The Small Agreement

A short, specific plan you make with yourself when a task is hard to start, easy to avoid, or hard to stop once you begin.

Start small. Stay briefly. Stop on purpose. Restore. Then look at what happened.

WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

Most people with ADHD do not have a knowledge problem. You usually know exactly what needs doing. The difficulty is at the threshold — the moment where intention has to become action — and again at the edges, where a task that has started has no natural place to stop. The Small Agreement works on those two edges directly.

You are not promising to solve the whole problem. You are agreeing, with yourself, to one small action with a clear first move and a clear ending, and to something restorative afterwards. Then you look at what actually happened, without judgement, and adjust the next agreement.

WHY IT CAN BE HARD — WHAT IS ACTUALLY GOING ON

- **Starting feels like agreeing to everything.** The brain does not register "open the file"; it registers the whole four-hour task behind it, and treats a ten-minute start as a commitment to finish. So it refuses. Bounding the effort in advance is what makes the threshold crossable.
- **A large task has no obvious first move.** Working memory holds fewer steps at once when you have ADHD, and an unsequenced task presents as a wall rather than a path. Naming one visible first action is not a trick — it is supplying the step the brain could not generate under load.
- **Stopping feels like failing.** If you have spent years being told you give up too easily, a planned stop feels like the same thing. It is the opposite: a stopping point you chose is what makes the next start safe. Without one, every start is a possible trap.
- **Rest has become something you have to earn.** When rest is a reward for finishing, and finishing rarely happens, rest rarely happens either — and depletion makes the next start harder still. Planning restoration into the agreement breaks that loop.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN
you are lazy or undisciplined. A plan that does not work is information about the plan — its size, its first move, its stopping point — not about you.

FOR A PARTNER OR FAMILY MEMBER
Stopping at the agreed point is the strategy working — not giving up early. "Just a bit more" removes the boundary that made starting possible.

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.

Each time you avoid a task, ask yourself: **if this were easy to start, would I still want or need to do it?** You do not need to act on the answer. Just notice how often it is "no" — and how often it is "yes, and I still cannot." That second group is where the Small Agreement works.

2
SET IT UP

Set it up: work through the workbook.

Pick one of those tasks — any size. In about fifty minutes the workbook takes you through the task, the first move, the dose, the stop and the restoration, and helps you find where yours tends to break. By the end, your first agreement is written down.

The Small Agreement is a five-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 28** 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

"Small steps are not real progress."

Actually — repeated contact with a task beats an ambitious plan you never start.

"I have to earn rest by finishing."

Actually — rest is part of the plan, not a reward for it.

CHECK WITH A PROFESSIONAL FIRST IF

you cannot start even very small tasks, tasks trigger intense fear or shame, or you cannot stop once you begin. Those change which skill comes first — and none of them mean this is not for you.

EVIDENCE **B/C — Behavioural activation aligned** PRIMARY TARGET **Task initiation / bounded effort**

Basis. Behavioural activation and graded-task principles; adult ADHD CBT context. Educational self-help information — not a diagnosis, treatment plan, or substitute for professional care.

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