
- make it as fun as possible. Sit in a comfy chair with your laptop, turn on the music and plow through.



Your Turn

When are you going to work on your backlog each week for the next couple of weeks.

2

Identify & Decide



After creating the right environment, the next step in managing your email confidently is being sure you can identify and know what to do with each piece of email.

After all, how many times have you opened your email, and just glossed over the same one again and again, not sure what to do with it?

Hmmm... a lot, I bet. And, in part, you probably do this because of your ADHD related challenges with making decisions.

And so those emails — the ones you gloss over again and again — continue take up a lot of your energy and time because you can't decide what to do with them.

Below are:

- types of emails you may have in your inbox.
- suggestions to guide you in making decisions about what to do with each type.

Can Answer in 2 Minutes or Less

If the action / response will take 2 minutes or less, do it right away. Why not get it out of the way.

Then, if there is nothing else you need from the email, go ahead and delete it.

Junk / Spam

This one is easy. These are unsolicited emails.

First, mark these as spam so they go right to your junk mail folder

Then delete them.



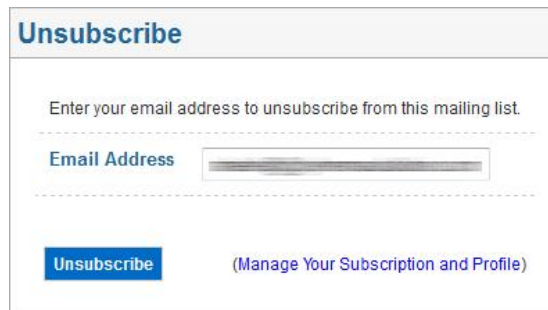
Subscriptions I Don't Read

You signed up to receive a newsletter, but never or almost never read it.

You may keep getting it because you wonder, "What if something interesting comes in the next one?"

Why keep getting it and letting it clutter you inbox? Don't let information overload get the best of you. There is more good information out there than you can possibly digest.

Go ahead, unsubscribe so you stop receiving it, and then delete it.

A screenshot of an "Unsubscribe" form. The title "Unsubscribe" is in a blue header. Below it, a text prompt says "Enter your email address to unsubscribe from this mailing list." There is a text input field labeled "Email Address". At the bottom, there is a blue "Unsubscribe" button and a link "(Manage Your Subscription and Profile)".

Unsubscribe

Enter your email address to unsubscribe from this mailing list.

Email Address

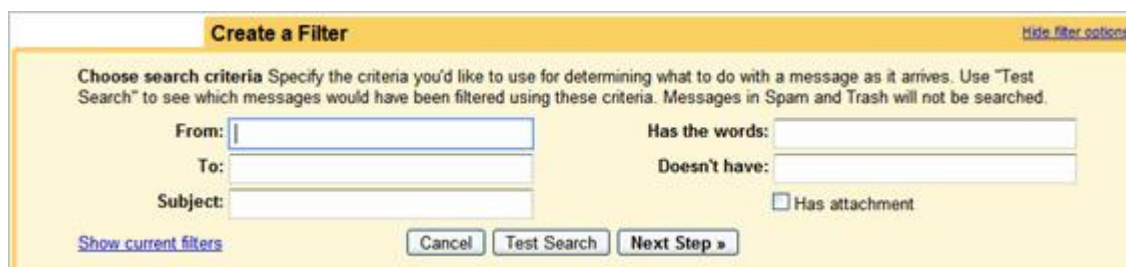
Unsubscribe [\(Manage Your Subscription and Profile\)](#)

Subscriptions I Read

You read this newsletter at least occasionally and want to keep receiving it.

Since these are still generally not a priority, and can distract you from work that is more important:

- Create an [email filter](#) so that these automatically go to a specific folder.
- Then, set aside time to read these newsletters, rather than reading them as soon as you receive them.

A screenshot of a "Create a Filter" dialog box. The title bar says "Create a Filter" and there is a "Hide filter options" link. The main text says "Choose search criteria Specify the criteria you'd like to use for determining what to do with a message as it arrives. Use 'Test Search' to see which messages would have been filtered using these criteria. Messages in Spam and Trash will not be searched." There are input fields for "From:", "To:", and "Subject:". There are also input fields for "Has the words:" and "Doesn't have:". A checkbox labeled "Has attachment" is present. At the bottom, there are links "Show current filters", "Cancel", "Test Search", and "Next Step »".

