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# The Invisible Labor of Managing Executive Dysfunction at Work

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# The Invisible Labor of Managing Executive Dysfunction at Work

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For WLA's Neurodiversity & Libraries Summit, Sep. 7, 2023

# A bit about me

- I'm the STEM Librarian at Gonzaga University, & graduated from UW in 2016.
- I live with ADHD and a few other brain-based disorders!
- This talk came about as I was reflecting on productivity hacks I've tried over the years for my own executive dysfunction
- Important note: I'm **not** a therapist, neuroscientist, psychologist, psychiatrist, or doctor.

# A bit about me

My positionality is relevant:

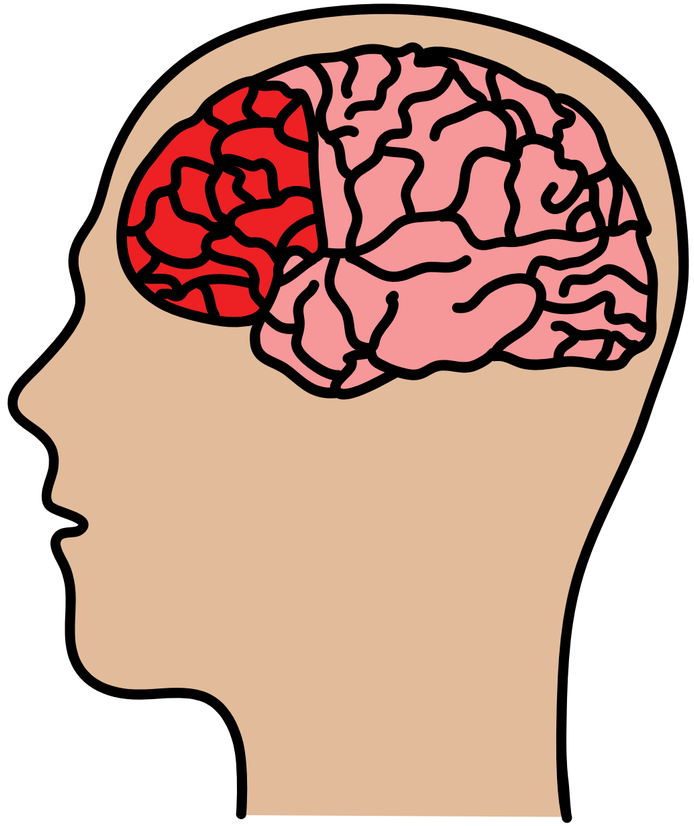
- I'm white, and life-long middle class;
- I've had a lot of opportunities to learn about this topic because I've had financial and social access to treatment;
- I've had some wonderful support experiences at work. I'm optimistic because of these experiences.

Part 1:

# An Overview of Executive Function and Dysfunction

# What is executive functioning?

- Very broadly, it's the set of **cognitive controls** in our brains that allow us to manage our behavior
- They help us to plan, organize, start and stop tasks, manage time, and more
- Associated with the frontal lobe and especially the prefrontal cortex
- Heavily studied, selectively understood



# 12 core types of executive function

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | **Response inhibition:** the ability to think about consequences and evaluate outcomes before acting. |
| 2 | **Working memory:** the ability to keep information in your mind while carrying out complex tasks. |
| 3 | **Emotional control:** the ability to manage emotions for the purpose of achieving goals, completing tasks. |
| 4 | **Task initiation:** the ability to start tasks in a timely manner. |
| 5 | **Sustained attention:** the ability to maintain attention despite boredom, distractions, or fatigue. |
| 6 | **Planning/prioritizing:** the ability to create concrete plans and prioritize when making decisions. |

From *The Smart but Scattered Guide to Success,* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare (2016)

# 12 core types of executive functioning

| | |
|---|---|
| 7 | **Organization:** the ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information as well as things. |
| 8 | **Time management:** the capacity to think about how much time you have, and how to effectively use it. |
| 9 | **Flexibility:** the ability to change your plans when necessary. |
| 10 | **Metacognition:** the ability to step away from yourself, observe your own behavior, and make changes. |
| 11 | **Goal-directed persistence:** the ability to set and then follow through on goals. |
| 12 | **Stress tolerance:** the ability to handle varying levels of stress and cope with uncertainty. |

*not an exhaustive list of functions!

