



S1:E9 "How I Plan" Transcript

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Karen Costa:

Welcome to the ADHD gallery, a podcast about teaching, learning and living with ADHD. My name is Karen Costa, and I'll be your host and curator. This podcast is for the ADHDers in the world. People like me. Join me to venture through this gallery of ideas, curiosities, brain science, random hyper focus interests, and reflections on what it's like to live with the gifts and many challenges of ADHD. Fellow dopamine hunters, let's be weird together. Stay connected at theADHDgallery.com. I'm aiming to be increasingly less active on social in the coming months and maybe even years. So my website and email newsletter will be the best way to stay in touch.

Hello, everyone and welcome to Episode Nine of the ADHD gallery. Come on in. My name is Karen Costa, and I'm your host and curator. Today's episode is called "How I Plan." This also happens to be the penultimate episode of season one of The ADHD Gallery. Oh my word.

I put a note here to share how I'm feeling. It's been a lot of work. I think one of my hesitations about creating a podcast was that I knew that it would probably be more work than I realized. And I was very intentional in designing a system that was focused on doing the least in order to share this work with the world. And it was still a lot of work. I have been focused solely on recording really. I haven't done my transcripts. I haven't worked on show notes. I feel like I need to roll with the momentum of recording. I shared this in an earlier episode, because if I started to get into the details, I felt that I would lose my momentum. So it's been record record record. And I will finish up hopefully this week, episode 10, and the work will continue of all those details that need to happen before I can share this with you, so it's a lot of work. I have no regrets. This is something I've wanted to do. So I'm really excited to be approaching somewhat of a finish line in terms of recording, so that'll be great.

All right. I am talking to you about how I plan today. One of my favorite areas of hyperfocus is hearing and learning about what other people do with their days. Oh my



goodness. This fascinates me. If someone shares like a day in their life on Instagram, I will write to them and be like, Oh my gosh, thank you for letting me know what you did with your day. I'm fascinated by this. I want to know how people plan their days. I want to know what systems and planners they use. I want to know what people actually end up doing. I'm so curious about what sober adults do during, you know, a global pandemic. Like how are we all passing the time these days? Give it all to me. So I'm really excited to share how I plan with all of you.

So let's start with taking a tour of my planning, quote unquote, throughout history first before I share my current system with you. Let's head back to college days. I can remember my planning system was a piece of notebook paper taped to the wall. It had a list of major assignments, and I would cross them off when I finished them, and I was very pleased with the system, and I have no judgment for my college self for using this system. I can remember feeling really good about crossing things off my list. I don't really know how I got anything done with that as a system. It was the best that I knew at the time. I'm guessing that the structure of fully on-site courses throughout my K through 12 and higher ed experience, you know, you have to show up to class every day. There's a lot of structure there. That probably was part of why my personal planning system, you know, lacking a bit, you know, didn't have too much of an impact on me. And also, of course, I am a reformed perfectionist, but at the time, a lot of those perfectionist tendencies, which yes, absolutely coexist in many ADHDers, that also motivated me to get my work done even though I didn't have a good planning system. That said, I don't like to think about how much time and energy I could have saved if I'd had a real actual system and maybe, you know, any actual support for the ADHD that I did not know that I had at the time.

It is really common to hear variations of that feeling amongst ADHDers, particularly adult women. Folks like me with a late diagnosis. Just because we quote unquote succeeded does not mean that we didn't suffer. It doesn't mean that we don't have ADHD because we succeeded. It means that we needed help. We didn't get it and we got through it.

After college, I was, out full time in the workforce, I used, oh approximately 700 just different planners and systems. This is also a really common thing I hear from ADHDers who are trying to be okay. And we think maybe this planner will help us be okay. We use the new planner for two weeks. And then the shiny new toy of a new planner and the



dopamine hit we get from buying it and setting it up, you know, that's impossible for us to resist, but it doesn't last and then we repeat.

