

Tips for Improving Concentration

- **Take care of yourself.** Insufficient sleep, lack of exercise and poor eating habits interfere with concentration.
- Your **study area should be free from distractions.** If you do become distracted, take time to analyze what is distracting you.
- Make sure your **study area is comfortable**, but not so comfortable that you doze off. Beds and easy chairs are not recommended for study.
- **Time how long you can concentrate** and schedule your study sessions for that length of time. Usually study sessions should last no longer than 50 minutes.
- If your concentration time is very short, set a timer for 1 or 2 minutes longer than you usually concentrate and **gradually increase the time** to at least 20 minutes. Don't try to increase too quickly or you will defeat the purpose.
- Take a **5 or 10 minute break after every study session** and then study a different, non-similar subject.
- Focus - Use the **Be Here Now** technique (described on page 33) to get the most out of classes and studying.
- **Learn actively.** It is easier to focus when you highlight, draw diagrams, read out loud, make summary notes, turn headings into questions and try to answer them or use recitation after reading a section.
- **Break homework tasks down into small, manageable chunks** and work on one chunk at a time.
- If you frequently find yourself daydreaming or getting distracted use the **Thought Stopping Technique** or the **Checkmark Technique** (see next page).
- If your motivation is low or you are worrying excessively, deal with those issues before trying to study.

Techniques to Help Improve Your Level of Concentration

Daydreaming

Daydreaming is a common source of distraction that can limit the effectiveness of your homework and study time. To help combat this problem, choose one of the following techniques that will help you become more aware of your level of distractibility while training your brain to focus for longer periods of time. In just a few study sessions, you can dramatically decrease daydreaming. You must, however, ensure that your study sessions aren't too long (maximum of 50 minutes), that you aren't hungry or tired, and that you are allowing yourself some downtime every day.

Checkmark Technique

Put a piece of scrap paper near your study area. Every time your mind wanders make a checkmark on the scrap of paper. Next time you sit down to study, set the goal of getting fewer checkmarks. Your mind is competitive and will try to "win" by helping you to focus longer in order to decrease checkmarks.

Thought Stopping

Every time you find your mind wandering yell "stop" in your head and then go back to studying. To make this even more effective, put an elastic band around your wrist and give yourself a little ping with the elastic band while you are yelling, "stop" in your head. Your mind automatically tries to avoid the negative word as well as the pain.

Worrying

While daydreaming is one source of distraction, worrying is another. Did you know that over 90% of what we worry about is futile? Worrying is like a rocking chair; it uses a lot of energy but gets you nowhere. Here are two techniques you can try if you find yourself bogged down by excessive worries:

Problem Solve

If you find yourself worrying a lot, you should determine a) Is this really a problem? and b) Is there anything I can do about it? If the answer to either question is “No”, then let go of it. If your worry is resolvable, then sit down and clearly define what the problem is, brainstorm possible solutions, and determine the best course of action. You may have to break the solution down into manageable chunks in order to work towards resolution. If you cannot solve the problem on your own, ask for help.

Worry Box

Another technique, called the “**worry box**”, works for many chronic worriers. Allot time each week specifically for worrying. For the rest of the week, write down each worry when it pops into your head and put the paper into a box. During your allotted worry time go through the contents in the box- you will probably get at least a smile from most of the things you were worried about. Take action (i.e. problem solve) on concerns that you can do something about.

Environmental Distractions

Both noises in and around your study area, as well as visual distractions, can have a significant impact on your study effectiveness. It is important to study in a place that is free of visual and auditory distractions, **especially television and computers because they provide both types of distraction.**

De-clutter

It is best to study in a room where you can leave your study materials set up. If that is not possible choose a quiet and clutter-free environment and have study tools (pencils, eraser, scrap paper, etc.) organized so you can set up your study space efficiently. Remove clutter or any items that may distract you from your work. You should only have materials related to the particular subject you are working on placed on your desk. You may need to shift your desk if it is positioned in front of a window or close to other visual distractions.

Block Out Meaningful Noises

The most important noise to block out is meaningful noise, usually conversations. If you cannot move to a room where there are fewer distractions, earplugs or white noise can help block out unwanted noises. Music can be used in this way, but if you listen to music while studying and find yourself singing along to the lyrics, the music may be a distraction itself.

