

## **Attention**

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 system allows us to do more than one thing at a time, or switch between 2 different activities. Unfortunately, these skills are often compromised following a brain injury. 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 fatiguing. Attention skills are closely associated with other skills that can be affected by brain injury 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 brain injury and reduced attention skills can put themselves in danger when they participate in certain tasks such as driving and cooking. Every day 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 for someone with 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 skills to improve by carrying out daily exercises. For most people it is a case of implementing functional strategies and sticking to a few guidelines.

- Monitoring our fatigue 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](http://www.icommunicatetherapy.com) for strategies around managing fatigue.



- Allow plenty of time to complete tasks.
- 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.
- 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. you want to talk and it is too noisy in a certain room because of the TV, so 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.
- 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 *adult brain injury* on [www.icommunicatetherapy.com](http://www.icommunicatetherapy.com)).

- 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.
- “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.
- Focus on one task at a time. Trying to multi-task may mean that you achieve nothing or make a poor attempt at each task.
- Reading is often difficult following a brain injury. Try to read when you feel at your most attentive. There are a number of strategies to help with reading following brain injury on [www.icommunicatetherapy.com](http://www.icommunicatetherapy.com) .
- 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 skills during conversations require lots of mental energy to follow and understand what is being said. 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* 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 the conversation 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 help them arrange the home environment so it helps them e.g. getting rid of distractions and helping set up systems around the house for reminders and checklists etc

## **Quick Checklist for Attention Skills following Brain Injury**

- Monitor your fatigue and schedule in breaks

Allow plenty of time to achieve tasks

Adapt your environment to eliminate distractions

Evaluate and monitor distraction before starting a task

Develop systems of alarms and reminders to keep focussed

Manage internal distractions

Try and attempt one task at a time

Allow yourself “brain breaks” between tasks

Self monitor during conversations

Try and use active listening skills during conversations

Make other people aware of your difficulties

Work together with housemates to adapt your environment