

Living with changes in your

# Attention and concentration



## IN THIS BOOKLET:

- How attention works
- Types of attention
- How a brain injury affects attention
- How attention affects your memory
- What you can do
- Practical tips and tools

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# Brain Injury Series

This booklet was written for, and with, people with an Acquired Brain Injury. An Acquired Brain Injury is an injury to someone's brain that happens during their lifetime. It can be caused by a stroke, an infection, lack of oxygen, surgery or a head injury, for example.

Note: throughout this booklet, we use the phrase 'brain injury' to refer to an Acquired Brain Injury.

Headway's Information and Support Team would be happy to hear your feedback on this booklet. Please contact us on 1800 400 478 or email [info@headway.ie](mailto:info@headway.ie).

Visit [www.headway.ie/information](http://www.headway.ie/information):

- To read or download copies of other booklets in this Brain Injury Series.
- To print the booklets and other resources, including Large Print versions.
- To request hard copies of the booklets.
- To see the booklet contributors and the sources we used.

Please note: we have done our best to provide information that is correct and up-to-date. However, we cannot be responsible for any errors or omissions. Everyone's brain injury affects them differently. You should not consider the information in this booklet as a substitute for getting advice from a doctor or other professional.

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## What the symbols mean:

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Key points about attention



Where to get more help and information



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People with brain injuries share their experiences

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# Introduction



Attention and concentration are terms used to describe the complex mental processes that allow us to notice things and to take in information from the world around us.



**N.B. in this booklet the term ‘attention’ refers to both attention and concentration because the two terms are often used interchangeably.**

Difficulties with attention are common following a brain injury. We focus on attention problems in everyday life in this booklet and suggest tips and advice to help with any difficulties. The suggestions are based on research and people’s own experiences. Try the tips out and see which ones are useful to you. Everyone’s brain injury affects them in a slightly different way. Some suggestions will work for you, while others may not.

In addition to your brain injury, other things can affect your attention - these include tiredness, hunger, stress, your mood, pain, other illnesses and medications.

**“I just can’t focus on one thing at a time. My mind keeps wandering off ....”**

**Siobhan from Meath**

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# How attention works

Attention involves many complex processes which are not all fully understood. However, experts agree that there are a number of different types of attention. We have included some examples below.

## Types of attention

**Sustained attention** is our ability to maintain attention on something over a period of time — for example: watching a movie.

**Selective attention** is our ability to focus on one thing and to ignore everything else — for example: listening to a friend talking in the middle of a busy café or choosing a particular tin of beans from a supermarket shelf.

**Alternating attention** is the ability to switch our attention between two things - for example: while you are writing an email, you receive a phone call. After you finish the call, you go back to writing your email.

**Divided attention** is our ability to multi-task or, in other words, to do two things at once. Examples of divided attention are: watching television while talking to someone or driving while listening to the news.

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## How a brain injury affects attention

Attention uses many different areas of the brain in order to work properly. So an injury to any one of these areas can cause difficulties. This is the reason why attention is so often affected after a brain injury. Difficulties include:

- Keeping track of what is being said or done.
- Following instructions or finding it difficult to do more than one thing at a time.
- Being easily distracted, particularly in busy places.
- Feeling overwhelmed when there is a lot going on around you.
- Having difficulty picking out the most important parts of something you read.

## How attention affects memory

Attention difficulties can affect your memory. If you have trouble noticing something and taking in information about it, you won't be able to recall it later.

 Due to the fact that memory and attention are closely related, it is often hard to tell which one is causing problems. A Psychologist, or Occupational Therapist, can help you understand more about your particular difficulties. They can assess a range of your thinking skills and suggest specific approaches that may help. See page 11 for contact information and how to get our **Memory** booklet.



## What you can do

- Read the **General advice** below
- Try out the **Tools** on page 5.
- See the **Tips for common situations** on page 6.

### General advice

Any attention difficulties you have will be worse if you are tired or stressed. These common-sense tips may help:

- Eat a healthy diet, get enough sleep and take regular exercise. Even seated exercise is beneficial. See our **Fatigue and sleep** booklet for more information.
- Every day do something to mentally wind down and physically relax - for example: try meditating or gentle breathing, do a hobby, get in touch with a friend or take part in a group activity.
- When you are doing something that requires concentration, take regular breaks.



## Tools to aid your attention



Mark the ones you find useful



To make it easier to focus on the words when you are reading:

- Get two pieces of plain paper.
- Place one piece of paper above the paragraph you want to read, and one piece below the paragraph.
- Move the pieces of paper down the page each time you finish a paragraph.



