

Attention and Concentration after an Acquired Brain Injury

Attention disorders are one of the most common problems associated with brain injury, occurring in almost every case, even after mild brain injury.

What is attention?

Attention is the ability to focus on certain aspects of the environment that are considered important or interesting and to manipulate this information flexibly. Attention can be divided into five levels:

- Focus
- Sustainment
- Selectivity
- Alternation
- Division

All five levels of attention can be adversely affected by brain injury.

Focused attention

This is the kind of attention used when we are actively attending to something. It is our ability to attend to one thing to the exclusion of everything else. For example when you are studying or driving. After a brain injury, attention may become rigid or inflexible, especially if the individual is unable to remove attention from the task when necessary.

Sustained attention

This is the ability to concentrate on one task for a certain period of time without switching off. After a brain injury, if you need to attend to one

thing for some time, you might find you lose your concentration quite quickly.

Selective attention

This enables a person to avoid distractions, from both external stimuli (e.g. noise) and internal stimuli (e.g. thoughts). For example, after a brain injury you may not be able to read a letter when there is a radio playing in the background.

Alternating attention

This is the ability to shift the focus of attention and to alter it between tasks.

Divided attention

This is the ability to respond to multiple tasks at the same time, or to give two or more responses simultaneously. For example, you might be watching television while eating your breakfast. After a brain injury, some people find that they are unable to concentrate on more than one thing at a time.

How is attention affected by brain injury?

The person with the brain injury may not immediately realise that their ability to concentrate is any different to what it was prior to the injury. In addition, there may not be any visible signs to alert other people that a problem exists. This can lead to misunderstanding by the casual observer who may think that a person who has difficulty maintaining attention is lacking in motivation or intelligence.

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People who have sustained a brain injury may:

- Become easily distracted
- Have trouble keeping track of what is being said or done
- Experience information overload
- Have difficulty doing more than one task at a time
- Be slower at taking in and making sense of information

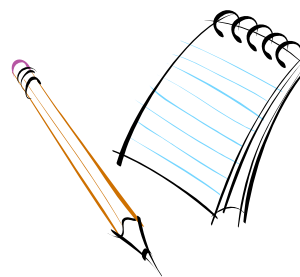
All of these issues can have an impact on people's everyday lives and can:

- Affect the ability to learn and remember information
- Cause a feeling of frustration with self and others
- Leave a person feeling overwhelmed and confused
- Lead to fatigue, headaches and dizziness
- Result in low levels of achievement
- Cause a person to avoid other people and become isolated

Attention and concentration strategies

There are a number of strategies that people with brain injury can implement to help improve their attention and concentration. The person with the brain injury should try and identify specific situations where particular strategies may be effective. Some of the following strategies may be helpful:

- Reduce all possible distractions in the environment e.g. switch off the television, radio etc...
- Take regular breaks, have a nap or go for a walk
- Know your own limitations
- Develop strategies for physical and mental relaxation e.g. meditation, deep breathing or talking to friends
- Plan how to approach a task with a simple and step-by-step approach
- Write information down using notes and keep them in specific places



- Concentrate on one thing at a time
- Repeat information and clarify it – using dictaphones can help with this
- Break important tasks down into small and achievable steps
- Schedule demanding tasks when levels of energy and alertness are greatest
- Explain the problems that you have to your family and friends
- Work for short periods only
- Eat a healthy diet and sleep well