ADAM Tristan COACHING

BEFORE THE BLOWUP

Spotting and Soothing ADHD Meltdowns Early

CHAPTER 1 – Why Meltdowns Start (and How to Spot Them Early)

Why This Chapter Matters

Ever felt like you just "snapped" out of nowhere—or your kid went from zero to meltdown in minutes? This chapter breaks that myth. Meltdowns don't appear suddenly. They build. And once you understand how, you'll never see them the same way again.

Real-Life Story: Same Time, Two Crashes

5:17 p.m. – The Grocery Store Spiral

You're standing in aisle six, staring at the salsa like it holds the answers to your entire life.

The cart squeaks. The lights hum like angry bees. One kid is bouncing beside you humming the Paw Patrol theme song. The other is asking rapid-fire questions—What's for dinner? Do ants sleep? Do we need rice?

You check your phone to look at your list. Slack pings. "Hey, can I get that deck real quick?" You close your eyes and exhale sharp. Your jaw's already tight. You mutter something under your breath that makes the kid flinch. You feel it—the shift.

You're trying to remember what you were cooking. Do you have onions? Is the chicken defrosted? You start mentally hopping between dinner options and aisle numbers and the time on the clock and the noise and the decision fatigue and the guilt.

Your brain's not helping. It's just spinning. The lights feel brighter. The questions louder. Your tolerance thinner.

You snap. “I CAN’T THINK RIGHT NOW. Just stop asking me questions.”

They look up at you—eyes wide, a little afraid.

You grab the Oreos. Dinner’s over. You’ll order pizza. You’re frustrated. You’re shaky. You hate how you sound.

You weren’t mean. You were overstimulated, under-fueled, chemically cold, and carrying too much alone.

5:17 p.m. – The Homework Breakdown

At home, your 9-year-old is at the kitchen table, hunched over a math worksheet that might as well be ancient runes.

They’ve read the first problem three times. Still doesn’t make sense. They wiggle. Tap the pencil. Try again. Still blank. Frustration building.

You step in to help. “Okay, let’s look at it together.” You mean well. You point at the first question. “What’s 7 plus 9?”

They shrug. You wait. “C’mon, you know this. Just count it.”

They huff. "I am counting!" Their voice is sharper than it was a second ago. You feel your own tension rise.

"Hey, I'm trying to help—don't snap at me."

They slam their pencil down. "I can't do it! It's too hard!"

You try to coach. "Just slow down. You're not even trying."

Now the tears come.

"No, YOU don't understand! It's not just hard—it's impossible!" They shove the chair back, bolt down the hallway, and slam the door.

Now you're standing there angry, hurt, confused. They're upstairs crying. And the worksheet is still blank.

So... What Just Happened?

Here's what it looked like:

- A grown adult snapping at their kids in a grocery store.
- A kid yelling at a parent who was just trying to help.

Here's what it was:

CHEMICAL	WHAT IT DOES	WHAT HAPPENED HERE
Dopamine	Gets you started	Tanked. Couldn't begin a simple task (dinner, homework). Motivation = gone.
Norepinephrine	Focus + alertness	Flickered. Noise and chaos made it impossible to track one thread.
Acetylcholine	Learning, clarity	Offline. No ability to plan, remember steps, or hold goals in working memory.
Serotonin	Mood, calm, control	Crashed. Tears, irritability, guilt, and short fuse all spilled over.

ADHD brains don't always crash because of big things. They crash because **you were already depleted,** then had too many small demands stacked on top—until your brain shut down or blew up.

What You Saw vs. What Was Happening

WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE

Snapped at kids in grocery store

Kid yelling or melting dow over homework

Brain chemistry collapsing

Dopamine
(Motivation + Starting)

Tanked - coulan't begin tasks

Norepinephrine
(Attention Control)

Flickered couldn't focus insues

Acetylcholine
(Learning + Clarity)

Offline couldn't retainst goals

Serotonin
(Mood + Regulation)

Crashed irritability, tears, shutdown

ROOT CAUSE

Skipped meals

No movement

Too many demands

No pause/reset

No pause/reset

This is why Pre-Games matter. They don't fix everything -they fuel the systern before it breaks.

