

## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding ADHD and Money

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### **In this chapter we get into ...**

- How and why ADHD can impact your money management
- Your brain's strengths
- Your interest-based nervous system (and why it struggles with money)
- Key motivation factors for the ADHD brain
- Recognising what you like (and maybe don't like) about money

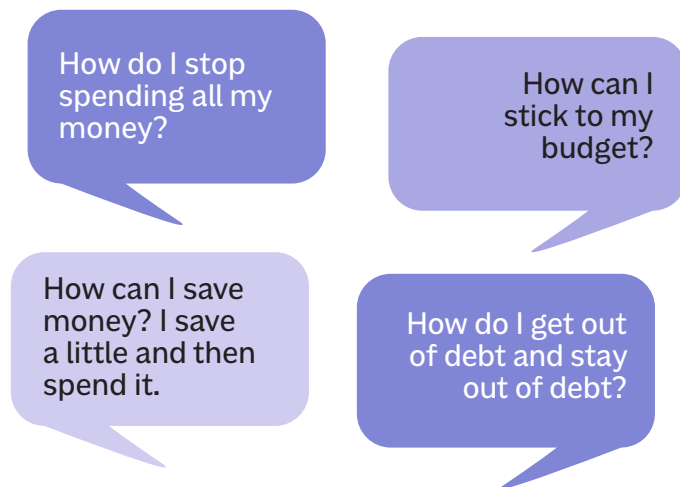
# How I became 'the ADHD Accountant'

When I was first diagnosed with ADHD, one of my first thoughts was, 'Can I still be an accountant?' I even Googled if ADHD and being an accountant were compatible!

Much of what I'd read about ADHD was how much we struggle with everything. Things like organisation, prioritisation, emotional management and, of course, money management. I wasn't sure how that could work with my job.

I started my Instagram account (@theadhdaccountant) because I had so many people ask for help. This confirmed for me I really wasn't alone — that many people with ADHD run into difficulties when it comes to managing their finances.

What did people ask? Among the most common questions were things like:



A part of me felt like a fraud. I, too, had my fair share of financial mismanagement in my time. I'd spent beyond my means. I'd been in consumer debt. I had started budgets but failed to stick to them.

However, I could easily help others manage their money. Something I'd done in my work as an accountant. I'd help businesses manage their budgets and forecasts, so why did I have so much trouble with my own finances?

This is something that is very typical in the ADHD world. We can do something that we struggle doing for ourselves quite easily for someone else.

Anyway, in among all this internal dialogue I realised I'd come a long way in my financial management from 15–20 years ago. The strategies I'd tried and tested, and ultimately put into place, had gotten me from financial ruin, to doing financially OK.

This led me into a hyperfocus on ADHD and finances. I wanted to really understand the link between two subjects that usually don't co-exist. Coupling this with my training and experience as an accountant, I worked with other neurodivergent people to help them too. What I learned was eye-opening!

For decades and across the world, ADHDers have proclaimed they are bad with money. But are we? Are we bad with money? Or do we just need to understand how our brain works and manage our finances in a neurodivergent way? Perhaps we just need a way that works with our brain rather than against it?

*Spoiler alert: it's the latter.*

Let's dive into what ADHD is. Briefly. Because there are plenty of resources that are better equipped to dive into the topic of ADHD itself; plus we need to get to the money part.

# Attentive Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

If you are reading this book, I assume you have heard of ADHD. You either have been diagnosed or identify as neurodivergent, or love someone who is neurodivergent. Whatever your relationship, you are welcome here and thank you for picking up this colourful and nothing-like-you-have-seen-before book.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects executive functioning and can cause inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. There are also emotional regulation and working memory challenges associated with ADHD.

Some of the challenges of ADHD can include:

- regulating attention
- regulating emotions
- being forgetful
- finding it difficult to organise tasks, time and belongings
- finding it hard to sit
- losing belongings
- struggling to follow through on instructions
- interrupting others
- being impulsive
- not being able to tolerate boredom.

That's just a short list of what someone with ADHD can struggle with day to day. It's not exhaustive and not diagnostic.

While there can be ways to help manage ADHD, it's a condition that most people will carry through their lifetime.

Of course, there are some amazing qualities people with ADHD can have. Again, this is not a complete list, but we have a few goodies to balance the not-so-great parts.

