



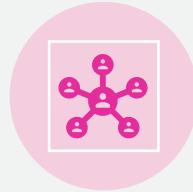
Strengthening Executive Functions for Improved Employment Outcomes

Rasha Elhage, PhD
Associate Professor of Special
Education
Governors State University
relhage@govst.edu

Learning Outcomes



Identify executive functions and understand how they develop.



Establish the connection between executive functions and employability skills.

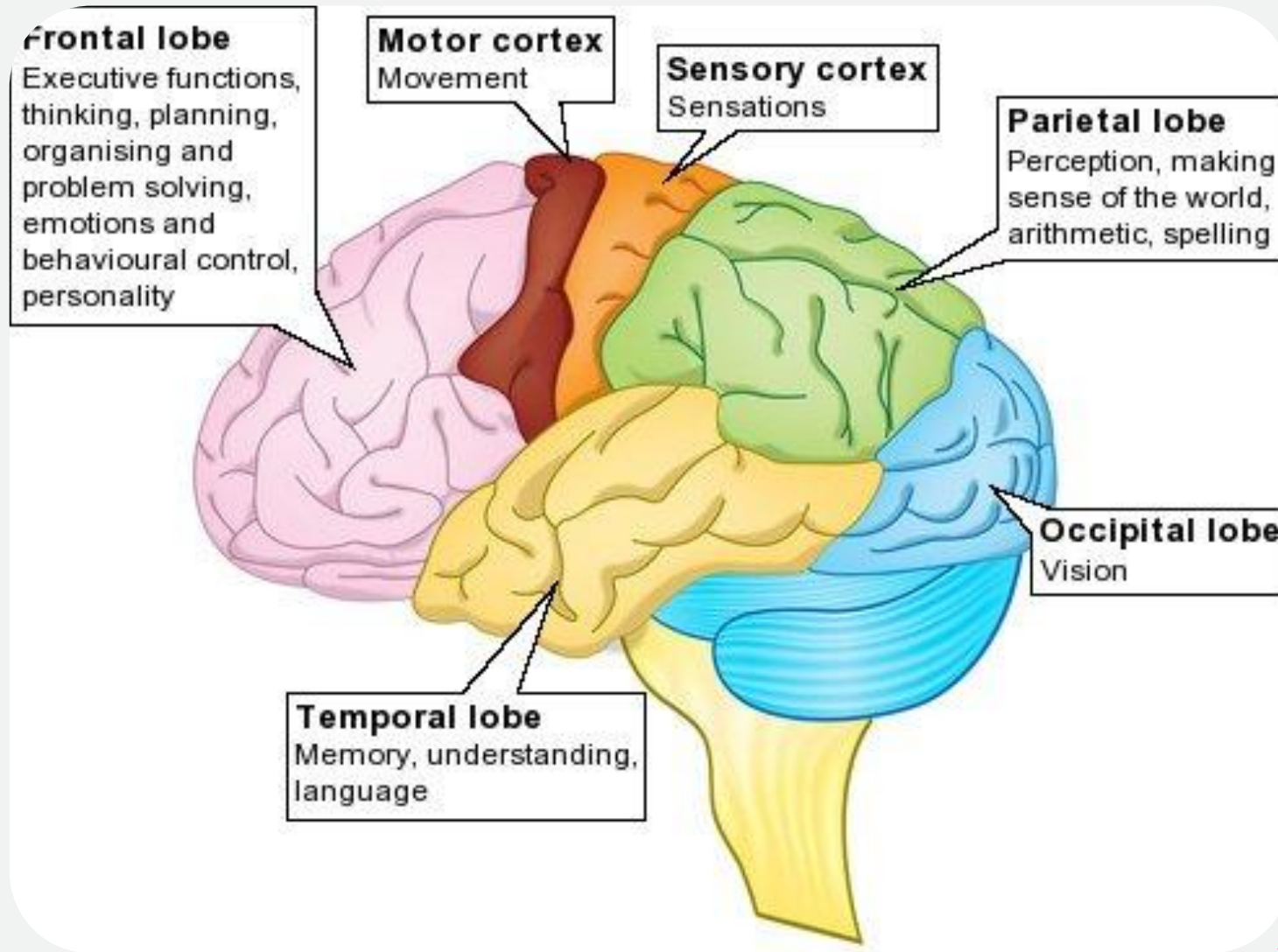


Apply practical strategies to address executive functions and employability development



What's Executive Function?

- + Executive function is a set of **mental skills** that help people **plan**, **organize**, and **manage** their time, **pay attention**, and **process information**. These skills are controlled by the **frontal lobe** of the brain and develop throughout childhood and into adulthood.



The self-management system of the brain

What's Executive Function?

+ In adults, reduced executive functioning can affect their abilities to **socialize, take in new information, follow directions, focus, control emotions, attain goals** and **perform well at work**.



Executive Function Deficits & Disabilities

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (**DSM-5**) does not recognize executive function disorder (EFD) as a specific mental health condition.

Instead, the DSM-5 considers executive function issues to be a **symptom of other conditions**, such as:

ADHD, Bipolar disorder, Depression, Anxiety, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, and Autism.

Main factor in ADHD – Executive Function Deficits

The Causes of Executive Function Deficits

There are several potential causes of executive function impairment, including:

- Heritable **neurological conditions** such as ADHD, depression, or learning disabilities
- **Injury** to the front of the brain
- **Damage** from Alzheimer's disease or strokes
- Childhood **physical and / or psychological trauma** resulting in brain developmental issues



Diagnoses

1

Barkley Deficits in Executive Functioning Scale (BDEFS) – This tool helps screen for problems with executive function tasks like organization, self-restraint, motivation, emotional control, and time management. It can provide information on how the person acts over a period of time, too, as opposed to other tests, which only provide in-the-moment information.

