

Maximising your thinking and memory abilities



About this handout

This handout is for anyone who is experiencing distractibility or slowed thinking in day-to-day life.

Focusing attention and avoiding distractions

We all have days when we struggle to focus and pay attention.

We might:

- Find it difficult to concentrate while reading, or listening to a conversation.
- Become easily distracted, or forget things because we are caught up doing something else, or worrying about something.
- Have trouble managing several tasks in the same period of time (e.g., when cooking, forgetting to start with the slowest-cooking thing first!).
- Find it takes a long time to get something done.

These difficulties become more frequent when we are distracted, stressed, tired or unwell, or when the task is particularly uninteresting. This is because our thinking processes may become slower and it is harder to keep many things in our mind at once. Many medical illnesses can also significantly slow thinking processes.

The following tips may help:

1 Follow a regular weekly routine to improve your focus and attention

- Try to establish a regular weekly routine, in which the same kinds of tasks are completed at the same time and day each week. This can help to free up your mental resources to focus on remembering new things and doing some new things.

2 Choose your best time of day to plan your activities

- Are you at your best in the morning or the evening? Try to schedule demanding tasks when your levels of energy and alertness are greatest.
- Don't try to do demanding activities if you are anxious, tired, hungry, unwell, or feeling upset or emotional.
- Plan your day so you can shop during 'off peak' hours.

Focusing attention and avoiding distractions

3 Focus on one task at a time

- If you are feeling overwhelmed with what needs to be done, it may help to break large tasks into a series of smaller achievable tasks.
- Set priorities to focus on important tasks and accept that non-essential tasks can be let go. It can help to make a 'to do' list, to help you plan the order in which you will do tasks.
- Take care of anything that is preoccupying you first. For instance, if there is something you want to share with a close friend or if you're worried about the extent of the mess in your kitchen, it is probably better to take care of these matters first.

4 Minimise distractions and avoid interruptions

- If you really need to focus on what is happening, avoid noisy places and interruptions (e.g., pick the quieter restaurant or café to meet up for lunch, and ask people not to phone you at that time).
- If you are at home, shut a door, or turn off the television or radio in the background. If necessary, use earplugs or turn off your phone ringer.

5 Use strategies to help with your difficulties

- **Take notes** in situations where it is difficult to keep everything in mind at once. For instance, it may be helpful to write down what your doctor says, or ask to be provided with a written summary.
- **Repeat information and clarify** it at the time you hear it. If it is important, try to write it down straight away.
- **Take a close family member or friend with you** to help you take in all the relevant information.

- **Only focus on the most relevant information.** For instance, you may wish to highlight the parts of this handout that you find most useful and ignore those that are less relevant.

6 Be aware of your limitations

- If your thinking is very slow, allow yourself plenty of time to complete tasks.
- To improve concentration it may be helpful to take breaks (e.g., every couple of hours). Have a cup of tea or coffee, a quick snack or go for a brisk walk.
- Try to avoid situations in which concentration or a rapid speed of response is important to maintain safety.

7 Carefully manage any anxiety you have

- Being panicky or anxious can worsen your ability to concentrate.
- Being aware of the times you are anxious can help you to overcome these issues. You may notice that certain situations (e.g., a new social setting) are more anxiety - provoking than others for you. When anxious you may feel overwhelmed, sweaty, and short of breath, or that your heart is beating very fast.
- If you are anxious, try to find ways to soothe yourself and calm down before attempting to engage in further social activity or tasks that require a high level of concentration:
 - Take time out to calm down and distract yourself (e.g., have a cup of tea or watch a TV program).
 - Brainstorm new ways to cope with any problems you are experiencing. Having a plan can help you to feel less anxious.
 - Use relaxation techniques.