

ADHD Reducing Distractions

Student Handout



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Reducing Distractions Handout

- The mind wanders 50% of the time for everyone.
- A symptom of ADHD includes being easily distracted. Recent studies show that ADHD minds may develop internal network connections slower than others.
- The concept of "*distractibility*" in ADHD typically means that you cannot block out unimportant distractions to focus on the matters at hand.
- *Executive function* is the cognitive process that organizes thoughts and activities, prioritizes tasks, manages time efficiently, and makes decisions.
 - Executive function skills are the skills that help us establish structures and strategies for managing projects and determine the actions required to move each project forward.

ADHD & Stimulant Medications

Side Effects:

1. Loss of Appetite/Decreased Appetite
2. Sleep Difficulties
3. Headaches
4. Nausea
5. Irritability & Moodiness
6. Dry Mouth
7. Tics
8. Nervousness
9. Fatigue
10. Drowsiness
11. Avoid ascorbic acid and vitamin C one hour before and after taking medication

Strategies to Reduce Distractions

1. Maintain Eye Contact in Conversations
 - a. While maintaining eye contact, you not only demonstrate that you want to listen to the person in front of you, but you also limit distractions from catching your eye pulling you away.
 - b. Your mind can still wander even if you focus your eyes on the person you are talking to, but maintaining eye contact helps to limit distractions from coming in.
2. Stop trying to be an ordinary person who keeps it together in the same way that non-ADHD people do. Help might mean another set of hands, someone to keep your morale up, or someone to function as a *body double*.
 - a. A *body double* is somebody who is physically present as you do a task but doesn't do the task with you. Your body double anchors you to the chore at hand.
 - b. Many people have raved about Focusmate if you don't have an accountability buddy in person.

Healthy Diet

1. Do you eat healthy foods that provide energy and help you focus? Or are you eating junk food and sweets that can help distractions creep in when you least need them?
2. Have healthy snacks and water readily available
3. Make time to eat to stave off hunger
4. Schedule meals and commit to eating even if your medication is reducing your hunger drive
5. Watch out for the stimulant crash

- a. This occurs when your ADHD medication wear off and both your brain and body are suddenly depleted

Sleep Hygiene

1. Good sleep hygiene means routine
2. Start by eating a healthy meal before bed.
3. After dinner what can you do to relax your mind and body?
4. Avoid electronics and screens!
5. Go to bed at the same time every night.

Move Your Body

1. Exercise turns on the attention system.
2. Walking for 30 minutes, four to five times a week, improves focus and executive functioning skills, especially in students with ADHD.
3. Any aerobic exercise will do the job, however the most helpful exercises for students with ADHD are ballet, yoga, and tai chi because they require you to focus on your body and your mind.

Take Breaks

1. You can't focus for 8 hours straight.
2. Real true breaks that give your mind and body time to rest. Giving your body and brain time to fuel providers greater energy later.
3. Anxious thoughts impact your focus.
4. Brain dump! Use a notebook (having a specific notebook that you always have on you can be important).
5. Try doing a brain dump before you sit down to work (or in the middle if you are struggling). Write down everything you are worried about.
6. Try to challenge these worries and after you complete this try to brainstorm some solutions if possible.
7. The goal is that once your worries and fears are heard, they should hopefully quiet down.

Strategies for Internal Distractions

1. You are not crazy, lazy, or incompetent. Understand that the problem is your ADHD.
2. When speaking with others, remain away from your problems. Sometimes you can catch yourself before you inadvertently change the topic.
3. When in lecture, try to sit close to the front.
 - a. This limits the number of distractions around you. Allows you to have tunnel vision in some ways.
4. Keep a "Brain Dump" notepad with you and write down your distracting thoughts instead of blurting them out.
 - a. Many people verbalize whatever is on their minds because they're afraid they will lose the idea if they save it later.
5. Explain the problem to people that you know and trust.
 - a. Ask them to signal to you privately when they notice you "jumping" and to help you refocus your attention.
 - b. Whether this is a visual signal or having a code word that indicates you are "jumping."