2

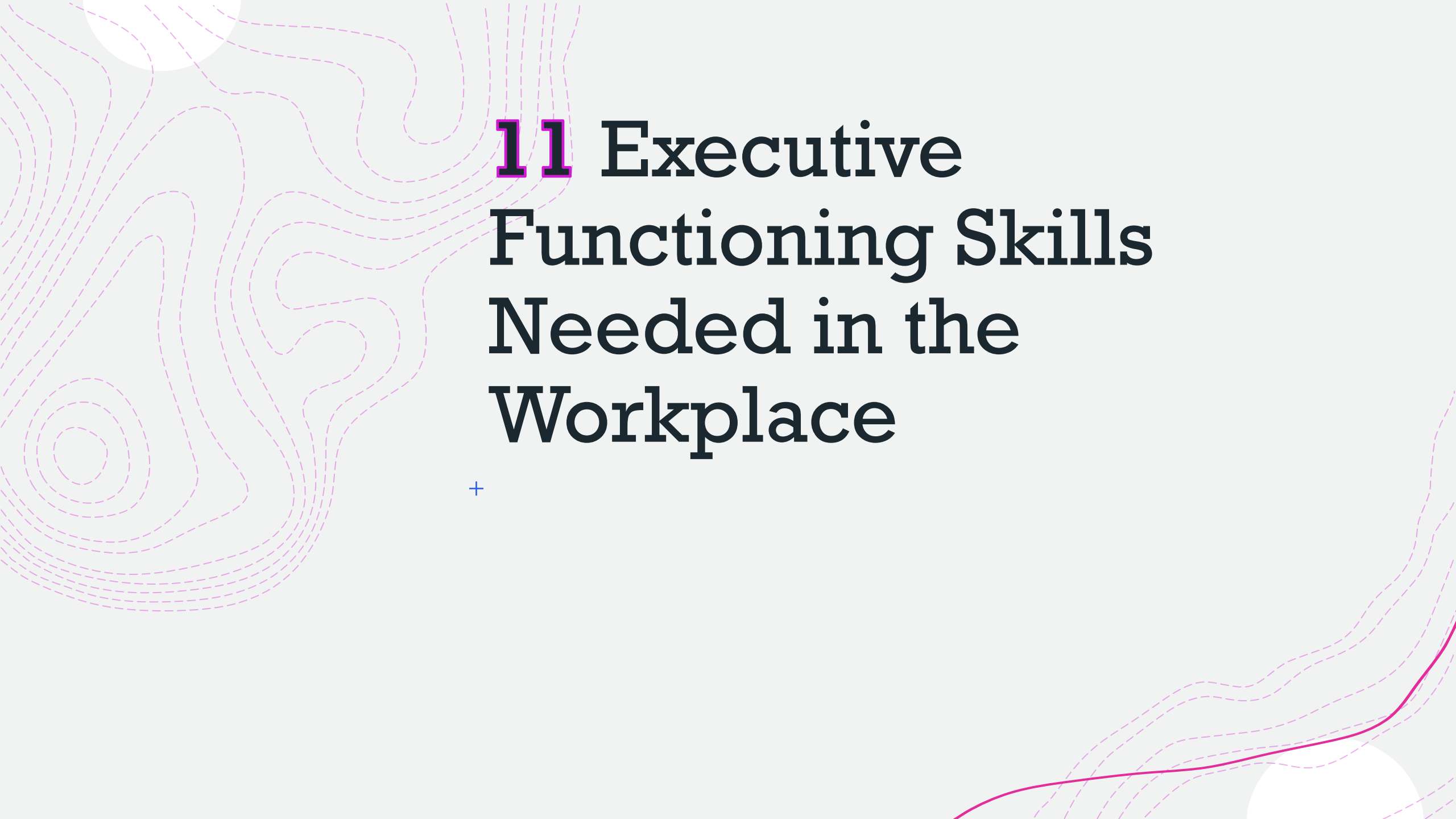
Comprehensive Executive Function Inventory (CEFI) – This scale is used to measure executive function strengths and weaknesses in kids from 5 to 18.
Compares a person to a norm group using parent, teacher, and self-report assessments

3

Conners 3-Parent Rating Scale – This tool measures behavior in kids ages 6-18. It helps identify learning problems in specific subjects, like reading, spelling, math and also in terms of broader concepts like memory.

Much like an **air traffic control system** at an airport helps planes on different runways land and take off safely, executive function skills help our brains prioritize tasks, filter distractions, and control impulses.





11 Executive Functioning Skills Needed in the Workplace

+

Executive functioning skill in the workplace #1 - Response Inhibition



Ability to control your responses to stimulation or distractions.

Self control, or the ability to refrain from actions that conflict with your goals, is one aspect of response inhibition.

Another is stopping habitual behaviors when they're not appropriate, like not trying to catch a hot pan that got knocked off the stove



By improving response inhibition, or impulse control, individuals are less likely to be distracted by actions and events that happen around them and interfere with their goals.



Being able to focus on your work will increase your odds of success.

Executive functioning skill in the workplace

#2 - Working Memory



Ability to hold information for a few minutes, hours, or days. Think of it like your brain's white board that keeps important information handy until you don't need it, but it's also limited in size and therefore as new information gets added, other information gets erased.



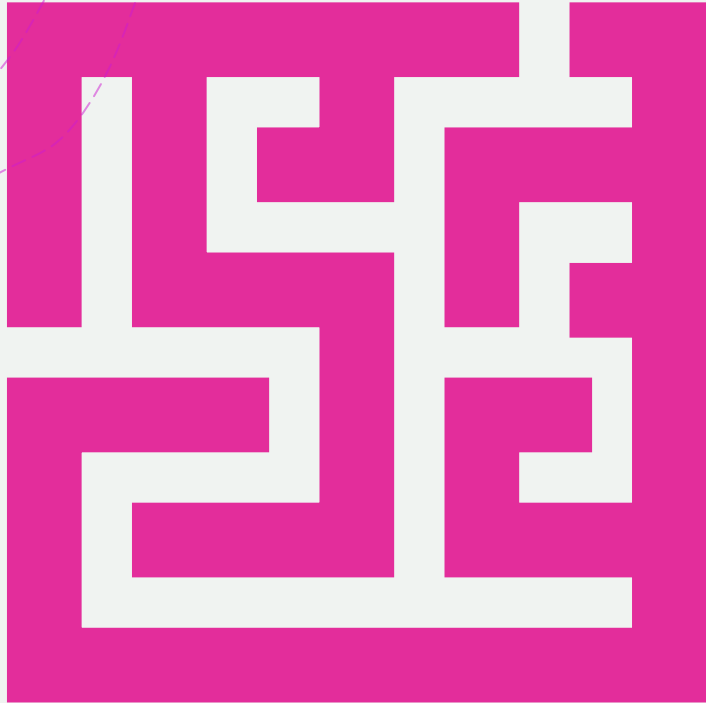
The ability to remember relevant information while performing complex tasks is often crucial for success. Having a well-functioning working memory can improve individuals' behavior and help them make more informed decisions.

