Overwhelm Triage

Sorting what is actually urgent when everything feels urgent at once — so one thing can happen instead of nothing.

When everything is urgent, nothing gets done. Triage makes one thing first.

WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

Overwhelm with ADHD has a specific texture: not too much to do, but too much all at the same level. Every task is loud, every one is now, and the brain — unable to rank them — does none. The result looks like paralysis or avoidance. It is a sorting failure.

Triage is what emergency departments do with the same problem. Get everything out of your head onto paper. Sort it fast, by two questions — what breaks if this waits, and what is actually mine — into three piles. Do one thing from the first pile. The rest waits, visibly, where you can see it is not lost.

WHY IT CAN BE HARD — WHAT IS ACTUALLY GOING ON

- **Prioritising is an executive function, and ADHD taxes it.** Ranking tasks by consequence requires holding them all in mind and comparing. Under load, that capacity is the first to go.
- **Urgency is a feeling, not a fact.** With ADHD, every task carries the same alarm. Triage replaces the alarm with a question that has an answer.
- **Paralysis is the brain protecting itself.** Faced with twelve equal demands, freezing is not laziness. It is overload, and the fix is fewer things in view.
- **Unsorted lists are not less overwhelming.** Writing everything down helps only if it is then sorted. A long flat list is the overwhelm, on paper.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN
you cannot handle responsibility. It means the sorting step your brain skips under load has to be done deliberately, on paper.

FOR A PARTNER OR FAMILY MEMBER
When someone is overwhelmed, adding one more thing — even a helpful one — makes it worse. Ask “what is the one thing?” rather than offering solutions.

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 the moment overwhelm hits — how many things are in your head at once, and whether any of them is actually due today. Do not sort yet. Just count what is in the pile.

2
SET IT UP

Set it up: work through the workbook.

Use a real overwhelmed moment, or the pile you have right now. Do one triage start to finish — dump, sort, one thing — so you know the shape of it, and set up where the waiting pile lives.

Overwhelm Triage 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 22** 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

“If I don’t do it all today something terrible will happen.”

Actually — Triage usually shows one or two things are due today. The terrible feeling belonged to the pile, not the tasks.

“I need a better system.”

Actually — You need a faster sort. Systems are for calm days; triage is for flooded ones.

CHECK WITH A PROFESSIONAL FIRST IF

overwhelm tips into panic attacks, shutdown or dissociation, or the pile includes things — bills, health, safety — that have already gone past their deadline. Those change which skill comes first — and none of them mean this is not for you.

EVIDENCE **B — Problem-solving / prioritisation** PRIMARY TARGET **Overwhelm / prioritisation failure**

Basis. Problem-solving and prioritisation modules in CBT for adult ADHD (Safren; Solanto); cognitive-load and decision-paralysis literature. 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