# Where does executive dysfunction come from?

Executive dysfunction is a core feature of a surprisingly large number of disorders and conditions, where different conditions correspond loosely to different impaired functions and levels of intensity.

**A**

**Lifelong: ADHD, autism**

**B**

**Episodic: bipolar, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, eating disorders**

**C**

**Traumatic: brain injuries, tumors, meningitis, concussions**

**D**

**End of life: Alzheimer's, dementia,**

# What does executive dysfunction look like?

Examining executive dysfunction by type.

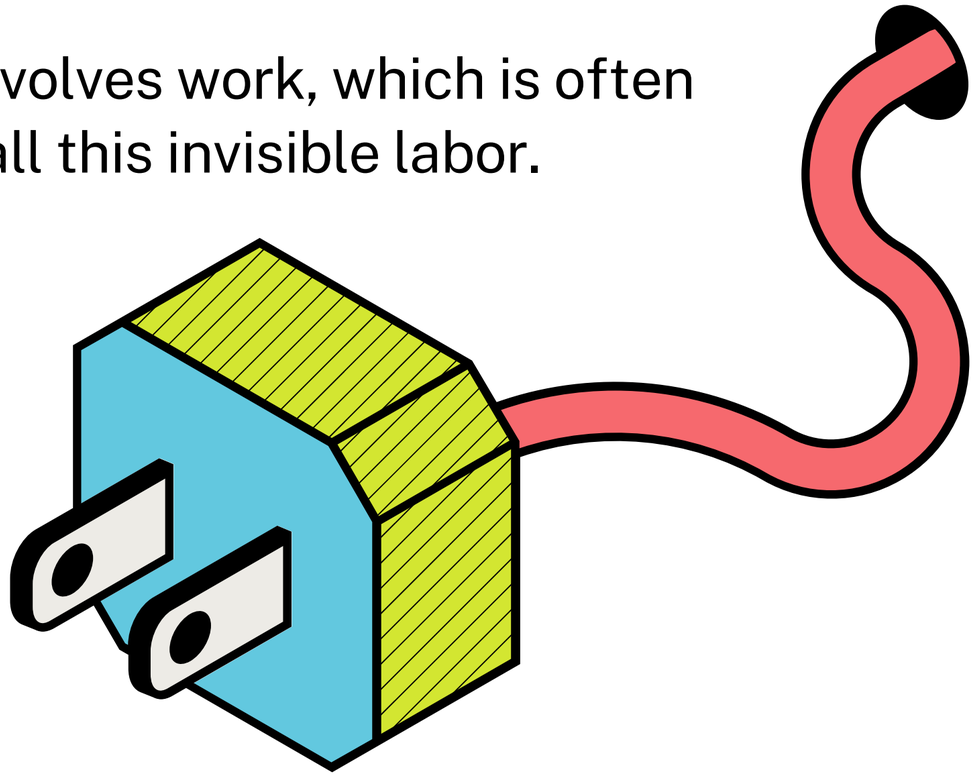
| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | **Time management:** you can't conceptualize how long a task might take. You're chronically late to things. |
| 2 | **Working memory:** you can no longer remember important bits of information that you need for immediate work. |
| 3 | **Goal-directed persistence:** even if you manage to make a goal, it's hard to find the willpower to reach it. |
| 4 | **Organization:** far more than just having a messy desk, you struggle to maintain any order over your possessions and information. You regularly lose important items. Critical documents are just gone now. |
| 5 | **Flexibility:** you're  unwilling to change your plans even for emergencies. You struggle to take in new info. |

# On the DSM, and diagnosis

- The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (most recently DSM-5) is the recognized standard for diagnosing most brain-based disorders.
- A diagnosis of a disorder in the DSM is required to access most HR accommodations, as well as insurance services/support, prescriptions, and more.
- The DSM is problematic, and diagnosis alone can't capture the nuances of our experiences with these disorders.
- Structural bias is also at play, particularly on access to information.