Executive functioning skill in the workplace #3

- Emotional Control



- + Emotional control is about being able to navigate your feelings in a healthy way. While similar to response inhibition, emotional control focuses on one's ability to recognize appropriate emotional responses and control their behavior to fit the context regardless of their emotional state.
- + Managing your response and not letting your emotions dominate your behavior is a valuable professional skill. Being able to think rationally, not be distracted by subjective thoughts and regulate how you respond to something that excites or disappoints you are all examples of how this function can apply to the workplace.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace #4

– Sustained Attention

- + The ability to maintain focus over time, even when you're tired or the task is challenging. It's similar to persistence and sticking with the activity at hand until it's done or the goal has been achieved.

Executive functioning skill in the workplace #5

– Task Initiation

- + It's all about getting started. People who struggle with task initiation likely call themselves procrastinators.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace #6

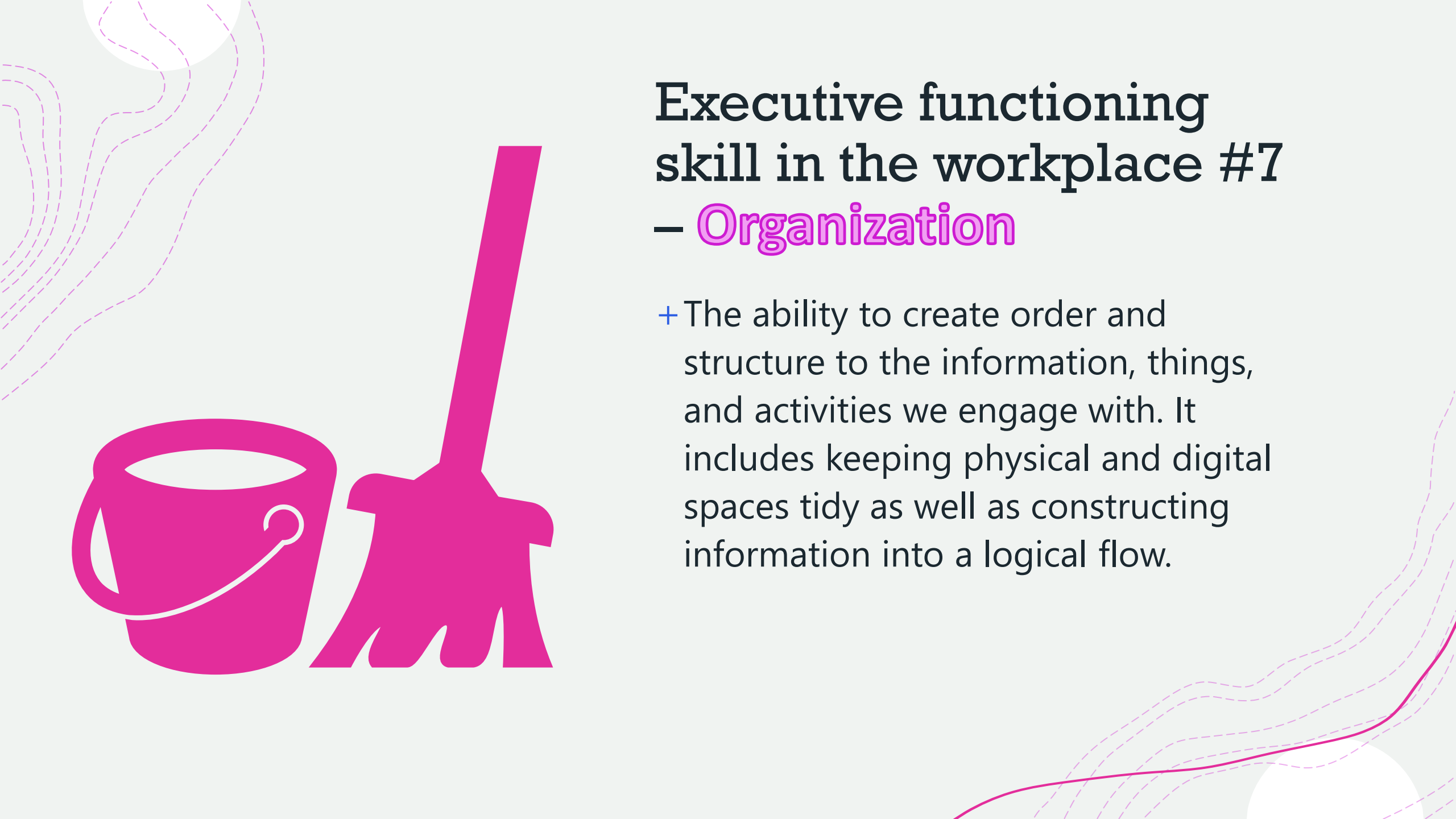
– Planning & Prioritizing



Your ability to consider what needs to get done and in what order. It requires us to take a step back and think through the bigger picture of all the work we have and the time it will take to complete, as well as the relationships between the tasks.



