

Coping with Concentration and Memory Trouble

By CDR R. Smith and Dr. T. Kupke, NMCP neuropsychology
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Introduction –

Concentration and memory are systems which are vulnerable not only to physical changes in the brain but also to any number of other health, as well as, environmental circumstances.

For example, physical discomfort or pain, such as headaches joint or back pain, can be distracting even if you have gotten used to the discomfort. Also, if you have stress in your life, whether at home or on the job, you may be more preoccupied than usual and this will make it harder to pay attention. Fatigue is yet another factor that can lower your usual mental efficiency. You may wonder how these factors work to cause memory trouble. The answer lies in the ability to concentrate. Physical pain and stress, for example, tend to make us more preoccupied, distractible, and therefore rob us of our powers of concentration. Information that is not fully attended to is less likely to get “encoded” into memory. Good memory requires good concentration!

Fortunately, there are some steps you can take to increase both how well you are able to pay attention and to remember. You may already have implemented some of these steps on your own, and if you have, that’s great, just extend your strategy further by adding the steps you might not already be using.

Remember, too, that as your physical problems get better, the stress leaves your life, or you find ways to adapt better to your circumstances, you should notice an improvement in your information processing abilities. For the time being, however, try the steps listed that seem applicable or useful to you.

Tips to help you concentrate better:

1. **Use a “Stop-Look-Listen-Repeat” approach.** This is the mother load of the tips! Make sure the person whether your spouse or co-worker, has your full attention. Stop what you are doing. Turn to them and make eye contact. Listen carefully. Ask the person to repeat the information for you. Repeat it back to the individual to make sure you have it right. Then repeat it to yourself a few times to help drive it into memory.
2. **Monitor and intervene in your stream of thought.** This one is a biggie, too. It refers to the tendency, particularly when busy or under stress, to become immersed in our thoughts, to “zone” or “space” out, and thus to not really hear others, such as spouse or children. It may also cause us to go on “automatic pilot” while driving. The key here is to be aware that it happens, and to actively use self-talk to guard against getting too immersed. Remind yourself to stay tuned in to your environment when you start to cycle into some deep thinking.
3. **Cue yourself.** More on the notion of self-talk. It means giving yourself mental reminders when you need to. If you are working on a task and start to drift off, cue yourself back on track. IF you are going into a situation (e.g. a meeting, driving during rush hour or at night) where you know it’s harder to concentrate, begin with a mental cue to perk up and stay vigilant.
4. **Whenever possible, work in a quiet environment free from distraction.** Minimize disruptions. Some work environments do not allow this. On the other hand, for a task where you need especially high concentration, you may be able to switch to a quieter environment temporarily just for the one task.
5. **Break mountains down into a series of smaller hills.** Break down all tasks into components. Focus only on step #1 until successfully completed. Then move on to the next step.

6. **Don't intermix social chit-chat with work.** Separate socializing in the workplace from the work itself, i.e. if there is a task that requires concentration, try to create a focused work session then take a break, rather than allowing constant talking while you are trying to work.
7. **Avoid over stimulation.** This overlaps with some of the earlier tips. The idea is that when you can control your situation, try to regulate just how much is happening at once. Perhaps at home the kids can be redirected into a different activity until you finish a discussion with your spouse. At work, you may be able to prioritize a group of tasks.
8. **Vary your activities often.** Again, when possible. If you have a choice of working on one project for a long time, or intermixing several projects to vary the routine, do the latter. It will keep you mentally refreshed.
9. **Monitor for fatigue and distractibility.** Stay attuned to your efficiency level. Take necessary rest breaks. A two minute change of pace like stepping outside, or simply standing up and stretching, can re-invigorate you. Whenever possible, save the work that requires the highest concentration for when you are at your best.
10. **Expect variability.** Your physical or environmental circumstances may temporarily lower your mental efficiency. So expect fluctuation and do not become upset at yourself or others if your functioning is not at peak levels until your circumstances improve.
11. **Make sure your stress management skills are up to snuff.** Review how well you deal with stress. If you need to, take steps to improving your ability to resolve conflict at home or on the job. Develop good assertive skills so you do not become preoccupied with unexpressed negative feelings. Allow enough flexibility in your daily schedule for recreation, exercise, and relaxation. When possible, do not make too many major life changes all at the same time. Get adequate sleep. Eat properly. Take it one day at a time. Focus on what you can change/control; don't dwell on what you can't. These are a few of many stress management tips.

Tips to help you remember better

1. **Make sure your powers of concentration are OK.** Memory trouble is often caused by, or mistaken for, problems with attention and concentration. If a person is not paying full attention up front, the information is unlikely to make it into memory. The difficulties you have been experiencing with memory may in fact be a problem with attention.
2. **Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!** The more you recite something you want to remember, the more you will drive it deep into memory storage. This requires active mental work on your part but it will pay rich dividends.
3. **Keep and use a memory notebook.** This may be nothing fancier than a cheap pocket notepad on which you write things to do, appointments, tasks and other information you want to be sure to remember. Refer to it often.
4. **Use other environmental cues.** These include checklists and sticky pad sheets posted on your desk and wherever else you need them. Writing notes on calendars is another example. The bottom line is...write it down and pin it up!
5. **Pair new stuff with old and familiar concepts.** What this means is to pair the item or bit of information you want to remember with something easy that you can visualize, like your favorite dessert. This way, for example, when you think of ice cream later on, you'll be more apt to remember the item.
6. **Turn the thing you want to remember into a mental image.** This is like the last tip except you don't pair what you want to remember with anything, you simply turn it into an interesting mental image, or picture, in your mind's eye. Maybe a dental appointment at 11 am becomes a visual image of two teeth side-by-side. This tip is also good for remembering things like grocery lists.

7. **Use other kinds of cues.** Sometimes recall will be better if you memorize the first letter of the word or name and use this letter as a stepping stone to recall the rest of the item. Another strategy is to make up a story for a list of unrelated items, the crazier the better! Your story will act like a thread to weave the items together.
8. **Show and tell.** If someone is giving you information in one form, say in words, and there is also an option to receive it in nonverbal form, say a diagram, take it in both forms. A good example is directions to someone's house. Have the person both tell you how to get there, and show you how to get there by drawing a map. If you are reading a book, study both the text and the charts or figures.
9. **Group information into logical categories.** Another term from this strategy is "chunking". It simplifies the process of storing information in memory. For example, a mental grocery list of bananas, carrots, oranges, and potatoes can be reduced to two categories - fruits and veggies.
10. **Do you really need to hear it all?** Limit the amount of information. If someone is giving you a lot, ask what the most important parts are, i.e. separate the wheat from the chaff. Also, if possible, have the person organize what they are saying (ask them to chunk, too), and slow down if necessary. Summarize the information regularly as it is being presented (i.e. feed it back to the person as in, "So what you're saying is...").
11. **Avoid selective attention.** It's also important to point out that once you become aware of memory or, for that matter, concentration difficulties, it is possible you will become highly sensitive to their presence. In other words, you may "selectively attend" to each lapse in your mental efficiency. This could lead you to believe that your memory is getting progressively worse. It is like the person who buys a new red car and then is amazed by how many red cars there are on the highway! We all forget many things each day. If we selectively attend to each incident of normal memory failure, we will soon believe we have a serious memory problem.
12. **Don't forget the bookstore!** The psychology sections of popular bookstores often contain paperbacks on how to improve your memory. You'll have to browse through these until you find one that seems good. Not all of the suggestions will apply, but some will.

University Counseling Services
Bayramian Hall, Room 520
818-677-2366
TTY 818-677-7834