Strategies for External Distractions

Visual

1. Keep your workspace clean and free of clutter.
 - a. Use baskets/containers without lids for items (e.g., shoes, hats, books, clothes, whatever is in the way)
 - b. Place a trashcan in every room
 - c. Spend 5-10 minutes a day de-cluttering
 - i. Throwing away and putting away things that are in the way
2. Designate Areas for Specific Items - “A place for everything, and everything in its place.” It helps keep your space organized and allows you to find what you need when you need it.
 - a. Drop Zones – things you lose often/can’t keep track of always have a drop zone for it
 - i. Have a basket/bin for items like keys, wallet, purse, glasses, backpack, etc.
 - ii. This is a strategy to help eliminate the rushing out the door anxiety and stress that happens when you can’t find the essential items.
 - b. Drop Zone baskets in every room can help with feeling overwhelmed.
 - i. Designating one junk drop zone basket can help if you don’t know where an item should go, or if it doesn’t have a home yet, put it in the drop zone basket.
3. Face your desk to a wall (with the doors and windows behind you)
4. In lecture, take copious notes.
 - a. This not only helps you stay focused in class, but also provides an outlet for restlessness.
5. Reduce your computer screen distractions:
 - a. Close unused tabs
 - b. Maximize word documents to fill the entire screen (or use focus mode)
 - c. Close applications that you don’t need/are not using
 - d. Turn off notifications and pop-ups
 - e. Use an app, like RescueTime, to block certain websites during times you need to work.
 - f. Set a timer to work distraction-free for short spurts of time, like the 25-minute Pomodoro.
6. Turn off phone notifications or flip your phone upside down
 - a. Tell your friends and family about your preferred preferences of communicating and explain the reasons for them. They might be able to make a quick call and get right back to work, but you can’t. The interruption takes you off task.
 - b. When you are working, it is okay to turn off your phone. Let friends know that you “unplug” when you are busy and that you will text them when you take a break.
7. Put a sign on your door to notify roommates, friends, family, sorority sisters/fraternity brothers that you are busy: *Focus Time*.

Hearing

1. Use noise canceling headphones or earplugs to drown out external noises
2. Silence your phone
3. Close your door
4. Put your phone, smartwatch, computer, iPad, tablet, etc. on Do Not Disturb

Touch / Physical

1. Buy tagless clothing / cut the tags out
2. Wear comfortable shoes
3. Clear your closet of all clothes that don’t fit

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4. Always do the *sit-test* when buying or trying on new clothes to be certain that you will be comfortable sitting throughout your day
5. Invest in proper ergonomic office furniture
6. Take movement breaks to minimize physical discomfort
 - a. Set alarms to remind yourself to do this
 - b. Start stretching to minimize discomfort
 - c.

Smell

1. When possible, eliminate nasty odors from your space
 - a. Throw away trash
2. Avoid strong scented perfumes and detergents
 - a. Strong odors increase distractions

How to Stay Focused

1. Productivity Self-Reflection Assessment: assess for when you have the most energy during the day and when you notice you have the most focus. If you take stimulant medication it is like about 45 minutes after you take it.
 - a. What is your best time of day?
 - b. Morning, afternoon, early evening, night owl?
 - c. Time when your hard, deep focus work for your prime hours. This is the time that you set yourself up for success.
2. Complete a Distraction Inventory:
 - a. Spend a day trying to notice what pulls your attention away and create an inventory of all your distractions. Once you know what these distractions are, you can start to turn them off.
3. Eliminate All Possible External Distractions: how many things on your inventory are external?
 - a. Does that pile of clutter on your desk give you an urge to organize? → put it on the floor or out of sight.
 - b. Are there notifications on your phone taking your attention away from the task at hand? → put your phone on Do Not Disturb or go put it in another room.
 - c. Are you avoiding work by attending house chores? → put the dirty laundry basket in your bedroom and close the door or use a different bathroom than usual so you don't have to walk past the dirty dishes to get to your usual bathroom.
 - d. *The goal is to eliminate the distractions from awareness – not from your life.*
4. Create Set Email & Call Times in Your Day
 - a. Texting, emails, phone calls, FaceTime, etc. are one of the biggest distractions and time-consuming activities of our lives.
 - b. Try to set specific times when you will check your notifications.
 - i. This assures important messages are addressed but also keeps them contained and keeps your focus free during the rest of the day.
 - c. Research suggests that digital overload can increase anxiety. The red notification badge/dot is intended to catch your attention.

d. Research from the University of North Dakota found that students spent 40 minutes less on their phones after simply switching their display mode to “greyscale.”

i. On iPhones, go to “Accessibility Settings/Display” and “Text Size/Color Filters.”

5. Put Yourself on Do Not Disturb

a. There is truly nothing more frustrating than getting into the flow with your work and having someone interrupt you. So, try creating a system with people around. You so they know when you are open for interruptions and when you are not.

b. Put a sign on your door, use over-the-ear headphones, put some sort of item on your desk that indicates you do not want to be bothered. Whatever it takes that makes it clear you need to be left alone.

6. Plan Your Day and Tasks Ahead of Time

a. Planning your day and tasks when your executive functioning battery is fully charged allows you to decide what your priorities are before distractions enter.

b. This will allow you to keep from having to weigh the importance of your tasks, but also allows you to stay in action mode rather than switching from action to plan and back to action repeatedly.