

Developing voluntary attention



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When you give *attention* to something, it means that you are responding to a particular stimulus and recording it in your subconscious. If this information is considered important or relevant, then it is transferred to the long term storage part of the brain to be stored as memory and to be retrieved later when desired. However, for all this to happen, first of all the stimulus must have your 'attention'. If you do not pay attention to it, then it will float away as so much other data which you perceive but pay no heed to. The quality of mind that requires that you respond to and remember and store any stimulus is what is called 'attention'.

You will notice that some thoughts and ideas get your immediate response and this information is stored automatically without much effort on your part as data in your memory. This is called 'involuntary' attention, or attention that is not forced because it is natural. You give attention naturally to those things that are of interest to you. This attention is brought out by your innate curiosity and desire to know more about the subject. It is an instinctive phenomenon.

'Voluntary' attention is the second type of attention. This is something that you have to do in order to force yourself to know more about a subject that may not interest you otherwise. This requires effort and usage of the will. Practice and training is needed to develop this.

Practicing Voluntary Attention:

Here are some successful methods to help you acquire the habit of voluntary attention i. e. having an interest in those things which are not naturally of interest to you.

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1. Improve your art of observing or noticing things, which is the first step in improving your memory. This can be done by first selecting an object that may not interest you much. Try and observe it in its minute details and then close your eyes and see if you can remember the object, its length, touch, feel, colour, shape, width, weight etc. Open your eyes, study the object again, and repeat the process. All this may seem very tiring in the beginning but soon you will automatically begin to be more observant and also find yourself becoming voluntarily interested in all that you see around you.

2. Eliminate distractions: One of the necessary elements required for paying attention is the removal of distractions. It is only when you give something your undivided attention that you can learn and perform properly. This means that you have to get rid of all such things as loud chatter, television, or a radio or music that may distract you from what you are studying or concentrating on. If your mind is distracted, you cannot concentrate on the data at hand.

3. Retain focus and concentration in the process of learning or memorization. You will notice that if you are really focused and concentrating on learning and retaining some information, everything else around you becomes irrelevant and you cannot bring yourself to pay attention to anything else. This is the kind of focus that you need to develop for learning anything that you set your mind to. People who advocate multi tasking are usually unable to do any one thing with full concentration or commitment.

4. Keep your thoughts on track. It is not enough to get rid of external distractions, your mind should be free on internal chatter as well. This requires that you keep your thoughts focused and on track as well. If you are making a cup of tea but your thoughts are on the call you are expecting, you may put salt instead of sugar in your tea. This is a simple example of the need to pay attention to the task at hand.

5. Get interested. Studying text or a subject you have no interest in is a sure way for you to not remember or recall anything that relates to it. This is because you are not interested in paying any attention to the subject. In order to start paying attention to the topic or the subject, you have to develop interest in it. This development of interest will come only through discipline and training of the mind .

6. Get motivated. Develop your interest in a subject by developing your motivation for studying it. Set small goals for yourself and reward yourself when you do accomplish them. Also set yourself targets to be achieved within a certain time frame, and again reward yourself when you do manage to finish a certain project in time. Goals and timeframe nourish motivation. And motivation in turn pushes you to learn and promotes a sharp memory. Since you are motivated to learn and remember, you will develop the required interest, thus becoming more productive and successful.

7. Informally commanding your subconscious to remember what you are trying to learn is another method that works. The subconscious is alerted to the need to remember what you are consciously feeding into the brain. This helps in the process of remembering and improving your memory as well.

8. Use “ time boxes”. When you need to study new information, sit down in a quiet spot and set a timer. Give yourself only an “ X” amount of time to read and comprehend the article. Break it down further into giving yourself 10 minutes to read an article, then 20 minutes to remember the information. A predefined “ time box” goes a long way in making you concentrate for you limit the time in which you want to work. You will be amazed at how well this works, for you do not allow yourself to be distracted. This is a simulation of the kind of situation you may often find yourself to be in when you are preparing for an examination and time is short.

The art and practice of paying attention goes a long way in making matter stick to your mind, even that which you may be forced to learn.

There are other physical ways in which you can work at improving your attention and concentration. These may seem simple, but they go a long way in bringing about the changes that you need to become physically ‘ into’ the process of attention centring. You may call these the quick fixes, if you like.

The Quick Fixes:

Take deep breaths: Stomach breathing means that you take deep breaths that reach deep into your stomach. This activates the brains Theta waves, which research shows improves memory. There is also an increase in the oxygen flow to your brain cells, which helps energise them.

Chew a piece of gum: The act of chewing gum increases the flow of blood to your brain.

Increase blood flow into the brain: Do a simple arm rotation exercise which helps to increase the heart rate and the flow of oxygen to the brain. Do 10 sets of arm circles on each side. To do an arm circle, simply extend your arm straight out, then swing your arm all the way around behind you and back to the front, keeping your elbow locked.

Play a brain game: Puzzles and brain teasers force your mind to get in concentration mode. Examples of this are Sudoku and Crossword puzzles.

Eat a brain snack or meal: The kind of food you eat energizes your brain or makes it sluggish. Eating fish and green vegetables will make your brain wake up. Carbohydrates are not advised since they give a ' spike', but then the blood sugar falls rather instantly. Do not skip meals for you will feel tired and faint.

Drink enough water: When thirsty, drink water instead of sodas, cokes or coffee.