



Improving Your Attention and Memory

If you struggle to pay attention or remember things, you may feel frustrated. There are ways you can manage and improve your attention and memory.

What challenges you?

Check all that apply to you.

Attention

- I get distracted easily.
- I can't focus on one thing for very long.
- I often don't finish a project or task after I've started it.
- I struggle to learn something new.
- I have trouble doing more than one thing at a time.

Memory

- I forget what I told people or what people told me.
- I lose my train of thought in the middle of a sentence.
- I can't find my keys, wallet, phone, or other item I use often.
- I forget where I parked or what I need at the store after I get there.
- I dial the phone and then forget who or why I'm calling.
- I forget what I read earlier when reading a book.
- I can't recall whether I did something earlier such as turned off the coffee pot or shut the garage door.
- I go someplace and forget why I was going there.
- I can't remember what I did last weekend when someone asks me.

Types of attention

Attention happens when you focus on a task, interaction or event. Read about the types of attention to help understand which of them may challenge you.

Focused

You respond to something you see, hear, touch, or feel.
Example: You hear the doorbell ring and go to the door.

Sustained

You focus on a task long enough to finish it.
Example: You read an entire newspaper article or clean a closet without letting distractions keep you from finishing it.

Selective

You concentrate on one task even if you are surrounded by distractions.
Example: You hold a conversation with your dinner companion without being distracted by everything going on around you.

Alternating

You shift your focus of attention and easily move between several tasks.
Example: You make a casserole and put it in the oven, start a load of laundry, set the table, help with homework, and then finish preparing dinner.

Divided

You respond to several tasks or senses at the same time.
Example: While driving, you pay attention to the other vehicles, pedestrians, and road conditions while you also read street signs and traffic lights. In addition you listen and talk to your passenger and hear the radio.

Types of memory

Memory happens when you store, retain, and recall information and experiences. Read about the types of memory to help understand which of them may challenge you.

Immediate

This is a memory held on purpose for less than one minute. Also called a “working memory,” an immediate memory relies on being able to focus in the moment.

Short-term

This is a memory held for one minute to one hour. Short-term memory is the first phase of storage or memory retention.

Long-term

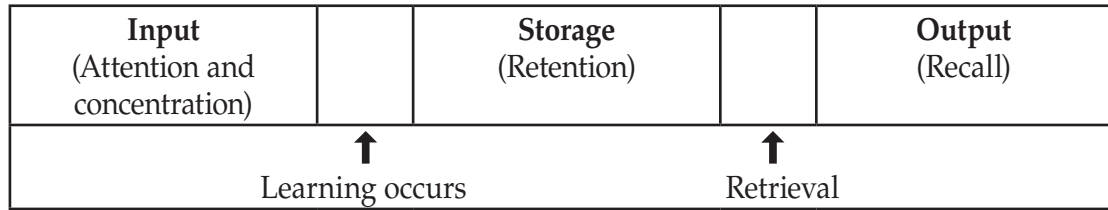
This is a memory held for hours, days, or months. Stronger memories help you recall an event, procedure, or fact on demand. Weaker memories often come to mind only after being reminded or prompted.

Remote

This is a memory held for many years. Usually remote memories are significant events such as childhood memories, vacations, or historical life moments.

Memory process

This diagram illustrates the memory process. If paying attention or concentrating is difficult, you may struggle learning new information and remembering old information.



Take action

You can manage and improve your attention and memory in many ways. If you find that trying to do all of the following tips at once is too much, pick two or three to work on first. After you have success with those, add a few more.

Tips for healthy living

Choices you make every day can help improve the quality of your life and your health.

- Talk to your health care provider about the medications you take and how they may affect your attention and memory.
- Sleep enough to feel well rested.
- Keep track of and manage your mood, stress, and anxiety.
- Make physical activity and exercise part of your daily routine.
- Organize in whatever way helps you do your daily tasks. Then find ways to stay organized.
- Stay mentally active by visiting with others, playing games, or reading.

Tips for improving attention

- Do one task or activity at a time.
- Choose to focus for a period of time and then take a break.
- Break down directions or tasks into smaller steps.
- Use your senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) to help you focus on the present.
- Limit the distractions around you.
- Read the instructions before you start a project. Double check each step before you move to the next step. Check off each step after you finish it.

Tips for improving memory

- Follow a daily routine whenever possible.
 - Put things in the same place, especially things you use often.
 - Write information on a calendar and look at it often.
 - Use electronic devices such as email, electronic calendars, and smart phones for reminders and to keep you organized.
 - Make lists or take notes about important items.
 - Use signs, cue cards, note cards, and white boards to help you remember information.
 - Use your senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) to help you remember.
 - Connect new things you learn with things you already know.
 - Reinforce things you learn by doing them again and again.
 - Rehearse new information over and over. Then recall it to test yourself. Increase the time between when you rehearse and when you recall, and test yourself again.
 - Take the time you need to recall information without putting pressure on yourself.
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