# Executive dysfunction is a communication problem

- Executive dysfunction is incredibly common, but not well understood.
- Because it’s not well understood, it’s hard to talk about.
- Even if you have it yourself, it’s a challenge to understand another person’s experience with executive dysfunction.
- Finally, managing executive dysfunction often involves work, which is often done on the side, that no one knows about. We call this invisible labor.



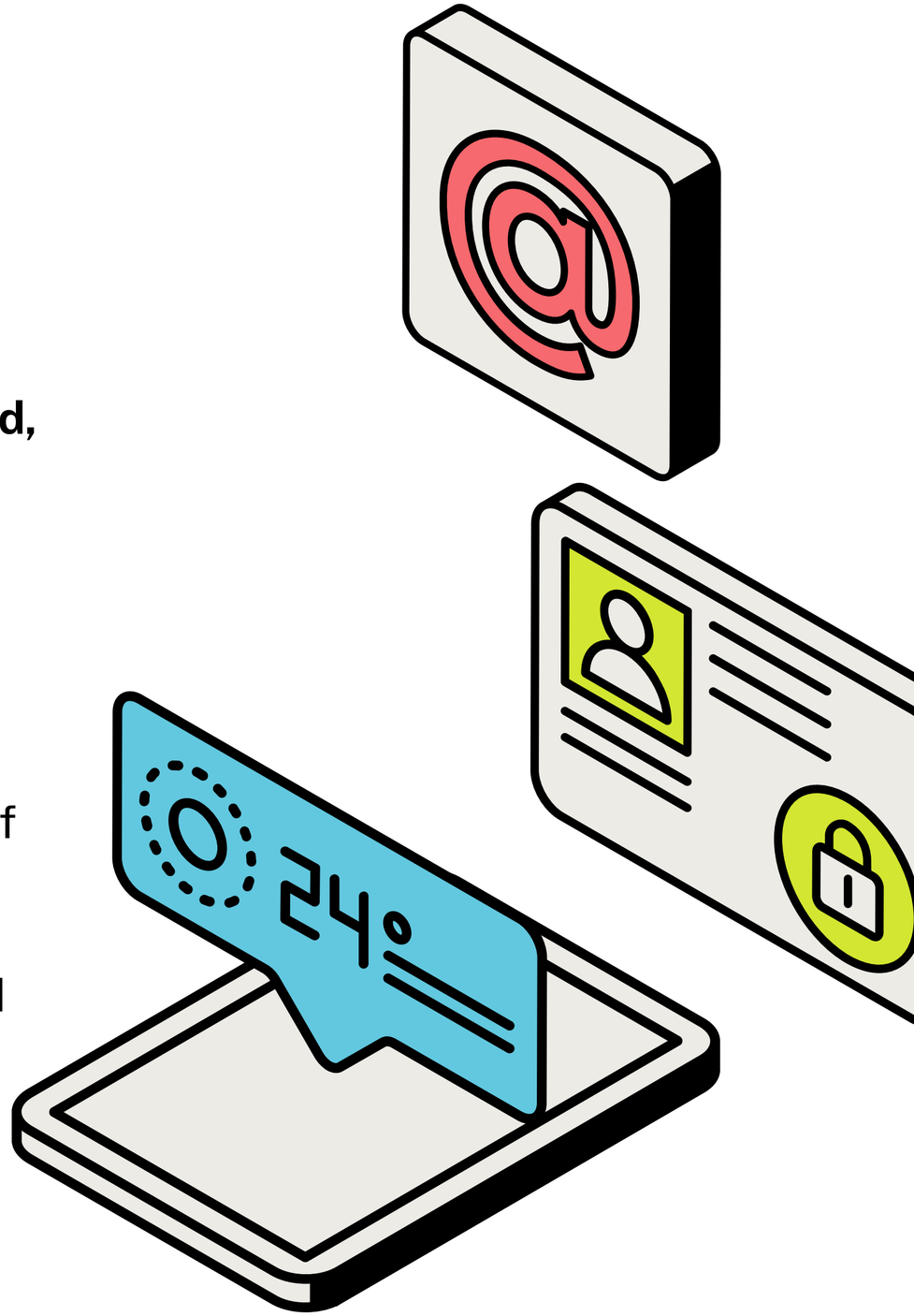
**Invisible labor is next.**

Part 2:

# Putting executive dysfunction to work (but secretly)

# On the concept of invisible labor

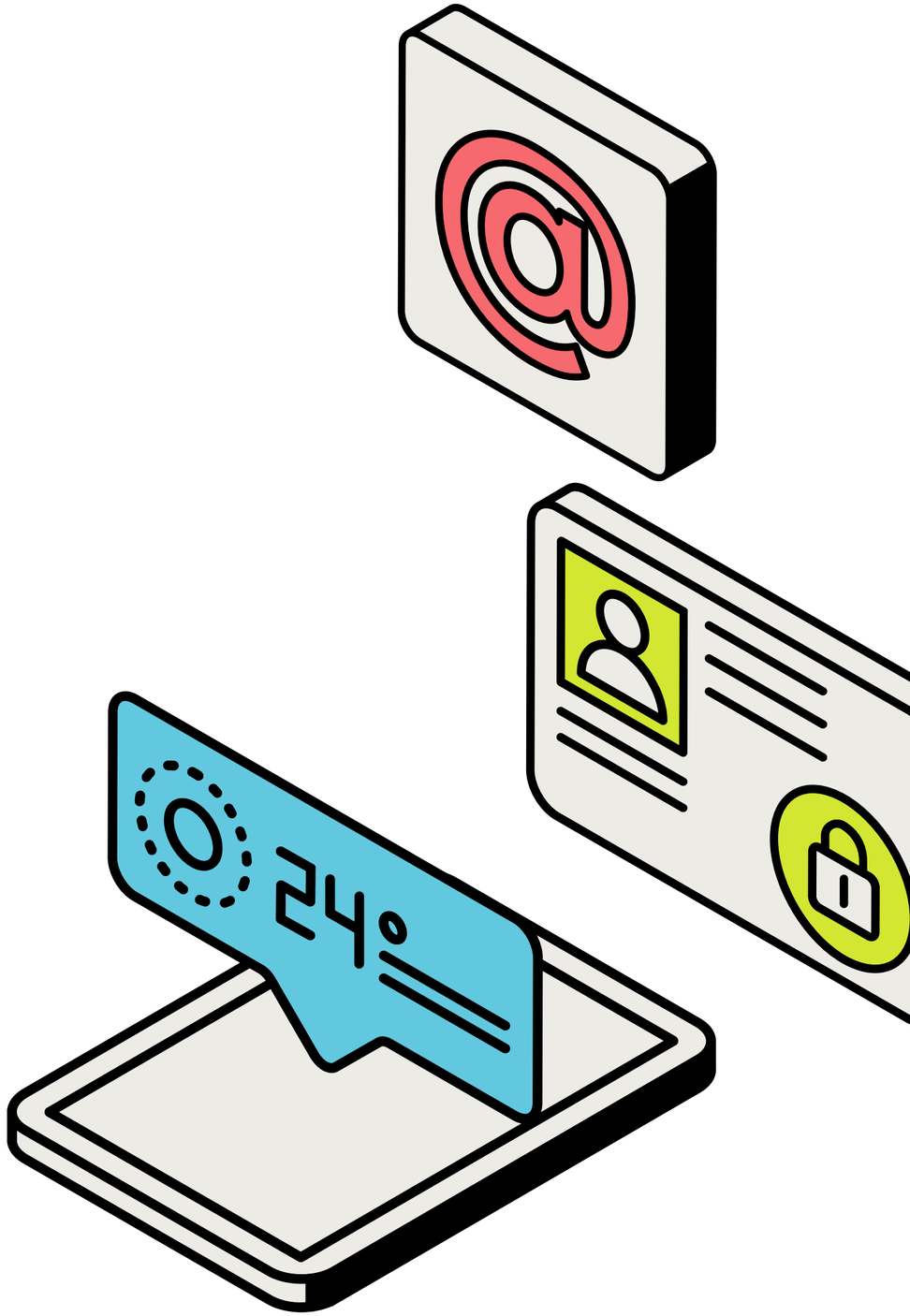
- Broadly: **labor that has great value but is not seen, appreciated, or compensated.**
- Coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild to describe the unpaid work that employed mothers do for their families. Related to emotional labor, which she also popularized.
- A modern example of both is expecting people of color to manage the bulk of DEI work in our libraries.
- In disability studies, invisible labor is discussed both in terms of disabled people ourselves, and in terms of the work of caregivers.
- This labor *is* valuable, but the problem comes when it is divided inequitably as in domestic work, or when it comes with a heavy emotional cost.




