There’s a particular kind of study struggle that doesn’t show up on most “how to revise” guides. You care about your course. You want to pass the exam, finish the assignment, move your degree forward. You sit down to work…and nothing happens. Your brain feels like it’s full of glue. Hours pass, the deadline gets closer, and you still haven’t really started.

I’ve been there as an undergraduate student more than twenty years ago and now, again, as a part-time PhD student who also works in higher education. On paper I look like someone who “knows how to study”. In reality, I’ve spent more evenings than I’d like to admit staring at a blank document, rearranging my desk, or building beautiful colour-coded plans that I then ignore.

If any of that sounds familiar, this article is for you.

Quick Summary

- Many autistic and ADHD students genuinely care about their work but get stuck on starting, planning or finishing – this is often about executive function, not laziness.
- Standard study advice (“just start”, “manage your time better”) usually ignores how ND brains handle motivation, overwhelm and task switching.
- Small, concrete changes – like making the first step tiny and obvious, working in short “messy start” blocks, and choosing study tasks that match your current energy – can make studying 5–10% easier.
- Talking to tutors, supervisors or disability support about what you’re finding hard is allowed, even if you feel you “should be able to cope”.
- Struggling with studying does not mean you don’t belong in education. It means you’re trying to do it with a brain and body that the system wasn’t designed around.

The gap between “I care” and “I can’t start”

A lot of advice treats study problems as if they are about motivation. The assumption is: if you really cared about your degree, you would just get on with it.

That doesn’t fit with my experience or with many neurodivergent students I’ve met.

You can care deeply and still:

- feel physically unable to open the file
- bounce off the same paragraph again and again
- sit at your desk for an hour, doing everything except the thing you sat down to do
- watch the clock move closer to the deadline while your body feels heavier and heavier

From the outside, it can look like procrastination. On the inside, it often feels more like a freeze response: your brain recognising “this is important and hard” and slamming the brakes in a slightly unhelpful way.

When I’m in that place, it doesn’t matter how much I tell myself that the assignment is important or that Future Me will be sad. The gap between intention and action feels like a cliff.

That gap has a lot to do with something called executive function.

What executive function actually is (in student terms)

Executive function is the cluster of brain skills that help you:

- plan and organise
- break tasks down
- start things
- switch between tasks
- keep track of time
- hold information in mind while you use it

If your executive function is wobbly, you can be bright, capable and interested – and still end up with late essays, half-finished readings and panic-written projects.

For me, executive function problems with studying have looked like:

- reading the assignment brief, understanding it, and then somehow never coming back to it until three days before the deadline
- spending hours tweaking a reference format while the actual essay body has three sad paragraphs
- intending to “just make a start” after work, then looking up to find it’s midnight and I’ve done nothing but reorganise my email

If you recognise yourself in that, it doesn’t mean you’re lazy or uncommitted. It means your brain is trying to do complex tasks with tools that don’t match the shape of the job.

What studying looks like when executive function is struggling

Different neurodivergent students have different patterns, but here are some common ones:

- The blank page freeze – you open a new document, stare at it, and suddenly every sentence you could write feels wrong or too big.
- The “I’ll do it properly later” loop – you convince yourself you need a perfect long stretch of time to start, and that perfect stretch never arrives.
- The planning spiral – you spend hours making elaborate timetables, colour-coding modules and building revision trackers, then feel too tired to use them.
- The micro-avoidance dance – you get up for water, tidy your desk, check another website, message someone… anything except the task.
- The mis-matched hyperfocus – you fall deeply into one small part of the work (fixing references, reformatting slides) and ignore the bit that actually matters for the grade.

When you live with this, it’s easy to tell yourself a harsh story: “I’m just bad at studying” or “Everyone else seems to manage; I must be broken.”

But what if we change the question from “Why can’t I just do it?” to “What would make this task easier for my actual brain, not the imaginary one the study skills booklet is written for?”

Why standard study advice often misses the point

Most generic study tips assume:

- you can start tasks on demand
- you have a pretty accurate sense of how long things take
- you can hold multi-step plans in your head
- your energy is fairly stable day to day

If you’re autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent, those assumptions may not be true.

When I read “Just break the task down”, my brain often goes “Into what? How? How small is

small enough?” When people say “Just manage your time better”, they rarely include steps for what to do if time and energy are experienced as fuzzy, unreliable things.

You are not failing because those tips don’t work for you. Those tips were written with a different nervous system in mind.

So rather than trying to force yourself into someone else’s model of “a good student”, it can be more useful to build gentle, neurodiverse aware ways of getting from “I want to study” to “I have done *something* that moves this forward.”

Tiny ways to reduce the “starting cost”

You do not need a perfect system. You need a way to make the first step so small and obvious that your brain can tolerate it.

Here are some experiments you might play with.

Make the first step embarrassingly tiny

Instead of “write the introduction”, you might write a list of first steps like:

- open the document called “Essay 2 draft”
- paste the question or title at the top of the page
- write three bullet points of anything you already know or think about the topic
- save the file and close it again

You can tell yourself that your only job today is to get to the third bullet. If, once you are there, you want to keep going, great. If not, you have still done more than staring at nothing.

For my PhD work, I often set myself a “one sentence” rule: open the chapter and write one bad sentence about the idea I’m stuck on. That’s it. Many days I end up writing more. On truly awful days, at least Future Me has a sentence to start from.

Use short, “messy” blocks instead of big perfect ones

Long stretches of “quality study time” are ideal in theory and extremely rare in real life.