Create a Filter [Hide filter options](#)

Choose search criteria Specify the criteria you'd like to use for determining what to do with a message as it arrives. Use "Test Search" to see which messages would have been filtered using these criteria. Messages in Spam and Trash will not be searched.

From:

To:

Subject:

Has the words:

Doesn't have:

☐ Has attachment

[Show current filters](#)

Contains Links

You want to save the email because it contains a link for a webpage you want to explore.

Rather than going down a rabbit hole by clicking on the link immediately, choose where you want to keep the link, and then delete the email.

Here are a few options:

Instapaper - The advantage of a service like Instapaper is that it is simple to use. [Click on an icon](#) in the toolbar and the site is saved.

Read Later

Save articles to
Instapaper or Read It
Later, so you can read
them later.

I Instapaper

➤ Read It Later

Dropbox - If you are working on a project and use Dropbox to save your material, you can [drag and drop the url](#) into a folder associated with the project.



Evernote Web Clipper - Another great way to [organize links](#) associated with a specific project is in the Evernote.



These are all great options. Choose 1 or 2 and use them consistently.

Reference

You may need to refer to the email later because it contains information for a current task or project.

But you don't need to do anything with it right now.

Here are a few options:

1. If you are using an electronic task manager (Remember the Milk, OmniFocus, Nozbe, etc.), store the information with the task.



2. Put it in a folder labeled with the name of the project. When you are done with the project you can move the folder to your archives or just delete it.



3. If you are using Evernote for the project, store the information in the relevant notebook in [Evernote](#).



Contains Information for a Calendar Item

The screenshot shows the Google Calendar 'Add Event' form. Red circles highlight the following fields:

- Name:** Jane Smith
- Date and Time:** 9/11/2011, 10:30am to 10:30am
- Description:** Review position

Other visible fields and options include:

- Where:** Enter a location
- Video call:** Add video call
- Calendar:** Using (Law Office)
- Guests:** Add guests, Enter email addresses, Add
- Guests can:** ☐ modify event, ☒ invite others, ☒ see guest list
- Event color:** Selection of colored squares
- Notifications:** No notifications set, Add a notification
- Show me as:** Available, Busy
- Visibility:** Calendar default, Public, Private

At the bottom, there is a note: "By default this event will follow the sharing settings of the calendar. Event details will be visible to anyone who can access details of other events in this calendar. Learn more" and a "Publish event" link.

The email contains information for a scheduled event.

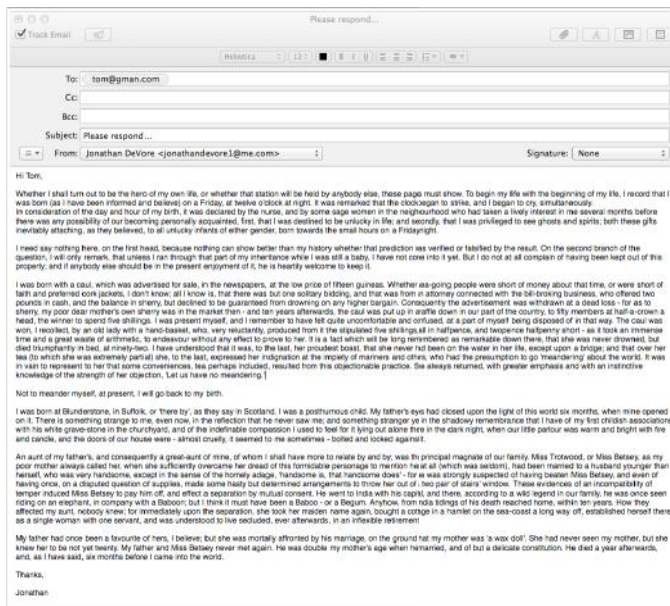
Put the event in your calendar.

Then cut and paste information you need from the email into the notes / description section of the calendar item, which may include:

- address
- contact information
- items needed for event / appointment

Last, once you have all the information you need, delete the email.