Being able to prioritize your tasks according to urgency and importance while considering a clear-cut plan of completion are essential skills in both personal and professional settings. Identifying the most productive actions and planning their execution is crucial for efficiency.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace #7

– Organization

- + The ability to create order and structure to the information, things, and activities we engage with. It includes keeping physical and digital spaces tidy as well as constructing information into a logical flow.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace #8

– Time Management

- + The ability to use time wisely. It includes estimating how long tasks will take, allocating your time between tasks, pacing yourself appropriately, and working to meet deadlines.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace #9 – Goal Directed Persistence

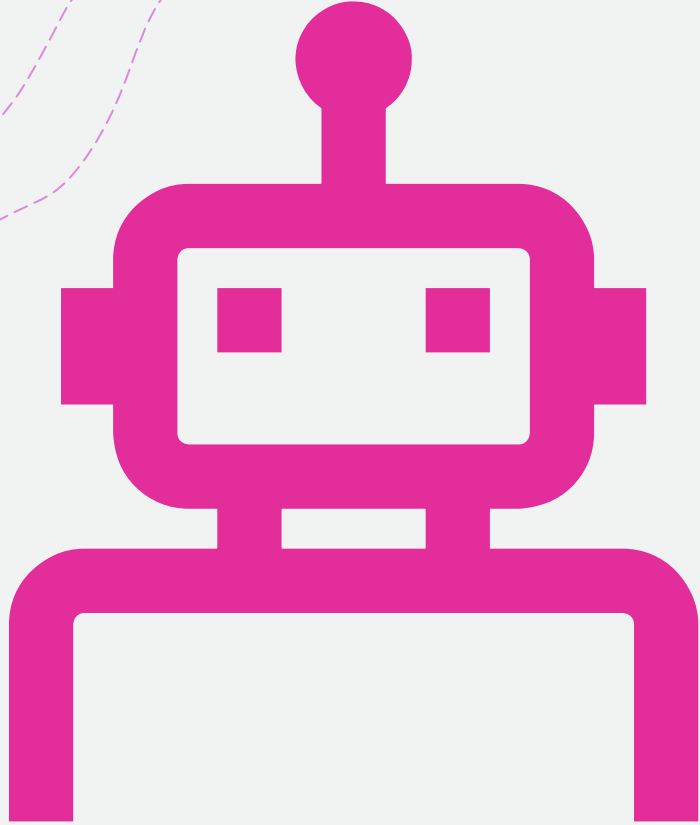
- + Your ability to articulate and work towards accomplishing a goal. It requires us to be able to clearly define what success looks like as well as make choices that drive us toward that goal even when distracted, tired, challenged, etc.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace

#10 – Flexibility

- + The ability to quickly change or adapt to new circumstances. This includes adjusting to changes as well as moving fluidly between activities.



Executive functioning skill in the workplace

#11 – Metacognition

- + It's about seeing the bigger picture. It's the ability to put information and situations in context. It's also about being able to reflect on your own thinking or behavior and explore both the what and the why behind your thoughts and actions.

Executive Function Skills

Response
Inhibition

Working
Memory

Emotional
Control

Sustained
Attention

Task Initiation

Planning &
Prioritizing

Organization

Time
management

Goal Directed
Persistence

Flexibility

Metacognition

Universal Employability Skills

Communication

Teamwork

Self-Motivated/Ability to work with little or no supervision

Problem-Solving/Decision-Making, Reasoning/Creativity skills

Planning/
Organizing Skills

Dependability/
Reliability/
Responsibility

Adaptability
Availability/Flexibility

Interpersonal
Abilities

Multi-Tasking Skills

Willingness to
Learn

Self-Confidence

Why teach executive function skills?



+ Executive
functioning skills
are **shaped**, not
innate.

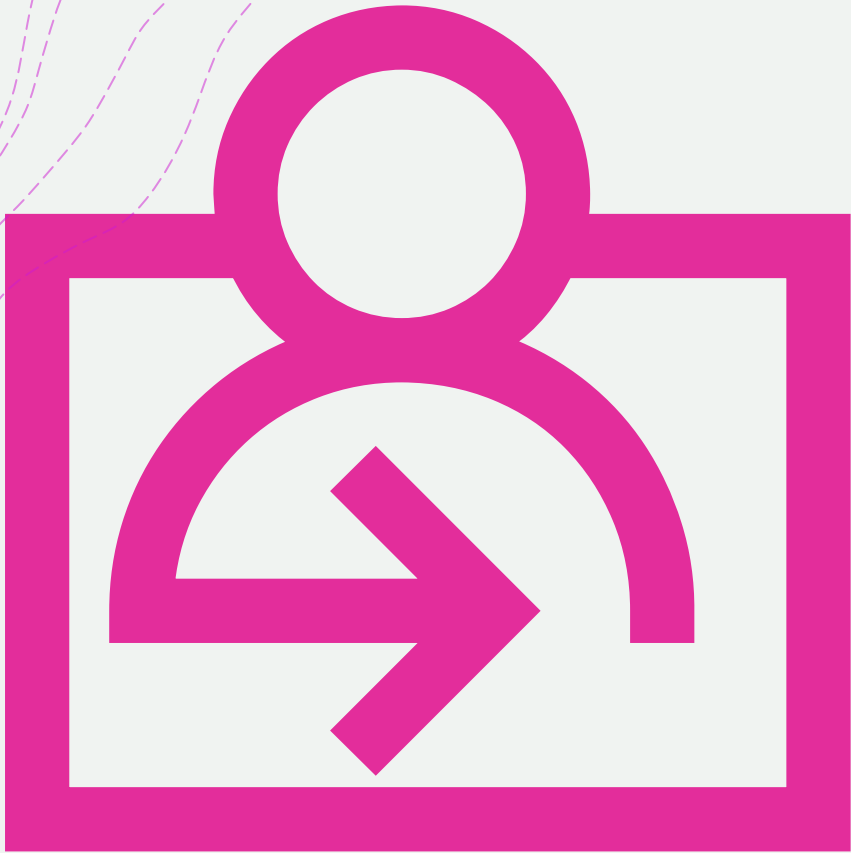


+Executive
functioning skills
are **life skills**.