- We tend to be great in an emergency.
- We can have lots of ideas and be very creative.
- We can hyperfocus on topics that we are interested in.
- We can often think outside the box and see things that others cannot.
- We are resilient.
- We can have a lot of energy.

## SIDEQUEST

### The amazing ADHD brain

Rather than focus on what we struggle with when it comes to ADHD and money, take some time to focus on the amazing qualities we have. Some of our strengths and skills can be really beneficial when it comes to managing money.

- Which of the strengths on the next page do you relate to the most?
- Can you think of any personal strengths you might have?

## ADHD strengths and skills

Feature	Description
Great in an emergency	We can focus our attention, process information quickly and act fast when the pressure's on.
Highly creative	We are full of big ideas and have a flair for the unexpected.
Hyperfocused	We are passionate and know lots about what matters most to us.
Able to think outside the box	We come at things from different angles, and sometimes we can see solutions other people miss.
Resilient	We're adaptable, and we can bounce back from setbacks or disappointments stronger than ever.
High energy levels	We have lots of oomph and enthusiasm to fuel our work, life and dreams.

# The ADHD brain and the interest-based nervous system

ADHDers operate on an **interest-based nervous system**. Simply put, that means we often struggle to focus on things that don't grab our interest. While neurotypical people might be motivated by outcomes or rewards, we are generally motivated by what we find fascinating or enjoyable in the moment.

An interest-based nervous system is one reason we often prefer to research the subject of our latest hyperfocus rather than do the dishes — even though we know the dishes need to be done. It's not as simple as just telling ourselves 'hey, the dishes are important'.

## The interest-based nervous system

With an interest-based nervous system, an ADHD brain is motivated by four key factors:

- interest
- novelty
- urgency
- challenge.

As these four factors suggest, our brains like to prioritise tasks or activities that are engaging, exciting or rewarding. If a task involves some degree of interest, novelty, challenge and/or urgency, the ADHD brain is more likely to want to see it through.

So what does an interest-based nervous system mean for you when it comes to money?

This need to feel interest, novelty, urgency or challenge is one reason you might find yourself avoiding things like budgeting or reviewing your spending. Those activities may not be engaging for your brain when there is no immediate reward.

People who are not neurodivergent can find it difficult to wrap their head around this, and it's one reason they might see ADHDers as 'lazy'.

But we are not lazy!

We just need to work with an interest-based nervous system, rather than against it.

# The consequence-based nervous system

By comparison, a neurotypical brain will generally respond to the promise of possible outcomes. This is known as a **consequence-based nervous system**.

What motivates behaviour with this nervous system? It might be a fear of punishment or the promise of a reward. For example, the fear of potentially running out of money can be enough motivation for someone to check on their finances. Or they might think, 'If I budget, then I will have money for everything I need.'

In this way, someone with a consequence-based nervous system can usually work well with a sequence of tasks. They are motivated to follow that sequence of tasks (like budgeting) by the promise of the end result (having, or not having, money later).

It's time to find strategies that work for you.

If you find you shaming yourself for not being able to do the things that your nervous system literally doesn't allow you to do, I hope this brings you some peace and clarity. ADHDers can absolutely still prioritise and do all the things we need to for a more financially secure future. We just need to leverage our interest-based nervous system!



**Our brains like to prioritise tasks or activities that are engaging, exciting or rewarding.**



# ADHD brain motivation factors

Throughout this book, I aim to challenge you to look outside the neurotypical finance box and use the **motivation factors** that work for the ADHD brain: interest, novelty, urgency and challenge.




You'll notice that I've called the activities throughout the book *challenges*. That's because they are important, and better yet, they're achievable. You've got this!

I also invite you to think about what might spark your *interest* when it comes to your financial management.

We'll look for *novelty* that you can put in place to help you smash your money goals.

And we'll find the *urgency* that will help motivate you.

## ADHD motivation factors

Motivation factor	Description	Strategies to stay on track
 Interest	We are stimulated by activities or topics that interest us personally.	Partner obligations with passions.
 Novelty	We are drawn to new experiences and things that pique our curiosity.	Change it up.
 Urgency	We act under pressure because we are driven by a time limit or a deadline.	Create your own urgency.
 Challenge	We rise to a challenge that has a defined goal, an end point and, especially, a reward.	Give yourself rewards along the way. Find the why.