How Did We Get Here?

Let's rewind three hours:

Adult:

- Skipped lunch
- Haven't sat down since noon
- Brain overstimulated
- Slack messages nonstop
- No movement, no pause, no plan
- No music, no dopamine, no moment to breathe

Kid:

- Day full of correction, pressure, and tasks
- Homework feels like punishment
- No break or snack
- Bright lights, background noise, sibling distractions
- One failure spiral started, and there was no reset
- Parent help = pressure, not relief

Cold Brain Symptoms to Watch For:

- You get sharp with people you love
- Can't make basic decisions ("What's for dinner?" = rage trigger)
- Loud stores, whining, small talk = sensory explosion
- Kid becomes snappy or rude when "helped"
- Small tasks feel impossibly big
- Working memory breaks under stress → everything feels like too much
- You or your kid feel "lazy," "dumb," "dramatic"—when it's really just **under-fueled neurology**

Key Insight: Cold Brains Don't Have the Chemicals to Cope

Behavior isn't random. It's a visible result of invisible chemistry.

A cold brain can't focus.
A cold brain can't stay calm.
A cold brain can't plan dinner or survive math homework without short-circuiting.

This is why we don't "power through."
We pre-load.

Take-Aways

1. Meltdowns are predictable, not personal. Learn to spot them early.

2. Start lower on all 4 critical chemicals—so we crash faster and harder without rituals.

3. This isn't about mindset. It's about maintenance. Think of it like brushing your brain's teeth.

CHAPTER 2 – SPOT THE SLIDE (Before It)

Why This Matters

Once an ADHD brain starts slipping, it rarely self-corrects without intervention. The longer it slides, the harder it is to stop.

This isn't a character flaw. It's chemistry.

But the earlier you spot the signs, the faster you can interrupt the spiral—with a reset, a pause, or a ritual. And once you learn your red flags, everything gets easier. More control. Less chaos. Better connection.

TWO TYPES OF RED FLAGS:

1. OBJECTIVE RED FLAGS (What You Know)

These are the measurable things you either know or can track. They're chemical predictors—if these are off, your brain's running low fuel before you even start.

CHEMICAL	WHY IT MATTERS
Skipped meals / low blood sugar	Brain runs on glucose. No food = no fuel = dopamine flatline.
Bad sleep (less than 7 hrs)	All four key chemicals refill during sleep. Less sleep = less control.
No movement	ADHD brains require physical movement to activate focus systems.
Screen overload	Fast dopamine = crash after. Leads to irritability, focus drop.
Medication off / late	Late dose = late chemical support. You're climbing without gear.
Over-scheduled / no pause	No margin = brain load stacks up. Stress rises. Memory tanks.

Reality check: If 2+ of these are true today... you're not weak. You're in a chemical deficit. Same for your kid.

What to do:

Build awareness. Track this in the morning. Note trends. If the system's low, don't expect peak performance. Plan resets.

2. SUBJECTIVE RED FLAGS (What You See + Feel)

These are the behaviors and signals that show your brain (or your kid's) is sliding into overload or shut-down—even if the checklist looks "fine."

Here's what it looks like:

ADULT SIGNS

- Snapping at small things (slow walkers, noise, texts)
- Rage-cleaning or rage-scrolling
- Freezing over simple decisions
- Talking faster or louder than normal
- Irritation at help, questions, or interruptions
- Sudden cravings (sugar, snacks, caffeine, nicotine)
- Feeling blank, heavy, stuck—but busy inside

These aren't just "bad moods." They're pre-crash signals.

