

There are days when you look at your calendar, see a deadline written in clear ink, and still somehow feel as if it's not quite real. Weeks pass strangely quickly, afternoons disappear into small tasks, and then suddenly the thing you meant to start "next week" is due tomorrow.

If you're autistic, ADHD, or otherwise neurodivergent, this may not be a rare experience. You can care deeply about your work or studies and still struggle to feel time passing in a useful way. On paper you might look organised. In reality, you may be lurching between last-minute panic and long stretches of avoiding tasks that feel too big to start.

In this article I'm using "time blindness" as shorthand for that pattern: when deadlines, estimates and future planning don't quite stick, even when you want them to. I'll draw on my own situation – working full time, studying part time as a PhD student, raising a family and volunteering with Beaver Scouts – because that mix of roles makes planning both essential and very difficult.

This is not a promise to fix your executive function. It's a collection of small, realistic planning tools and perspectives that might make assignments, projects and everyday life feel 5-10% more manageable.

Quick Summary

- Time blindness for neurodivergent people isn't about not caring. It's about brains that don't track time and future tasks in the way most systems expect.
- Planning is harder when you're juggling work, study and family life, especially if you're already close to burnout.
- Breaking tasks into smaller, concrete steps, working backwards from deadlines, and agreeing clear check-in points can reduce some of the chaos.
- Different contexts need different planning approaches: assignments, work projects and everyday life admin all have their own pressures.
- You don't have to become perfectly organised. The aim is to build planning that works for your actual brain, not your imaginary ideal self.

What time blindness feels like from the inside

Time blindness can be hard to explain because, from the inside, it doesn't feel like "ignoring" time. It feels more like time being slippery.

You might:

- genuinely believe there is more time left than there is
- underestimate how long tasks will take, even when you've done them before
- mean to start something and repeatedly find that the day has gone without you touching it
- swing between hyperfocusing on one task and ignoring everything else, then avoiding that task entirely once it feels overwhelming

In my own life, the pattern often looks like this:

- I know an assignment, report or piece of life admin exists.
- I intend to "just plan it out" soon.
- Other urgent things – work emails, children's needs, meetings, unexpected problems – soak up my attention.
- The deadline stays in the future in my head, even as the calendar moves closer.
- At some point, a small event (an email reminder, a comment from someone) suddenly makes the deadline feel real. Panic sets in.

It's not that I didn't care during the in-between period. It's that my brain wasn't holding the task in a useful way.

Why planning is hard for neurodivergent brains

Planning well depends on several things that can be wobbly when you're autistic or ADHD:

- Working memory – holding multiple steps in mind at once
- Executive function – deciding what to do first, switching between tasks, and starting
- Time perception – feeling how long things take and how far away a deadline really is

When these are under strain, you might:

- find multi-step instructions overwhelming
- feel unsure where to start, so you don't
- jump between tasks every time an email or message arrives

My own brain prefers structure and patterns. Give me a complex dataset or a detailed problem to analyse and I'm happy. But rapid context-switching and juggling unrelated priorities use a lot of energy. If priorities are vague or change constantly, planning starts to feel like guesswork.

It can help to think of planning less as "discipline" and more as "external scaffolding for an

unreliable sense of time”. You’re not trying to make your brain behave like someone else’s. You’re trying to build supports around it so it doesn’t have to do everything internally.

Noticing your planning patterns without shame

Before changing anything, it can be useful to notice how your planning currently works (or doesn’t) without jumping straight to judgement.

Some questions you might gently ask yourself:

- Do I tend to overestimate or underestimate how long things take?
- Do I avoid starting tasks until the pressure is very high?
- Do I get lost in detailed parts of a project and lose sight of the whole?
- Do I plan in my head but struggle to translate that into actions?

When I looked honestly at my own patterns, I saw that I often held a lot of the plan in my head and assumed I would remember it. I would sketch ideas in bullet points, but not always translate those into specific time slots or interim deadlines. The result was carefully thought-through plans that did not always turn into steady progress.

