Three ways to improve focus and concentration

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(HealthDay)—Do you get distracted easily or find that it's getting harder

to stay focused on a task at hand or retain new information? These issues can happen to anyone, though they may seem to be more troublesome with advancing age.

But concentration is an ability that you can improve with a few simple "study skills."

For instance, when someone is talking to you, look at the person and listen closely. If you missed something that was said, ask him or her to repeat it or to speak more slowly. Then to imprint the information on your brain, repeat it back.

Stop multitasking. You might think you're being more productive, but chances are you're not doing each task as well as if you were focused on just one at a time, according to experts at Harvard University. Also try to avoid interruptions. For example, if a co-worker asks you something while you're in the middle of a task, ask if he or she can wait until you're finished. Don't even answer the phone until you're done—let voicemail take the call.

While originally designed for students, anyone can benefit from these three specific techniques created by researchers at Kansas State University:

Use a mantra to help you refocus. When you notice that your thoughts are wandering, say to yourself something like the phrase "be here now" to gently bring your attention back to where you want it. You're not trying to block thoughts from entering your mind, but when they do, the mantra helps you pull yourself back to the task at hand. You might need to do this dozens of times a day at first, but that number will come down with practice.

Set aside some time for worrying. If worries are interfering with your

ability to concentrate, schedule "worry time" every day—five to 10 minutes when you let your mind fill with the thoughts that distract you the rest of the time. Set a timer and stop when it goes off.

Change your physical environment. Your workspace should be well lit so that you aren't straining to see, but shouldn't be overly comfortable. Choose a chair that supports you, and sit up straight—slouching breeds distraction. To limit distractions, turn off any slide show that appears on your monitor when it goes to idle mode. Face away from glass walls at work and away from other tables at a restaurant if you're easily distracted during conversation.

  More information: Kansas State University has more on these and other tips to improve focus.

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