KID SIGNS

- "I'm bored" five minutes into anything
- Over-correcting others / hypercritical
- Getting silly or loud out of nowhere
- Avoiding homework, chores, transitions
- Snappy responses: "I SAID I'M DOING IT!"
- Movement shifts: bouncing, pacing, flopping
- Sudden perfectionism or "I can't do it!" shutdowns
- Saying "I don't care" or "whatever" with tight voice or wet eyes

Many of these are misunderstood as "bad behavior." They're actually early warning signs of overwhelm.

SUBJECTIVE RED FLAGS

Snapping at a slow walker

Freezing over dinner options

“I SAID I’M DOING IT!”

Saying. ‘Whatever’
with wet eyes

ADULTS VS. KIDS: HOW THE SLIDE LOOKS DIFFERENT

BEHAVIOR	ADULTS	KIDS
Masking	Hide stress behind sarcasm, control, busywork	More raw – visible frustration, crying, running off
Withdrawal	Goes quiet, skips tasks, ghost texts	Stares at wall, hides, avoids eye contact
Irritability	Passive-aggressive, snapping, rushing others	Yelling, name-calling, "leave me alone!"
Shut-down	"I'll do it later" → avoids for hours	Melts into tears, flops, yells "I can't!"

Both are hurting. Both need fuel, movement, clarity, and compassionate interruption.

Early Detection = Self-Rescue

Once you can spot the slide, you can pause it—before it takes over.

You don't need to fix everything. Just catch the signals early, and change the chemistry before it's too late. That's where the Pre-Game comes in.

Quick Take-Aways

1. Track objective data: food, sleep, movement, hydration. Don't guess. Know.

2. Learn your subjective signs: tension, voice changes, eye darting, avoidance.

3. Watch your kids: wild to whiny isn't random—it's often a cold brain starting to slide.

4. ADHD brains don't "just explode"—they leak signals first. Learn to read them

Cheat Sheet: Spot the Slide (Save or Screenshot)

TYPE	YOU	YOUR KID
Fuel Check	Did I eat? Sleep? Move? Hydrate? Meds?	Did they eat? Sleep? Snack? Move?
Mood Clues	Snappy, quiet, indecisive, craving?	Snappy, loud, clingy, silly?
Body Clues	Jaw tight, shoulders up, darting eyes?	Slouching, bouncing, flopping, fidgety?
Mental Clues	Stuck looping? Avoiding decisions?	"I can't," "whatever," "I'm stupid"

CHAPTER 3 – THE PRE-GAME FIX

What It Is, Why It Works, and How to Build One in 5 Minutes

Why This Chapter Matters

Now that you can see the slide, it's time to stop it. This chapter teaches the ritual that flips your ADHD brain "on" before the day—or a hard task—starts.

What Is A Pre-game Ritual?

A Pre-Game is a short, 3–5 minute routine that hits all four of your brain's fuel tanks before you start a task, transition, or day.

It's built to:

- Flood the brain with dopamine (motivation), norepinephrine (focus), acetylcholine (clarity), and serotonin (calm)
- Prime the nervous system for control, not chaos
- Break "cold starts" that lead to spirals
- Make transitions smoother and less reactive
- Reduce overwhelm before it even shows up

It works for you, and it works for your kid—because the same neurochemical laws apply to both.

WHY IT WORKS (SCIENCE MODE)

Let's break down what's happening under the hood.

ADHD isn't a lack of focus. It's a lack of regulation—especially under stress, boredom, or transitions.

Here's the neurochemical picture:

CHEMICAL	FUNCTION	PRE-GAME TRIGGER
Dopamine	Start signal, reward, motivation	Music, novelty, anticipation, micro-rewards
Norepinephrine	Attention spotlight	Physical movement, breathing, posture
Acetylcholine	Learning, clarity, goal targeting	Saying the goal out loud, writing it
Serotonin	Mood, calm, safety	Touch, breath, scent, environment

The Pre-Game doesn't fix ADHD. It **activates the systems ADHD brains struggle to access on demand.**

Why Adhd Brains Need It More

Neurotypical brains naturally shift gears between tasks and regulate chemical flow with ease.