It might help to:

- set a timer for 10–15 minutes and tell yourself this is allowed to be messy work
- use that time to scribble ideas, copy quotes, or list questions, rather than producing polished paragraphs
- stop when the timer ends, even if you feel you could keep going – it’s easier to convince your brain to come back to something that wasn’t awful

You can think of this as “warming up” the task. You are teaching your brain that starting does not mean entering a three-hour tunnel of suffering.

Prepare the runway the day before

Future-you will have less energy than you’d like. One of the kindest things you can do is prepare the smallest possible runway for them.

That might look like:

- leaving the relevant document and reading open on your computer
- writing a one-line note to yourself like “Tomorrow: rephrase paragraph 2 so it makes more sense”
- stacking the book, notebook and pen you need in one place, so you don’t have to hunt for them

This is not about discipline. It’s about reducing the number of little decisions your tired brain has to make before it can do anything.

Matching study tasks to your actual energy

Not all study tasks demand the same kind of brain. On a low-energy day, asking yourself to write an entire essay draft may be unrealistic. That doesn’t mean you have to give up on studying altogether.

You might try sorting tasks roughly into:

- High-brain tasks – planning an essay, writing fresh paragraphs, wrestling with new concepts
- Medium-brain tasks – editing, reorganising notes, making simple flashcards
- Low-brain tasks – highlighting, copying key quotes, filling in reference details, labelling diagrams

On days where your brain feels foggy, you could deliberately pick a low- or medium-brain

task and see that as a win. On better days, you can save your limited “sharp” energy for the high-brain tasks.

As someone who studies part-time while working, I’ve had to accept that I cannot make every evening a high-brain evening. Some weeks, the most I can do is tidy my notes or copy references. It still moves things forward, and it counts.

Studying in the middle of a full life

A lot of study advice quietly assumes you are a full-time student with few responsibilities beyond your course. Many neurodivergent students are juggling work, caring, health appointments, family stress or all of the above.

I say this with feeling. I work full time with student data in higher education, study part time as a PhD student, have a family with children, and volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader. You could argue I have chosen the “hard mode” difficulty setting. I sometimes joke that I am very committed to making things harder for myself – but the truth is, this is just what my life looks like right now.

If your life is also full in several directions at once, it might help to:

- pick a very small number of key study tasks each week (for example, “finish section 1 of assignment” and “do one past paper question”) rather than trying to do a bit of everything
- be realistic about the hours you genuinely have available, not the hours you wish you had
- notice any “all or nothing” thinking (“If I can’t do a full study day, there’s no point doing anything”) and gently challenge it with tiny actions

You are allowed to move at a pace that makes sense for your situation, even if it is slower than the imaginary student in your head.

Talking to your course about what’s hard

As someone who works with student data, I’ve seen how often universities don’t hear about struggles until very late, if at all. Many neurodivergent students stay silent because they feel embarrassed, or because they don’t know what they are allowed to ask for.

You are allowed to:

- contact a tutor or supervisor and say you are finding some aspects of studying difficult
- ask for things like clearer instructions, written summaries of key information, or more notice before presentations
- explore whether you can register with disability or learning support for more formal adjustments

You do not have to disclose everything at once. You might start with something like:

> “I’m neurodivergent and currently finding the planning side of assignments hard. Is there a way to check I’m on the right track before the deadline?”

or

> “I struggle with processing a lot of information at speed. Would it be possible to have the slides in advance where you can?”

Not every institution will respond perfectly, although they really should, and some systems are frankly frustrating. But asking for support is not cheating. It is part of making education accessible.

When deadlines feel impossible

Sometimes, despite all your efforts, the deadline is too close and your brain has hit the wall.

If you are in that position, you might:

- check if your course has an extensions or mitigating circumstances process
- talk to someone who can help you understand the forms (a tutor, support service, trusted friend)
- be honest, but brief, about the impact: “I’ve been experiencing autistic/ADHD burnout and it has affected my ability to start and complete work on time.”

Again, this is not legal or individual advice, and procedures vary a lot. But you are not the first person to need more time, and you will not be the last.

The Disclaimer & boundaries page explains more about what this site can and cannot help with, and your university or college should have its own guidance on formal processes.

When studying is harming your health

There is a difference between “this is hard” and “this is damaging me”.

It may be time to seek more support if:

- you are regularly losing sleep over work and cannot “switch off”
- you cry most days about your course, or feel constant dread
- your eating, movement or self-care have changed significantly
- you are having thoughts like “I don’t deserve to be here” or “I’d rather disappear than face this work”

These can be signs of burnout, anxiety, depression or other health issues that deserve attention in their own right. It might help to reach out to:

- student support at your institution, or the student’s union
- a GP or mental health professional
- a counselling or wellbeing service linked to your institution
- a trusted person in your life
- crisis or support lines where you live, if you feel unsafe

Quietly Neurodivergent cannot provide crisis support, therapy or medical advice. What it can do is sit alongside those supports, giving you language and recognition so you do not have to start from scratch every time you explain yourself.

A quiet closing thought

If studying feels harder for you than it seems to be for other people, it is easy to jump straight to self-blame. You might tell yourself that you are lazy, disorganised, or not cut out for education.

From where I’m sitting – as someone who works in higher education, studies part-time, has children, volunteers, and has spent a lot of time stuck in front of blank pages – there is another, kinder story available.

You are trying to learn in systems that were not designed with your brain in mind. The gap between “I care” and “I can’t start” is not a moral failure. It is a sign that your executive

function is being asked to do a lot, often with too little support.

You do not have to fix everything at once. You do not have to become the perfect student. You do not even have to finish this article.

If all you take away is one tiny idea – a smaller first step, a 10-minute messy block, a slightly kinder way of talking to yourself about studying – that is enough. The work you are doing to find ways of learning that fit your quietly neurodivergent brain is real work, even when you do not have much to show for it yet.


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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