5 ADHD Brain Hacks for Focusing: Keep Your Eyes on The Prize

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ADHD Tips for Focusing

Inattentive ADHD means a person has problems concentrating, listening or paying attention to detail. Hyperactive/impulsive ADHD describes a person who has very high levels of energy, has trouble sitting still and fidgets frequently. If a person experiences characteristics of both inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive ADHD, they have the combined type of ADHD.

Having Trouble Concentrating

Concentration is the ability to give focus and attention to one thought or activity at a time. People with ADHD find it very difficult to focus our attention. So why do people with ADHD find it so difficult to concentrate? The answer is, different brain chemistry. ADHD brains are naturally low on dopamine and norepinephrine which controls brain arousal and attention.

The reason for this is ADHD brains appear to have a higher concentration of dopamine transporters in the brain. These transporters remove the dopamine from the brain cells. More transporters in one area of the brain do so too quickly and the dopamine has less time to exert its effect. Lower levels of dopamine (which is essential to normal functioning) make it harder for ADHD brains to concentrate on tasks which do not give instant gratification. This suggests dysfunction in the brain's reward pathway interferes with how we experience reward and motivation. Stimulant medications can increase attention to cognitive tasks by elevating brain dopamine levels. Medication may not be suitable for everyone but discuss it with your doctor if you are considering it.

Having trouble staying focused can quickly lead to disorganization, unfinished projects, failure to meet deadlines and poor communication with our peers.

We are living in especially interesting times now. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are having to adapt to an extreme breakdown of our usual routines. There are lockdowns and restrictions across the world as everyone is encouraged to stay inside and physically distance themselves. Many people are being asked to work from home, and for some people, they will find it very challenging. The following are some ADHD tips for focusing and strategies that can help you improve your concentration.

5 Brain Hack Tips

1. Create a Space

Firstly, don't expect yourself to be able to concentrate on demand. Instead, my advice is to set up any work or life tasks in a way that allows you to work on them, during the window your brain allows you to. Create a space that can shift into a work zone. I have a routine of putting music on whenever I need to get some housework done. Listening to the music is a good distraction from the boring job of doing dishes.

2. Use a Timer

Set a timer and enforce time limitations between work periods and recreational breaks. Breaking your time down into smaller chunks can make it easier to get through the day.

3. Motivation

Reward yourself when you complete a task. For myself, as a lifelong gamer, a few hours of uninterrupted gameplay are wonderful motivation to clean my house.

4. Identify What Overwhelms You

When an ADHD brain becomes overwhelmed or stressed, it can appear like there is a lack of motivation. Laundry may pile up and emails may go left unanswered while you instead binge-watch YouTube or Netflix. Break this cycle by identifying what causes you to feel overwhelmed. It may be something as simple as hunger or a lack of sleep. Or, it might be conflicting priorities and you simply don't know where to start. Plan to address what overwhelms you and take steps to anticipate it, such as reminding yourself to eat regularly.

5. Use Visual Reminders

Visual reminders can be useful for prioritizing tasks that need to be completed. There are many apps available to download which can send you reminders, especially for time sensitive jobs. Post it notes can also be great, especially for housework, because you can stick them in the area of your house that needs attention. I like to number the notes and remove them as each task is completed to help trigger that reward centre in the brain.

These strategies and ADHD tips for focusing can be very effective for helping you to complete tasks, but perhaps none are as powerful as harnessing the power of your hyperfocus.

Hyperfocus

An aspect of ADHD which often gets misunderstood is that people think we are unable to concentrate on anything. A more accurate way of explaining it is that we find it very difficult to concentrate on things that do not interest us.

Hyperfocus is the ability to focus intensely for extended periods of time on an interesting project or activity. It is the opposite of getting distracted. People who experience hyperfocus often become so engrossed in whatever they are doing they block out the rest the world. Unless someone or something interrupts their engagement, hours will drift by. Priorities such as important jobs and sometimes even relationships can be cast aside.

Both distraction and hyperfocus are thought to result from abnormally low levels of dopamine, which is known as the feel-good neurotransmitter. This dopamine deficiency makes it difficult for us to move from a task that interests us to something more mundane, but necessary, like housework.

While it does have its downsides, the ability to hyperfocus so intensely gives us an advantage over our neurotypical peers when we can focus on something productive such as a school assignment or work project. For me it was the ability to cram before a university exam, learning an entire semesters worth of knowledge within a 24-hour period. It takes me a long time to start working but with the right motivation, such as fear of failure, I can easily step into "the zone" and focus my entire attention to the task, as hours tick by unnoticed.

Just ensure you have set a few alarms, so you don't forget lost time.

Conclusion

Improving your focus will often involve a bit of experimentation and trail and error. Track which strategies you are using and monitor your progress. Use what works for you and be proud of any progress, even if it seems small. It

can be hard for those of us with ADHD brains to stay focused, but remember, it is possible. Give some of these ADHD tips for focusing a try and remember, keep your eyes on the prize.