THINKING · ONE PAGE EXPLAINER

Executive function

The eight mental skills that turn intentions into finished things.

Executive functions are the brain's management layer, run largely by the prefrontal cortex. They are what let you start the boring thing, resist the shiny thing, hold the plan in mind, and switch course when the plan breaks. They are skills, they vary between people, and they are the first thing stress and sleep loss degrade.

THE EIGHT SKILLS

Working memory
Holding information in mind while using it. When strained: walking into rooms and forgetting why, losing the thread mid sentence.

Inhibition
Stopping the impulse between urge and action. When strained: blurting, doomscrolling, the snack you did not decide to eat.

Cognitive flexibility
Shifting between tasks, rules, or perspectives. When strained: getting stuck on one approach, derailed whole days after one change of plan.

Task initiation
Starting without a deadline breathing on you. When strained: the five hour standoff with a ten minute task.

Planning and prioritizing
Sequencing steps and picking what matters most. When strained: everything feels equally urgent, so nothing gets chosen.

Organization
Keeping track of things and information. When strained: lost keys, buried emails, piles that move from surface to surface.

Time awareness
Sensing how long things take and how much time remains. When strained: chronic lateness and the honest surprise that it is already 4 pm.

Emotional regulation
Managing feelings enough to stay on task. When strained: small frustrations ending work sessions, feedback that ruins a day.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

- Identify your two most strained skills. Support those specifically instead of trying harder in general.
- Externalize everything you can: lists, timers, alarms, visible calendars. Offloading is a strategy, not cheating.
- These skills run on sleep, food, and recovery. Support the hardware before judging the software.

Based on executive function research in cognitive neuroscience, including Adele Diamond's model of the core skills. Executive strain is central in ADHD and appears in depression and anxiety.

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