I'll also add here that for the past 10 years I have been fully remote, pre pandemic I was fully remote, and I have been working multiple jobs. So for the past 10 years or so I have not had really much structure at all. I have some structure in my roles, but I don't have the structure of a traditional office setting that helps me to decide how to use my time. I think a lot of ADHDers are drawn to work like this, for great reasons. I, you know, I can't imagine doing it a different way. That said, the lack of structure can be a blessing and a curse. I've really only fully learned the power of a strong system the past couple of years. Before the pandemic, I had learned that I needed a, for example, a specific space I needed a desk. I loved working remotely, but when I started I would carry my laptop around the house with like a pile of papers on it, and I just after a few years that really wasn't working, so I got a desk, and then when the pandemic hit, I think I really was, you know, in good ways and bad ways, forced into a place where I needed to get a stronger system, and certainly my diagnosis helped me realize that I needed a stronger system.

As a reminder, I'm going to share my current system in a moment. I am not suggesting at all that you adopt my planning system. What I'm doing here is sharing how I came to create that system, why it works for me. And I want to encourage you to forget what anyone else thinks about what you need, and use this as inspiration to create a system that works for you.

All right, so let's dive into my current planning system. I think the first thing that it's important to share is that I throw everything and the kitchen sink at my ADHD and at my planning so I use a combination of strategies. One is not enough for this brain. No. I like variety. A lot of ADHDers like variety. I need things presented to me in multiple means or multiple ways. So for example, and I'll talk more in detail about this, I need both digital and analog planning strategies. So digital on devices or computers, analog paper, old fashion, okay. I also need a combination of visual and audio reminders. So it's that variety, it's multiple means, multiple ways. I use a combination of strategies or you know, again, throw everything in the kitchen sink at it.

So the first part of my system is Google Calendar. This is new, probably about 18 months ago. And I'll talk a little bit more about the shift from paper to Google Calendar.



Google Calendar is, I would now say, the heart of my planning system. Again, might not be for you, but it is for me. Second, I use a giant whiteboard that is hung up on the wall in my office. It lists weekly tasks and it is divided up. I have five columns for five different roles. Third, I have a bulletin board with monthly calendars, paper monthly calendars that I printed, found them free online. And those show sort of the big picture, so they show the weeks that I'm in for the various classes I teach. So for example, Class X might be in week one this week, but I'm also teaching class Y and they're in week two. So I'm often teaching multiple classes at a time. And because they're at different institutions or they're different classes, they might be at different points in the term. So those paper monthly calendars up on the bulletin board help me when I sit down to respond to a student email who's asking about a deadline or things like that. I need to just be able to look up quickly and say, okay, we're in week three. And then the fourth part of my planning system, this is the most recent addition is what I call my Notion, second brain. And I'm going to do an entire episode on my Notion second brain. But you know, quick version is that my Notion second brain. Notion is a database tool. It's free for the basic level. So you can check it out. This is where I put my totally big picture creative, brain dump project planning ideas: the rabbit hole. When I'm taking notes about anything, when I see a quote that I love, it all goes into Notion. And again, you're gonna get an entire episode that's going to be this season finale for season one next week.

At the start of each term, here's what I do. I map out my jobs on this, you know, paper monthly calendar. And I see, this is when it started, you know, this is when this course or this commitment starts. This is when it ends. I do a lot of contract work. I also do a lot of, you know, one time workshops, so they go onto these paper monthly calendars. And again, I'm teaching classes at a variety of institutions. Typically those classes run for four or eight weeks; they have different start times. But generally speaking, I do this big picture term planning in August and January. Those are my big planning months to see what's coming up for the upcoming semester. But I also will often pick up a new course in February for example, so then I have to go back to those paper monthly calendars. And that's sort of like a high level overview of week to week. I would consider that more like weekly and monthly planning. Then each week, I write out every task for each of my jobs onto this giant whiteboard. This includes my work at 100 Faculty. That's my business and that is random. It's workshops, it's podcasts, it's community work, it's writing. So a lot of that stuff, some of that has a specific deadline, but a lot of it doesn't. So for example, recording this podcast is up under the 100 Faculty column. And I do



that for all of my roles: teaching roles, faculty development roles. Each has a column and I list my weekly tasks. And then on Friday, typically Friday, mid morning or afternoon, I go into my Google Calendar, and I plug every single one of those tasks from the giant whiteboard into a specific time.

