

Using Habits to Support Executive Function

How do habits relate to executive function?

Executive function refers to higher-level thinking skills that help you organize your actions, thoughts, and emotions to reach goals. Many autistic folks struggle with executive function skills. There are plenty of reasons why, but some of the most common include:

- It can be hard to generalize skills, so autistics often need to consciously work through each step of a task every time they do it.
- Autistics can have a hard time prioritizing tasks or deciding what order to do them in, which makes starting or changing tasks harder.
- It can be hard to estimate how much time something is going to take, so time management gets thrown off.
- Autistics may have shorter or less developed working memory than other people, making it hard to keep steps, facts, and ideas in mind.
- Transitioning from one thing to another can be challenging: we often hyperfocus and have a hard time moving our minds on to the next thing
- Life feels unexpected a lot of the time. Autistics often feel like they don't know what's coming.

One way to make executive function a bit easier and address some of these challenges is to rely on habits and routines. Routine is a strength for many autistics, which means it works with autistic neurology instead of against it. When you create a habit, you no longer have to think about each step of the process, which solves many of the problems listed above.

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When to use habits

Habits can be incredibly useful when you use them intentionally. They can become a problem when they set you up for more challenges. For example, if you get very distraught when you have to do something a different way, or you can't adjust to changes, your habits may be getting in the way instead of helping you.

As you start thinking about how you can build or break habits to support your executive function, take some time to consider what habits you currently have. When do you do them? Why do you do them? Do you think you could move it to a different time of day or location if you had to? If an element of the habit needed to change, could you do that? If you notice some habits that aren't serving you well, think about how you can adjust them to be more useful. On the other hand, maybe you notice some areas that are just ready for a habit but don't have one yet. Maybe you don't have a great routine for when you get up in the morning and you'd like to build one. Taking stock of your current situation can help you decide what you want to keep the same and what you want to change.

A first step to incorporating habits into your executive function is to pick one habit to start building.

Building Habits

No matter what habits you're trying to build, there are some principles to use that will be helpful. First, only work on one habit at a time. Trying to do too much at once can be overwhelming and will keep you from focusing. Second, start with something small and easy. Once you've practiced building habits you can work on something harder. After you've picked a habit to work on, you can follow these steps to start building it up.

1

Be specific. A habit is something that occurs at a specific time and place, in a specific way. It would be easy to say you want to build a habit to brush your teeth. But that doesn't actually tell you much about what you will be doing. How often will you brush your teeth? At what time of day? Where? For how long? Try to add as much detail as possible when you're describing the habit you want to build so that you'll know if you have succeeded or not, and you have a plan to help you move forward.

2

Work with your strengths. Sometimes we get an image in our mind of what a habit "should" look like, even if that method is not working for us. For example, you might believe that you need to go to the gym to work out, even though adding in the extra step of leaving the house makes it much harder for you. Think about what gets in the way for you and brainstorm other ways of completing the habit that don't include that challenge. Maybe you get some weights and work out at home. One strategy here is to link multiple habits together. You probably have some habits that you already do. Try adding another element: if you cook dinner each night, can you meal prep for the next day at the same time? When you're working on adding multiple habits together, try to combine things that happen in the same place or that are similar tasks.

3

Add in enjoyment. Many times, the habits we try to build are boring or unpleasant. You're much more likely to be successful if there are some fun elements. If you struggle to shower regularly, you could invest in a waterproof speaker and listen to music or a podcast. Another option is to build in rewards when you complete a habit. You could pack yourself a fun size candy bar every time you remember to pack a lunch as a little treat. Think about what gets you excited and try to incorporate it.

4

Plan for challenges. This suggestion includes multiple elements. First, think in advance about what might be challenging for you in building the habit. For example, you might be working on a habit to go to the gym regularly. A common challenge would be low energy. To prepare for this, think about what you'll do when that happens. A response could be "If I have low energy when it's time to go to the gym, I will try to go for a short walk to still get exercise." In addition to prepping for common challenges, also remember that missing a habit one time is not a failure. You have still completed the habit many other times. Try not to get discouraged, and focus on completing the habit the next time. While the sense of momentum can feel good, don't get too focused on building a streak of successfully completed habits: it can become a problem if you do miss a day.

5

Use reminders and supports. You don't have to remember everything on your own. You can set alarms, use apps to get reminders, or ask other people to help remind you when it's time to do your habit. Try out a few different options to see what works best for you. Many habit trackers have reminder features (see the next page).

6

Take data and review your progress. It's a good idea to try using a habit tracker when you're trying to build new habits. This has a few benefits: first, it keeps your habit at the top of your mind because you need to fill in your tracker each day. Second, it lets you see how well you're doing which can help build momentum. Third, it gives you data so you can come back and see if your current strategies are working or if you need to change them. Plan in advance for when you'll review your progress so that you have a set amount of time before you try changing your strategy.