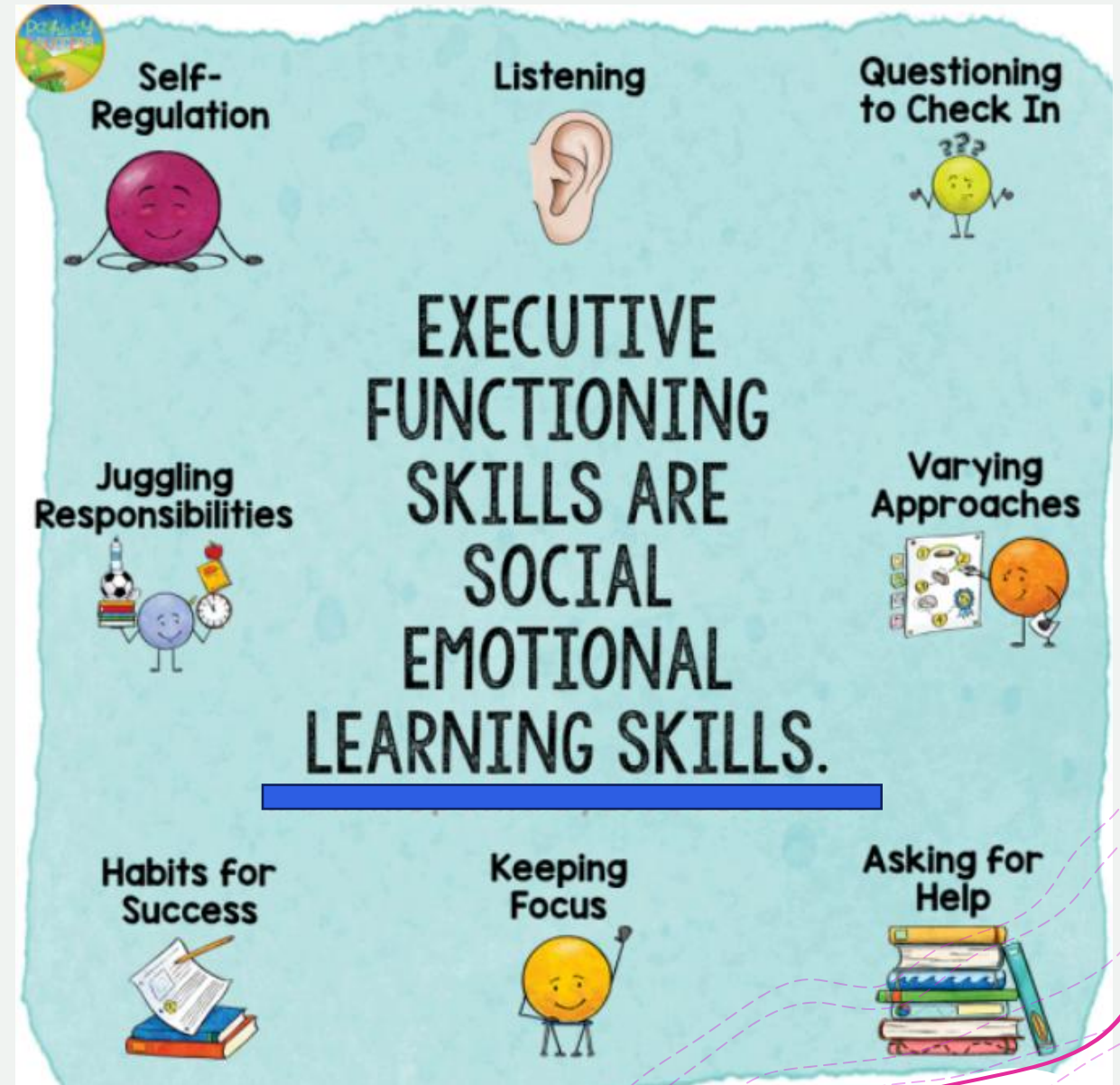


Executive functioning skills
build independence.



+ Strong executive functioning skills support **professional growth.**

+ Executive function skills are a component of **social emotional learning**



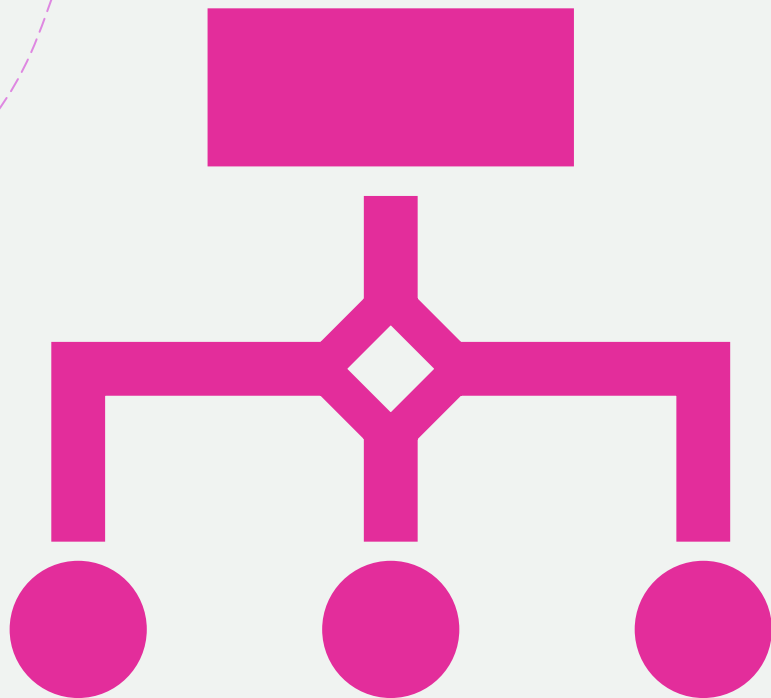
How to improve executive function skills



How to improve executive function skills

+ Divide tasks:

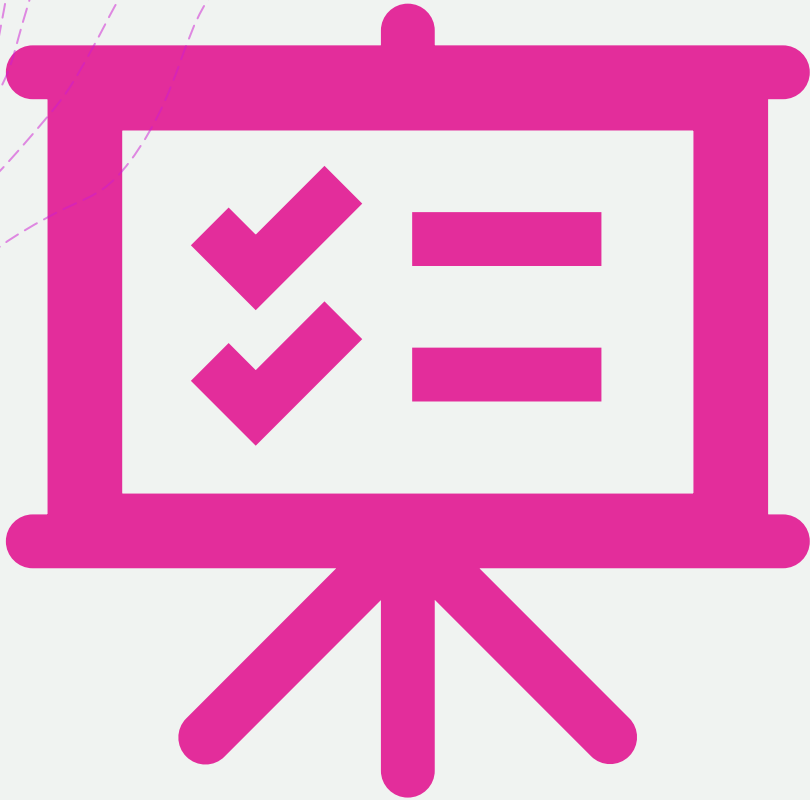
A complex task often seems intimidating and hard to complete but breaking it into smaller and more manageable parts can help you plan and prioritize better.



