

Understanding distractibility and inattention.

How to assist a person with developmental disability and challenging behavior to be less distractible and more focused.

The dictionary definition of “distractible” means “capable of being drawn aside or having attention diverted.” Also, “suffering conflicting emotions or distraught.”

The definition of “inattention” is “lack of notice or regard.”

There could be many aspects to a person who is displaying distractible and inattentive behavior. I’ll briefly outline these and what can be done.

Motivational factors:

- lack of interest. (doesn’t “grab” me)
- lack of caring or concern. (not relevant to me)
- deliberate neglect. (I couldn’t be bothered)

To overcome these factors it is helpful to make the information or task relevant, exciting and important to the person.

Attentional (focus) factors:

- simple carelessness and acting without forethought or thoroughness. (oops!)
- being unwatchful, unobservant or unalert. (uh-oh!)

To overcome these factors it is helpful to gain direct eye contact before giving guidance, and then to model and repeat correct actions.

Memory factors:

- the direction could have too many steps for the individual to follow. They may just not remember what they are shown.
- the individual may only be able to do one step at a time or only able to remember the first or the last step they were shown.
- there may be too many words for the person to follow. They may just not remember what they are told (see next section.)

Understanding distractibility and inattention.

To overcome these factors it is helpful to break instructions down into single steps, presented one at a time. Allow and assist individual to complete one step before presenting the next step. Frequently rehearse guidance so that individual can come to recognize and remember familiar cues. Use extra visual prompts with pictures and lists to assist memory and attention to relevant detail.

Language processing factors:

- the individual may only be able to process very short sentences.
- they may not process the meaning of words relating to time sequence such as “after”, “before”, “first” and “not until.”
- they may not process the meaning of words that have abstract meaning such as “he” and “she”, rather than “Bill” and “Mary.”
- they may not process words that require comparisons, such as “if” and “or”, “either”

To overcome these factors it is helpful to “talk short” and talk slowly, giving the individual time to think about what is said before making any additional comments. This is not talking “down” to the individual, rather talking only one step at a time by breaking down what you say into “concrete” behavior. (For example, instead of “help me clean up this spill”, try, “I need a napkin. There is a napkin on the table. Please bring me the napkin.” To avoid distractibility and inattentiveness, this approach keeps guidance simple and the meaning of offered assistance obvious.

Sensory factors:

- the individual may be unable to focus their attention in the presence of background noise. They may be unable to hear certain frequencies of sound such as higher pitched voices, or the soft sound of “s” at the end of a word that indicates more than one (“dishes” rather than “dish.”)
- Two people talking at the same time may overwhelm them.

To overcome these factors it is helpful to provide a “protected” environment that is quiet and free from distractions. It is helpful when two persons are present for only one person at a time to talk to or interact with the individual.

Understanding distractibility and inattention.

Organic-brain factors:

- the individual may be fine attending to simple tasks that are familiar (dump the left over food into the garbage) but overwhelmed by a task that requires them to “analyze” the nature of what is expected of them. Even if they are really trying hard to do well, unless directly guided, they may be unable to sort out what is important to focus on.

(If trying to “bus” at a restaurant, when is the person ready to have their plate cleared so the next person can sit down? When they stop eating? When they push the plate away? Or do you wait till they get up and walk away?)

- the individual may lack the ability to delay their response to a stimulus in their immediate environment. They may be unable to sustain their focus to task or inhibit their response to whatever “captures” their immediate attention.

One 24-year-old woman with fetal alcohol syndrome had relatively good capacity to understand language and her memory was intact. She could do “rote” schoolwork at a grade seven level, and could comprehend at a grade three level. In an environment with no additional external demands she was able to process and follow in the correct sequence up to four verbal directions.

When other people came into the room and began to interact with each other, she was unable to maintain focus or to correctly carry out even a single direction. She immediately left her task and chattily socialized instead.

To overcome these factors it is helpful to be aware of these types of unique sensitivities and to match expectations to the individual’s requirements for successful participation.

It is helpful to teach the individual to rely on their over-learned routines and rituals. In this manner the individual can practice familiar motor habits as a means of “protecting” themselves from becoming distracted by irrelevant things in their environment.

Understanding distractibility and inattention.

Developmental learning and emotional factors:

- from hard experience an individual may recognize situations similar to those where they have experienced previous failure. When they are certain that they will fail they may do any number of behavioral, self-distractions to avoid the situation.

It is helpful to be encouraging and to reduce expectations that demand the participation of a reluctant individual. Rather than directly challenging them to participate, give them “space” to observe and to be a “helper.” Allow them to become confident in the new situation and wait for them to be ready.

In general:

- It is always helpful to be clear, visual as well as verbal, repetitive and to assist the potentially distractible and inattentive individual to work one step at a time.

- Use few words, and sentences that are short and simple structure. Talk present tense and use concrete language.

- Rather than “correction”, instead, give explicit, positive direction.

These approaches will overcome many of the potentially unknown factors that might otherwise cause the individual to be distractible and inattentive.

Psychiatric factors:

- an individual may be experiencing racing thoughts associated with extreme anxiety, manic disorder, hyperthyroid, or a number of other biological-psychiatric disorders.
- they may be “flooded” with emotion and unable to self-calm or focus their thoughts.
- in such an over-aroused state the individual may not understand or be able to resolve any conflict, or contradiction, that ordinarily they could figure out on their own.
- They may not be able to properly process any emotional messages.
This includes non-verbal facial expressions and body language.

Understanding distractibility and inattention.

For distractibility and inattention that seems like it may be due to over-arousal:

In general,

- It is helpful to keep things easy, low-key, simple, and accepting.
- At the same time give the individual the safety, security and guidance they require.
- Use few words and a calm voice and slow gestures to give explicit and direct guidance to engage in familiar, comforting action. (For example, run a bath, take a cool washcloth, have a drink, etc.)
- Model and prompt being calm and breathing evenly. Engage in familiar routine. Advise the individual what they need to do next, or what you are going to be doing next.
- Momentarily lower all expectations while you assist the person to calm and focus once again. At this time, don't ask individual to make decisions that require them to focus and make a choice.

Nathan E. Ory, M.A.
Registered Psychologist
6 February 2006
Island Mental Health Support Team