ADHD brains? Not so much.

Transitions feel like whiplash.

Starting feels like lifting concrete.

Focus feels like a fight.

Moods turn fast and unexpectedly.

But when you flood the right systems in the right order, it's like flipping the "ON" switch. Suddenly, the brain cooperates.

Pre-Games don't just "calm you down." They **switch your brain on.**

WHEN TO USE A PRE-GAME

Anywhere you're about to face:

- A **transition** (bed to day, screen to task, home to school)
- A **demand** (homework, work meeting, errands)
- A **social shift** (going from alone to people, or vice versa)
- A **known trigger** (commute, getting kids ready, cleanup)

It's the **bridge between chaos and control.**

THE BIG RULES OF A PRE-GAME

1. **It must hit all 4 chemicals —** or the system stays cold.
2. **It must be short —** 5 minutes or less, or you'll skip it.
3. **It must be repeatable —** not a one-time hack.
4. **It must feel good —** because dopamine needs to want it.
5. **It must be yours —** it should feel like a groove, not a grind.

A PREGAME ISN'T SELF-CARE. IT'S BRAIN CARE

This isn't journaling under fairy lights or taking a spa day (unless that's your thing). This is neurochemical prep work—the difference between running a race barefoot or with your shoes tied and laced.

You're not being "extra."

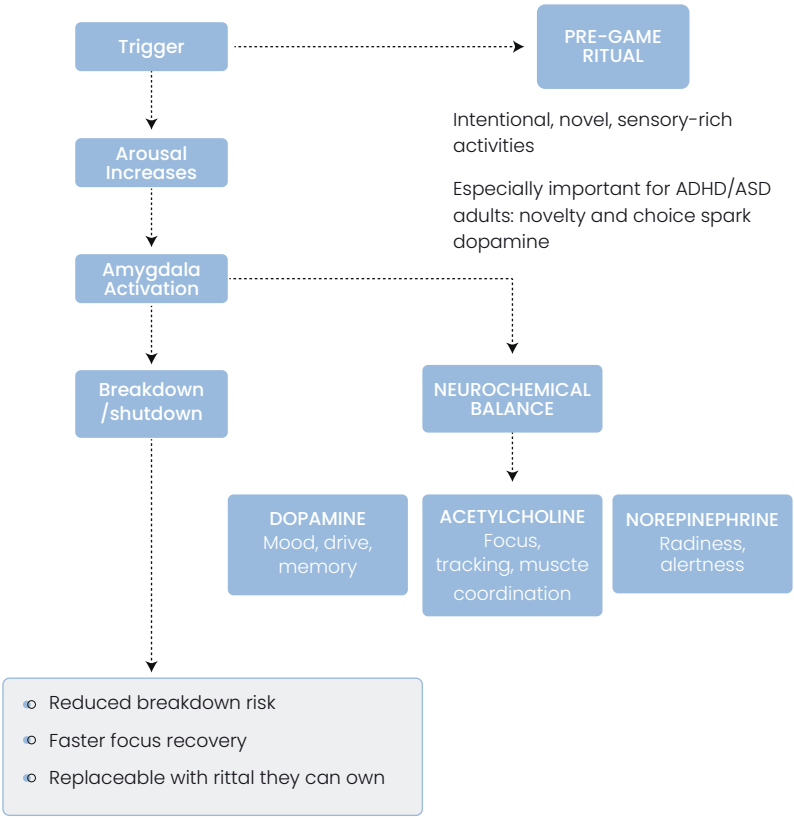
You're being smart.

This is what ADHD brains require to succeed.

When your brain starts cold, everything stacks against you.

But when you Pre-Game, even for 3 minutes, you shift the outcome.

HOW PRE-GAME RITUALS HELP ADHD ADULTS REGULATE EMOTION, FOCUS, AND PRESSURE



No, it's not magic. But it is chemistry.

What looks like "snapping," "shutting down," or "getting off track" usually starts before the visible behavior.

