

SMARTER BRAIN

A woman with brown hair pulled back, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a grey top. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. A glowing, white, ethereal halo or ring of light encircles her head. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

better life

BRAIN TRAINING AND MORE WAYS
TO INCREASE IQ,
FOCUS AND CREATIVITY

Cheat Sheet: Hacks for Achieving Ultimate Focus and Concentration

When many of us think about mental performance and getting the most out of our brains, the thing we will be most interested in is increasing focus and attention. This is why the flow state is such a popular concept.

But beyond achieving 'flow', there is much more to motivation and focus and understanding what's happening here and how to improve it can make a huge difference to your performance and your output.

And this is especially important considering the role of focus in working memory, visualization and internalization. In this cheat sheet, we will provide some valuable additional information – tools that will help you 'hack' your attention and to gain much greater focus and motivation.

The key thing to understand? Your attention is driven by *emotion* – by the release of dopamine which signals the importance of something. This is why things that have an emotional 'hook' are easy to pay attention to, while things that are dry and dull are less easy.

How to Hack Your Attention

- 1) First, try to block out the potentially distracting environmental factors. A method that WordPress CTO Matt Mullenweg uses to accomplish this, is to listen to music he knows well on repeat. Eventually, excitation of the same neurons results in something called desensitization – which is why we tune out the sound of a ticking clock (it's also why you start to hallucinate when surrounded by a completely white snowscape – this is your brain making up for a lack of stimulation). Tuning out of the sound in your ears can provide a kind of sensory deprivation, allowing you to focus more effectively on writing or working. White noise actually works equally well.

- 2) Tim Ferriss is known to watch films he knows on silent while writing. This has a similar effect – it keeps the visual cortex busy and stimulated thus avoiding distraction and making other distracting thoughts, movements or sounds less inviting. You can also achieve this by working in a ‘richer’ environment with more to look at. This is a flow trigger as you may recall, meaning it can theoretically wake your brain up more and also avoid distraction. It’s why the old corporate idea of working in grey cubicles is so outmoded.
- 3) This is also why it’s so important to make sure you are in homeostasis – to avoid unuseful stress, tiredness or hunger that can tell your body you have more important things to consider.
- 4) Most important is making what you’re doing more interesting. Got writer’s block? Can’t force yourself to concentrate on what you’re writing? Chances are, it’s because what you’re writing doesn’t excite you. And if it doesn’t excite you, it probably won’t excite your readers either. So, try to change the scene or the approach to the topic and make it something you feel passionate about. If it’s something you don’t have any say over, then try to find something about the task or subject you *can* relate to. Nearly every subject contains some element of artistry.
- 5) Use CBT to remind yourself why you are doing what you are doing. Link the task at hand to the emotionally gratifying end goal. If you’re doing boring work now, it is probably because you are trying to get a promotion, launch a business... etc. So, focus on that end vision and picture it in your mind’s eye. This will drive you toward achieving that end. The opposite can also be true here, if you want to end a bad behavior then try to picture the negative outcomes that you associate with it and you can effectively rewire your brain. For instance, if you keep snacking, then you should focus on your growing belly each time you go to – and even try to conjure the feeling of being overly full. Remember the last time you ate desert and didn’t really need it and how that made you feel!

- 6) Make sure that you believe that the activity you're engaged in really will yield that reward. This is important in order to be motivated by that activity. We motivate ourselves to go to work every day because we *know* we'll get paid. We don't motivate ourselves to workout consistently though, because there's a chance that that effort won't result in the body we want (most of us have tried and failed before!). Make sure you have a plan you believe in and you're chances of sticking with it will greatly improve! This again requires CBT and cognitive restructuring. Challenge your thoughts and really break down what you *actually* believe. If you can identify the problems with your plan, then fix those. Keep it simple. Doing more press-ups will burn *more* calories. And write your goals appropriately: aim to simply get into better shape and start working out, rather than aiming to transform your physique in weeks.
- 7) Dopamine is released in anticipation of reward. This is why activities such as programming are so inherently addictive and make it much easier to achieve flow – every time the coder hits compile they get a rush of dopamine waiting to see if the program works. They can then make one small fix and hit run again. Something similar happens when editing video. This is also what makes computer games more rewarding – it's the constant reward/failure and the sounds and the colors that signify each. Longer and more abstract tasks lack this reward loop and aren't as immediately gratifying, meaning they lack the dopaminergic reward. Find ways to gamify what you're doing and you can remedy this – for example, try keeping focussed on the word count while typing. Or try tidying your hoes in a set time frame. Go for 'big wins' first so that you can see the fruits of your labor. Even choosing the right data to show on a Sat Nav during a long drive can make a huge difference. It's better to show how much further is left to go, rather than what time you'll arrive. Why? Because the former *counts down* thereby providing that stimulating reward loop.

- 8) Finally: practice your focus, your motivation and your attention. Like anything else, this can be trained. Many people say to start by making your bed every morning and if you can motivate yourself to do that every day, eventually you can motivate yourself to do anything!