

Attention Following a TBI



After a traumatic brain injury (TBI), many people notice changes in their ability to focus, pay attention, or stay on task. You may find it harder to follow conversations, complete work tasks, remember what you were doing, or stay engaged while reading or watching TV. These challenges are common after a brain injury, and you're not alone.

After a TBI, your brain often has to work harder to process information. Tasks that once felt automatic may require more effort, leading to slower thinking, mental fatigue, distractibility, or difficulty completing tasks. These changes can be frustrating, but many people improve with time, the right strategies, and consistent practice.

Types of Attention

- **Sustained Attention**

The ability to stay focused on a task over time.

- **Selective Attention**

The ability to focus on what is important while ignoring distractions.

- **Divided Attention**

The ability to manage more than one task at a time (multitasking).

- **Alternating Attention**

The ability to switch your focus between different tasks.

Strategies to Support Attention

1. Reduce Distractions

- Turn off the TV or background noise when working or having a conversation.
- Use quiet spaces or noise-reducing headphones if helpful.
- Keep your workspace organized and free of unnecessary clutter.

2. Single-Task Whenever Possible

Our brains generally work best when focusing on one task at a time, especially after a brain injury.

- Finish one task before starting another.
- Use a checklist to keep track of completed steps.
- If interrupted, briefly remind yourself what you were doing before returning to the task.

3. Take Brain Breaks

Mental fatigue is common after TBI.

- Work for 20–30 minutes, then take a short break.
- Stretch, walk, practice deep breathing, or simply rest your brain for a few minutes before continuing.

4. Use External Supports

Don't rely on memory alone.

- Set alarms or reminders on your phone.
- Use sticky notes or a whiteboard.
- Keep important items in the same location every day.

5. Break Tasks into Small Steps

Large tasks can feel overwhelming.

Instead of:

"Clean the kitchen."

Try:

- > Put dishes in the dishwasher.
- > Wipe the counters.
- > Sweep the floor.

Completing one small step at a time makes it easier to stay focused.

6. Prioritize Sleep and Hydration

Fatigue, dehydration, and poor sleep can make attention more difficult.

Aim to:

- Stay hydrated throughout the day.
- Maintain a consistent sleep schedule.
- Take breaks before becoming mentally exhausted.

7. Use Self-Talk

Self-talk means using your inner voice—or saying things out loud—to guide your actions and keep yourself focused.

Why It Helps

Talking yourself through a task keeps your brain organized and reduces the chance of becoming distracted.

Examples

- "First, I'll check my to-do list."
- "I'm going to read this email slowly."
- "Let me finish this before I check my phone."
- "I can stay focused for five more minutes."

Practice

Choose one everyday activity (writing an email, taking medication, folding laundry, paying bills, etc.) and quietly say each step to yourself as you complete it.

8. Try Visualization

Before beginning a task, spend 10–15 seconds picturing yourself successfully completing it.

For example:

Imagine yourself gathering the laundry, carrying it to the washer, adding detergent, starting the machine, and putting the basket away.

Mental rehearsal helps prepare your brain for the task ahead and can improve focus and follow-through.

9. Use Point & Call

Point & Call combines movement, vision, and speech to strengthen attention.

Examples:

- Point to your keys and say, "Keys in my bag."
- Point to the stove and say, "Stove is off."
- Point to your medication and say, "Medication taken."
- Using multiple senses helps your brain stay engaged and reduces mistakes.

Focus During Everyday Tasks

Choose one simple daily activity such as:

- Folding laundry
- Making coffee
- Loading the dishwasher
- Watering plants

As you complete the task:

- Say each step quietly to yourself.
- Notice when your attention drifts.
- Gently bring your focus back without criticizing yourself.

Afterward, ask yourself:

- Was it easier or harder than I expected?
- What distracted me?
- What strategy helped the most?

Talking to Others About Your Needs

It is okay to let others know what helps you succeed.

You might say:

- "I'm working on improving my attention after my injury. Could we turn the TV down while we talk?"
- "Would you mind repeating that a little more slowly?"
- "Could you write that down for me?"
- "Can we focus on one thing at a time?"

Advocating for your needs helps others support you more effectively.

Track Your Progress

Consider keeping a simple daily journal of:

- What activities were easiest to focus on.
- What distracted you.
- Which strategies worked best.
- How mentally tired you felt.
- Over time, you may notice patterns that help you better manage your attention.

Attention often improves with time, consistent practice, and the right strategies.

Progress may happen gradually, and some days will be easier than others.

Celebrate small improvements, continue using the strategies that work best for you, and remember that recovery is not always linear.

Disclaimer: This resource is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for individualized medical or speech-language pathology care. Every brain injury is different, and strategies should be tailored to your specific needs by your healthcare provider.