That's why this tool works—it interrupts the spiral before it takes over.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE: ADULT MORNING PRE-GAME

Before:

- Woke up late
- Checked phone first
- No plan, no food
- Brain is sluggish
- Kid's already yelling
- You react from the cold brain—snappy, overwhelmed

After:

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Put on hype playlist while getting dressed	Music triggers novelty + reward expectation
Norepinephrine	10 pushups or 30-sec jumping jacks	Movement spikes alertness + clears fog
Acetylcholine	Write one sticky note goal	Clarifies what matters—locks attention
Serotonin	Sip warm drink in soft lighting	Comfort + calm = emotional regulation
Launch	Open laptop or car door with brain on	Full stack is active → start without drama

Takes 4 minutes. Changes everything.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE: KID HOMEWORK PRE-GAME

Before:

- They just got home
- Backpack drop, screen grab, you say "start homework"
- They freak, freeze, or fight

After:

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Let them "beat the clock" with a fun timer	Adds game + urgency = interest + spark
Norepinephrine	1-minute dance battle	Movement → regulation + reset
Acetylcholine	Dry erase board with ONE target	Goal = clarity. Clarity = calm.
Serotonin	8-second hug and snack	Touch + food = safety + stability
Launch	Sit down together with calm playlist	Full stack = smoother start

Key Take-Aways

1. ADHD isn't lazy. It's low chemical readiness.

2. Pre-Games work because they prime the system—in the order your brain needs.

3. Build your own. Test it. Tweak it. Keep it simple.

4. Once you learn what fuels you (and your kid), you'll start seeing fewer spirals—and more stability.

5. This is how you stop surviving and start strategizing.

The Structure Behind It All: Why Pre-Games Work

Before you move on to building your own ritual, it helps to understand why this 5-minute routine makes such a big difference.

The Pre-Game doesn't just pump up your energy. It creates the conditions for your brain to actually perform. It does this by fueling the base of what we call the Performance Pyramid—a model showing what the ADHD brain needs in order to function well under stress, pressure, or transitions.

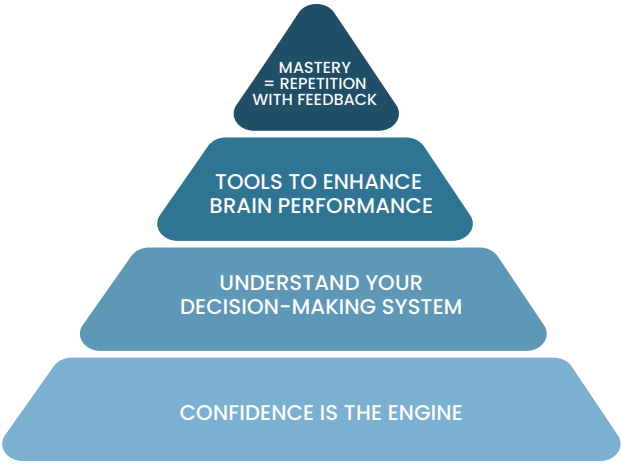
Here's what it looks like:

Insert Pyramid Graphic Here

Think of it like this:

- If the **bottom layer (Safety & Fuel)** isn't in place, nothing above it works.
- You won't access coping tools (psych-skills), decision clarity, or resilience under pressure if your system is chemically cold.

THE PERFORMANCE PYRAMID FOR NEURODIVERGENT MINDS OR ATHLETES UNDER PRESSURE



- That's why Pre-Games start at the base. They heat up your brain's engines so you can use your strengths.

Once the foundation is solid, everything above it—focus, confidence, self-regulation—has a chance to stick.

CHAPTER 4 – BUILD YOUR RITUAL

Layer the Right Tools. Understand Why They Work. Make It Yours.

Why This Chapter Matters

The Pre-Game only works if you actually do it. This chapter helps you build one that fits your life—not someone else's. No fluff. No overthinking. Just tools that work and the science behind them.