*The Managed Heart* (1983) and *The Second Shift* (1989) by Arlie Hochschild

# On the concept of invisible labor for executive dysfunctions management

- In our context today, this labor takes lots of forms.
- Can be quite intensive, but also may seem basic without context.
- The key is that **this labor is done in addition to one's regular work, and often under a sense of shame, which adds an emotional dimension to it.**
- Again: this work is valuable. It needs to be done! But important to note the very real energy tax it can put on the brain.



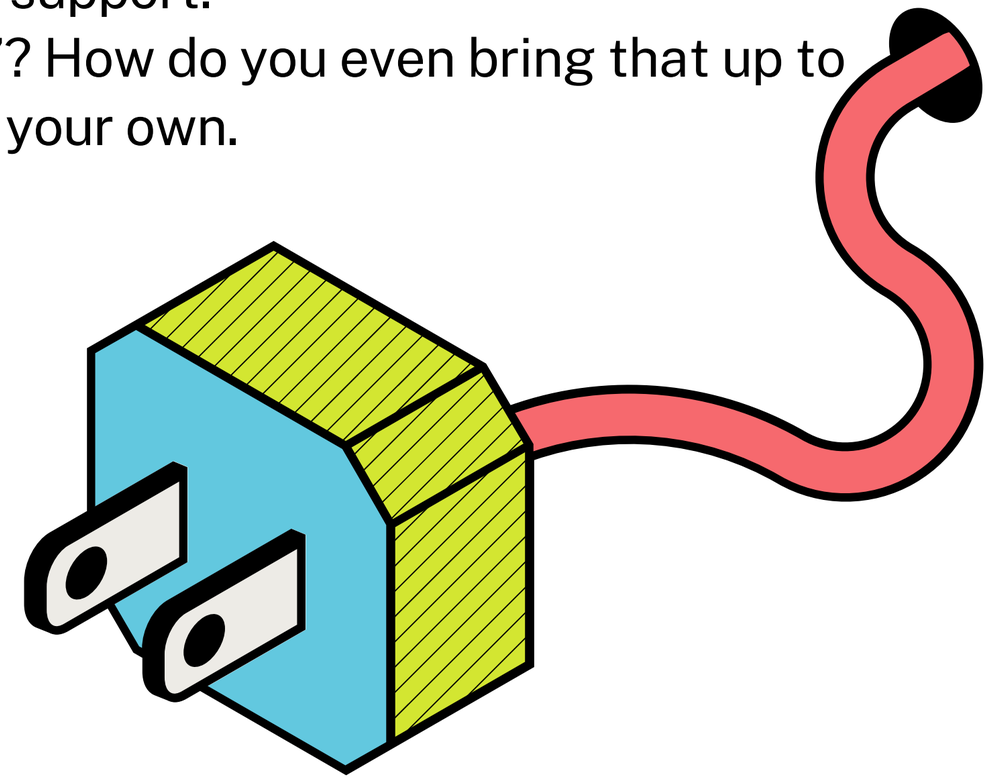
# On the concept of invisible disabilities

- Defined as **any disability that's not immediately apparent to observers**. Today we're referring to brain-based disorders, but there are many others.
- This concept is both important and flawed.
- Helpful for capturing the experience of minimization, isolation
- However, the term may not represent the visible elements of these disorders.

# Invisible labor, invisible disabilities, and library work

- Libraries are complex workplaces.
- Given what we now all know about executive dysfunction, we can agree that a library is not an ideal place to be having these issues without support.
- How do you solve “I can’t seem to start my projects”? How do you even bring that up to someone? You’re probably going to try to fix this on your own.

