



Weird Reasons You Can't Focus

Brain fog and monkey mind can be maddening. Here, why you can't concentrate and how to clear your head. **BY KRISSY BRADY**

WHEN YOU HAVE the attention span of a puppy (*oooh, squirrel!*), the fix isn't always as obvious as pounding an espresso. Distraction or fuzziness may be your body's way of signaling something's off, says Niket Sonpal, DO, assistant professor at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine in New York. Keeping your mind trained on a single task requires your brain to be flooded with a complex cocktail of neurotransmitters and hormones, he explains. Read on for the surprising things that interfere with your ability to keep your head in the game.

1 **Food Sensitivities**

Among the people most likely to have trouble focusing include those with celiac disease (which produces an autoimmune reaction to gluten, proteins found in wheat, barley, and rye) or sensitivities to such foods as dairy and soy, according to a report in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. Trigger foods spike inflammation, which can cause your brain to go fuzzy. Blood tests can ID food sensitivities. Once you find the culprits, it can take as little as 72 hours (or as long as 6 weeks!) to start feeling less foggy and more focused, says Michelle Mudge-Riley, DO, a physician and registered dietitian in San Antonio, Texas. As a general rule, drink more water, suggests Michael Russo, MD, a bariatric surgeon in Fountain Valley, California. If your stomach

is struggling to digest certain foods, dehydration can make it harder. Plus, a lack of H₂O can impair memory and cause fatigue and headaches—none of which will help you focus.

2 Being a Perfectionist

Perfectionism coincides with ambition, but it's also highly correlated with a fear of failure. Say you're stressed about a work project: As your worry grows, your brain tries to protect you from a potential flop, ironically, by tuning out—potentially derailing your success, explains Carly Snyder, MD, director of women's health for Family Health Associates in New York City. Don't let anxiety fester—get it out! Spend five minutes free-writing: Why is this task important? What worries you about the outcome? Is your fear legit? Or vent to your work wife about why you're nervous—bonus points if you walk around the block while you do so for additional stress relief. Then return to your task with a clear head.

3 PMS

The week before your period, fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone can cause spaciness. "Focus should return within a couple of days of your period starting," says Dr. Snyder. In the meantime, hit the

gym. Exercise elevates the neurotransmitters responsible for concentration, like dopamine.

4

Unresolved Drama

Upset about that tiff you got in with your roommate this morning? Because your brain perceives conflict as danger, it homes in on the threat in an effort to keep you safe, leaving you unable to focus on much else. Schedule a time to work things out, then jot down your major points of concern and set them aside (to avoid obsessing). Knowing a resolution is on the horizon helps neutralize the body's fight-or-flight response.

5

Low Iron Levels

When iron levels drop, cognitive performance and concentration take a dive with it. A small study of college-age women found that eating an iron-rich lunch for four months improved memory and attention. Pair foods that contain iron—like red meat, pork, shellfish, leafy greens, pumpkin seeds, and dark chocolate—with ingredients high in vitamin C, like citrus, for max absorption.

6

A Vague To-Do List

If your to-do list is written in general terms, like "finish presentation," you're not giving your brain insight

4.1 PERCENT
OF U.S.
ADULTS HAVE
ADHD. SO
CHANCES
ARE, YOU
DON'T
NEED AN
ADDERALL RX.

SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTE
OF MENTAL HEALTH

into exactly what it needs to focus on, says Oksana Hagerty, PhD, a learning specialist at Beacon College. Instead, write down individual tasks, like "add stats to intro" and "copy-edit slides." Think of a to-do list as a commitment, says Hagerty. "Failure to keep those commitments could negatively affect your self-respect." To avoid that, divide items into urgent and nonurgent. This will help you prioritize and offer an opportunity to save face—by viewing failure to do certain things not as a fiasco but as a strategic retreat.

7

Drinking Coffee on an Empty Stomach

When you skip breakfast but down a venti coffee, you're giving your body two signals to spike the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline (low blood sugar and caffeine), says Nicole Van Groningen, MD, an internist in San Francisco. This sends your body into survival mode, decreasing your attention span to barely there levels. Pair your brew with a breakfast that includes protein, fat, and complex carbs, like a veggie omelet or have Bulletproof Coffee (java blended with grass-fed butter) and a green smoothie. ■

