

What ADHD feels like: Lesson plan with interactive simulation

Description

This lesson plan is part of [Through My Eyes](#), an interactive experience created by Understood.org. This free set of resources features three simulations that are based on the real-life experiences of students with ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia.

Goals

- Build empathy and understanding of ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder).
- Promote self-awareness, empowerment, and understanding of neurodivergence.

Time

- 30–45 minutes of teacher prep
- 30-minute class lesson
- Optional extensions/at-home activities

Target audience

Grades 5–8

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Teacher preparation (before the lesson)

1. Review resources

Familiarize yourself with these lesson materials:

- [Through My Eyes](#)
 - Pedro's ADHD simulation
 - Pedro's "day in the life" video
 - ADHD fact sheet
 - Kid resources (available as interactive activities on the main landing page or as handouts in the Educators section):
 - How to be an ally
 - Strengths and challenges
 - Self-advocacy sentences
- [ADHD warm-up task](#)
- [Storyboard or comic strip template](#) or interactive site

2. Use the readiness checklist

To be sure you and your class are ready for this lesson, review the readiness checklist in the Educators section of [Through My Eyes](#). Make sure you've considered all necessary accommodations and supports for your students, including norms, mindsets, and examples.

3. Check technology

- Test the simulation for audio, video, and keyboard functionality on available devices.
- Supply headphones for the simulation, if possible. If headphones are limited, consider how best to run the simulation, such as playing it for the whole class with speakers.
- If using technology for the comic strip activity, set up and test those platforms.

4. Prep materials

Print necessary handouts. Gather manipulatives for the warm-up (see that activity for ideas of objects you may need). Gather art materials for the comic strip activity (if completing on paper).

5. Set up the classroom

Arrange the space for whole class viewing, small group or partner discussions, and whole class sharing.

Lesson procedure

1. At-home pre-lesson activity (or post-lesson extension)

Before the lesson, assign the class to watch Pedro's "day in the life" video in [Through My Eyes](#). Have students answer the following questions and be ready to discuss them in class:

- What surprised you?
- What is one of Pedro's challenges?
- What is one of Pedro's strengths?
- What is one question you'd want to ask Pedro?

2. Lesson warm-up: Movement-focused challenge (5 minutes)

Teacher script: "Let's try a quick challenge. I'm going to give you three tasks to do at the same time. Your goal is to remember them and complete them all in just one minute. Ready?"

- Choose three of the following tasks to give to students at once. Or come up with similar options that fit your group best. These tasks should be playful, quick, and accessible for a range of learners.
 - Touch four objects in the room that are red.
 - Fold a piece of paper into three equal parts.
 - Whisper the spelling of your first name backward.
 - Draw a star on a sticky note with your non-dominant hand.
 - Name five animals in your head, then write down only the third one.
 - Stack three items on your desk as fast as you can.
- Set a timer for one minute. Encourage students to try to complete all three tasks, but let them know it's OK if they don't finish everything.
- Debrief the activity with the whole class. Key points to highlight:
 - Remembering complex directions long enough to do multiple tasks from the directions requires skills like focus, memory, organization, time management, and prioritization. These skills are part of a group of key skills called executive function. ADHD causes trouble with executive function.
 - If it felt hard to remember or to switch between tasks, that might feel similar to what someone with ADHD may experience.
 - Today, we're going to explore what it's like to have ADHD, and what supports can help.

3. Framing the experience (2 minutes)

Teacher script: “Before we dive into learning about ADHD, it’s important to understand why we’re doing this. Everyone’s brain works in its own way. For example, some people move through the world with lots of energy, and that’s just part of how their brain is wired. Sometimes these differences can make everyday things like getting ready for school or following directions more challenging.

When we learn about how different people experience school and life, we can better understand each other. Today, we’re going to experience what a typical morning might feel like for someone with ADHD, like Pedro.”

4. Introduction to ADHD (5 minutes)

Display or pass out the [ADHD fact sheet](#). Talk about the following points:

- ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) is a condition that affects how the brain manages focus, emotions, planning, and follow-through.
- It’s not about being lazy, not caring, or not trying hard enough.
- People with ADHD often have difficulty with executive function. Executive function is a set of skills. These skills help us stay organized, follow directions, manage time, remember things, and regulate emotions.
- ADHD can look different for different people. Some may be more physically active or impulsive, while others might seem distracted or forgetful.
- With the right support (like timers, checklists, breaks, and movement), kids and adults with ADHD can succeed in school, at work, and in everyday life.

5. Simulation experience (10 minutes)

Teacher script: “Now we’re going to step into the shoes of a real student named Pedro, who has ADHD. We’re going to watch an interactive simulation of what it’s like for Pedro to get ready for school. Pedro narrates the simulation, and you’ll play it like a game. Pay attention to what helps Pedro, and what gets in his way.”

- Provide clear instructions on how students will access and view the simulation (projector, small groups, or individual computers). Suggest that students use headphones, if available.
- Play the simulation for the whole class, in small groups, or individually, depending on computer availability.

6. Creative activity: Design your own brain level (15 minutes)

Teacher script: “Now that you’ve seen what Pedro’s day is like, I want you to think about your own brain when you’re having a tough time getting stuff done. We all have moments when it’s hard to focus, stay calm, or get things done. Just like Pedro, we all face obstacles. But we all also have strategies and supports, or bonuses, that help us through. You’re going to design your own video game level based on what it feels like inside your brain when things get challenging.”