**Let’s examine.**



# Case study: me

I'm a science librarian in a mid-size library, serving a mid-size liberal arts college. I need all of my executive functions to properly do my job.

## Working with users

**Working memory, Flexibility, Goal-directed persistence, Response inhibition, Emotional control, Stress tolerance**

## Completing projects

**Time management, organization, planning/prioritizing, sustained attention, task initiation, goal-directed persistence, emotional control, response inhibition, metacognition**

## Committees and groups

**Stress tolerance, response inhibition, working memory, emotional control, sustained attention, flexibility, metacognition**

# Case study: me again!

I have a number of disorders that involve executive dysfunction. Here are three.

**ADHD**

**Affects my task initiation, response inhibition, sustained attention, time management, organization...**

**Eating disorder**

**Can affect my flexibility, sustained attention, stress tolerance, working memory, emotional control...**

**Bipolar Disorder**

**Affects my emotional control, response inhibition, task initiation, time management, stress tolerance, goal-directed persistence...**

# Case study: me, trying to manage my time better in 2018

# Expanding this beyond just me

Just a few other examples of this type of invisible labor:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | **Sustained attention:** the work involved in trying to locate a reliable space in the library that's quiet and you're not constantly being distracted by users and other employees. |
| 2 | **Time management:** setting up and maintaining elaborate calendars or multi-calendar systems to remind you of tasks others might consider mundane. |
| 3 | **Goal-directed persistence:** the combined effort involved in starting numerous projects that you aren't able to see through to completion. |
| 4 | **Organization:** you invest in fancy and expensive file folders. They sit unopened on your desk, emanating guilt about a pile of papers that may actually one day engulf your office. |
| 5 | **Working memory:** you need to take a ton of notes to complete any reference transaction. It significantly slows down the process, to the point where users are noticing. You don't feel good about this. |

## Part 3:

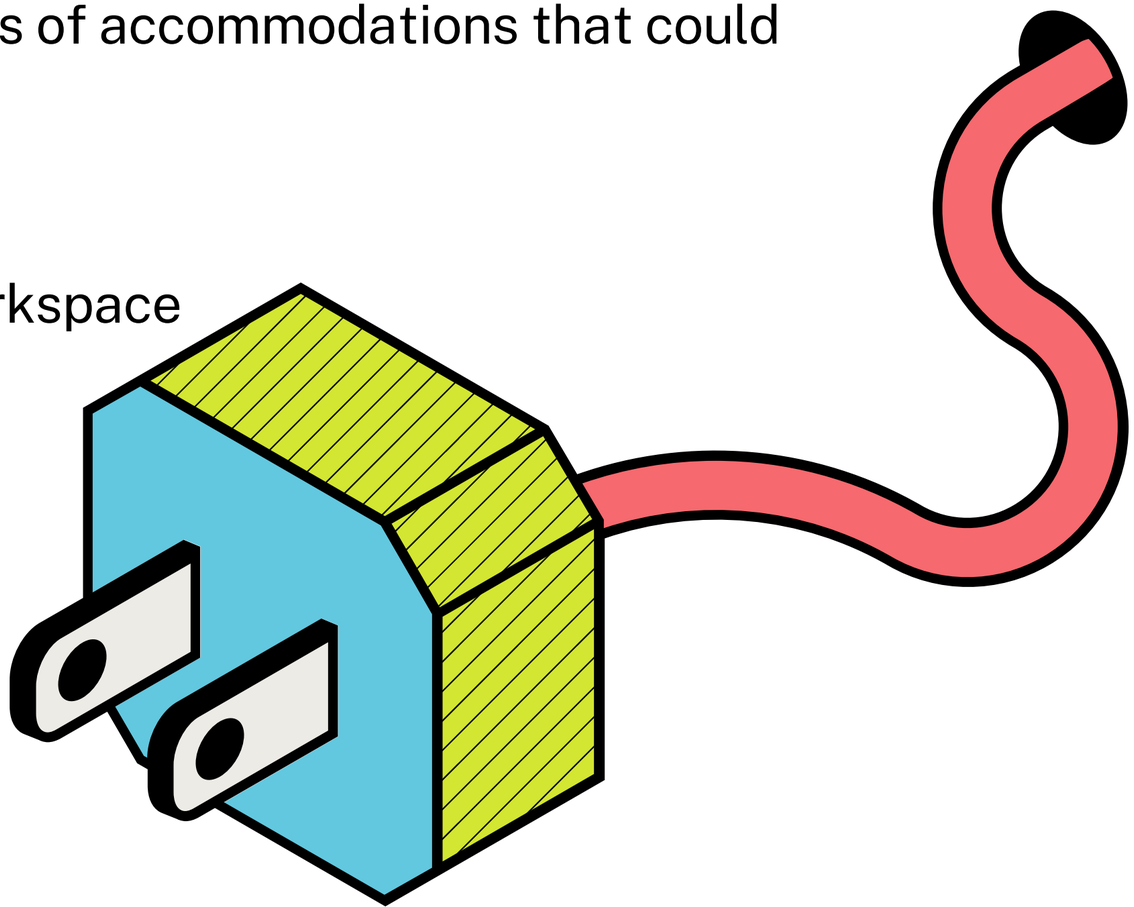
# What is to be done?

