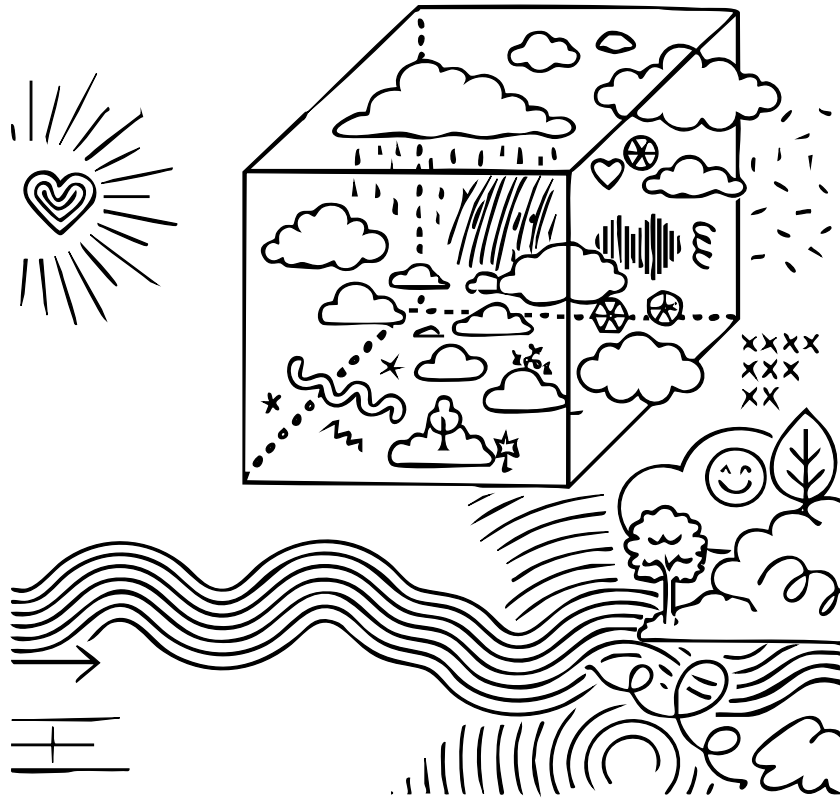




| *The Adaptive Worry System* / Group Plan |



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The Adaptive Worry System: A Creative, Trauma-Informed Workshop for Adults with ADHD

Workshop Title: The Adaptive Worry System, An ADHD Workshop

Target Population: Adults diagnosed with ADHD, particularly those experiencing anxiety, Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) (Dodson, 2023), perfectionism, and executive functioning challenges.

Overall Goal: To reframe anxiety and chronic worry as adaptive signals that, when externalized and organized, can become allies in planning, nervous system support, and sustainable self-trust.

Rationale

Grounded in clinical and neurobiological research, this workshop reframes the ADHD worry system through the lens of psychological flexibility, internal systems, and trauma-informed care (Hallowell & Ratey, 2011; Hallowell & Ratey, 2021). Rather than pathologizing worry, the workshop seeks to engage it as a messenger and internal guide. *The Adaptive Worry System* is grounded in an evolving understanding of ADHD not as a disorder of attention, but as a condition rooted in a unique cognitive style, one marked by a surplus of ideas, heightened sensitivity, and a nervous system that struggles to filter rather than feel. As described in *Driven to Distraction*, ADHD is not a deficit of attention, but a difficulty regulating and directing it (Hallowell & Ratey, 2011). What is often dismissed as disorganization or carelessness is in fact, the outward manifestation of an overloaded internal world, an anxious, overactive “worry system” that constantly scans for danger, deadlines, or disappointment. Rather than pathologizing this system, the workshop helps participants build a compassionate relationship with it, treating it not as a saboteur, but as a misunderstood internal protector in need of scaffolding, curiosity, and care.

