

Improving Attention

Easily distracted. Overwhelmed by complex tasks. Can't follow a movie, lecture, or conversation. These are signs of attention problems. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is just one cause – cognitive symptoms are part of everyday life and part of every psychiatric disorder.

To improve attention, start with 3 steps that are essential to a well-functioning brain: sleeping, walking, and eating.

1. Sleep

Sleeping at least 8 hours a night improves memory, attention, and creative problem solving. Don't think that applies to you? Think again. Sleep deprivation also makes people unaware that they are making mistakes.

To deepen sleep, lower the lights 1-2 hours before bed and sleep in a cold, dark room. If you can't turn off the screens, wear blue light blocking glasses 1-2 hours before bed. The world still looks bright through these orange-tinted glasses, but by blocking out blue waves they make the brain think it's pitch dark. People who wear them before bed perform better on cognitive tests the next day. Find a pair at:

chrisaikenmd.com/darktherapy

One caution. Many things that help people fall asleep actually worsen sleep quality, particularly alcohol. Learning and memory are worse when people drink alcohol before bed.

2. Walk

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.

For better effects, walk in nature. A walk in the woods improved ADHD more than a similar walk in the city or suburbs in 5 clinical studies.

3. Brain Food

A diet rich in vegetables, berries, nuts, beans, whole grains, fish, lean meats, and healthy oils like extra virgin olive oil improved ADHD in a clinical trial. The same approach helps depression:

chrisaikenmd.com/antidepressantdiet

Foods with particular benefits for concentration include probiotic foods (kefir, kombucha, fermented/pickled foods, and yogurt with live cultures) and flavanols (tea, berries, and dark chocolate). Foods that worsen ADHD include artificial food colors, high processed foods, and BPA (a byproduct from microwaving in plastics).

Stay hydrated. Students perform better on tests if they drink water throughout the day, and so do people with ADHD.

You don't need a lot of caffeine improve focus. A half a cup of coffee an hour is usually enough. 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 you have any insomnia).

Tea has more brain-boosting ingredients than coffee, like l-theanine and catechins, particularly green, black, and matcha tea. The cognitive benefits of tea hold up even after the caffeine wears off.

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.

Reduce distractions

People with attention deficits are not good multi-taskers (actually no one really is). Do one thing at a time. Turn off the music 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 stay away from distracting web sites.

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), keeps your brain on a regular rhythm.

Self talk

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

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

Try to find something personally relevant about the material. This can be a challenge, but the search alone may reactivate your attention. Alternatively, search for the most important information – like a scavenger hunt – during a boring lecture or conversation.

Participate

If you’re having trouble paying attention in a conversation, ask questions. Taking a more active role will keep you focused.

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

Five Minute Rule

If there’s a task you keep avoiding, like returning emails, make this deal with yourself. “I’ll set a timer and work on my inbox for just 5 minutes. At the end, if I still can’t stand emails I will stop. Otherwise, I’ll keep at it.” You win either way.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 7/1/2025