What Happens Without It vs. With It

Sometimes it's hard to realize what's actually going wrong in your day—or why something that seems small (like skipping breakfast or not knowing your first task) totally derails you.

ADULT — MORNING PRE-GAME (LOW-FRICTION + HIGH-IMPACT)

You wake up groggy, distracted, and already behind. Instead of doomscrolling or rushing, you start with a low-limbic-friction sequence that primes your brain before the day grabs you by the throat.

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Promise yourself: "After this list, I get [coffee/podcast/walk]"	Anticipation triggers dopamine. ADHD brains need reward before effort, not just after.
Norepinephrine	**Balance drill:** Stand on one leg while brushing teeth (switch legs halfway)	Forces micro-adjustments → lights up proprioception and focus systems. Wakes up the body and the brain.
Acetylcholine	Write a 3-item to-do list using your **non-dominant hand**	The novelty + precision fires both motor cortex and focus systems. Writing with the "wrong" hand boosts alertness + clarity.
Serotonin	Eat protein (eggs, Greek yogurt) in a warm space with soft light	Protein = precursor for acetylcholine & dopamine. Safe, cozy environment calms nervous system.
Launch	**Read your list.** Start task #1 before opening your phone	Beginning from calm → builds momentum instead of chaos.

Why this works: Every tool is multitasking—fueling chemistry and reducing friction. No heavy decisions. No wasted energy. Just layered wins.

ADULT — MIDDAY RESET (BETWEEN TASKS OR BEFORE A DEMAND)

You just finished one task—or maybe procrastinated through it. You need to switch gears, but your brain feels scrambled.

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Play a 30-sec segment of a nostalgic or victory-themed song	Emotion-tied music activates dopamine. Bonus if linked to a past success (e.g., graduation, big win).
Norepinephrine	**Saccadic eye drill:** Look left-right quickly x15, then up-down x15	Activates brainstem focus systems. Especially helpful after screen time or fog. Instant "refocus" signal.
Acetylcholine	**Say out loud:** "The only thing that matters right now is ____."	Verbal self-direction shifts executive attention back to goal. Talking = focus lock.
Serotonin	Deep breath with audible sigh, then sip cold water	Sigh activates parasympathetic calm; water soothes internal alert signals.
Launch	Start task with 2-minute countdown timer	Short ramp-up decreases resistance. The "just start" method.

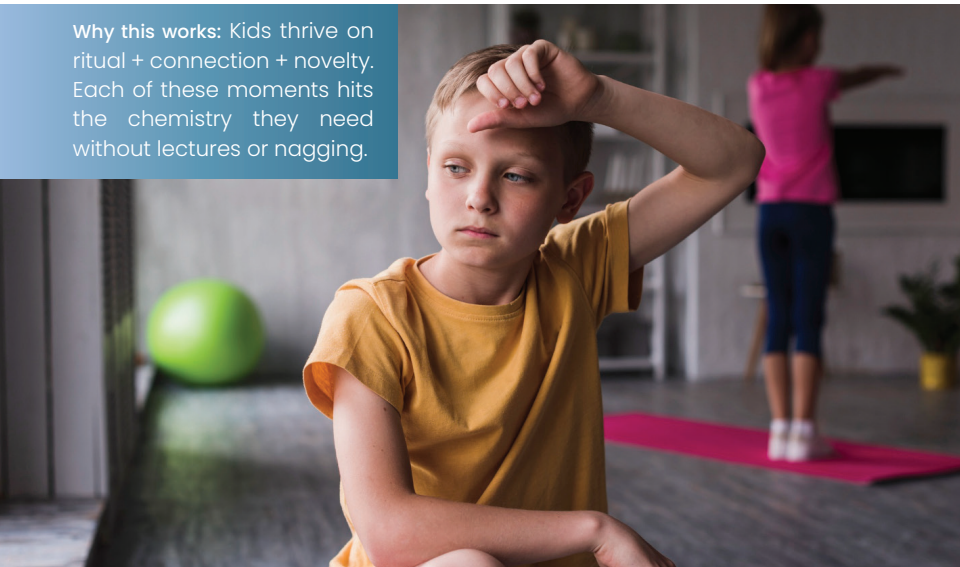
Why this works: This reset breaks mental looping, anchors attention, and rebuilds internal stability—especially after overstimulation or distraction.

