The Exit Alarm Ladder

A set of alarms, spaced and named, that gets you out of the door — or off the task — on time without a last-minute scramble.

One alarm tells you it is too late. A ladder tells you where you are.

WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

A single alarm at leaving time does one thing: it announces that you should already have left. Everything before it — finishing, finding things, changing gear — has not happened, because nothing prompted it. The scramble that follows is not disorganisation. It is the predictable result of one cue for a five-step process.

The exit alarm ladder places cues along the runway: one to start finishing, one to gather, one to move, one to leave. Each is named for what it means, not just when it fires. Time becomes a series of steps you can see coming instead of a wall you hit.

WHY IT CAN BE HARD — WHAT IS ACTUALLY GOING ON

- **Leaving is a sequence, not a moment.** Stop, save, gather, dress, go — five transitions in fifteen minutes. With ADHD each is a cold start, and a single alarm prompts only the last.
- **Time before the alarm does not exist.** If the internal clock is unreliable, “I have twenty minutes” is not felt. The first cue is the alarm, whenever it is set.
- **Hyperfocus does not hear one alarm.** Absorbed in a task, a single ring is dismissed by reflex. Several, spaced and escalating, break through.
- **Rushing pairs leaving with panic.** Every scramble teaches the brain that transitions are emergencies. A ladder makes them boring — which is the goal.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN
you are careless about being on time. It means a five-step process was given one cue, and the fix is more cues, not more effort.

FOR A PARTNER OR FAMILY MEMBER
If you hear several alarms before someone leaves, that is the system working. Do not add your own reminders on top; the ladder is already doing it.

Continued on the next page.

Where to go from here

This sheet is the introduction. The workbook that goes with it walks you through setting the skill up yourself.

1
BEFORE

Before you start: notice one thing for a week.

For one week, notice what actually happens in the fifteen minutes before you need to leave — what you are doing when you realise it is time, and what the last five minutes feel like. Do not set alarms yet.

2
SET IT UP

Set it up: work through the workbook.

Pick one exit you regularly struggle with. Walk backwards from the leaving time, place the rungs, name each alarm for its job, and set them up on your phone before you close the workbook.

The Exit Alarm Ladder is a four-step sequence. Each step exists because of one of the difficulties on the previous page, and the order matters. The workbook takes you through them in that order.

3
AFTER

After: a review date, and the rest of the library.

Choose a review date before you start and look at what happened then — a plan that did not hold is information, not a verdict. This is one of thirty-three skills across five focus areas; the Skill Finder points to the others. If several fit, start with one.

READY TO START?

Open the workbook for **Strategy 14** in your library and set a review date.

WANT SUPPORT?

This works on your own. For support, a therapist or ADHD coach can work through it with you.

TWO THINGS PEOPLE GET WRONG

"More alarms means more nagging."

Actually — One alarm nags because it comes too late. Four alarms with jobs feel like a countdown, not a scold.

"I should just be able to watch the clock."

Actually — Watching the clock is a task. With ADHD it competes with whatever you are doing, and loses.

CHECK WITH A PROFESSIONAL FIRST IF

lateness is tied to dread of the destination rather than loss of time, or alarms themselves trigger significant anxiety. Those change which skill comes first — and none of them mean this is not for you.

EVIDENCE **B — Externalised time cues** PRIMARY TARGET **Punctuality / exit transitions**

Basis. Externalising time and cueing (Barkley); alarm and prompt systems in CBT for adult ADHD (Safren; Solanto). Educational self-help information — not a diagnosis, treatment plan, or substitute for professional care. © 2026 STG Health Services Inc. Personal, non-commercial client use permitted. SaskADHD.com