

Strategies to improve Attention Skills following Traumatic Brain Injury

We are all equipped with a very complex and dynamic system of attention. These skills allow us to go through life attending to the things that are important and blocking out those stimuli that are not important. Our attention skills allow us to do more than one thing at a time, or switch between 2 different activities. These skills are often compromised following a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Following a brain injury, the ability to concentrate for more than short lengths of time may be compromised, and trying to maintain attention will quickly become tiring. Attention skills are closely associated with other skills that can also be affected by a TBI such as memory and planning skills. The extent of the attention deficit will depend on the severity and nature of the individual's injury, but may appear more marked in some individuals who had jobs or activities that previously relied on good attention skills. Attention skills are important because we need them to carry out most daily tasks and to communicate effectively. Individuals with a brain injury and reduced attention skills can put themselves in danger when they participate in certain tasks such as driving.

We use different types of attention skills to carry out our daily tasks:

Sustained attention

This skill is needed to maintain attention over a period of time to complete a task. For instance, sitting through a lecture or driving a car a long distance may be extremely draining if you have a brain injury. Tasks will also become harder because of the greater amount of mental energy required to achieve them, leading to fatigue.

Selective attention

This skill allows an individual to easily attend to stimuli that is important and be able to disregard stimuli that is not important. For instance, a person in a busy room can attend to the person they are talking to and ignore everyone else's conversation. Following a brain injury, individuals may find it hard to block out non-important stimuli and get easily distracted by other noises or movement.

Alternating attention

This skill describes a person's ability to switch between activities. An individual with a brain injury may be unable switch from one activity and immediately initiate a new task. Once they start the new task, it may be difficult to then switch back to the previous task.

Divided attention

This skill refers to our ability to do more than one thing at the same time. For instance, most people can drive a car and talk to their passenger, performing both skills effectively. Using this example, a brain injured person may find it difficult to listen to, and process a conversation while concentrating on driving.



Strategies to help attention

Although attention difficulties cannot be “cured” as such, there are many strategies we can use in our daily lives to facilitate our attention skills. Some people can actually practice and train their attention to improve by carrying out daily exercises. For most people it is a case of implementing functional strategies and sticking to a few guidelines:

- Self awareness. Learning to be aware of your current level of attention, concentration, and fatigue can help you know when to attempt tasks and when to take a break. One way to do this is to create a scale from 1 - 10, with 1 representing total relaxation, and 10 representing total stress and exhaustion. When you are about to attempt a task, look at your scale, if you score yourself between 1 and 3, you are probably ready to achieve things. If you score between 4 and 6, you can probably manage completing a short and easy task. If your score is higher, it is probably appropriate to take a break and attempt any tasks later.
- “Internal distractions” can also have an affect on attention. These are feelings such as stress or depression which will occupy your mind and distract you from a task. It is important not to attempt tasks that require a lot of concentration when you have internal distractions. Some people tell themselves that they will allow time later to think about things that are bothering them so that they can focus on the task at hand. If you feel anxious about completing a task, write down what worries you, and you will often find that your fears are unfounded. Write down rational responses to irrational fears.
- Build your confidence. Aim for progress rather than perfection when attempting a task. If the task seems too big, make a plan that is specific and break it into small steps, giving yourself a break after each step. If things go wrong try not to criticise yourself, just take a break and then attempt the task again, one step at a time. Congratulate yourself when you have completed a task.
- Planning. Planning and writing down a task can make it seem a little easier. Write down the steps, include your brain breaks and your reward at the end. If things do not go to plan, know that you can stop and re-attempt the task tomorrow. If there are lots of jobs to do, prioritise and don't overload yourself. Agree to complete 2 or 3 small tasks each day.
- Be Flexible. Remember, be flexible, if things are not going as planned, stop and re-plan, or just have a break and do something else.



- Stay on track. It can be easy to become distracted especially if the task is mundane. Staying on track with mundane tasks is difficult for everyone. There are a number of things you can do to help you complete the task. Divide up a mundane task and do a bit every day. Give yourself a list of affirmations such as “I can do this”, “keep going”, “let’s get this done”, to motivate yourself. Promise yourself a reward when you complete the task.

- Monitoring your fatigue. This is probably one of the most important strategies we can use. Many people with brain injury suffer higher levels of fatigue than normal and must be aware that fatigue will have a major impact on attention capabilities. This means scheduling activities that require your attention at times when you feel at your best. See www.icommunicatetherapy.com for strategies around managing fatigue.



- Consider your environment. When you are trying to attend effectively in an environment that contains many distractions it is unlikely that you will be effective. Reduce noisy distractions such as TV, radio or other people talking. If your environment is cluttered and messy, try and tidy things up a little. Working in a clutter free environment is easier than working in a messy one.

- Allow plenty of time to complete tasks.

- Eliminate distractions. When there are distractions, try and decide how best to manage them. Decide what the distractions are and how you can change them e.g. if you want to talk and it is too noisy in a certain room because of the TV, you can either turn off the TV or go to another room to talk. If you cannot change the environment then try and move to a new environment. If you are unable to complete a task because of distractions, write it down your task and attempt it again later.