Example: Packing a Lunch

So what does this look like in practice when you're building habits to support executive function? Let's say you struggle to remember to bring food to work with you each day, and you find yourself having to go without or buy food at work. You want to remember to pack a lunch. To make it easier, you decide to try and make it a habit: you'll do it the same way, at the same time each day. Here are the steps you might take.

1

Be specific. Start by narrowing down what you mean when you say pack a lunch. In this case, you might say that you're going to put food in your lunchbox the night before each weekday just before you go to bed. You could even create some examples of meals, so that you just have to choose one and put it in the lunch bag.

2

Work with your strengths. You may find that you do better packing each evening instead of doing meal prep once a week, or the other way around. Try both and see which one works better for you. You could also try adding this to a habit you already have: if you cook dinner each evening, you could pack your lunch before you start making dinner since you're in the same room.

3

Make it fun and build in rewards. To add in a reward, you could pack a small candy bar or treat when you pack. You could also consider ways to make the process of packing more fun. Maybe you listen to your favorite music, listen to a podcast, or doing it with a friend/family member. You could even treat yourself to a lunch box that excites you, whether that's one decorated with a character or a cute bento box.

4

Plan for challenges. Challenges could be not having ingredients, being tired, forgetting when it's time to pack, or struggling to stop what you're already doing and transition. Solutions could be that when you go grocery shopping, make a list of what you're planning to make for lunches and get ingredients. Maybe you add an alarm to your phone to remind you to get started, and plan to start early enough in the evening that you aren't tired yet. Try finding easier meals like mac and cheese or frozen dinners for tired days.

5

Use reminders and supports. If you keep a planner, you could add in a task to make your lunch each day. You could also ask a friend or loved one to remind you when it's time to pack. Another way to make it easier is to keep all the things you need in the same place so you never have to wonder where your lunchbox is.

6

Take data and make adjustments. Think about when you'll look at a habit tracker and try to note each day if you've packed your lunch or not. You might decide that you want to give it two weeks and then check back in. Maybe after two weeks, you realize that you like packing your lunch every day, but you realize that you're too tired in the evening and you want to try packing in the morning instead.

Picking a Habit Tracker

When you're working on building habits, one of the most important tools you can use is a habit tracker. There are also nearly endless options for habit trackers. How do you know which one is right for you?

Finding a habit tracker that meets your needs might take some trial and error. However there are some questions you can use to figure out what might work well for you.

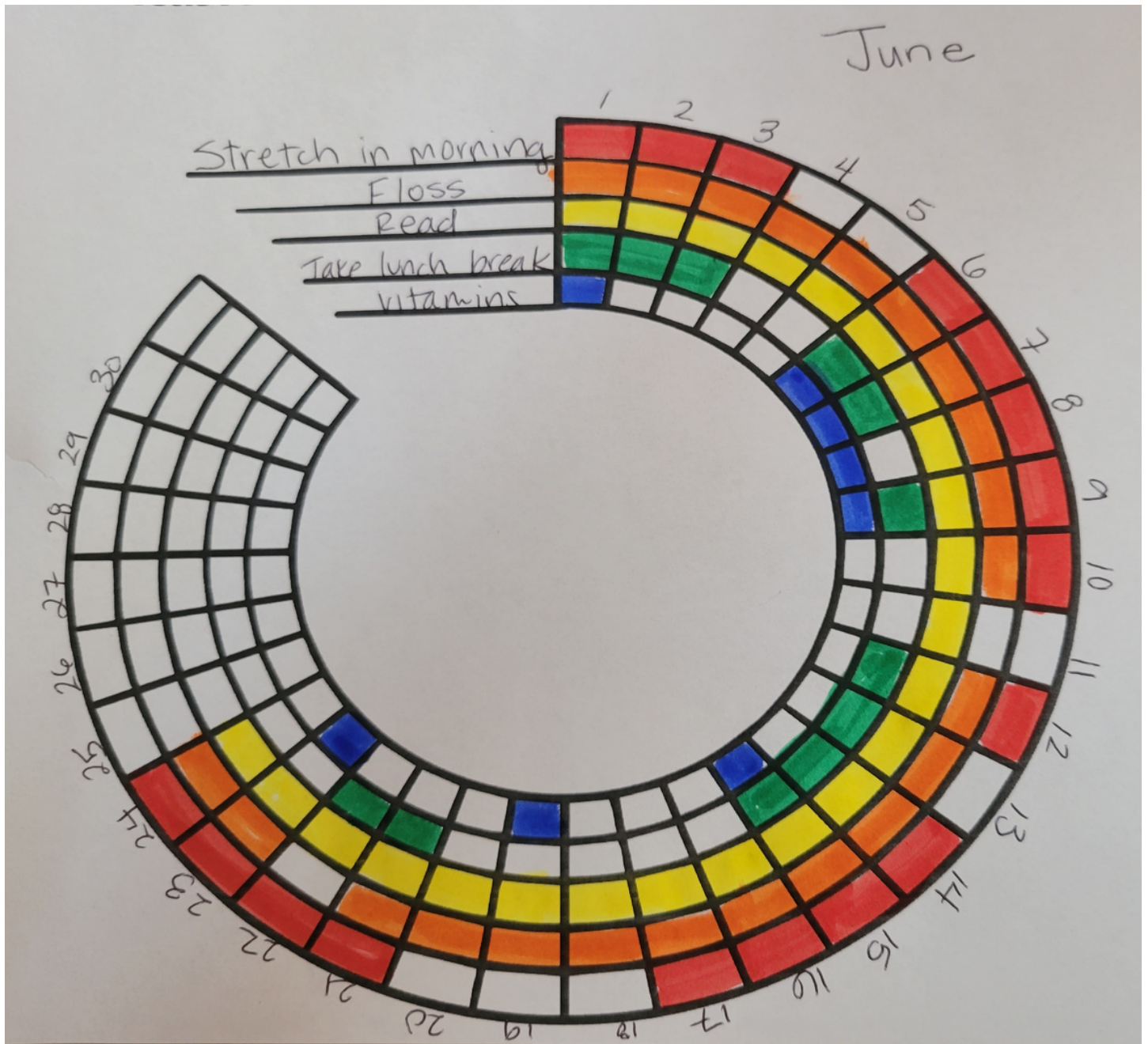
- Do you keep a paper planner/journal/calendar that you look at regularly?
- Do you do most of your organizing on your phone or another digital device?
- Are you doing your habit daily, weekly, or in a different time frame?
- Do you need your tracker to give you reminders?
- What makes you feel accomplished when you've completed a habit?
- What makes you more likely to look at a tracker or planner? This could be colors, stickers, quotes, themes, etc.