Drawing on experts in the field, and the science of neurodivergence, the workshop invites participants to reimagine worry not as a flaw, but as a form of inner intelligence, one that has simply gone unloved, untrained, and misunderstood (Hallowell & Ratey, 2011; Hallowell & Ratey, 2021). This approach reframes chronic worry, task paralysis, and perfectionism as responses to both neurological wiring and systemic invalidation. Participants are not taught to silence their worry, but to listen to it with curiosity, to externalize it through creative tools, and to develop compassionate inner systems for responding (Brach, 2003). This model synthesizes experiential concepts from Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Emotionally Focused Individual Therapy (EFIT), trauma-informed, and ADHD counseling (Hallowell & Ratey, 2011; Hayes et al., 2012; Schwartz, 1995). Each activity blends practical, mindful, somatic, and imaginative methods, in alignment with a nervous system that craves novelty and structure simultaneously (Porges, 2011).

Preventative Wellness and Research

Instead of focusing on symptom reduction alone, this workshop promotes preventative wellness through self-trust, self-regulation, and meaning-making. It is ideal for clients who have been pathologized, misunderstood, or feel spiritually and creatively stifled in traditional planning models. Ultimately, the workshop is less about fixing what's broken and more about reclaiming the intelligence of one's worry system, transforming it from an enemy into an inner guide.

The Adaptive Worry System is a workshop grounded in contemporary research that underscores the intricate relationship between ADHD and anxiety (Seli et al., 2016). Studies indicate that 27% to 50% of individuals with ADHD also experience an anxiety disorder, highlighting the necessity for interventions that address both conditions concurrently (Cuffe et al., 2001). This workshop aims to reframe worry not as a hindrance but as a

potential tool for enhancing executive functioning and nervous system support or emotional regulation (Hallowell & Ratey, 2011; Porges, 2011).

ADHD worry can often stem from dysregulation in the default mode network and amygdala, leading to patterns of executive dysfunction and emotional hyperarousal (Barkley, 2020; Williams & Ramsey, 2017). EFIT offers a framework for helping clients externalize worry and engage in attachment-based processing (Johnson et al., 2022). ACT tools like mindfulness and defusion are effective in helping ADHD clients reframe internal criticism and reduce experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 2012). The impact of trauma and early invalidation in ADHD populations can shape nervous system hypervigilance and lead to maladaptive worry loops (Porges, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2014). Research highlights the benefits of structuring interventions around the neurobiological underpinnings of ADHD and co-occurring anxiety (Anastopoulos & Shelton, 2001). National statistics reveal that ADHD is underdiagnosed in adults, which contributes to delays in understanding and addressing nervous system support needs (CDC, 2023; Porges, 2011).

Organizing Thoughts

The workshop's emphasis on externalizing worry aligns with therapeutic approaches that advocate for the visualization and organization of anxious thoughts. Techniques such as creating *worry maps* or *journey calendars* can aid individuals in categorizing and managing their worries, thereby reducing cognitive overload and enhancing task initiation. This method resonates with cognitive-behavioral strategies that focus on restructuring thought patterns to improve functional outcomes.

Somatic Practices

Incorporating somatic practices, such as body scans and grounding exercises, addresses the sensory sensitivities often observed in individuals with ADHD (Brach 2003, Linehan, 2015; Porges, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2015). These techniques can mitigate the physiological manifestations of anxiety, promoting a state of calm that is conducive to focus and productivity. By integrating these practices, the workshop offers a holistic approach that encompasses both cognitive and physical aspects of anxiety management.

Archetypes and IFS

The exploration of internal roles or "archetypes" within the workshop draws from Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, which posits that recognizing and harmonizing internal parts can lead to improved self-regulation. By identifying roles such as the "Alarmist" or the "Architect," participants can gain insight into their internal dynamics and develop strategies for internal collaboration, fostering a more balanced response to stressors.

Core Values and ACT

Furthermore, the workshop's focus on values-based action is informed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which emphasizes the importance of aligning actions with personal values to enhance psychological flexibility. By guiding participants to identify their core values and commit to actions that reflect these values, the workshop facilitates a shift from avoidance-based coping to purposeful engagement, thereby reducing the impact of anxiety on daily functioning.