- Develop Systems. As with other cognitive difficulties caused by brain injury it is advantageous to develop systems such as checklists and reminders which take the load from your attention skills (examples of these systems can be found under at www.icommunicatetherapy.com).



- Brain Breaks. Set time periods for tasks and then have a “brain break” before continuing. You can use alarms to prompt you. Some people use alarms on their mobile phones.
- Health. Looking after all aspects of your general health will help you perform better on a daily basis. The 4 main areas to be aware of are Nutrition, Sleep, Exercise and Relaxation. Make sure you have a well balanced and healthy diet and stay well hydrated. Make sure you have a regular and sufficient night time sleep, as well as sleep breaks in the day if needed. Try and do some exercise every day to stay reasonably fit. Relaxation is sometimes overlooked, but contributes to a positive and healthy lifestyle. Everyone relaxes in different ways, but it is important to find some time everyday to get away from your stress and worries. Going for a walk, meditating and yoga are all good ways to relax.
- Reading is often difficult following a brain injury. Try to read when you feel at your most attentive. For strategies to help with reading following brain injury visit www.icommunicatetherapy.com .
- Try not to Multi-task. Focus on one task at a time. Trying to multi-task may mean that you achieve nothing or make a poor attempt at everything.
- If you have to divide your time between 2 tasks try and do one task that relies on mental concentration and one task that is physical e.g. listening to the radio while cleaning the sink.
- If you are switching between tasks, try and take a small break between switching to give your brain time to adjust. Some people find it helpful to say aloud what they are doing when they change tasks to help them stay on track.





- Listening to, and following conversations sometimes requires lots of mental energy. Try to self monitor so that you are aware when your attention is beginning to falter. Try and repeat important points in your head. Pick out the key pieces of information and disregard the non-important stuff. Develop active listening skills to manage conversations:
 - *Clarification* - requesting extra information or repetition
 - *Probing questions* - ask questions to gain further information
 - *Paraphrasing* - this allows the listener to make sure you understood
 - *Summarising* - pulls together key points and concludes the topic

What others can do to help you

- If you have attention difficulties it is important to discuss this with other people so that they understand and can accommodate your difficulties.



- If you are communicating with a person with brain injury or attention difficulties make sure you face them when talking, speak clearly and do not keep switching between different subjects.
- There is no need to speak too slowly, but try not to give too much information too quickly.
- Carry out discussions in an environment that is free of distractions.
- If you live with a person with brain injury, arrange the home environment so it helps them e.g. getting rid of distractions and helping set up systems around the house with reminders and checklists etc



Quick Checklist for Attention Skills following Brain Injury

- Learn to be self aware and monitor your level of attention
- Monitor your fatigue and schedule in breaks
Allow plenty of time to achieve tasks
- Make a plan and break your task into small steps
Adapt your environment to eliminate distractions
Evaluate and monitor distraction before starting a task
- Be flexible - stop, re-plan, or reschedule if you need to
Develop systems of alarms and reminders to keep focussed
Manage internal distractions
- If you are anxious, write down your fears
Try and attempt one task at a time
Allow yourself “brain breaks” between tasks
- Congratulate and reward yourself when you have completed a task
- Health - nutrition, sleep, exercise and relaxation
Self monitor during conversations
Try and use active listening skills during conversations
Make other people aware of your difficulties
Work together with house-mates to adapt your environment



To learn more about Traumatic Brain Injury and strategies to enhance communication, speech, memory and cognition, you can read about and purchase books on our website www.icommunicatetherapy.com. Click this link to see our online Resource Centre [Book Shop](#)

Suggested reading:

Brain, Heal Thyself: A Caregiver's New Approach to Recovery from Stroke, Aneurysm, And Traumatic Brain Injuries

by Madonna Siles and Lawrence J. Beuret

Brain Injury Survivor's Guide: Welcome to Our World

by Larry Jameson and Beth Jameson

Textbook of Traumatic Brain Injury

by Stuart C. Yudofsky, Jonathan M. Silver, and Thomas W. McAllister

The Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Workbook: Your Program for Regaining Cognitive Function & Overcoming Emotional Pain (New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook)

by Douglas J. Mason and Gottfried Jean-Louis

Living with Brain Injury: A Guide for Families, Second Edition

by Richard C Senelick and Karla Dougherty

Rehabilitation for Traumatic Brain Injury

by Walter M. High, Angelle M. Sander, Margaret A. Struchen, and Karin A. Hart

Traumatic Brain Injury in Children and Adolescents: Assessment and Intervention

by Margaret Semrud-Clikeman

The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science (James H. Silberman Books)

by Norman Doidge

Aphasia Therapy Workshop: Current Approaches to Aphasia Therapy-- Principles and Applications

by Jacqueline Stark, Nadine Martin, and Ruth Fink

Beyond Aphasia: Therapies For Living With Communication Disability

by Carole Pound, Susie Parr, Jayne Lindsay, and Celia Woolf