A New Motivational Theory to Restore Equilibrium

Motivation is one of the most misunderstood concepts in ADHD.

Most people think motivation is about attitude, discipline, laziness, effort, or desire. But from the perspective of executive functioning, motivation is better understood as a dynamic emotional process influenced by competing forces within the brain.

That misunderstanding matters because, when motivation is misunderstood, interventions often fail.

Cognitive Ergonomics From the Inside Out® has derived a new motivational theory based on Dr. Russell Barkley's executive function model, one that explains many of the motivational anomalies commonly observed in ADHD but poorly explained by traditional views.

Motivation as a Two-Level System
This model proposes that motivation is governed by two competing motivational systems.

1. The Automatic Brain
The automatic brain is emotionally driven and reflexive. It manifests as an urge. Its motivational force is centered around:

- Seeking pleasure
- Escaping pain
- Conserving cognitive effort
- Minimizing discomfort

This system favors what feels emotionally easier, safer, faster, or more immediately rewarding. It is efficient for survival.

2. The Executive Function Brain
The executive function (EF) brain is effortful and purposeful. It is the emotional desire for accomplishment. Its motivational force is tied to:

- Achievement
- Long-term goals
- Delayed rewards
- Sitting in discomfort over time

Unlike the emotional urges of the automatic brain, executive-function motivation often feels flat, dull, quiet, mundane, and requires the ability to sit in some level of discomfort. Yet, it is the system that allows individuals to persist toward goals that are not immediately rewarding.

In this model, we look at motivation as two competing forces fighting for dominance. What manifests as motivation reflects the force that prevails over the automatic brain or the executive functioning brain.

Looking at ADHD as an Executive Function Impairment Factors in the Impact of the Impairment

Dr. Barkley defines ADHD as an executive function impairment. Executive functions are a collection of mind tools used to work towards a goal over time. In simple terms, the tools are used to problem-solve.

If executive functioning is impaired, then the executive brain becomes less efficient. This changes the motivational balance between the two systems.

For illustration, assume a 50 percent impairment in executive function efficiency. A neurotypical individual may require 10 units of motivation to produce 10 units of executive-function output.

But if the ADHD executive system is operating at just 50 percent efficiency, then:

	Neurotypical	**ADHD**	**ADHD (Compensated)**
Motivation Input	10 units	10 units	20 units
Executive Output	10 units	5 units	10 units

Under this model, the ADHD brain requires significantly more motivational force to produce the same internal executive-function output. This creates what can be described as a **motivational disequilibrium**.

Motivational Disequilibrium

Because the executive brain is less efficient, it must exert more effort to compete for the impairment. That additional effort comes with an emotional cost. That cost creates the imbalance that favors the automatic brain.

This helps explain why individuals with ADHD may sincerely want to do something, fully understand its importance, and still struggle to initiate or sustain action. The issue is not simply lack of drive or desire. The issue is that it is more uncomfortable.

As a competitive swimmer, I swam four hours a day. Each day, I stood over the water's edge and had to talk myself into diving into the pool. The water was 79 degrees. That is uncomfortable. Many times after driving 30 minutes to practice, I stood over the water's edge, and turned around and drove home to avoid the discomfort or initial shock of the cold water.

Imagine, if the water temperature was 59 degrees, that is FAR colder. In college, my body fat was just over 4%. I wouldn't swim in anything that was below 75 degrees. It isn't that I wasn't motivated; it was that the level of discomfort was much greater. This is a great metaphor to understand the context. Note, if I had worn a wet suit (an accommodation), 59-degree water wouldn't be so bad.

Question is: How Can We Restore the Motivational Equilibrium

People with ADHD often try to compensate for this imbalance in three primary ways.

Willpower: Essentially, willpower is using emotions to manage emotions through brute force. It can work temporarily, but it is metabolically and emotionally expensive. Over time, reliance on willpower often leads to:

- Fatigue
- Burnout
- Emotional exhaustion
- Avoidance

The individual is forcing the impaired executive system to overpower the automatic brain repeatedly without reducing the underlying inefficiency.