# Awareness?

- Feels cheesy! Maybe feels annoying! Still important.
- A surprising number of people, including neurodivergents, are not aware of executive dysfunction or its effects.
- If *we* don't know, and even the researchers are siloed, the general public definitely doesn't know.
- **Awareness will never solve our problems, but it can allow us to have more meaningful conversations with our coworkers, communities, and HR.**

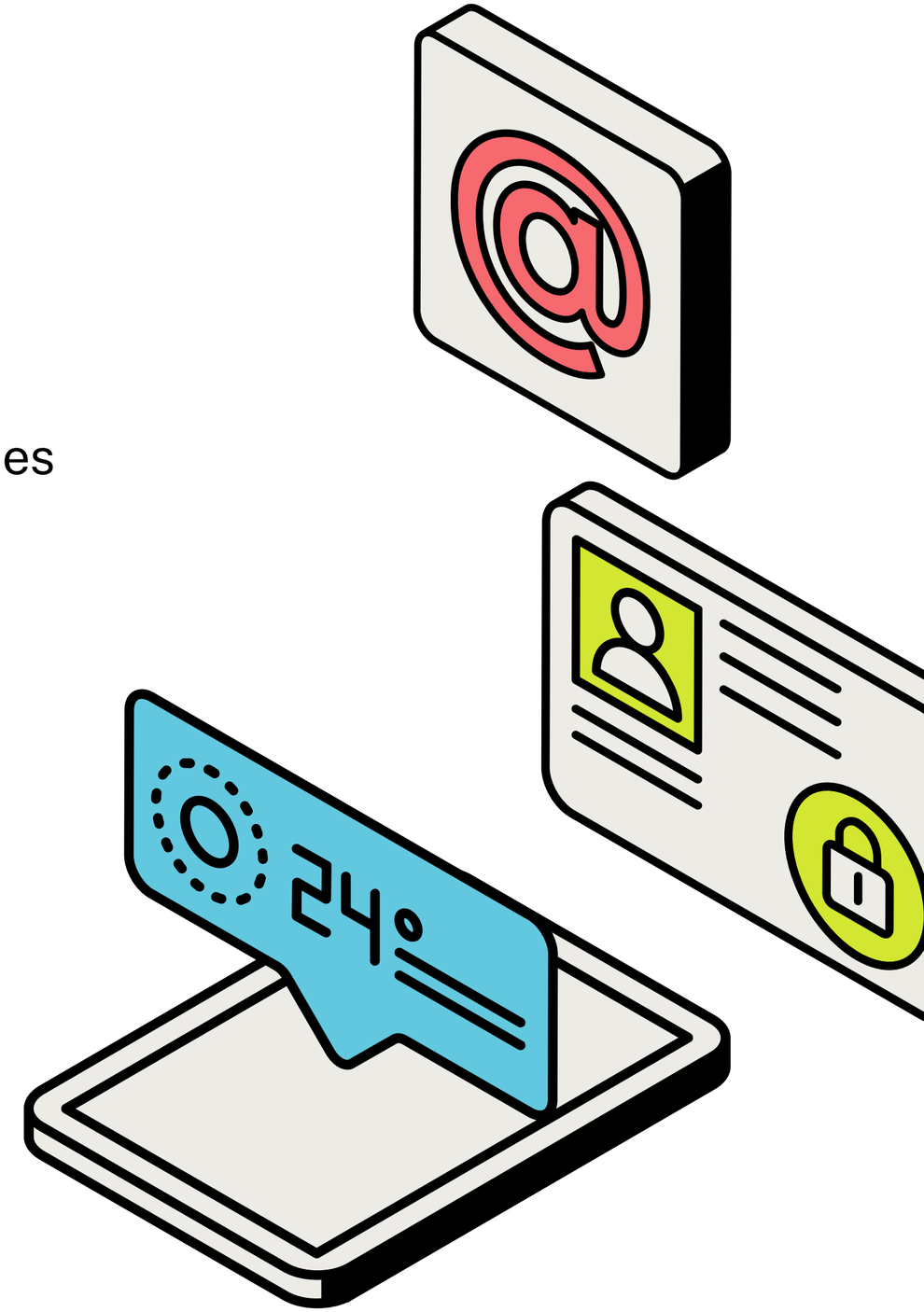
# Getting HR accomodations

- The topic of accommodations for disabilities is *fraught*.
- In my experience, you need to know exactly what you're asking for *before* going in for accommodations talks.
- Theoretically, though, it's possible to get all kinds of accommodations that could potentially help with executive dysfunction:
  - Request for time management software
  - Request for flexible hours
  - Request for support identifying a quieter workspace
  - Request for a whiteboard!

