

Six Ways to Stay Focused

Whether you're still in school or all grown up, these six strategies will help you pay attention to the important stuff.



It's a common misconception that people with ADHD are unable to focus. ADDers *are* able to focus. It's just that we have a hard time *staying* focused. That's especially true when the activity calling for our attention isn't one that we find especially engaging. Ever struggled to pay attention to a boring lecture? Or stay involved in a business meeting that drags on?

During my 30-plus years working with ADDers, I've found six strategies to boost the ability to focus:

1 Get it in writing. If you're preparing to attend a meeting, lecture, workshop, or another gathering that requires close attention, ask for an advance copy of the relevant materials (meeting agenda, lecture outline, and so on). Take the materials with you to the gathering. Use them to guide your active listening and—just as important—your note-taking. Writing as you listen will help you stay focused on what the speaker is saying.

2 Get a good seat. Where you sit is critical. You may find it easier to be attentive if you sit up front, facing the speaker. Arriving early will increase your chances of getting a seat far away from distractions, such as a noisy fan or a doorway that opens onto a busy hallway. If the

event is scheduled to run for several hours, change your seat after each break. That will give you a new perspective and allow you to refocus your attention. If you will need to work independently for some time, such as in a science lab or during a lengthy exam, ask ahead of time for permission to take occasional breaks and, possibly, to change your seat. Standing up and walking around will help you stay fresh and focused.

3 Ask for a review. As soon as possible after the class or meeting, ask your teacher or co-worker for a brief review of the main points. Explain what you think the points were, and see if he or she concurs. This is a good time to fill in any details you might have missed when your focus flagged. It's also a good time to find out exactly what is expected of you next—assignments to turn in, succeeding steps on a project, and so on. Don't forget to confirm deadlines.

4 Avoid fatigue. It's hard to pay close attention when you're tired. Whenever possible, sign up for classes that meet early in the day (or whenever your focus is greatest). At work, you may not be able to control meeting times, but, whenever possible, pick a time that works well for you.

5 Move! Feel the urge to fidget? Go right ahead. As long as you don't disturb others, clicking a pen, playing with your hair, knitting, and so on can help you pay attention. If discretion is an issue, chewing gum, sucking on hard candy, or even sipping from a glass of water might do the trick. If there is any doubt as to what's permissible, ask the speaker—*before* the lecture or meeting begins.

For more ideas, see the book *Fidget to Focus*, by Roland Rotz, Ph.D., and Sarah Wright (iUniverse).

6 Choose your leader carefully. Picking classes? Look for an instructor who is well-organized, flexible, and dynamic enough to hold your interest. You also want someone who announces deadlines well in advance and provides students with lots of feedback.

You may not be able to choose your supervisor at work. However, you can ask for accommodations that allow you to function at your best and get the job done. Getting deadlines in writing, working in a quiet spot, and scheduling frequent short meetings to confirm that you are on track will help enormously. ▲

Medication Matters

If you're taking a short-acting medication that wears off as the day goes on, ask your doctor about switching to a long-acting drug, such as Concerta, Adderall XR, or Focalin XR. These formulations last 10 to 12 hours. The methylphenidate skin patch, Daytrana, provides up to 12 hours of coverage.

By PATRICIA QUINN, M.D., co-author of *Understanding Women with AD/HD* and co-founder of the National Center for Women's Issues and ADHD. She lives in Washington, D.C.

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