Requires a Lengthy Response



You know how to answer these emails.

However, they will take some time to respond to because either you need more information or you just need time to compose a thoughtful response.

These are also often the ones you promise to get to later — when you have time. But because of your challenges with time and planning, maybe the time does not come.

So, when you come across these during your processing time...

- put them on your to do list as a task.
- schedule time to answer them.

Otherwise, you may continue glossing over these.

Not Sure How to Answer



Making decisions is one of the biggest challenges for Adults with ADHD, and can lead to decision paralysis. You know that.

So, when you are avoiding answering an email, it may be because you are just not sure how to respond. Maybe you get a pit in the bottom of your stomach when you see these.

But you may not even know that the reason you are avoiding them is because you are not quite sure how to answer them.

Here are steps you can take when you come across these types.

1. First identify the email as one you are avoiding. Then ask yourself, "Am I stuck answering some part of it?"
2. If you are stuck, ask yourself, "What is it that I am stuck answering?"
3. Next ask, "If I set aside enough time, can I figure out how to answer this on my own?"

If the answer is yes, go ahead set aside the time.

4. If you decide you can't figure it out on your own, ask, "Who or what do I need to access for support in order to answer this email?"

Your next task is to access the support you need to answer the email.

These are tricky emails, for sure.

But leaving them in your inbox can also be frustrating, too, right?

Need as a Reminder



If you are keeping emails in your inbox as reminders, I'm guessing it is not working very well. Because out of sight is out of mind.

The trick is to keep the reminder in a place you will see it at the right time.

Here are two places to keep these reminders:

- When you send an email and are waiting for a response put a task on your to do list, such as:

"Sent email 3/12. Call or email Bob, if I don't hear from him by 3/24."

- If you have an email concerning a project you are responsible for tracking, again put the task on your to do list. For example:

"Follow up with Bob to check status of the Smith Project on 4/12."

The bottom line is to not keep emails in your inbox because you think they will help remind you to do something.

It just does not work.

Other Types of Emails

If you receive other types of emails that are not on this list, please let me know what they marla@marlacummins.com.

I will add it to the list and provide a tip or two on how to deal with them.

3

Practice



© Can Stock Photo

If your inbox is overflowing in part because deciding what to do with each email is such a challenge, the only way to change this is to practice processing your email.

In fact, when needed I will do a screen share with clients to help them practice making decisions about their email.

I bet, like my clients, the more you practice, the better you will get at processing your inbox.

Ready?



Your Turn

Go through and identify 10 of your emails.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Remember, out of sight out of mind, especially for adults with ADHD. So, you do not want to use your inbox as a filing cabinet.

4

Get Help



If you have a difficult time identifying any of your email, find a thought partner who can practice with you.

Once you feel confident you can process your email fairly quickly you will likely be more willing to stick with the habit of doing this on a regular basis.

Much of your email remains in your inbox because you are not sure what to do with it.

And needing to revisit the same email again and again takes up a lot of your time and energy. Because every time you see it you need to think about it, "I have to do something with that."

But then you move on...

Until the next time you think, "I have to do something with that."

So, it is important to trust that the time spent practicing identifying your email until you can do so fairly automatically is time well spent.

Concluding Thoughts

In the long run having systems and rules for how you process your email will help you save time and communicate more effectively.

I know you get that.

More specifically, by adopting a routine you will also:

- increase your chances of acting on what is important to you.
- screen out what is not important so that you can spend your time in ways that you value.
- respond in a timely manner so you can take advantage of opportunities.
- be seen as a reliable and professional.
- have information where you need it, not swimming around in your head.
- lose the constant nagging feeling that you are forgetting something.

But remember the learning curve can be steep and is usually non-linear, which means in the short run it will also take a lot of time — time you don't think you have.



So, in the moment, when you may be tempted to give up because it is just too hard, it is important to use self-talk to remind yourself:

- "I am trying to minimize my overwhelm in the long run, and this will take time upfront now."
- "If it is too hard to do on my own, I can ask for help."
- "Email is part of my job and I'll need to take time to handle it right."
- "Putting off dealing with this will just make it harder for me."

What else can you say to yourself when you feel like giving up creating a system for taming your email?



Wish you all the very best,

Marla