To cut out background noise:

- Use noise-cancelling headphones or ear plugs.



To remove distractions when you are using the internet:

- Download a computer app such as Evernote Clearly that removes the clutter and advertisements from websites. If you want to search for other similar apps on the internet, they are known as a 'Read later' apps.

To make planning your week easier:



- Using an organiser can help. You can get a **My organiser** booklet from **Headway**. It contains a Diary, Contacts and Personal Details sections, and useful Planning Worksheets. Phone 1800 400 478 to get one.



## Tips for common situations

### If you find it stressful trying to do a few things at once:

- Turn off the television and other distractions.
- Take a few minutes to plan the order in which you are going to do the tasks.
- Write down the order, if that helps.
- Complete one task before you start another.

### To make it easier to concentrate on a task that has a number of steps in it:

- If there are instructions, read over them fully **before** you start.
- Follow the instructions step-by-step.
- Tick off the steps as you complete them.

### To reduce visual distractions while you are working or doing a hobby:

- Keep your work area clear of clutter. Tidy up as you finish each thing you are doing.
- Keep your workspace, or home, as well-organised as possible.
- Throw out, recycle or donate things you don't need.

### **If you need to do an important task:**

- Start the task when you are feeling fresh.
- Find a quiet place or use ear plugs or noise-cancelling headphones.
- Give yourself enough time so you are not rushing.
- Put your phone on silent to avoid getting interrupted.

### **To make it easier to pick out the important points from a document:**

- Read one paragraph at a time.
- Mark the important points in each paragraph using a highlighter pen.

### **If you find it hard to keep track of what is being said at meetings:**

- Write the information down in a note book.  
**or**  
Use your phone or a smart pen to record important things. A smart pen has a mini-computer and voice-recorder built in. Do an internet search for 'smart pen' to find out more information if you wish.

### **If you find it difficult to socialise in noisy groups:**

- Explain to your friends that you find the noise and distractions in busy pubs or cafés difficult.
- Suggest you meet somewhere quieter.
- Try meeting one or two people on their own first to see how that goes.



## Summary of key points

- The terms ‘attention’ and ‘concentration’ are interchangeable. They are both terms for the mental processes that allow us to notice things and to take in information from the world around us.
- Attention uses a number of different parts of the brain and difficulties are common after brain injury.
- There are a number of practical things you can try to work around any attention difficulties you may have.
- Memory and attention are very closely related.
- A Psychologist, or Occupational Therapist, can assess a range of your thinking skills to see what your specific difficulties are and what approaches may help.
- Show your friends and family this booklet. It will help them better understand what you are dealing with and how they can help.



To get more information and support see [Help and information](#) on page 11.







## Help and information

### Information

Visit [www.headway.ie/information](http://www.headway.ie/information) to:

- Read more booklets in the **Brain Injury Series**.
- For further information and where to get support.
- For ways to connect with other people living with a brain injury.

### Psychologists

**Headway** offers free community-based brain injury assessment, counselling and rehabilitation in Cork, Dublin, Kerry and Limerick.

**t: 1800 400 478** or visit [www.headway.ie](http://www.headway.ie)

To access a public psychologist, your GP or Public Health Nurse can refer you.

**HSE t: 1850 24 1850** or visit [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

To find a registered private psychologist, contact the **Psychological Society of Ireland**.

**t: 01 472 0105** or visit [www.psychologicalsociety.ie](http://www.psychologicalsociety.ie)

### Occupational Therapists

To access a public Occupational Therapist, contact your local HSE Health Office or Health Centre.

**HSE t: 1850 24 1850** or visit [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

To find a private Occupational Therapist, contact the **Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland**.

**t: 01 874 8136** or visit [www.aoti.ie](http://www.aoti.ie)

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# About Headway

**HEADWAY**  
Brain Injury Services & Support

Founded in 1985, Headway is a charity that offers community-based brain injury rehabilitation services in Dublin, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and the South East. We also have a country-wide information and support service:

t: 1800 400 478 and web: [www.headway.ie](http://www.headway.ie)

Headway is accredited by CARF International for Adult Home, Community and Vocational Brain Injury Services. [www.carf.org](http://www.carf.org)



## Acknowledgements

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Our thanks also to Headway UK for kindly allowing us to use their publications as one of the main sources for this Brain Injury Series.

To support Headway Ireland's work, please phone 1800 400 478 or visit [www.headway.ie](http://www.headway.ie).  
Charity Number: CHY 7417

# HEADWAY

Brain Injury Services & Support

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