Noticing this wasn’t comfortable, but it did give me something to work with.

Gentle planning principles that help

Different tools work for different people, but a few principles have helped me across contexts.

1. Break tasks down until the first step is obvious

“Write report” is not a helpful task. It’s actually many tasks.

Breaking it down might look like:

- find the relevant documents
- skim them and note key points
- outline the main sections in bullet points
- draft one section

The first step should be small enough that your brain says, “I can probably do that.” Tiny steps don’t mean you’re childish; they mean you’re respecting how your executive function

actually works.

2. Work backwards from the deadline

Instead of writing “Essay due 30 April” and hoping for the best, you can:

- mark the due date
- then work backwards to set earlier dates for: first messy draft, data collection or reading, topic choice, and any conversations you need to have

You can do the same at work:

- if a report is needed for a meeting, set a date a few days earlier to have a draft ready
- agree with your manager when they’d like to see a first version

This doesn’t guarantee a smooth journey, but it means you’re not relying on a single cliff-edge date.

3. Decide what is genuinely urgent (and what can wait)

Time blindness is worse when everything feels equally urgent, because it becomes harder to choose a starting point.

If possible, it helps when a manager, supervisor or even your own future self is clear about:

- which tasks must be done this week
- which would be nice to do but can slide

At work, I’ve found it helpful to ask explicitly, “Of these items, what is most important to you this week?” It’s a small question that can prevent a lot of silent guessing.

4. Plan in the format your brain likes

My own writing and planning usually start in bullet points. I expand these into sub-points, and only then turn them into full paragraphs or tasks.

If your brain also prefers outlines, you can use that:

- start with a quick list of steps
- then assign rough dates or time slots to each step

- then, if useful, put just the next one or two steps into your calendar or to-do list

There is no rule that says planning has to be done in one particular app or layout. The “right” format is the one you’ll actually use.

Planning assignments when time feels fuzzy

In academic settings, assignments and exams often arrive in a cluster. If you’re studying alongside work and family life, that cluster can feel impossible.

Some approaches that have helped me, and might be worth experimenting with:

Turn the assignment brief into a task list

Instead of reading the brief and hoping you’ll come back to it, try:

- highlighting key phrases (e.g. “critically evaluate”, “use at least three sources”)
- turning those into tasks (e.g. “find three sources”, “write comparison section”)
- estimating, very roughly, how long each might take (it’s okay if you’re wrong; you’re building a sense of shape)

Set very small, regular slots

If your week is already full, long study sessions may be rare. Short, consistent blocks can still work.

For example:

- 20–30 minutes after the house is quiet
- one slightly longer block at the weekend

On low-energy days, you might switch to lower-brain tasks: managing references, formatting, simple reading. On better days, you can tackle planning and writing.

Agree check-in points if you can

If you have a tutor or supervisor, you might ask:

- “Could we set a check-in date to make sure I’m on the right track?”

Having an agreed point where you’ll show your progress can help tasks feel more real

before the final deadline.

Planning work tasks when everything is “in progress”

Work planning is often messier than assignment planning. New tasks appear, meetings get added, priorities change.

Given that reality, planning at work might focus on reducing decision load rather than creating a perfect system.

Some things that help me:

Grouping similar tasks into blocks

Switching between completely different types of work is hard. When I can, I try to:

- group data-heavy tasks together
- have a separate block for emails and quick queries
- reserve some time for deeper thinking or analysis

I’m not always in control of my schedule, but even small groupings can reduce the mental cost of switching.

Being honest about progress and next steps

My natural instinct is to go quiet and produce a finished product, then report back. That can make colleagues anxious if they can’t see what’s happening.

I’m working on:

- agreeing check-in points at the start of pieces of work
- sending short summary emails on longer tasks
- using simple phrases like, “This is where I am, this is what I’ll do next, and this is when I expect to finish.”

