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Strategies for Enhancing Attention

Definition:

Attention is a general term referring to the ability to focus our mind's direction, sustain focus (resist interference), temporarily hold onto information, selectively shift direction, as well as use or manipulate the information we are focused on. Depending upon the task, attention can be dependent on other higher-order cognitive abilities such as executive functions. The term *working memory*, sometimes called *short-term memory*, has been used to describe our ability to temporarily hold onto information until it can be used or stored in longer-term memory stores. More complex attentional skills, such as *divided attention*, refers to the ability to engage in multiple tasks at the same time (two or more tasks simultaneously).

General Tips:

- 1) Keep information and tasks in simple, manageable quantities to prevent being overloaded.
- 2) Remain relaxed, well-rested and pace your activity.
- 3) Promote your strengths – Use your strengths to help your weaknesses.
- 4) Ask for help.

Preparation & Environment:

- 1) Take time to mentally prepare yourself for an upcoming activity.
- 2) Slow down and give yourself enough time to process information or complete an activity.
- 3) Do one thing at a time.
- 4) Use a simple relaxation technique or deep breathing to help restore mental focus.
- 5) Avoid crowds & interruptions – These place additional demands on attention ability.
- 6) Get plenty of rest. Fatigue can decrease attention. Use deep breathing or relaxation techniques to have a restful sleep.
- 7) Create an environment that minimizes distractions (turn off radios, T.V., phone, iPod, etc.) when needing your attention skills.
- 8) Watch the use of alcohol, medications, and other drugs which may affect attention and cognition. Consult your doctor before making any changes in medication.
- 9) Safety – When driving, do so when well-rested. Resist talking on the phone, listening to radio and engaged in conversation. If it is not safe for you to drive, don't drive. If you are unsure if you can drive safely, get a driving test.

Specific Strategies:

- 1) Simplicity – Begin with a simple target objective such as reciting numbers or letters (i.e. phone numbers).
- 2) Task Size – Break down large complex tasks into smaller simpler ones.
- 3) Start small and build your skill set – Start with 5 minutes, then increase the time spent.
- 4) Selectivity – Do one task at a time or meet with one person at a time. Decrease multiple demands. When not practicing attention skills, allow more time to do one thing at a time
- 5) Resist shifting away from a task – This is distraction, not attention.
- 6) Slowly increase complexity – Practice attention by inserting distracters to increase skill/ ability.
- 7) Breaks – Take physical or mental breaks as needed when performing sustained tasks. Fill in breaks with rest or “non-thinking” activities, such as light reading, humorous conversation, or a short walk.