

How to Improve Your Concentration and Memory

Ten simple strategies that anyone can use to improve concentration and memory

By Neel Burton, MD

The following are some simple strategies that anyone can use to improve the amount of information that they take in and remember:

1. Pay attention. You cannot take in information unless you are paying attention, and you cannot memorize information unless you are taking it in. Get enough food and sleep, and avoid distractions such as a background radio or television.

2. Involve as many senses as possible. For example, if you are sitting in a lecture, you will remember more of what is being said if you listen and scribble down a few notes. Or if you are reading a letter or an article, you will remember more of what is written if you read it aloud to yourself.

3. Relate new information to what you already know. New information is much easier to remember if it can be contextualized. For example, if you are prescribed a new antidepressant drug, you can relate its side-effects to the side-effects of your old antidepressant drug. Or you might notice that both antidepressant drugs are from the same class of drugs, and thus that they have similar side-effects.

4. Structure information. For example, if you need to remember what ingredients you need to cook a meal, think of them under the subheadings of starter, main course, and desert, and visualize how many ingredients there are under each sub-heading. Or if you need to remember a telephone number, think of it in terms of the five first digits, the middle three digits, and the last three digits.

5. Use mnemonics. That is, tie information to visual images, sentences, acronyms, or rhymes. For example, you might remember that your hairdresser is called Sharon by picturing a Rose of Sharon or a sharon fruit. You might remember the order of the colors of the rainbow with the sentence, 'Richard of York got beaten in Versailles'. Or you might remember, as medical students do, the symptoms of varicose veins with the acronym 'AEIOU': aching, eczema, itching, oedema, and ulceration.

6. Understand information. Try to understand more complex material before you try to remember it. If possible, summarize the material in your own words and write or type out your summary. Reorganize the material or your summary of the material so that it is easier to remember. By manipulating the information in this way, you are forcing yourself to think about it actively.

7. Rehearse information. Review the information later on the same day or sleep over it and review it the following day. Thereafter, review it at regular, spaced intervals until you feel comfortable that you know it well enough.

8. Exercise your mind. Mental challenge can help to create new wire connections in the brain, which makes it more effective and more resistant to memory disorders such as Alzheimer's disease. So develop a new hobby, read a novel, learn a foreign language, or practice yourself at crosswords or sudoku.

9. Develop a healthy lifestyle. Eat a healthy, balanced diet, take regular exercise, and avoid smoking. A healthy lifestyle increases the amount of blood and oxygen that is delivered to the brain, and reduces the risk of medical conditions that can lead to memory loss such as Alzheimer's disease, stroke, and diabetes. Exercise also increases your 'feel-good' endorphins, which improves your mood and prevents depression. Depression results in impaired attention and concentration, and is also a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease.

10. Get sufficient sleep. Sleep is necessary for memory consolidation, and feeling alert and refreshed improves your attention and concentration.

11. See a doctor. Certain prescribed and over-the-counter drugs can impair your attention and concentration, and hence your memory. If you suspect that this is the case for you, see your family doctor. You should also see your family doctor if you begin having memory problems that affect your ability to get by on a day-to-day basis.