Be Here Now *

Be here now is a powerful tool for enhancing concentration, memory and learning. Be here now means staying focused on what you are doing, while you are doing it. If you are not practicing the principle of “Be here now” while studying or doing homework you are not getting the fullest benefit from your study sessions.

Your mind absorbs new material best when you are **fully focusing** on **one** thing at **one** time. Sometimes we need to “multi task” but do not fool yourself into thinking that you are fully focused on your learning at those times.

Being in the here and now requires you to focus your attention on your attention. You can enhance your effectiveness by letting go of distracting internal dialogue and mental images, and being totally in the moment.

How to “Be Here Now”

1. Notice when you leave the here and now. Notice stray thoughts. Acknowledge and accept them. Tell yourself, “There’s that thought again.” Then gently return your attention to the task at hand.
2. If something is distracting you, get up from your study area and write down the “nagging” thought so you can deal with it later.

*adapted from Becoming a Master Student by David Ellis

Studying with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder(ADHD)

ADHD impacts ability to focus and sustain attention on a task or on relevant information. Distractibility, impulsiveness, inattentiveness and disorganization are common characteristics of individuals with ADHD. Hyperactivity may or may not be present. The following is a summary of some of the most important strategies for students who experience difficulty with attention and concentration.

In the classroom:

- Always attempt to sit near the front of the classroom away from distractions such as windows, doorways, pencil sharpeners or electronic equipment.
- It may be beneficial to use a peer note-taker so that you can concentrate on the instructor.
- Taping lectures may help reinforce new material learned in class (get permission from your instructor and classmates).
- Attend all classes.

When Studying:

- Your study area should be as free of distractions and clutter as possible. Have only the material and equipment you are using visible.
- Before you start to study, write down your goal for the study session.
- Always do your most important or difficult studying and homework first.
- Use short study sessions with breaks. Alternate subjects you are studying.
- While studying, set a timer. Have the goal of concentrating until the timer rings.
- Gradually increase the time you are trying to focus by 1 to 2 minute intervals.
- Use study strategies that will keep your mind alert and focused. Don't rely on reading and rereading. Experiment with different study strategies outlined in this book, and decide which ones help you to focus most effectively.
- Reading out loud may help you to focus and may increase comprehension.
- Some students with ADHD find they can focus more effectively when working on a computer.

Organization:

- ❑ Learn to structure your environment. Organize your study space, classroom materials and locker so that materials are in a consistent, easily accessible spot.
- ❑ Post your class schedule in easily visible areas (locker door, front of binder, fridge, etc.)
- ❑ Make a daily list of tasks. Prioritize the tasks and start with the most important ones first.
- ❑ Use your NAIT Students' Day Planner to write down assignment due dates, exam dates and other appointments, plus reminders several days in advance of due dates.
- ❑ Follow a daily routine. Most importantly try to go to bed and get up at approximately the same time each day.
- ❑ Learn time management skills.
- ❑ Control procrastination.
- ❑ Post a semester planner (available in the Student Counselling Centre) in a visible place.
- ❑ Enlist a friend, relative, partner or spouse to encourage you to finish tasks, help you to remember commitments, and to provide feedback.

Other:

- ❑ If you are experiencing stress, frustration or other ADHD-related problems, counselling may be beneficial.
- ❑ Individuals diagnosed with ADHD often write exams in a separate room.
- ❑ A reduced course load may be beneficial.
- ❑ Setting up a self-reward system may help to motivate you.
- ❑ Schedule regular physical exercise.
- ❑ Maintain a sense of humor.
- ❑ Reduce negative self-statements and substitute positive statements such as, "I can do it" or "I can stay focused".
- ❑ Learn to control your emotions. Depression, low self-esteem, discouragement and anger can overwhelm students with ADHD. Be prepared with coping strategies to deal with negative emotions.
- ❑ Reduce or eliminate alcohol or drug use.
- ❑ Participate in rewarding activities that will boost your self-esteem.
- ❑ Students with ADHD may benefit from working with an Academic Strategist.
- ❑ Avoid fatigue.
- ❑ Take advantage of NAIT resources such as Student Counselling.