Improving Attention

If you have trouble finishing tasks, get distracted easily, or can’t follow a book, movie, or conversation, then you may be suffering from attention deficits. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) is just one cause of this problem. Mood disorders also disrupt attention, and that issue can linger long after the mood symptoms go away. Below are tips for improving attention:

Modify expectations

Give yourself more time to complete activities if you need.

Take Breaks

Take a break at least once an hour, or more often if your attention starts to slip. The break only needs to be a few minutes, and should involve something relaxing, like stretching, walking, prayer or meditation.

Change tasks

Set times throughout the day to change tasks. Shift to something very different. An alarm clock or timer can help.

Stay hydrated

Studies find that students perform better on tests if they drink water throughout the day.

Reduce distractions

People with attention deficits are not good multi-taskers (actually no one really is). Do one thing at a time (e.g. don’t talk on the phone while reading). Turn off the music and television and work in a quiet room. Use a white-noise generator or ear-plugs if needed.

Stay Focused is a free extension for Google Chrome that helps people limit their time on distracting web sites (it basically serves as an alarm – it closes down the websites that are distracting to you if you spend too much time on them).

Timing

Some people have sharper focus in the morning, and others in the evening. Reserve more complicated tasks for the time of day when your mind is working best. Establishing a routine, where you do certain tasks at the same time each day (within 30 minutes), can help keep your brain on a rhythm. That method also improves sleep and mood disorders (as long you don’t let stimulating activities keep you up too late).

Sleep, eat, and walk

Sleeping at least 8 hours a night improves memory, attention, and creative problem solving. Don’t think that applies to you? Think again – when people are sleep deprived they also lose awareness of the mistakes they are making.

Walking briskly (a little less than a jog) at least 45 minutes every other day helps cognition and protects the brain’s memory center. Brain scientists know of no better way to improve memory than this one.

A diet low in saturated fats and simple sugars has similar effects. The MIND Diet is
particularly effective and relatively easy to follow:
moodtreatmentcenter.com/minddiet.pdf

Weight loss also improves memory because obesity causes inflammation in the brain. Lowering calories and eating more fiber and protein are the best ways to lose weight; read more at:
moodtreatmentcenter.com/easyweightloss.pdf

Foods rich in flavanols, such as green or black tea, berries, and dark chocolate, are also good for memory.

**A note on caffeine**

You don’t need a lot to improve focus. A half a cup of coffee an hour is usually enough. Dark chocolate also has caffeine. If you have trouble with sleep or anxiety try going without caffeine to see if the problem improves (and avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. if sleep is the issue).

**Self talk**

Repeat a simple, positive phrase to yourself, like “I will write this paper,” to help sustain your focus.

**Use rewards**

Reward yourself every time you finish a task with a fun activity or small piece of candy. Avoid alcohol and anything that might be addictive for you. Rewards sharpen attention by raising dopamine in the brain, and we can all benefit from that. One study found that doctors make more accurate diagnoses when they have a small piece of chocolate with them during the work.

**Make it interesting**

It’s natural to remember things that are interesting to us. If your attention is fading, try to find something personally relevant about the material. This can be a challenge, but the search alone may reactivate your attention.

**Active listening**

If you’re having trouble paying attention in a conversation, ask questions. Taking a more active role will keep you focused. You can even try this with a book or a movie – it will engage your mind more even if the book doesn’t talk back.

**Search for key material**

Another way to keep your mind active while you’re on the receiving end of a lecture or conversation is to search for the most important information about what the other person is saying. This includes body language as well as content.

When reading, pause to summarize the main points to yourself. Underlining and taking notes can aid the memory process by activating the visual and motor centers in the brain.

**Therapy**

The tips in this brochure were derived from a therapy program cognition called *Functional Remediation Therapy*. They are meant to be practiced daily with professional guidance. The tips also need to be personalized – some may not work well, or may not be needed, depending on your cognitive abilities.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 1/3/2017