# Strategies to help you stay motivated

Here are some examples of how you can put these motivation factors into practice.

- **Interest: Partner your obligations with passions**

Think about what might spark your *interest* when it comes to your financial management. You can pair something that doesn't interest you with something you enjoy. For example, I often use what I do on the weekend as an example of this. I pop a podcast in my ears while I do my housework. This means I can do something I enjoy at the same time as I start a task I don't particularly enjoy.

- **Novelty: Change it up**

Try doing an old task in a new way: in a new place, with different people, or using a new tool or method. For example, if you don't like tracking your **cash flow**, you could try doing it in a new environment, like your favourite café, or with a new tool, like an app.

- **Urgency: Create your own urgency**

Focus on creating a sense of urgency that will help motivate you. You could implement your own deadlines, break big tasks down into smaller deadlines, or set a timer when doing an activity, for example, for things like bills that are before the actual due date. This can create some motivation before you need to pay it. (Use this one with caution; you don't want to get overly anxious.)

- **Challenge: Give yourself rewards along the way**

If you can break the task down into chunks, you can give yourself little rewards when each chunk is completed to keep the motivation going. For example, once you have tracked your expenses, watch an episode of your favourite show.

● **Challenge: Find the why**

In order to complete a task, we often need to understand why it is important that we do it. What's your clear end goal? For example, if you want to save for a holiday, make a vision board of where you are going and why. Keep this somewhere you can see it as you build up the savings.

## SIDEQUEST

### Find your own strategies to stay motivated

What are some personal strategies that might work for engaging your interest-based nervous system?

- Think of one chore or task you don't enjoy or that you're always putting off — it can be anything, money-related or not.
- Then in the 'My strategy' box, write how you could engage your interest-based nervous system to help you feel more motivated about this task.

# Strategies for staying motivated

## MOTIVATION FACTOR: INTEREST

*We are stimulated by activities or topics that interest us personally.*

**My strategy:**

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## MOTIVATION FACTOR: NOVELTY

*We are drawn to new experiences and things that pique our curiosity.*

**My strategy:**

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## MOTIVATION FACTOR: URGENCY

*We act under pressure because we are driven by a time limit or a deadline.*

**My strategy:**

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## MOTIVATION FACTOR: CHALLENGE

*We rise to a challenge that has a defined goal, an end point and especially a reward.*

**My strategy:**

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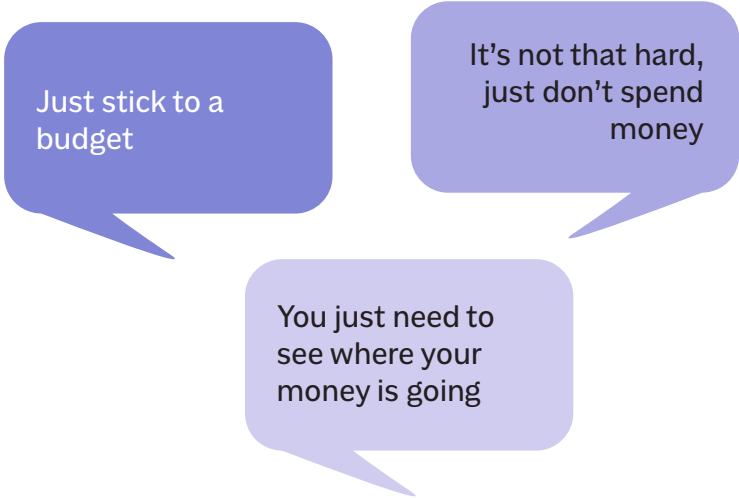
Hopefully you are getting a good picture of why money management purely being *important* is not going to charge our brain into action. However, receiving an overdue bill with some red on the paper (yep, don't worry: I know what they look like because I've received them too) can spring us into action.

Why? Let's look at this through the lens of motivation factors: the overdue bill has created *urgency*. Sometimes it is even a *challenge* if we don't immediately have the cash flow for the bill. So now our brain might be motivated to respond and pay the bill.

## Money management

Money management and **financial literacy** is not something that naturally comes easy to humans, neurodivergent or not. But add in a feeling of shame around our finances and money — for things like for getting into debt, spending too much or not sticking to a budget — and financial literacy becomes increasingly harder.