Use your answers to help you find a good tracker for your needs. If you don't keep a paper planner and you use your phone often, you might want to look for an app on your phone. If you're artistic and feel fulfilled by creating something beautiful, you may want to make a paper habit tracker that you can personalize to your needs. You can also use one of the trackers provided below. Feel free to customize them to your needs!

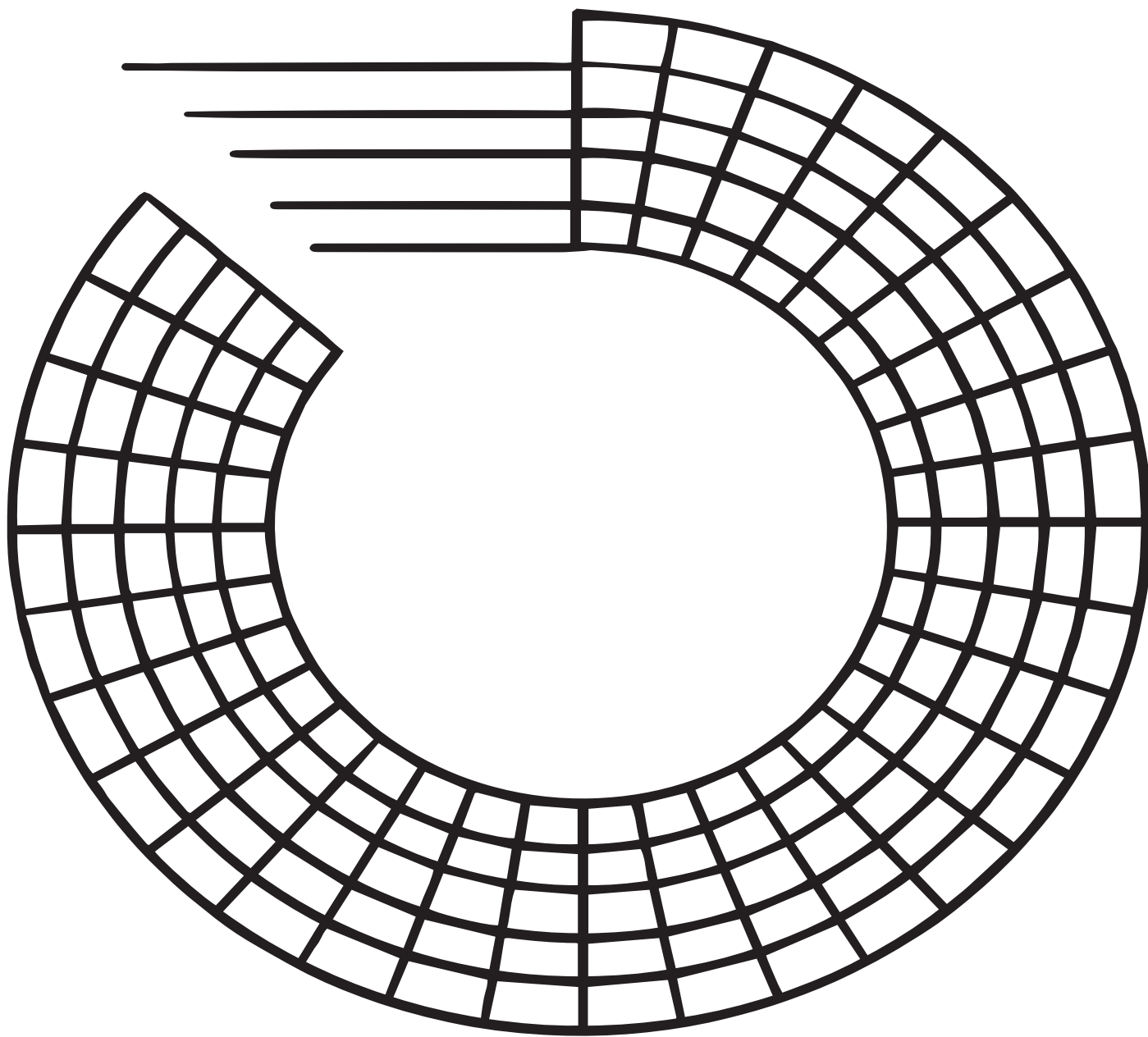
Check out some examples of trackers:

- [Habit Tracker Apps](#)
- [Examples of Paper Trackers](#)

Habit Tracker Example 1



Printable Habit Tracker 1



Habit Tracker Example 2

	S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
<u>Stretch</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<u>Floss</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<u>Read</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<u>Take lunch break</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Vitamins</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<u>In bed by 11</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Write to do list</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Printable Habit Tracker 2

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Habit Tracker Example 3

June Stretch

m	T	W	Th	F	Sa	Su
1 X	2 X	3 X	4 X	5 X	6	7 X
8	9	10 X	11 X	12 X	13 X	14 X
15	16	17	18 X	19	20 X	21 X
22 X	23 X	24	25 X	26 X	27 X	28
29 X	30					

Printable Habit Tracker 3

Areas To Try Building Habits

You may be struggling to think of places to try building habits in your life. Here are some suggestions to get you started. Some of these may be things you already do, but struggle with. Think about how you could create a habit that makes it easier.

- Hygiene
 - Brush teeth
 - Take a shower
 - Floss teeth
 - Put on deodorant
- Cleaning
 - Laundry (and put it away)
 - Dishes
 - Pick up after yourself
 - Dust
 - Sweep
 - Vacuum
 - Trash/recycling
- Organization
 - Write a to do list
 - Put away items when you're done with them
- Time management
 - Leave the house on time for a particular appointment
 - Determining how long a task takes
 - Getting ready in the morning
 - Creating an evening routine
- Food
 - Eat three meals a day/at a consistent time
 - Drink more water
 - Eat more of a food you need
 - Take vitamins
 - Meal prepping/planning
 - Get groceries
 - Cook at home
- Tasks at work that repeat
 - Respond to emails
 - Data entry
 - Prepare for recurring meetings
- Hobbies
 - Work on a writing project
 - Practice an instrument
 - Work on learning a language
 - Craft/make art
 - Read
- Work out/move your body
- Sleep
 - Go to bed on time
 - Get up on time
 - Avoid distractions before bed
 - Sleep for a certain amount of time each day
- Sensory inputs
 - Get deep pressure
 - Spin or get vestibular input
 - Light candles or add a smell you like
 - Take time where it's quiet
- Self care
 - Get time alone or spend time with people
 - Spend time doing something you enjoy
 - Take breaks at work
- Emotion regulation
 - Practice mindfulness
 - Check in with your emotions during the day\
 - Track your moods
 - Notice something you're grateful for
- Take your medication
- Spend time with friends or family
- Water plants
- Check your bank account
- Pay your bills

Worksheet

What habit are you trying to build?

1

Let's make it more specific. What time of day? Where will you be? What steps will you take? How often will you do it? For how long? Share as much detail as possible.

2

Do you have an already-established habit you can add this on to? What is it?

3

What are some challenges that might get in the way?

4

What could you do when you encounter those challenges?

5

How can you make it more fun for yourself? Are there ways you can reward yourself when you succeed?

6

What will you use to remind yourself to do this habit? Will you ask anyone for help?

7

Which habit tracker do you plan to use? You can try the one we have here, or pick another. When will you review to see if your habit is working?