How to improve executive function skills

+ Make lists:

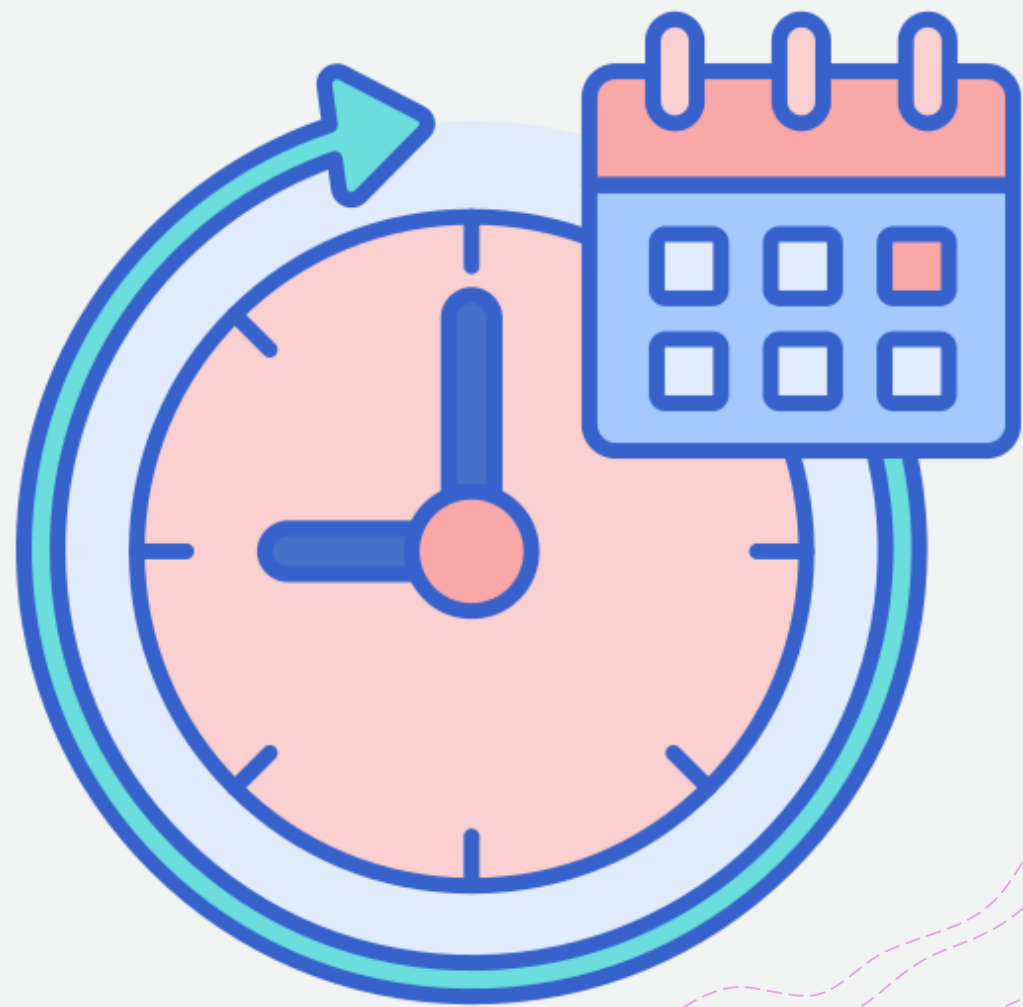
Lists can improve your executive skills by aiding in planning your tasks and deciding their order of importance. They also keep you focused and can help save time. Take advantage of technology like smartphone apps to create lists and set up reminders




How to improve executive function skills

+ Develop routines:

Like placing your cell phone and keys in the same place every time you return home from work, batch check emails and text messages three times a day.






How to improve executive function skills

+ Practice journaling:

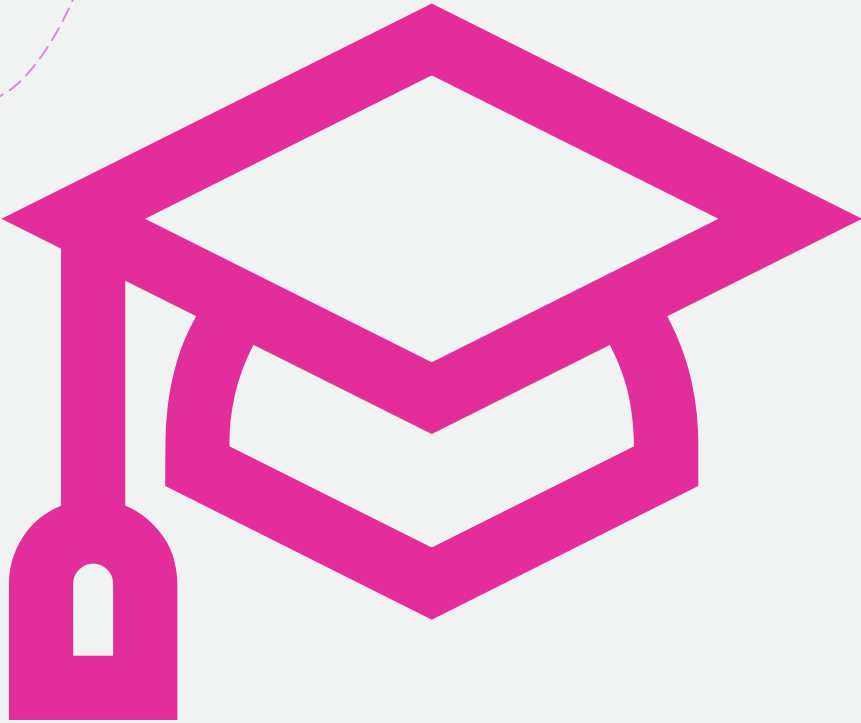
Encouraging personal reflection through journaling can be an avenue for self-discovery. By documenting daily challenges and successes, one can identify patterns, strategize better, and celebrate small victories



