



Attending to Attention: Strategies for Focus and Concentration

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We can experience difficulties with our attention for many reasons, including our commitment to and interest in a task, our skill level for the task, our emotional and physical state, our neuropsychological wiring, and our environment. This handout will help you identify attention skills and strategies that you can practice in your daily student life to deal with impediments to attention.

When we talk about cognitive functioning, we often talk about attention as being a “gateway” to all other cognitive functions. Basically, if you are not attentive to something then you aren’t going to be able to learn, remember, or make sense of it.

Brainstorming activity. What factors might influence your ability to attend/focus/concentrate? (e.g., amount of sleep the night prior, mood state in that moment, time of day, subject matter of the task at hand, trying to study in a noisy dining hall)

Self-Assessment. Let’s pause now for you to do a quick self-assessment of your attention challenges and current coping strategies.

My biggest challenge with attention is _____

One strategy I use to improve my focus/concentration is _____

Acceptance vs. Change. It’s important to recognize that while there are some things we can change, there are others we have to accept. For instance, you can learn strategies for reducing distractions and increasing your attention span, but you might have to accept that working in the dining hall doesn’t work for you. Similarly, you can develop planning skills to help you better manage your time, but you might have to accept that doing the reading for your Gen. Ed. class takes you longer than it does your roommate. And, while you can increase your attention span, no one can focus for an unlimited amount of time.

One thing I anticipate I can change is _____

One thing I anticipate I will need to accept is _____

Strategies for Managing Distractibility. One variable that can influence our ability to attend is distractibility. What are the things that typically distract you from your work? How can you minimize or eliminate those distractions? You can use the table on the next page as a guide.

Distraction	Solution
The internet (browsing sites, Facebook, twitter)	Use an internet blocking software program
My roommates socializing in the common room	Study in the library at night. Put on noise cancelling headphones. Study for 25 minutes and then take a 5 minute social break.
Wandering thoughts, daydreaming, tangential thinking	Use the “Stop” strategy for attending (see Strategies for Attending below)

Take another look at the distractions you listed above. Are these distractions external? If so, they will likely require you to modify your environment as in the first two examples provided. Are these distractions internal? If so, you may find that developing one or more of the strategies for attending discussed below will be helpful.

Strategies for Attending. One part of attending is increasing our attention span, i.e., the time we can attend to a task before our thoughts wander.

STOP. When you notice your thoughts wandering, say to yourself “STOP,” and then gently bring your attention back to where you want it to be. Each time it wanders, bring it back. You might even visualize a big red stop sign with the white letters S-T-O-P. To begin with, you might have to do this several times a minute. But each time, say “STOP,” and then refocus on the task at hand.

Don’t waste energy trying to keep thoughts out of your mind (that will only make the thoughts more intrusive). Just put the effort into stopping yourself from latching on to the thought and then toward refocusing. With time, you will find that the period of time between your straying thoughts gets a little longer each day. Be patient and keep at it.

Focus Practice. Practice keeping your focus on what is in front of you and not giving in to distractions. If you are distracted, use the STOP technique above to regain concentration.

Practice in various situations. If people move or cough in a lecture, ignore them. Don’t look at them and actively exclude them from the focus you have on the lecturer. In a social situation, keep your attention focused solely on one person – what that person says, how that person looks, etc. – and ignore what is going on all around you. Or, practice attending with a lower threshold task, such as listening to the news on your laptop.

Brain Breaks. In between periods of attending, do things to change your physical and mental activity. You could move around to boost your circulation if you have been sitting, or you could think about something completely different to give your brain a new focus.

Check in with yourself. Does your brain feel saturated? Take a short break and then recharge your mental batteries by reviewing what you have done so far, considering whether it might help to switch to a new topic at this point in time.

If you're too tired to restart, identify where you need to pick up again, and decide when you will restart the task.

Designated Time for the Internal Distractions and/or Worries. Set aside one or more specific periods in the day when you are allowed to attend to your internal thoughts and/or worries. It can help to set this time to just before something you know you will do to ensure that you keep this time limited, such as before a meal or before meeting up with friends. Whenever a distracting thought or worry enters your mind during the day, banish it until your next worry time and refocus on what you were doing. You may find it helpful to write the distracting thought down so that you can trust that you will return to it later. It's important to keep your worry time(s). If you find you can't fill the time, then make a conscious decision to reduce the time set aside.