It's not something we were taught in school. And unless you had financially literate parents or caregivers, money is often not something that is spoken about in home settings either. Much of the financial advice and guidance out there is great. However, it is given with a neurotypical lens. You may have read and heard things like:



Just stick to a budget

It's not that hard, just don't spend money

You just need to see where your money is going

What this well-meaning advice misses, though, is that it fails to take into account ADHDer's executive functioning challenges, financial trauma and emotional dysregulation. Some neurodivergent people might also have another area of neurodiversity such as dyscalculia (which is like a financial dyslexia).

This book is intended to do what I call '*take the typical advice and sprinkle it with some neurospice*'. Not all money management advice is something we need to throw in the bin. A lot of it is very sound and can get you far in your financial journey. However, we need it to make sense for our brains, our mental capacity and our current skill set.

## SIDEQUEST

### Sprinkle it with spice

We can flip the typical advice, sprinkle it with some neurospice and make it work for us.

- Do you need a budget? Or would it be better for you to manage your cash flow?
- Do you really need a fancy spreadsheet? Or are you actually better off using a pen and a notebook?
- Do you need to save for a 'rainy day'? Or will you be more successful if you're motivated to save for something specific?

Each of these options can achieve the same result. It's just that what works best for you might not look like the 'typical' advice.

# ADHD and money

The ADHDers I have worked with and spoken to often feel that typical financial advice can make them feel overwhelmed or unsure of where to start. If they're unable to save, people can feel ashamed, like they have failed. Similarly, ADHDers who spend more money than they'd like can feel guilty about it.

It's easy to educate people about money and finance, but it's quite another thing to understand the ins and outs of a neurodivergent brain when it comes to managing money.

## Executive functioning, or the struggle to be 'practical'

Typically, financial management takes executive functioning to succeed.

What do we mean by 'executive functioning'? For a neurotypical brain, the brain's command centre helps it to manage functions relating to organisation and time management. But for the ADHD brain, these executive functions aren't so straightforward.

Executive functioning can include:

- planning (like budgeting)
- prioritising (say, you need money for rent rather than the latest tech you've been eyeing off)
- impulse control (you see something you instantly 'need', and you get it without thinking twice)
- self-monitoring (e.g. tracking your spending)
- focus (like staying committed to your goals and saving).

Straight off the bat, it seems like we are doomed. (We're not — but more on that later.)

## How we might struggle with executive functioning

Executive function	ADHD challenge	Typical result
 <p>Planning</p>	<p>Can be difficult to think ahead or stick to a plan.</p>	<p>Missing bills, accruing fees, feeling stressed and guilty.</p>
 <p>Prioritising</p>	<p>Can be driven by interest rather than 'importance'.</p>	<p>Spending money on impulse purchases without stopping to think.</p>
 <p>Impulse control</p>	<p>Find it hard to resist unplanned spending and overspending.</p>	<p>Running out of money for necessities or getting into debt.</p>
 <p>Self-monitoring</p>	<p>Not easy to stay on track with spending and bills.</p>	<p>Feeling lost, dreading checking your bank balance, running out of cash.</p>
 <p>Focus</p>	<p>Can be tricky to keep tasks consistently top of mind.</p>	<p>Abandoned savings goals.</p>

## How Money Makes You Feel

Successful financial management also assumes we don't feel things like shame and guilt around our finances. And it would be remiss of me to not say that even neurotypical brains can carry around some shame or guilt when it comes to money.

There are a lot of different opinions out there when it comes to what we 'should' do with our money. Whether we're neurodivergent or neurotypical, we can judge ourselves — and others — harshly if it seems like we're not living up to that idea of 'should'.

Many people feel pressured to keep up with friends or family when it comes to lifestyle spending. And it's probably safe to say that most people have made an impulse buy that they regretted later.

Financial management also assumes that we haven't been through some financial trauma in our lives. Sometimes our past difficulties can make it even harder to get a handle on the present. How we feel about those past experiences can have a real impact on how we spend and save in the present. For example, if someone has experienced financial instability, scarcity or loss in the past, they might feel compelled to avoid looking at bills or their bank balance. They might spend more money as a way of soothing negative emotions like stress. Or they might go the opposite way and hoard their savings, scared to spend on 'unnecessary' purchases or experiences.