Psychological Flexibility and ACT

ACT emphasizes psychological flexibility by helping clients accept difficult thoughts and emotions rather than avoiding or pathologizing them. Chronic worry and perfectionism are seen in ACT as forms of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, which the therapy aims to gently defuse and reframe in alignment with one's values. ACT also invites clients to explore how their responses may be contextually adaptive, rather than seeing them as pathology to be fixed, which mirrors emphasis on neurological wiring and systemic invalidation.

The Adaptive ADHD Worry System helps participants recognize their anxious mind not as a malfunction, but as an adaptive, though untrained, messenger. This reframing encourages curiosity, compassion, and creative organization rather than shame or suppression. This workshop honors the lived experience of ADHD not through

behavioral compliance, but through reconnection to internal wisdom. By listening to worry, rather than silencing it, participants may uncover the scaffolding for a life led by curiosity, care, and meaningful structure.

Prevention and Wellness Activities

Note for Instructor:

All activities are offered with sensory-friendly alternatives, and participants are invited to engage in ways that feel authentic and accessible. Participants are invited, not required, to engage with each activity. Alternatives such as visual metaphor, journaling, or quiet reflection will be available throughout. All workshop materials can be provided in visual, auditory, or simplified formats to accommodate sensory processing differences and accessibility needs.

Activity 1: *Worry as a Messenger, an Inner Alarm*

Goal: Normalize and validate worry as an adaptive system rather than a personal flaw.

Objectives:

- ___ Identify the most common ADHD-driven worry patterns (time, forgetfulness, failure, others' perceptions)
- ___ Reflect on the hidden logic behind recurring anxious thoughts

Method:

- ___ Prompted journaling: *My worry usually sounds like...*
 - ___ Group discussion: Share how anxiety shows up, visually, physically, behaviorally
 - ___ Facilitated mini-lesson: The neuroscience of ADHD + amygdala hijack + default mode network
 - ___ Optional metaphor: *Your worry is a frantic assistant with a foghorn. What is it trying to warn you about?*
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Activity 2: *Mapping the Signals*

Goal: To externalize worry and convert it into visual, structured tools that support nervous system support and self-awareness.

Objectives:

- ___ Translate abstract worries into categories of actionable insight and compassionate support
- ___ Learn strategies for giving worry form through *worry journeys* or *map calendars* that encourage containment and choice

Method:

- ___ Create a personal “worry map” using one or more of the following mediums: sticky notes, sketching, journaling, or a digital tool (e.g., Trello or Notion)
- ___ Structure the map into three categories:
 - ___1. *What I fear*
 - ___2. *What this tells me I need*
 - ___3. *What I can hold gently, or What I might try if I have energy*

___ Introduce containment rituals, such as a daily *Worry Map Hour*, *parking-lot lists*, or symbolic closing practices (e.g., folding the map, placing it in a journal)

Activity 3: Anxiety Alchemy: Transforming Spirals into Sequences

Goal: Reframe anticipatory anxiety as fuel for structure and sequencing

Objectives:

- ___ Practice using anxiety-driven thoughts to reverse-engineer tasks
- ___ Learn body-based strategies to regulate enough to act
- ___ Emphasize the reverse-engineering without the productivity pressure
- ___ Use affirming language like *soft structure* or *scaffold*
- ___ Include optional *completion grace statements* like *I did what I could*, or *I showed up*

Method:

- ___ Use a real-life *spiral* moment from the past week
 - ___ Walk through a worksheet that converts the spiral into:
 - ___ A time-blocked to-do
 - ___ A 2-minute start ritual (ex: light a candle, 4-7-8 breath)
 - ___ A “done is enough” completion statement
 - ___ End with a somatic pause (butterfly hug, grounding stone)
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Activity 4: Archetypes of the Inner Planning System

Goal: Develop self-awareness around the inner roles that manage worry

Objectives:

- ___ Identify internal parts that fuel or soothe anxious planning
- ___ Create rituals to support internal collaboration

Method:

- ___ Introduce 3 archetypes (can be visual or metaphorical):
 - ___ 1. The Alarmist (anxious protector)
 - ___ 2. The Architect (structured planner)
 - ___ 3. The Nurturer (self-compassionate re-regulator)
 - ___ 4. The Critic or The Shadow Planner (to help name internalized shame or urgency voices)
 - ___ Participants write a dialogue or draw each one
 - ___ End with a group ritual: *What I want to say to my Worry System...*
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Activity 5: Drawing the Inner Landscape of Worry

Goal:

Support creative exploration of internal experiences and emotional patterns related to worry through metaphor, imagery, and visual storytelling.

Objectives:

- ___ Translate internal emotional states into symbolic, external forms
- ___ Foster self-compassion and insight through metaphor and artistic expression
- ___ Encourage regulation through creative flow and nonverbal processing

Method:

___ Invite participants to choose from several prompts to illustrate or symbolize their “Worry System” and its surrounding environment. Options may include:

- ___ *Draw your inner world when you’re overwhelmed by worry*
- ___ *Create a map of your nervous system on a hard day*
- ___ *Illustrate what your worry protector might look like if it had a body, a color, or a texture*
- ___ *Draw what safety, rest, or clarity would look like if it lived in your body*

___ Provide a variety of art materials (colored pencils, markers, collage scraps, watercolors) or offer a digital art option (e.g., drawing apps or a Canva template).

- ___ Allow quiet music and individual reflection time (15–20 minutes), with the invitation to share with the group (sharing is optional).
- ___ After the art session, offer a brief journaling prompt:
“What did I learn about my worry system from this drawing?”
“Is there anything I want to say to the part of me I drew?”
- ___ Optionally, close with a ritual of naming, each person gives their drawing a title (e.g., *The Watchtower, The Weathered Bridge, The Shadow Garden*) and places it in their folder or journal as a witness to their internal experience.

Activity 6: “*Gathering the Thread*” (Optional Closing Ritual)**Goal:**

To gently conclude the workshop with collective reflection, empowerment, and integration.

Method:

- ___ Invite participants to write a single line or word that captures what they’re taking with them from the workshop.
- ___ Place these notes anonymously in a shared bowl or read aloud in a circle.
- ___ Close with a mindfulness moment and a gentle reminder:
“You are not broken. You are building.”

Optional Rationale (for instructor)

This workshop draws from principles of Internal Family Systems, ADHD neuroscience, and trauma-informed care. Worry in ADHD populations often stems from the nervous system’s attempts to compensate for executive dysfunction and repeated environmental invalidation. Rather than suppressing or pathologizing worry, this program uses creative externalization and gentle cognitive restructuring to help participants partner with their worry system, reclaim their inner planner, and establish sustainable scaffolds for self-trust.

Prevention Resource Websites:

- ___ 1. CHADD: ADHD info, planning strategies, and support groups, <https://chadd.org>
 - ___ 2. ADDitude Magazine: Articles on anxiety, task paralysis, and routines, <https://additudemag.com>
 - ___ 3. ADDA – Resources for adults with ADHD, <https://add.org>
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Books:

- ___ 1. ***Driven to Distraction***, Understanding the complexities of ADHD
Hallowell, E. M., & Ratey, J. J. (2011). *Driven to distraction (revised): Recognizing and coping with ADHD from childhood through adulthood*. Ballantine Books.
 - ___ 2. ***ADHD 2.0***, Contemporary research understanding the complexities of ADHD
Hallowell, E. M., & Ratey, J. J. (2021). *ADHD 2.0: New science and essential strategies for thriving with distraction—from childhood through adulthood*. Ballantine Books.
 - ___ 3. ***Radical Acceptance***, Mindfulness and nervous system
Brach, T. (2003). *Radical acceptance: Embracing your life with the heart of a Buddha*. Bantam Books.
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