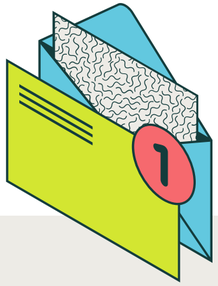


# Solutions beyond HR

- From awareness to community: build on base-level connections to create trust and accountability.
- You don’t even have to tell anyone you’ve got these issues in order to get some help!
- Reduce feelings of shame by engaging with other neurodivergents and their work, and connecting with positive representations of people like us.
- For non-neurodivergents: it’s your job to spread this information far and wide!

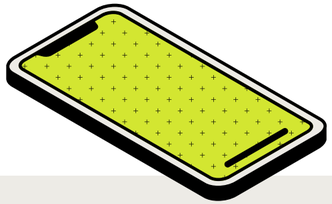


# Starter pack for executive dysfunction



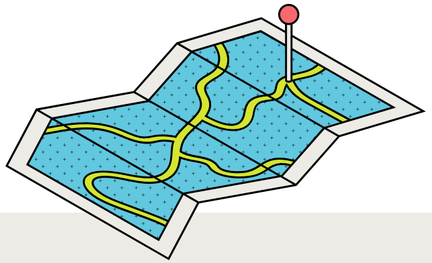
**Environmental hacks**

Changing the space around you to promote desired behaviors.

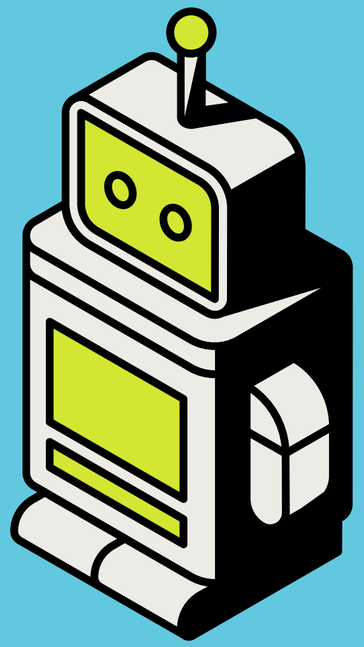


**Cognitive offloading**

Getting your thoughts out of your head.



**Strategic rewards**

Using your brain's reward system to trick yourself into doing stuff.

# Thank you for your *sustained attention*.