So what's different for emotions related to money when it comes to ADHD? People with neurodivergent brains can feel emotions much stronger. We struggle with emotional regulation, so when we feel guilty for overspending, for example, it can be harder for us to overcome that feeling and move on. We can carry the feeling with us, and use this instance as evidence that we will stuff up down the track.

We can also struggle with naming the emotion we are feeling, which makes it difficult for us to process that feeling and move through it.

How money makes you feel is a complex issue! We'll explore more on how to identify your emotions around money in the next chapter.

## **This is where *ADHD* *Money* comes in**

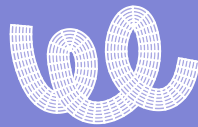
This book is designed to share information and tips with the ADHD brain in mind so you can find your own financial empowerment. You can learn how to prioritise, curb and/or plan for your impulse purchases. With the right strategies, you can focus on what you want for your financial future, rather than what society or someone else tells you to want.

You get to look at finances with a different lens.

My goal is to help you find what works for you. And this book will be with you every step of the way.



**With the right  
strategies, you  
can focus on what  
*you* want for your  
financial future,  
rather than what  
someone else tells  
you to want.**





## CHALLENGE

# Money and me

You can use the worksheet as the starting point of your financial journey.

Think about the following 'Money and me' questions, then write down your answers.

1. What do you like about money? Does it bring you security? Do you like that you can buy things? Do you enjoy earning it?
2. What *don't* you like about money? Does it make you feel stressed? Do you struggle to keep money in your bank account? Do you want to earn more?
3. What are you good at with money? Are you good at checking your bank account? Are you great at cancelling subscriptions you don't use? Are you good at budgeting?
4. What are you maybe *not* so good at with money? Do you not enjoy budgeting? Do you struggle to check your bank account? Do you have trouble remembering to check in with your financial goals — or to set goals in the first place? Whatever it is, you won't be the only one who feels this way.

It's OK to be honest in this challenge; there are no right or wrong answers. This activity is for you to understand your thoughts and feelings about money. Recognising those thoughts and feelings now will help you as you move through this book.

I've filled out an example that might help you get started. Part of me wanted to use examples I've seen and heard from speaking to people I've worked with in the past. But I want to help you be vulnerable and if I want this book to truly help you, I need you to know where I have come from. Where my mindset *was* compared to where it is now. And I need you to be comfortable with writing down what is truly in your mind and heart, rather than just the surface stuff.

Your responses may be completely different to mine; your money story may be more positive, or more negative, and that is completely fine. Be truthful; no-one will see this, unless you decide to share it with them.

Your thoughts are valid, too. If the only thing you like about money is to earn it, write it down. If you think that spending is the only thing you are good at when it comes to your finances, write that down too.

This activity is not about shaming you for how you feel or act around money. Let me say again: *anything that feels true to you is valid.*

# Money and me worksheet

## 1. WHAT I LIKE ABOUT MONEY

*I like that money has afforded me a house for my family to live in, to buy the food I want to eat and to keep my family safe and well.*

*I also like that it buys me things. While I am not overly materialistic, I want to be able to afford most of the things I want without having to stress about it. I like to have plenty of money, as growing up we didn't have much.*

## 2. WHAT I DON'T LIKE ABOUT MONEY

*I don't like that money makes me feel like a bad person for wanting it. It can also be hard to manage with a partner that has a completely different way of managing finances.*

*I don't like that I feel bad for not being typical with my money. Money has made me feel a lot of shame and guilt and has taken away from the good things that money can bring.*

## 3. WHAT I AM GOOD AT WITH MONEY

*I am very good at spending money! I am also good at being able to plan what I want to do with money. I am good at keeping track of what is coming in and out of my bank account (cash flow). I am now good at thinking more positively about money, because I have done a lot of work on my money mindset.*

## 4. WHAT I AM NOT SO GOOD AT WITH MONEY

*I am not great with saving money, but I am getting better. Sticking to a budget is hard. Trying to manage finances with a partner who does things differently is hard too.*

# Money and me worksheet

## 1. WHAT I LIKE ABOUT MONEY

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## 2. WHAT I DON'T LIKE ABOUT MONEY

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## 3. WHAT I AM GOOD AT WITH MONEY

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## 4. WHAT I AM NOT SO GOOD AT WITH MONEY

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