

STUDY HACKS

for neurodivergent brains

It just needs a different manual. This is yours.

If you have ADHD, autism, dyslexia, or another form of neurodivergence, the usual study advice can feel impossible - or just plain wrong for you. These strategies are designed to work with your brain, not against it.

YOUR BRAIN RUNS ON INTEREST, NOT IMPORTANCE

Use the Dopamine Menu

Make a list of small things that give you a boost: a favourite song, a snack, a two-minute video, doodling. Use these as planned rewards between study chunks. Pairing something boring with something that lights you up makes it much easier to start.

Make It a Challenge

Turn revision into a game. Time yourself. Beat your own score. Use flashcard apps with streaks. ND brains often respond to competition and novelty more than routine.

Start with What Interests You

You do not have to study topics in order. Start with the bit you actually find interesting - momentum from that can carry you into the harder stuff.

BUILD EXTERNAL SCAFFOLDING

Your Brain Needs Cues, Not Willpower

Use timers, visual checklists, sticky notes, alarms, and colour coding. Write your study plan where you can see it. ND brains often struggle with working memory and time blindness - external scaffolding is not cheating, it is strategy.

Body Doubling Works

Study next to someone, or join an online study session. Just having another person nearby - even silently - can help you stay on task. This is one of the most effective focus tools for ADHD brains.

Use Transition Rituals

Switching tasks is hard for ND brains. Create a tiny ritual: "I close this book, stand up, stretch, then open the next subject." A consistent bridge between tasks reduces the friction of starting again.

Write It Down or It Does Not Exist

If a task is only in your head, your working memory will quietly drop it. The moment you think of something, write it on paper or type it into your phone. Externalise everything.

Chunk It Small

"Revise biology" is too vague for an ND brain. "Read pages 12-15 and write three key facts" is a task you can actually start. Break every subject into the smallest possible next step.

Use Apps as Allies

Forest grows a virtual tree while you focus (and kills it if you leave the app). Tiimo creates visual schedules. Todoist breaks tasks into small steps. Use technology to build the structure your brain craves rather than fighting against it.

Set Up Your Sensory Environment

Noise-cancelling headphones, lo-fi playlists, dim lighting, a weighted blanket on your lap - figure out what your nervous system needs to feel settled, then build it into your study setup.

Use a "Now" and "Later" System

Two lists: one for the task you are doing now, one for everything your brain throws at you while you work. Capture intrusive thoughts on the "Later" list so your brain can let go of them.

STUDY YOUR WAY

You Have Permission to Study “Weird”

Standing up, lying on the floor, listening to lo-fi beats, using a wobble cushion, chewing gum, wrapping yourself in a blanket - if it helps you focus, it is not weird, it is what works. Ignore anyone who tells you there is only one right way to study.

Fidget WITH Purpose

Keep something in your hands - a tangle toy, blu-tack, a smooth stone. Fidgeting can actually improve focus and information processing for ND brains. Choose quiet fidgets for classrooms.

Try Shorter Bursts

25 minutes might be too long. Try 10 or 15 minutes instead. Some ND brains do better with very short, intense focus sessions followed by proper movement breaks.

MANAGE THE OVERWHELM

One Subject. One Task. One Page.

When everything feels urgent, pick ONE thing. Just one. Write it on a sticky note. Do that and only that. You can choose the next thing when this one is done.

Done Is Better Than Perfect

Perfectionism and ND brains often go together. A finished piece of work that is "good enough" beats a perfect piece that is never handed in. Set a limit and stop.

Regulate First, Study Second

If you are overwhelmed, anxious, or in shutdown, studying will not work. Take five minutes to regulate: deep breaths, cold water on your face, music, movement, or a sensory tool. A calm nervous system learns. A dysregulated one cannot.

Talk It Out or Draw It Out

Not everyone learns by reading and writing. Try explaining things out loud, drawing diagrams, colour-coding notes, or recording yourself. Use whatever channel your brain actually processes best.

Rest Is Productive

ND brains fatigue faster from sustained focus. Resting is not slacking - it is recharging. A 15-minute rest that lets you do another productive session is smarter than pushing through until you crash.

YOUR CHEAT SHEET — PICK ONE TO TRY TODAY

- ✓ Make a dopamine menu and use it between study blocks
- ✓ Set a timer for 10 minutes and see what happens
- ✓ Try body doubling — study next to someone or online
- ✓ Write one sticky note with the one thing to do next
- ✓ Regulate first — breathe, move, then begin
- ✓ Give yourself permission to study your way

Different is not less. Your brain just needs a different route.

Want more resources like this?

Join the Dragonfly mailing list for free guides, toolkits, and practical strategies delivered straight to your inbox. → victoria@dragonflypsychotherapy.co.uk