

May I Have Your Attention Please

In Upward Bound, you were all taught about the importance of time management and how it aids in your success. Giving a specific amount of time to a specific task so that you can perform or work more efficiently is a great rule to have in place for academic purposes. A typical time management scenario for a student may look like waking up at 8:00 AM, heading to the gym, making a study plan for the day, getting to your class by 10:00 AM and have a study session for a minimum of 3 hours. This is a wonderful plan and one that you should follow. We only get 24 hours in a day so time management ensures that we get to make time for everything that we may need or want to do.

Many of you may have noticed after a while that even after following the rules of time management, we still miss our goals.



For example, you had planned on studying chapters 1-3 within that first hour of the study session and you realize 45 minutes in that you are only now getting done with chapter 1. So now there is only one option, to complete chapters 2 and 3 in the next study hour. This can become overwhelming and frustrating.

One of the reasons this happens is because of poor focus management. You may have focused on less important things during this hour like a text or two, eating some snacks, or maybe finding an awesome study playlist. Rather than following a straight focused path, you were bobbing and weaving from your actual goal. As a result, it is now going to take more time to complete the task.

Attention Management

The simple definition of attention management is the "practice of controlling your attention". It is a skill where you effectively choose to focus on things that matter the most and you don't engage in the distractions. But what exactly does that mean? And how can attention management help you? Let's look at our study session example,

In a 3-hour study session, you aimed to cover chapters 1-3 in an hour. Now, ask yourself this question. What are the highest priority things I need to achieve this goal?

The answer could be try reading and understanding the texts, formulas, examples, and solve the problems. The list of lower prioritized things could be to rewrite the same things given in the textbooks to your note, respond to any texts that come your way, browsing the web, etc.

So, attention management is the strategy to keep the focus only on the top priority and leave the rest alone. Though it sounds simple, we all know that it is not. Uninterrupted focus on a single task is a skill that requires much practice in order to master.

Today, with the Internet and mobile devices, it often seems impossible to keep our focus on one thing at a time. The online world has transformed our lives even more so in the last two years. We are constantly reacting to buzzes, beeps and pings. We have a multitude of distractions at the tip of our fingers.

Attention Management Distractions

For students, attention management is the path to achieving goals set by time management. So, before you start following steps of attention management, make sure you have a good grasp at time management first.

It wasn't so long ago that time management strategies alone would help us. We could start every morning making a list of important tasks to do that day. We could decide our top priorities and feel confident we could address them all. If we got behind, we could always close a door so we could really focus. But as the nature of the world changed, time management strategies didn't. These days, if we still make a list every morning, it probably becomes obsolete as soon as we check our email. We're bombarded with messages, and they all seem urgent. That makes it harder to spend our time according to our lists.

Scientific studies have proven that there is a limited number of things we can focus on. Because of technology, it's easy to let other things decide where our attention goes and constantly shift focus. Researchers call this "*task switching*" and studies show that we switch our attention every 3 minutes on average.

And get this! About half the time we are actually interrupting ourselves! *In full disclosure, I have been sitting here for the past 45 minutes writing this blog and I have interrupted myself at least 5 times. I am so used to constantly being interrupted by students or staff needing my help that even my focus shifts to other items that I need to do every 15 minutes. We're so used to being distracted that distraction becomes habit. Even when there is no distraction, we distract ourselves by expecting one.*

Flexibility for Modern Day

The practice of attention management is built for today's open floor plan, tech-centrism, always-on work. It helps us to adapt to what is going on, allows us to incorporate our priorities on a particular day or moment, and offers the opportunity to engage to achieve the best results in the moment.



This means that sometimes managing our attention means giving ourselves time for focused work. At other times, it means making sure we are fully present for others. And sometimes it even means giving yourself a break to not pay attention to anything in particular.

"Paying" Attention

Whether in the classroom, reading a textbook, listening to a podcast, or practicing a skill for work, dedicating complete attention is absolutely critical. Remember: "paying" is an action. You are essentially giving your thoughts, energy, and time to what is happening in the moment. Think about when a friend says, "Are you paying attention to me?" Attention means focusing on what is being stated, discussed or shown, using the senses to literally bring information to the brain.

Here are some tips and strategies for increasing your awareness about attention and help your brain do what it is designed to do: learn!