This is really important and I want to share this with you all, this is probably the most important part, one of the most important parts of my system. Every task that I have has a scheduled time. Doesn't always get done at that time. Sometimes I'm like, oh, I don't want to do that right now. I want to do that later. So I move it down the Google Calendar and do something else. Generally speaking, though, I'm really thoughtful about when I schedule times for things, but every task gets a scheduled time. I don't just start Monday morning first thing and fill up days randomly with tasks. I have learned that I am at my best before lunch. I am actually, wasn't always the case, but I've become an early bird. So I'm usually up around six and I tend to get to my desk on work days before seven. The tasks that are the most mundane for me that have the least amount of dopamine reward, those I try to put earlier on Monday. I like to get them out of the way; it decreases my stress. I don't always love doing them, but I get them out of the way and then I feel like my week is a little more clear for me to engage with.

I mix in tasks from my various jobs. So I will, if I have three mundane tasks for three different jobs, I sort of will play with how I'm going to order them. I might then, you know, squeeze in something that's fun in the middle of those three tasks. So I know that I need variety. I can't just do the same thing over and over and over and over all day. I like to switch things up.

I also do my, you know, can I call it grown up work? Paid work. I do certain kinds of work on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Maybe we would call that the more mundane or the more logical or the grown up type of work. I try to cluster that on Monday, Wednesday Friday. Same for meetings. I try to cluster meetings on Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Tuesday and Thursday I had, this was a huge realization for me early on in the pandemic, was that the, you know, working Monday through Friday, and maybe getting done a little bit earlier was just too long of a stretch for me. I needed to weave in some more openness and some more creativity. I would rather work longer on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and have more flexibility on Tuesday Thursday. So Tuesday and Thursday for me are more open days. That is time that I try to protect for rest, fun,



podcasting, reading, writing. It's not 100% that I'm able to do that, but that is my general workflow. That's also been really helpful.

I think that, you know, just throw out any ideas that you have to do it a certain way to the extent possible, right. So we need to get paid. We need to survive in this world. But beyond that, if there's a way that you can structure your time that works for you, that doesn't look like what works for everybody else, I just encourage you to be bold and creative and to take risks and give that a try.

Another thing that I've done, and this is controversial, I have this as a confession. I have, I have to be careful that I say them, the Alexa devices, because they, you know, they'll start talking from Amazon. They're all over my house. Okay. And I know that there are very real and important concerns with the corruption of Amazon. I know there are very real and important concerns about privacy issues around having surveillance tech in our homes. I know that these things are listening to me because when I talk to them, they respond. This is a both/and for me, and I'm not going to go too far down this path today. I will say these devices are an adaptive tool that I use to manage my disability. And we will now continue on.

Okay. I have linked these devices to my Google calendar. And I know your privacy, people are just screaming at me. And again, this is an adaptive tool that I use to manage my disability. It's a both/and for me. I might change my mind down the road, but this is what works for me and keeps me well right now. So when I schedule an appointment in my Google Calendar, where an appointment meaning I have to show up to something, a perhaps, a meeting with other human beings, I will typically add two notifications: sometimes more usually like 10 minutes, five minutes, one minute. The device in my office, the Alexa person, device lady, will then, because of how I have it set up. announce these three layers of audio notifications. You have a meeting.

I added this layer to my planning because I was running into too many instances where I was sitting at my desk - I had a paper planner that I would meticulously plan in. It will be open next to me. It will clearly show an appointment time. But I just, my brain just didn't acknowledge it. I missed meetings that I, you know, had planned for and written down and wanted to be at. My brain just said no. I was down some other rabbit hole. I was distracted and completely missed meetings. So I have learned that I need external



reminders, both visual and audio. And this is the system right now that allows me to do that.