- **Whole class brainstorm** (use a whiteboard, chart paper, or a tool like Padlet or similar to collect student ideas)
 - What makes it hard to focus or get started?
 - What helps when you’re trying to concentrate or be calm?
 - What’s something that gives your brain a boost or a bonus?
 - What does it feel like when your brain is overloaded?
- As students share, relate their answers to Pedro’s day with challenges and bonuses to help students connect concepts. Encourage them to jot down ideas in the “Class brainstorm notes” section of their worksheet to reference later.
- **Activity: “A level in the game of my brain”**
 - Have students complete the “Plan your brain’s game level” section of their worksheet to come up with ideas for obstacles/challenges and bonuses/supports.
 - Students can create one of the following to show their own obstacles and supports:
 - Video game level
 - Comic strip
 - Creative drawing of their brain
 - Use Google Slides, Canva, or other electronic resources for a digital version.
 - Students can add a short script, description, or writing using sentence starters.

Optional supports for students during this activity:

- Try sentence starters for the writing option, like:
 - “Something that makes it hard to start my day is...”
 - “A bonus that helps me is...”
 - “When I get overwhelmed, _____ helps me reset.”
 - “In my brain’s game, the hardest level is...”
 - “One of my many strengths is...”

- Use a technology platform like [Padlet](#) or [Screencastify](#) to have students explain their visual or written explanation.

7. Wrap-up and empowerment (3 minutes)

- Students can complete more simulations in [Through My Eyes](#) to wrap up their learning, if time is available.
- When ready, wrap up the conversation with takeaways such as:
 - We all have different strengths and challenges when it comes to learning.
 - It's important to remember that thinking creatively and asking for help with organization can make tasks easier to manage.
 - We're all in this together, and we can support each other to succeed in school.
- Additional resources for empowerment: Choose one or more of the following activities in [Through My Eyes](#) for students to explore and discuss. Each activity is available as an interactive activity in the Kids section and as a handout in the Educators section.
 - Strengths and challenges
 - Self-advocacy sentences
 - How to be an ally

Optional extension activities: In class or at home

- **Expand on today's learning:** Continue working with the comic strips students created. You can turn cartoons into Google Slides animations or stop-motion scenes. Another option is a class gallery walk to have students display their brain-game designs.
- **Assistive tools exploration:** Explore different tools and supports that can help with executive function, such as visual timers, noise-canceling headphones, fidget tools, checklists, or task management apps. A school counselor, a special education teacher, or an occupational therapist can help demonstrate how these supports work.
- **Guest speaker:** Invite a member of your school staff who is open about their ADHD to speak with the class about their experiences. Have students brainstorm questions for your guest speaker before the visit.
- **Resource exploration:** [Explore more resources for kids in Through My Eyes](#), including a pop culture quiz, strengths and challenges, and more.

Notes about the lesson

Lesson format

Teacher-led with whole class viewing of the simulation and then individual or small groups for the creative activity. Small group viewing and/or discussion is optional based on your classroom and preferences.

Engagement recommendations

- Encourage students to express their reflections in multiple ways: writing, drawing, voice recordings, or digital storytelling.
- Use small groups or partners during the cartoon/game design activity to promote collaboration and idea exchange.
- Allow movement breaks before or after the simulation to help students reset and maintain focus.
- Incorporate visuals, timers, and checklists to support students' executive function during the lesson.

Assessment recommendations

- Observe student participation in the discussions.
- Review final brain level activity for connection to obstacles and supports.
- Optional exit slip: "One thing I learned about how ADHD can impact a person's life is..."

Watch-outs

- Don't skip reviewing classroom norms before group or whole class discussions.
- Even with classroom norms to guide your conversation, students may still engage in negative discussion points.
- To reframe negative comments, keep in mind the lesson goal, which is to build empathy and awareness. You can reference something from the simulation and have students connect it to their own lives.
- For example, if a student says, "Kids with ADHD can never focus," reflect back and ask them how they felt navigating the challenges in the simulation. Remind students that negative language doesn't empower us or others around us.

- Be careful not to generalize ADHD. Remind students that it looks different in each person.
- Avoid implying that ADHD is caused by laziness or lack of effort. Instead, emphasize that it's a brain-based difference.
- Some students may recognize themselves in the simulation. Be affirming and supportive without pressuring anyone to share personal information.
- Monitor for signs of frustration or anxiety during the simulation, and offer breaks or alternative activities as needed.

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Resources for the lesson

A level in the game of my brain: Worksheet

Instructions: After completing Pedro's simulation, think about what your own brain is like on a tough day. Just like Pedro, we all face challenges and we all have tools or bonuses that help us through.

Use this worksheet to plan your ideas. You can then use these ideas to create a video game level, a comic strip, or a creative drawing using the tools offered by your teacher.

Class brainstorm notes: Use this space to write down ideas from the class discussion.

Plan your brain's game level

Obstacle or Challenge #1: _____

Obstacle or Challenge #2: _____

Bonus or Support #1: _____

Bonus or Support #2: _____

Where does your level take place? What is happening in it?