

## Executive Dysfunction and Free Will

### The Social Consequences of Having Executive Dysfunction

Imagine you're a student, you're writing an assignment for a lower level English class that's about 5 pages or so that is due in a few hours, you know what you want to write about and you know how to structure it according to the rubric. You sit down to write the paper, and then you can't get yourself to do it. You maybe stare at the wall, open up your phone and look at twitter, come back to it, etc.. You maybe write two sentences but then become distracted, or even just stumped on how to continue even though you know how to, as if you can't figure out how to link the steps together. Soon the sum of these patterns combine and it's an hour before the cut off date and you're barely done. You rush to get it completed but ultimately you feel dissatisfied because it was rushed, and low quality subsequently. You call yourself lazy and promise to do better but it never happens. If you feel like this then you may deal with [executive dysfunction](#).

Executive functioning skills are the name for basic skills that are involved in executing actions, such as: planning, organization, prioritizing, and paying attention. To lack these skills or for these skills to be poor is to have executive dysfunction, or EDF. EDF is a symptom of ADHD and is also very common with Autistic individuals, and at least in a social context, is often mistaken for a lack of intelligence, or more commonly, laziness. This can present challenges for autistic individuals and those with ADHD as this can mean a lack of critical functioning in school, jobs and careers, and even in performing basic tasks for self maintenance. I will say that the categorization of this phenomena is definitely one born out of capitalist ideology wanting to maximize production at any cost, for those who follow the [Neurodiversity Paradigm](#), this still can be a major issue for social reasons, and that is what I mainly want to talk about here.

Experiencing EDF is often an annoying fact of life for a lot of neurodiverse individuals because it makes it harder to hold down a job, or to stay in school, as deadlines become daggers pointed at our hearts, but this is because of an expectation on how productive an individual should be. The productivity that's expected in everyday society is one that leads to even the most well adjusted neurotypical to burn out once and awhile, so it's expected that this expectation is even worse for neurodivergent folk, not even just in a school or work environment, but even with living with others or our expectations at private appointments, etc.. Often I find myself buying stuff for roommates and forgetting to write it down and then having to apologize later for forgetting it, sometimes things like this are just let go, but sometimes they aren't.

Sometimes I'll find myself in a situation where because of a memory issue, or because I can't take the steps to start something, it affects someone else and they feel the need to hold me responsible. Like for instance, you might need to pick up clothes in a shared bedroom that's blocking the way of a desk or a bed or whatnot, and per the pattern given, you don't do it, or you

don't do it completely. Your roommate gets mad at you and their justification is that they believe that there was some component of free will involved and therefore they can attribute responsibility to you. However from what was stated above, it would make sense to say that while you can attribute the action or inaction to yourself, this is a misfortune more aptly attributed to your disability.

Philosophically, there are traditionally three positions when people are debating over free will, libertarian [free will](#), hard determinism, and [compatibilism](#) (or soft determinism). Libertarian free will is really hard to defend, as you have to defend free will as a metaphysical concept, which effectively means making a case as to why our actions have zero restraints whatsoever, which again, is a hard case to make. Hard determinism is [incompatible with this idea](#), with hard determinists believing that so long as we exist in a space where the state of being is determined by cause and effect, then so are we, therefore we cannot have free will. Compatibilists challenge the notion that free will is incompatible with hard determinism by saying that free will isn't a metaphysical concept, and there are many ways that philosophers define free will in this sense, but for simplicity's sake, I will define a free action in a compatibilist context as being able to assign the action as your own and to be sufficiently motivated to do it. Asking most people on the street about their beliefs on whether free will is a thing, they are likely going to say yes but also not deny the existence of cause and effect, and if they say no, they are likely to still act as if other people have free will because without this notion, we can't hold each other accountable for our actions, so it makes sense to say that a form of compatibilism is the basis for many people's understanding of how others act.

So what happens when we apply this to our previous situation? We run into an issue. The accused person in this situation can attribute their actions/inaction to themselves, however they cannot say that they were sufficiently motivated to do or not to do, so there is this degree of alienation from oneself that exists with executive dysfunction (at least in this context). In fact an often response you get from people when they talk about the results of their EDF is that they differentiate themselves from their brain or body, this is usually metaphorical as they still attribute an action or inaction to themselves, but this is representative of the alienation present. Now understanding that we have this degree of alienation, does it make sense to say that this person was free to act or to not act? In this view there was no motivation to act in this way, so we can't say that this person was free to act, but the action is still attributable to them. So we end up in this weird space where this person could be described as being not free, but at least in a practical sense, this person wasn't free because of themselves, and not because of outside influences. Though still, most people still would hold the accused responsible for the action. This is either because they have a belief that even though this was a result of disability that the best course of action would still be to hold this person responsible, or because they genuinely cannot understand how EDF can affect a person's ability to perform a simple task, but either way, the way we hold people with EDF responsible for actions can have consequences for them socially.

I'm not trying to offer a prescriptive solution on how to fix this, because I'm not going to pretend to have a perfect answer and ultimately people who do have answers have specific ideas in mind on what they want from people around them already. If you're like me, and your concern is the mental well being of neurodiverse individuals with EDF, and you're also concerned about making sure that people to retain moral consideration still, my goal would be to create the conditions necessary for people to be able to act with minimal interference of EDF, but that often means involving other people in the process who may not see it as their responsibility to help other people in this way. In fact a lot of people would see my main concern as a concern I shouldn't have because of this fact, regardless of who has a disability, so even if they acknowledge it they would still think that requiring people have this kind of responsibility with little deviance from what's expected to be the best course of action. And then there are people who have no awareness of other's disabilities or who cannot understand how such disabilities affects a person, or who just straight up denies all of this, which is a very common and depressing sight to behold.

Again, EDF can be very crippling to a lot of people and how we hold people with EDF responsible for their actions or inaction has serious social consequences. Employers look at these problems and they fire people or will reject people who they think will cost them valuable time in their eyes. Having issues with turning in homework assignments can mean the difference between a passing and failing grade even if a person knows the subject well enough to merit a passing grade. Even in everyday life, social relations hinge on expectations like showing up on time or when living with people, being able to do the most basic tasks and failing at these things can lead to social ostracization. How we as disabled people deal with navigating the world with these issues, and how we as people in a society deal with others who have these issues affects the ability of people with EDF to cope, survive, and/or thrive.