Negative thinking about yourself and self-doubt should be included in this worry time. But also pursue discussing these concerns with others so that you can check out their reality. You may notice that certain things keep reappearing, especially if you keep a list. This is a clear indication that you need to do something about them. Talking with a counselor may help you to identify an appropriate next step.

Active Learning. What does it mean to be an "active" learner? It means that you are active in your mental activity. The more active you are, the easier it will be for you to maintain your focus and concentration. Ask yourself questions to help focus when listening to a lecture or reading reference material rather than passively listening or reading, hoping something will stick. Then write brief notes about the answers to your questions. Ask yourself how you will use the material, where it fits into what you already know, and what new questions it triggers.

Tools to Maximize Your Unique Attention Powers. Beyond practicing the distractibility-reducing and attention-enhancing strategies described above, it's important that you customize your learning experience in order to account for how your unique brain works best.

Preferred Learning Style. Each of us has our own distinct learning style, i.e., how we best process, take in, store, and retrieve information. Your learning style can provide clues about how to best approach a task in order to maximize your ability to attend to it.

Some students learn by reading and then asking themselves questions; others learn by making condensed notes and memorizing them; others learn by making associations to the material; and others learn by creating a visual image of the material or a narrative about the material. Some people learn through a combination of these approaches.

Once you know your preferred learning style, you can organize the material you want to learn so that you can take advantage of the ways you learn best. If you don't know how you learn best, try to analyze your experience either with someone who knows you or by talking with a counselor.

Self-Knowledge. Knowing yourself will allow you to more effectively incorporate the strategies we've discussed thus far into your daily student life. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a. What are my strengths?
- b. What are my limitations?
- c. When/what time of day do I work best?
- d. Do I prefer working alone or with others?

- e. Do I prefer quiet or white noise in the background?
- f. Add your own:

Self-Empowerment. It's important to empower ourselves to take action when we can rather than resign ourselves to thinking that we just can't concentrate. For instance, if you find yourself struggling to focus, ask yourself, "Am I stuck because of difficulty attending, or is it a matter of gathering more knowledge and understanding about the task at hand? If it's the latter, what can I do about it?"

You might also find it helpful to think about your personal rewards for completing tasks – your motivation to keep attending to the task. Ask yourself, "What 'treats' can I use to reward myself as I progress through tasks?"

Best Brain Care Practices. Remember to take care of your brain in order to enhance your powers of attention. Physical, mental, and social practices allow us to increase our brain power and thus our ability to better attend to the task at hand.

Physical Practices. Physical exercise improves cognition, decreases stress, and improves sleep. Getting enough sleep is essential to our ability to attend and focus. For instance, research has shown that a single all-nighter can triple reaction time and greatly increase lapses of attention. Learning to regulate stress is important as chronic or unregulated stress will inhibit our attention by raising cortisol levels and telling the brain to focus on dealing with the "stressor" rather than on what you are trying to read or learn.

Mental Practices. Mental exercise involves challenging our brain by trying new things, tackling difficult problems, and persisting with a task when it gets hard rather than escaping or avoiding it. When we engage in such tasks we develop new neural connections so we are literally helping to increase our brain power. The brain is akin to a muscle that grows when exercised. As you practice the attention strategies and tools we've discussed, your brain will develop more capacity to attend, making it easier for you to focus in the moment and for longer periods of time.

Social/Relational Practices. Social/relational interactions allow us to feel supported, useful, and connected. While life also inevitably includes experiences of loneliness, conflict, or interpersonal stress, noticing and cultivating positive social and relational experiences alongside of uncomfortable ones helps us to and use our brain power to better attend, learn, and engage with daily life.

Going Forward in the Semester:

1. Two things (or more!) I plan to try in order to address my attention concerns are:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____

2. If I find that I'm continuing to experience difficulties attending, I plan to actively address my attention concerns by

- 1. Scheduling an appointment with a BSC counselor *and/or*
- 2. Take the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies
- 3. _____