KID — MORNING PREP RITUAL

Your child is bouncing between socks, cereal, and YouTube. You need them ready for school—but without yelling, rushing, or meltdowns.

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Let them choose their "power song of the day"	Choice = control = dopamine. The music itself also sparks motivation.
Norepinephrine	Do an **animal movement drill** (e.g., crab walk to the bathroom)	Physical novelty + body engagement = full-brain activation. Burn off chaos.
Acetylcholine	Draw a "What's today's mission?" card with a simple icon (e.g., backpack, smile, book)	Visual goal-setting externalizes focus—perfect for developing executive function.
Serotonin	Snuggle or hug for 10 seconds before they leave the house	Touch + presence = security. Calms hyperactive nervous systems and builds regulation.
Launch	Have them hand you their backpack or lunch	Micro-success triggers action momentum. They're already "doing the day."

Why this works: Kids thrive on ritual + connection + novelty. Each of these moments hits the chemistry they need without lectures or nagging.



KID — HOMEWORK TRANSITION RITUAL

They walk in the door, throw their bag, grab a tablet. You ask about homework and get a meltdown or flat-out shutdown.

SLOT	ACTION	WHY IT WORKS
Dopamine	Give them a 3-sticker "mission tracker" for the night	Visual progress = immediate micro-reward = dopamine hits on each task
Norepinephrine	Balance game: "Stand on one foot while brushing your teeth!" or "Do a hallway sprint"	These boost vestibular and proprioceptive awareness → immediate attention reset
Acetylcholine	One-item dry erase checklist: "Today: JUST MATH"	Simplicity calms the brain. Visible goal = mental clarity.
Serotonin	Let them choose snack + play a calming song together	Food + choice + music = nervous system regulation
Launch	Sit down together and say, "Let's beat the clock"	Shared focus → safer transition into effort

Why this works: This ritual changes the narrative from "Do your work" to "We're activating your brain." It's playful, effective, and stabilizing.

DRILL

Backward Writing

WHY IT'S POWERFUL

Activates novelty, coordination, and motor precision → boosts dopamine + acetylcholine

DRILL

Balance Drills

WHY IT'S POWERFUL

Engages focus + body awareness → lights up norepinephrine systems

DRILL

Word Replacement Drills

WHY IT'S POWERFUL

Forces creative re-routing → triggers dopamine via novelty + attention redirection

DRILL

Saccadic Eye Drills

WHY IT'S POWERFUL

Re-activates visual tracking + focus networks → fast norepinephrine reset

FINAL NOTES TO THE READER (WRAP-UP)

You've just learned more about how to support ADHD function in 4 short chapters than most people get in 4 months of therapy or content binging.

What you do next doesn't have to be perfect.

But it does have to be consistent. And now you know why.

- You've seen how cold brains crash
- You've learned how to spot the slide early
- You understand what fuels the system
- You know how to build a real Pre-Game, not a trendy trick

This free playbook was built to get you results fast—and get your trust, not just your clicks.

If you're already thinking, "Damn, this makes sense. I've never heard it broken down like this before," good.

That's because you're finally seeing your ADHD through a strategy lens, not a shame lens.

There's a lot more I could show you—ritual stacks, systems for school, emotional regulation hacks, and deeper neuroscience—but this is where we stop.

Why? Because you don't need another instruction manual.

You need a win.

So here's your first one: build your Pre-Game.

Try it. Feel it. Tweak it.

Let your body teach your brain what works.

I'll be right here when you're ready for what's next.

—Adam Tristan

Sensitive Not Soft Studios