

Are you having difficulty staying on task...?

What is attention and concentration?

Attention is not just one type of mental process. There are thought to be three basic types of attention: selective attention, sustained attention and complex attention.

Selective attention is the ability to focus on one part of the world while ignoring other aspects of the environment that are not important for the task at hand. For example, listening carefully to what someone is saying while blocking out other noise in a room.

Sustained attention is the ability to focus on the task at hand for a sustained or relatively lengthy period of time.

Finally, complex attention is the ability to flexibly control attention by either switching or dividing attention between more than one thing. This could include carrying on with a conversation whilst driving a car or bringing one's attention back to cooking a meal after you were momentarily distracted by a child's cry for attention. Complex attention is important when we want to multi-task.

Not all types of attention will necessarily be equally impaired if you have a problem with attention.

How will I know if I having a problem with attention?

- Having a short concentration span, jumping from one idea to the next.
- Finding it hard to focus on and finish a task.
- Finding it hard to plan a set of steps that are needed to complete a task (for example cooking a meal) and then finishing them in the right order.

- Difficulty with problem solving.
- Loss of concentration.
- Finding it hard to keep attention focused for a long period of time, for example watching a movie, reading a book.
- Being easily distracted.
- Can't sit still for long - being agitated or restless, getting up and down and walking around all of the time.
- Unable to do two things at a time, for example, talk while making a cup of tea.
- Not appearing to listen or maintain a conversation.

'Liz's' Story

'Liz' is woman in her early fifties who was diagnosed with a right temporal meningioma. She returned to her part-time clerical job, but found that she was finding it hard to stay focused and was easily distracted. 'Liz' tried using 'to do' lists to keep on track. She found that she was much slower in finishing tasks. 'Liz' said that she could only focus on one task at a time. There were times when she was working on task and was interrupted by the phone, when the call had ended she found it hard to pick up where she had left off. 'Liz' said that everyone at work was very supportive. However, she was unable to work at the same pace or complexity as she could before her brain tumour.

Strategies

For the person with a brain tumour

- Break the task into smaller parts to make it simpler to do.
- Reduce outside noise and distractions when trying to do a task, for example,

KEY FACTS

A survey of people with a brain tumour found that:

- 21% had problems paying attention or concentrating.
- 13% were disorganised.
- 29% could not do two things at the same time such as talk and prepare a meal.

turn off the television when cooking or eating a meal.

- Write a list for any tasks you need to do and tick off the list as it is finished.
- Use a whiteboard or notice board to write down any tasks you need to do.
- Work on harder tasks when you are not feeling tired.
- Use cues and reminders to help you return your focus to the task.
- Focus on tasks for a short time, then allow a rest break, take a walk or do something you find enjoyable.
- Use self-talk to keep yourself on task, for example tell yourself "I need to get milk when I am at the shop".
- Use lists to remind yourself what you need to buy when shopping – remember to look at the list.
- Work on tasks with a 'buddy', for example, prepare a meal together, share the housework (while one is dusting the other person can vacuum).



For the carer

- When giving instructions for a task that has a number of steps, only give the person one step at a time.
- Use reminders to keep the person on track.
- Help them by working on tasks together.
- Limit other sources of noise or distraction when talking to them, such as the television.
- When giving them important information to remember, make sure they are not being distracted and have heard what you are telling them.

Questions to ask your health professional

- What is the cause of the concentration or attention difficulties?
- Is it related to the tumour itself?
- Is it related to the treatments given for the tumour or other medications?
- Could the poor concentration/attention be an unrelated medical condition and does this need treatment in itself?
- Do I/we expect the poor concentration/attention to get better or worse over time?
- Are there any medications that can help the problem?
- Are there any diet or lifestyle factors that can help the poor concentration/attention?
- Will a psychologist be able to help treat this problem?
- Who else could I speak with to help with the poor concentration/attention?

Links to other resources:

- <http://braininjury.org.au/portal/fact-sheets/attention-and-concentration---fact-sheet.html>
- http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/documents/behaviour_mgt/attent_concentrate.pdf
- http://www.chw.edu.au/rehab/brain_injury/information_sheets/thinking_skills/attention_and_concentration.htm