How to improve executive skills

+ Learn new things

Exposure to unfamiliar scenarios has the potential to improve your executive skills because your brain is forced to learn something new and adapt quickly



How to improve executive function skills

- + Use Mindfulness and Meditation Apps: Mindfulness is about being present, which is integral to executive functioning. These apps often offer guided sessions that can help in relaxation, improving focus and attention over time.



A stylized pink figure is shown in a dynamic pose, swinging a bat to hit a ball. The figure is composed of simple geometric shapes: a circle for the head, a rounded rectangle for the torso, and thick lines for the limbs. The bat is a long, rounded rectangle. The ball is a small circle. The background features faint, wavy, dashed lines in a light pink color, suggesting motion or a field. The overall style is minimalist and modern.

How to improve executive skills

+ Play competitive sports

Aside from being good for your health, playing a competitive sport is known to improve your executive functioning, as you will have to make quick decisions and adjust to the moves of your opponents.



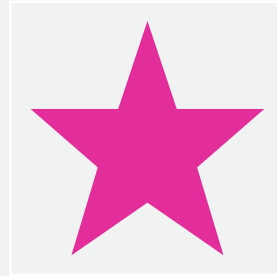
Executive skills for the job interview

- + Similar to showcasing them in a resume or cover letter, the best way to highlight your executive skills during an interview is by **providing examples** of situations in which you demonstrated executive functioning.
- + Executive skills are needed **simultaneously** for completing any action, so you don't have to think of individual examples for each skill. Instead, think about previously completed duties or accepted responsibilities, divide them into smaller parts and identify the executive skills that helped you complete them successfully.

Executive skills for the job interview



Prepare relevant
examples



Use the **STAR** method
(Situation, Task, Action,
Result)



Highlight key skills




Example Interview Answers

When managing a team on a tight deadline, I used a project management tool to prioritize tasks and regularly updated the team on progress, which allowed us to deliver the project on time and within budget." (Demonstrates planning, prioritization, and communication skills).

"During a critical business crisis, I quickly assessed the situation, gathered relevant information, and presented a strategic plan to leadership, which helped us navigate the challenges effectively." (Highlights adaptability and decision-making abilities)

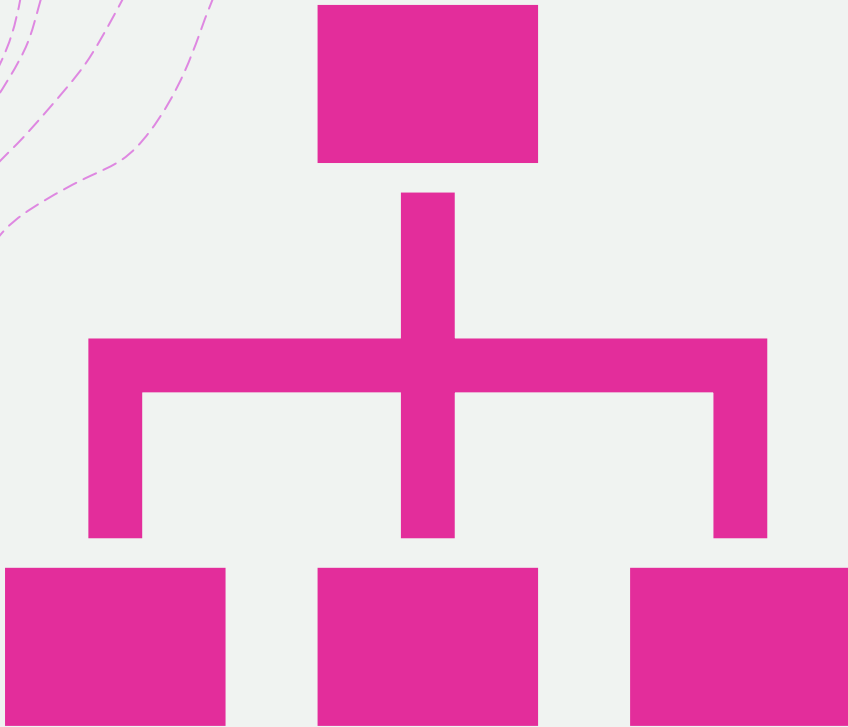
"To improve my focus on detail-oriented tasks, I implemented a system of regular breaks and checklists, which significantly reduced errors and improved overall quality." (Shows self-awareness and proactive approach to managing focus).

Self Advocate for Accommodations

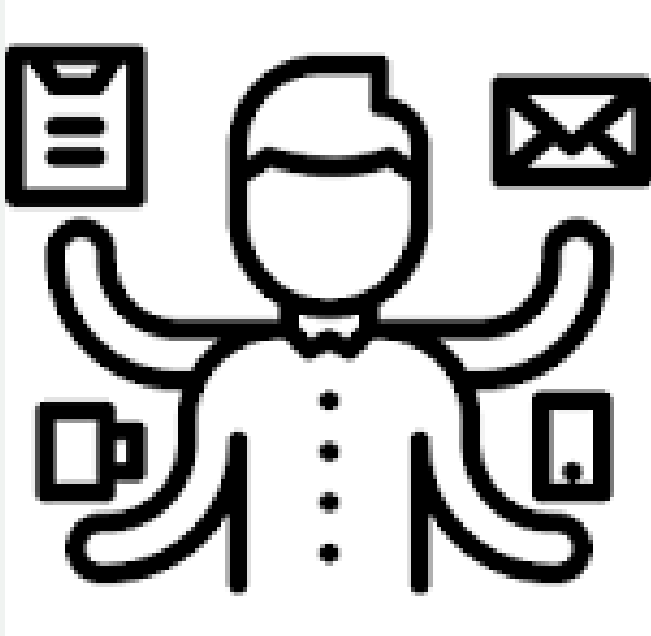
- 
- + Memory: Individuals may experience memory deficits, which can affect their ability to complete tasks, remember job duties, or recall daily actions or activities.
 - + Written instructions and checklists
 - + Use a recorder
 - + Ask for training refreshers
 - + Ask for minutes of meetings and trainings
 - + Use flow-chart to indicate steps in a task
 - + Use a color-coding scheme to prioritize tasks

