

UNDERSTANDING ATTENTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

The ability to attend and concentrate comprises a number of stages of mental skill. We have to select something to concentrate on; we then have to ignore or filter out all other distractions; we have to maintain that state of alertness and concentration, and then be able to shift our concentration when appropriate. These abilities are a prerequisite for independent living, working, learning of new skills and even social relationships. It is very common for this group of skills to be impaired following head injury as they are predominantly associated with the often damaged frontal lobe area of the brain.

Research has shown that people with a head injury have great difficulty doing two or more things simultaneously. If a person with a head injury is given a task such as to track a moving object on a screen, they do it just as well as anybody else, but, if you instruct them to track the moving object and repeat a string of numbers, they perform much worse than anybody else. It is as though the brain has gone back to a stage of development more noticeable in childhood. If you ask a two-year-old child to chew a toffee, walk and carry a cup at the same time they usually fail because they are not very good at doing more than one thing at a time.

Attentional problems are made much worse when the person is tired: the more tired we are, the more easily distracted. Stress and worry can also adversely affect attention. If we are thinking, "I can't do it", "I'll make a fool of myself", then attention will be diminished. A vicious circle is set up which leads to poorer attention, which leads to more worry and stress, which leads to poorer attention. These types of difficulties are more likely to show up during unstructured tasks, where there is more opportunity for the mind to wander.

COPING WITH ATTENTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

1. Set increasingly difficult tasks and targets to work towards. For example, play 'Snap', 'Dominoes', 'Connect Four', read a book or watch television for five minutes, then gradually increase the time on the task to 10 minutes. Make sure the task is not too difficult to start off with. Keep a record of progress and also include incentives and rewards, such as a present if you achieve a certain goal. Use a timer or an alarm watch to focus attention for a specific period.
2. Organise the environment to eliminate background noise and distractions, such as radios or people talking.
3. Place a 'picture' or 'cue card' in an obvious place to remind yourself to pay attention. It might read, 'What should I be doing now?' or 'Am I wandering?'
4. Know your own limitations. Try for something that is a little difficult but not too difficult, just out of grasp but not out of reach.
5. Develop strategies for dealing with emotional or stimulation overload. For example, if somebody is talking too quickly don't be embarrassed to say, "Excuse me, I think I've lost you. Could you repeat that slowly?"