These updates don’t take long, but they can reduce pressure for everyone, including me, because expectations are clearer.

Asking for clear instructions

Vague or open-ended tasks can create unnecessary strain. If I'm given a very broad request, I sometimes hold several possible interpretations in mind at once, which is tiring.

It's okay to ask:

- "What would a good outcome look like to you?"
- "Is there anything you definitely do or don't want included?"
- "When do you actually need this by?"

The answers can shape your plan and prevent you from overworking a task that didn't need that level of depth.

Planning everyday life when your day starts at 7am

Planning isn't just for formal tasks. It shows up in ordinary routines.

On weekday mornings my alarm goes off at 7am so I can get the kids up for school, start the day job and fit in all the ordinary adult tasks. There are days when I feel like I have absolutely no drive at all, as if the batteries never charged overnight. On those mornings, planning is less about productivity and more about getting through the basics.

A few small things that help:

- having a simple morning routine that doesn't change too much
- putting school things (bags, shoes, forms) in the same place the night before
- keeping breakfast uncomplicated on busy days

These are not revolutionary ideas, but when my brain is foggy, not having to make lots of small decisions makes a big difference.

In the evenings, I'm learning to:

- set out one or two priorities for the next day rather than a long, unrealistic list
- accept that some evenings will be "recovery first, tasks second" or "recovery only"

Everyday planning, for me, is mostly about making fewer promises I can't keep to myself.

Tools that might help (if you want them)

You don't need a perfect app to manage time blindness. Tools are only useful if you remember to use them, and if they reduce rather than increase stress.

Some people find it helpful to use:

- digital calendars with reminders
- simple to-do lists with just a few items per day
- timers for short focus blocks
- physical planners or whiteboards in visible places

I tend to mix digital and paper. Digital tools are good for fixed dates and reminders. Paper is helpful for rough planning, bullet points and working out what actually needs to happen today.

Your mix may be different. That's okay. It is fine to experiment and discard tools that don't work for you.

A quiet closing thought

If time blindness has tripped you up repeatedly, it's easy to build a harsh story about yourself: that you are lazy, disorganised, unreliable, or incapable of adult life.

From where I sit – as someone who juggles work, study, family and volunteering, and still misjudges time – a different story is available.

You are handling a lot, in systems that are not set up for your kind of brain. You are trying to plan with tools that assume an internal sense of time you may not have. When you miss a deadline or underestimate a task, it doesn't mean you don't care. It means the gap between how your brain works and what the world expects was showing.

You don't have to become perfectly organised. You don't have to master every planning technique. If one small idea from this article – breaking tasks down, working backwards from deadlines, agreeing check-ins, or adjusting your routines – makes your next assignment, project or Monday morning just a little less chaotic, that's enough.

Your time may feel slippery, but you are still allowed to use it in ways that respect your limits and your strengths.



Andrew at Quietly Neurodivergent

I'm Andrew, the person behind Quietly Neurodivergent. I'm an autistic adult who spent many years trying to pass as "fine" – holding things together at work, showing up to meetings, hitting deadlines – and then unravelling in private. I know what it feels like to look competent on the outside while running on fumes underneath.

By day I work with student data in higher education; by night (and very early mornings) I'm a part-time PhD student thinking about education, inequality and how people move through systems that were never quite built for them. I've also spent nearly ten years as a town councillor and I volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader, which means I've had a lot of practice navigating meetings, forms, responsibilities and sensory/social overload at the same time. That mix of lived experience, community work and research shapes how I write here: practical, plain-English pieces that sit somewhere between "this is what it's like" and "here are some things you could try".

I'm not a clinician and I don't offer diagnosis, therapy or miracle fixes. What I can offer are honest accounts of what has and hasn't helped me with study, work and everyday life, alongside small, realistic tools you can adapt for yourself. If you recognise yourself in the phrase "quietly neurodivergent", this site is for you.

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