Reward Amplification: Another common strategy is reward based. Providing a reward to amp up emotions to sit in discomfort. This can work for a period, but as time goes on, often the reward needs to be elevated, which explains why rewards lose their effectiveness (contextually, we are talking about engaging executive functions only).

Accommodations

There are two categories of accommodations:

Compensatory Accommodations: Compensatory accommodations modify external conditions so performance can occur despite the impairment.

Examples include:

- Extra time
- Reduced workload
- Extended deadlines

These accommodations don't relieve the impairment. They just give provide a longer time to suffer.

Imagine you have ADHD and are given ten hours to complete the work of an eight-hour day. The extra two hours gives you longer to suffer. Two extra hours a day to work is ten hours a week or 40 hours a month. This explains burnout.

Extra time gives extra time to operate around the inefficiency, but it does not relieve the impairment itself. The emotional cost remains. The extra stress shifts from acute short-term pressure to chronic long-term strain.

Adaptive Accommodations: Adaptive accommodations are fundamentally different. They provide systemic relief to the impairment, reducing the emotional cost bringing motivational equilibrium. My eyesight is impaired. Extra time to read doesn't provide relief. Eyeglasses provide relief to the impairment. Adaptive accommodations are things that reduce the cognitive load by shifting problem-solving from in mind to out of mind.

Examples may include:

- Real-time face-to-face collaboration on problems
- Cueing
- Demonstrations
- Direct oral communication (see the Intangible Accommodations Axiom)

These approaches do not simply help someone "try harder." They relieve the impairment and its discomfort.

A Different Way of Thinking About ADHD Motivation

This model reframes many common assumptions about ADHD and introduces the idea that the motivation can be engineered by adapting the environment to fit the impairment, replacing the idea that we need to condition behavior to conform to the task.

This motivational theory factors in the impact of the impairment and changes how we understand motivation. Most importantly, the model suggests that sustainable improvement does not come from endlessly increasing pressure, urgency, or willpower. It comes from restoring equilibrium.

Conclusion

If ADHD is an executive-function impairment, then motivation cannot be understood independently from executive-function efficiency. The less efficient the executive system, the greater the emotional cost required to sustain effortful control. That imbalance creates a motivational disequilibrium that naturally favors the automatic brain. While willpower and reward

amplification may temporarily compensate, they often increase stress and emotional fatigue over time.

Adaptive accommodations offer something fundamentally different: Systemic relief that reduces effort lowers emotional cost and supports more sustainable functioning. In the end, the goal is not to motivate those with ADHD to “try harder.” But rather, the goal may be to restore equilibrium so effort becomes sustainable in the first place.

To understand adaptive accommodations, reference the Intangible Accommodations Axiom which reveals ADHD accommodations that have been hidden in plain sight for thousands of years!

Sidebar

Cognitive Ergonomics From the Inside Out®... Cog-Erg for short… is a new field of engineering and a new ADHD intervention. Dr. Russell Barkley's executive function construct is used to define executive functions. AttentionScope®, developed by ADHD coach Jeff Copper, is a collection of metaphors and simulations to bring tangibility to what Dr. Barkley had defined. The definitions and AttentionScope® enable us to make objective observations and engineer ADHD accommodations to provide systemic relief to executive function impairments. To learn more, visit www.cognitive-ergonomics.com.

Jeff Copper Bio

Jeff Copper, cognitive engineer and ADHD coach, is founder of DIG Coaching Practice and host of Attention Talk Radio and Attention Talk Video. He developed *Cognitive Ergonomics From the Inside Out*™, a new paradigm and a new ADHD intervention that takes an engineering approach to identify accommodations for those with executive function impairments. Jeff holds an MBA from University of Tampa, professional designations from ICF and PAAC, and certifications from ADD Coach Academy (ADDCA) and Coaches Training Institute (CTI). He received the 2022 Professional Excellence Award by the ADHD Coaches Organization. His work continues to innovate and redefine ADHD coaching.