



6 Ways to Retain Focus (When Your Brain Says ‘No!’)

It’s a common misconception that people with ADHD can’t pay attention. We can focus. It’s just that we have a hard time staying focused. That’s especially true when the activity requiring our attention isn’t one that we find especially engaging. During my 30-plus years working with adults with ADHD, I’ve found six strategies that boost the ability to focus.

BY PATRICIA QUINN, M.D.

1. Get it in writing.

If you’re preparing to attend a meeting, lecture, or workshop, ask for an advanced copy of materials (meeting agenda, lecture outline, etc.). Take the materials with you and use them to guide your active listening and your note taking. Writing or typing as you listen will help you stay focused on the speaker’s message.

2. Get a front row seat.

Seat location is critical. You may find it easier to be attentive sitting up close, facing the speaker. Arrive early to get a seat far away from distractions, such as a noisy fan or a doorway that opens onto a busy hallway.

If the event is scheduled to run for several hours, change your seat after each break. That will help you periodically refocus your attention with a new perspective. Ask a friend sitting nearby to tap you lightly if you zone out.

When working individually, such as in a science lab or during a lengthy exam, ask ahead of time for permission to take occasional breaks and, possibly, to change your seat. Standing up and walking around will help you stay fresh and focused.

3. Ask to review.

As soon as possible after the class or meeting, ask your teacher or co-worker for a brief review of the main points. Explain your take-aways, and see if he or she concurs. This is a good time to fill in any missing details and to find out exactly what is expected of you next — assignments, succeeding steps, and so on. Always confirm deadlines.

4. Avoid fatigue.

It’s hard to pay close attention when you’re tired. Whenever possible, sign up for classes that meet whenever your focus is greatest. You may not be able to control meeting times at work, but, whenever possible, pick one that works well for you.

Know your limits. “When you simply can’t listen any more and find yourself drifting, be frank,” says Alex Zeigler, coauthor of [A Bird’s-Eye View of Life with ADD and ADHD](#). “Tell the person you’re talking to, ‘I’m sorry. Can we stop for a minute?’”

Medication matters! If you’re taking a short-acting medication that wears off as the day goes on, ask your doctor about switching to a long-acting formulation that lasts 10 to 12 hours.

5. Move!

Feel the urge to fidget? Go right ahead. Clicking a pen, using a fidget, knitting, and so on can help you pay attention. If discretion is an issue, chewing gum, sucking on hard candy, or even sipping from a glass of water might do the trick.

For more ideas, read [Fidget to Focus](#), by Roland Rotz, Ph.D., and Sarah Wright.

6. Choose your leader carefully.

Picking classes? Look for an instructor who is organized, flexible, and dynamic enough to hold your interest. She should also announce deadlines well in advance and provide feedback.

You may not be able to choose your supervisor at work but you can ask to get deadlines in writing, work in a quiet spot, and schedule frequent short meetings to confirm that you are on track.