Another thing that has really worked for me is to plan on Friday for the following week. Mondays, I'm not like a Monday hater like some people. I definitely have those Mondays, but sometimes I'm actually, I look forward to Mondays because there's things in my work, in my life, in the coming week that I'm excited about, but Monday's can be tough. I have learned that I don't typically have the dopamine or the energy to sit down on Monday morning and plan that week. If I used my energy to plan on Monday for that week, I would not have any energy left on Monday to do any actual work. Because planning you know, particularly I think for ADHDers, has a pretty high cognitive demand. I've got to make decisions about when I'm going to do things. I'm navigating back and forth between my giant board and my Google Calendar. I'm glancing up at my paper calendar as well. I'm thinking about you know, not only my work and what I need, but also my son and my husband and my dog, family stuff that's coming up, so it's, you know, it's intense cognitive and emotional work, I think. And if I did that on Monday, I would lose Monday as a work day. It works for me to use Friday. On Friday, even though I am, you know, tired from the week, and I'm, you know, kind of crawling toward the weekend, I also have the energy of the promise of the weekend right there. And I think that brings me enough of those precious neurotransmitters to help motivate me to get my planning done on Friday. I love knowing that Monday morning, first thing, I can just sit down. I don't have to make any decisions on Monday morning. I do not have to make any decisions on Monday morning. That is so valuable to me. I just sit down and do what my Google Calendar tells me to do.

Okay, speaking of G-Cal, I want to talk a little bit about this idea of analog planning. Old fashioned paper or digital planning. I used to use paper planners until about a year ago, or maybe 18 months. Time, you know, has no meaning. When I made the change to Google Calendar, I had thought about doing it before, but I really felt like I needed that tactile experience of sitting down with the paper planner. But I also realized that I was writing out the same recurring tasks each week. So in my work, particularly with my teaching, whether I'm teaching students or faculty, it tends to be like, respond to discussion posts, grade discussion posts, grade papers, respond to faculty posts, and I do those, you know, every week for four weeks or every week for eight weeks, and I realized I was taking a lot of time to write down something that I could, you know, use those gorgeous recurring task options in G-Cal instead. That has saved me a lot of time.



I also didn't like how, you know, I had white out and things would change and I would have to white them out. I love how in G-Cal, if I can't get to something on Monday, I can just grab it and move it over to Tuesday. Rather than getting all scribbly and messy in a paper planner.

The other thing that was really important for me, has always been in planning, I have always needed planners that gave me 15 minute increments, and as someone who as I said has had 700 planners, this was really always very hard to find. It seems like a lot of planners only use 30 or 60 increments. My life and my brain do not work that way. I think and work fast. So for me, a task is often complete in 15 minutes, then I go on to the next class of tasks, that's 15 minutes and so on. And so forth. And I would have to write in, you know, 12:15, 12:30 into a paper planner. It got messy, it was hard to read. I love that Google Calendar lets me customize times. So maybe this thing is going to take me five minutes, 15 minutes, 25 minutes, I can do that in Google Calendar.

My other most favorite thing about G-Cal is called the today button. The today button is one of the best examples of quality user design in the world that I can think of. When I go into my calendar, and I'm searching for something, or I'm clicking on next week, or I'm clicking on next month, and then I kind of come to and I say, what am I supposed to be doing? Which is, you know, a very common ADHD experience. I just click on the Today button and it brings me right back to today. I feel like everything and place in the world should have some version of the Today button. When we get lost, we click the Today button or the equivalent, and we are brought back to where we need to be. I love it.

So that is my system. My unique personalized system that has taken me 42 years to develop. I pretty much mostly created this on my own through blood, sweat and tears. I would love for more clinicians to give people with ADHD support in developing a planning system, a time management system, that works for them. To me that should be commonplace. It should be covered by my insurance. This strong personalized planning system is one of the fundamental ways that I manage my ADHD, and I basically had to make it on my own. I did get a little help with this from an ADHD coach that I met with early on in my diagnosis, paid for her out of pocket. I met with her for about three months. She was great. She really helped me, you know, get to a place, for example, one of the things we worked on was that Monday, Wednesday, Friday versus Tuesday, Thursday energy. So she was very helpful. And if you can afford that, a coach can be a



great investment. Seems to me that everyone should have access to that kind of support. I hope that as a world, as a community, we will do better. For folks who have a formal diagnosis, for folks who are self diagnosed, for folks who have many of the symptoms and experiences of ADHD and might not realize it. I hope we can do more to support people to develop a planning and time management system that works for them. And I hope that you enjoyed this glimpse into how I plan and spend my days.

Okay, everyone that is a wrap for episode nine. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen today. I know that you have a lot of choices about what to give your attention to, and it's an honor that you chose me and the ADHD gallery. Your support means the world to me. Please rate the podcast share with your friends and colleagues. And of course make sure to sign up for my email list by visiting theADHDgallery.com. Thank you friends.