Build Motivation

Sometimes one of the biggest challenges to attention is motivation. Here are some ways to make motivation work in your favor:

Remind yourself of the "why". Let's say you arrive in class unmotivated to be there. Ask yourself questions like, "What do I need to get out of today's class in order to be prepared for the exam or paper?" "How will today's topic connect to what we covered in the last class?" "How can I use this class to make progress in my major or towards my career goals?" These questions can quickly help establish the "why". Similar questions can help increase motivation to do the reading or other assignments.

Set a goal. Go into each class or study session with something specific you want to learn, clarify, or accomplish. Try to find opportunities for the "lightbulb" moments that come with learning.

Be aware of your self-talk. You may "hear" yourself saying, "I don't feel like doing this right now." This becomes an issue of motivation to address. Perhaps you hear, "I'm afraid I'm not going to do well." This is a natural fear that happens to every learner at some point. Tell yourself that you *can* and *will* succeed by committing your attention and effort.

Reward yourself. The brain is "wired" to respond to rewards, meaning it's a powerful motivator. Make a favorite activity whether it's spending time with friends, playing video games or going for a run, the reward for writing a draft of an essay, or even going to every one of your classes that day. You could reward yourself an hour of Netflix after you have had a study session.

Be Present

To "be present" means to physically be where the attention needs to happen as well as being there mentally. In addition to avoiding the pitfall of task switching, here are some tips for being present in order to maximize your attention:

Eliminate distractions. Some of this can be accomplished by managing your environment. This includes removing cues associated with other activities, keeping your phone off and out of sight, and sitting close to the front when in class.

Do a "brain dump" to get any distractions out of your head. You may be thinking of an errand you have to run or a conversation you need to have with someone. Part of the brain dump can be to assign a time in the week to deal with those tasks, which will free up the brain's need to hold onto it out of fear of forgetting.

Try not to overschedule. It's hard to balance your academics, work, relationships, and many other things. Do your best to say "no" every now and then. Overscheduling can lead to scheduling things back-to-back without any transition time, which in turn

causes major stress and burnout. Leave some time, even if it is brief, to think about, resolve, or document before moving on to your next task.

Train Your Brain

Some of what has been expressed above helps with training the brain, such as creating learning environments without distractions and building in a reward system. Remember, though, the brain treats every moment as an opportunity to learn, so what we do outside of formal learning environments can still impact its ability to pay full attention. Here are some ways to train your brain:

Practice just doing one task at a time. Whether having a conversation, listening to a class lecture, or watching a movie, our brain is taking in information. If this is paired with taking out your cell phone to play a game, text or browse social media, the brain's attention is split between more than one set of stimuli. The brain does not have the ability to multitask, and the more often you do this, the more you are forcing the brain to pay *less* attention to any one thing. The result can actually decrease the brain's ability to concentrate and pay full attention. By just focusing on one task, you are building more efficient brain chemistry, priming the brain to get the most out of every learning situation.

Challenging the boredom. As mentioned earlier, every learner feels unmotivated from time to time. However, your response to when attention starts to drift can either improve or hurt your learning in the moment. If you reach for a device when your attention starts to drift, you are creating a "boredom response". In many cases, it's not that you are bored, rather you haven't tapped into your motivation or made efforts to connect or engage with the material in front of you.



Engage with the Material

One of the best ways to keep your attention is to be an *active learner*. Many students were never taught how to be active in a learning situation. This leads many students believing that the best way to learn is to passively listen or write down every word that is being said. Here are three ways to be active in the moment and to avoid the boredom response:

Take notes actively. There are many ways to take notes and most of them involve connecting concepts while documenting new information. This is different than just writing down everything on the board or PowerPoint. Taking notes actively is effort made on purpose with the intention of gaining deeper knowledge.

Read actively. Students often say that reading a college-level textbook or article is a challenge, which makes it hard to pay attention. Reading actively involves writing down cues and key words, checking for understanding as you go along, and summarizing in your own words.

Question actively. Asking questions out loud or even in your own head is one of the best ways to keep your attention on alert. In the classroom, take the opportunity to ask your professor for clarification. During class, ask how the concepts or information that is being given connect to what you already know or understand. While reading, ask yourself "why" and "how" questions, along with connecting the reading to what you either already know or are trying to learn.

Even the most motivated learner can only pay attention for a certain amount of time before getting tired. It is important to figure out how long you can keep your full attention before you start getting tired and less efficient. Make sure to plan ahead so that there are enough shorter study times during the week to have enough time to get your academic tasks complete. Learning works best with spaced practice instead of cramming, which also is a more effective approach in paying attention.