Self Advocate for Accommodations

- + Organization and Prioritization: Individuals may have difficulty getting or staying organized or have difficulty prioritizing tasks at work.
 - + Develop color-code system for files, projects, or activities, and to prioritize tasks
 - + Use weekly chart to identify daily work activities
 - + Use electronic organizers, mobile devices, and e-mail reminders
 - + Create a "cheat sheet" of high-priority activities, projects, people, etc.
 - + Organize workspace to reduce clutter
 - + Take time at the end of each day to organize and set up for the next day



Self Advocate for Accommodations

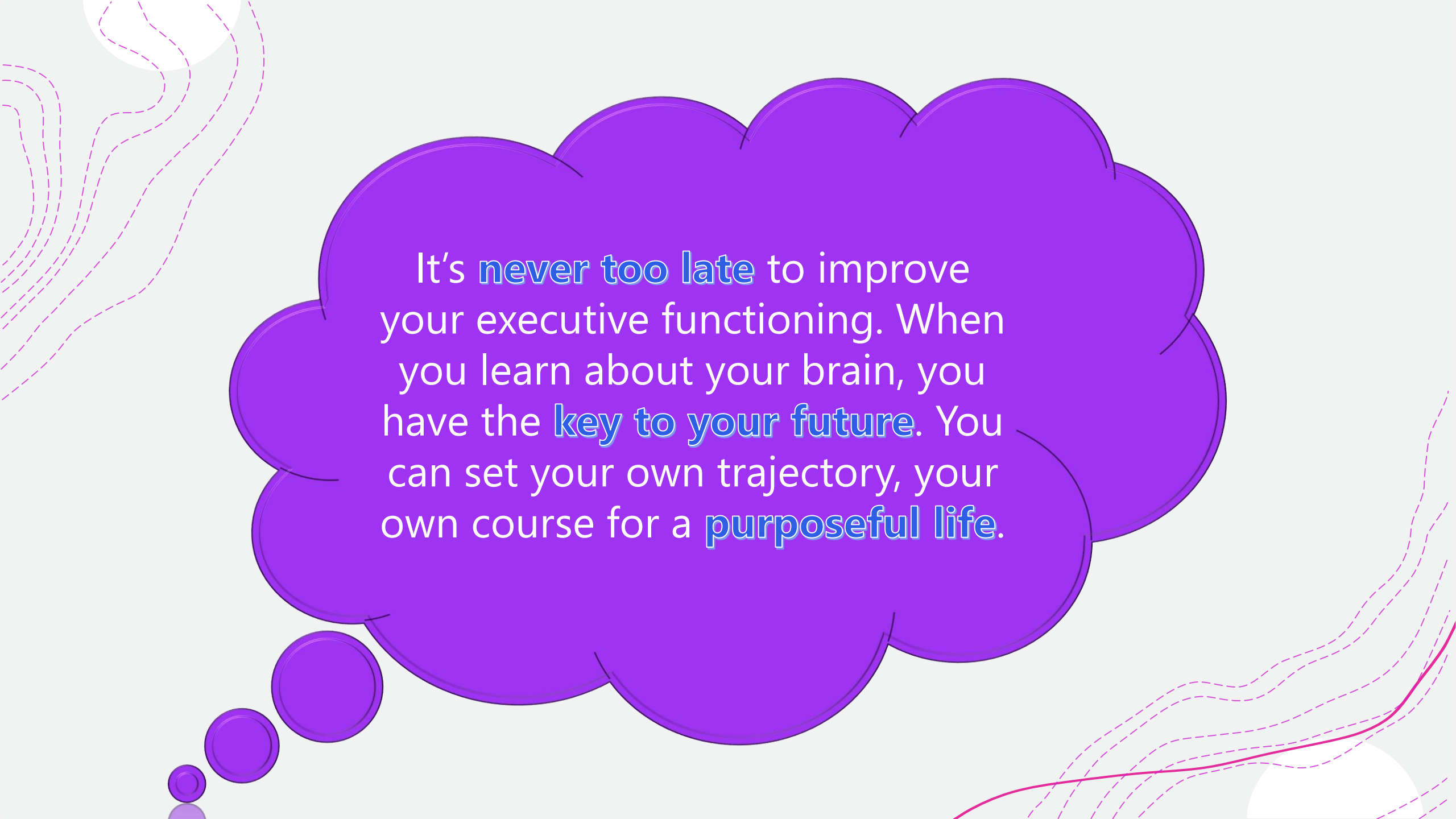


- + Multi-tasking: Individuals may have trouble performing many tasks at one time. This difficulty could occur regardless of the similarity of tasks or the frequency of performing the tasks.
 - + Create a flow-chart of tasks that must be performed at the same time, carefully labeling or color-coding each task in sequential or preferential order
 - + Identify tasks that must be performed simultaneously and tasks that can be performed individually
 - + Ask for specific feedback to help target areas of improvement
 - + Remove or reduce distractions from work area

Self Advocate for Accommodations

- + Managing Mental Fatigue: Individuals may have more difficulty with cognitive functioning when experiencing fatigue.
 - + Ask for flexible scheduling, which may include longer or more frequent work breaks
 - + Ask for additional time to learn new responsibilities
 - + Ask to do mentally difficult tasks when you have the most focus and stamina





It's **never too late** to improve your executive functioning. When you learn about your brain, you have the **key to your future**. You can set your own trajectory, your own course for a **purposeful life**.



**Questions?
Comments?**



Thank you

Rasha Elhage, PhD
Associate Professor of Special Education
Governors State University
relhage@govst.edu