Life throws a lot at us these days. School, work, families, friends. They all ask for a piece of our time and attention. Add to that the background noise of day-to-day life: telephones, voice mail, text messages, faxes, and computer e-mails. It’s a wonder that any of us can keep our mind on even one task long enough to get it done. Yet most of us have many tasks to juggle. And we have to pay attention so that we don’t drop the ball on any of them.

Keeping focused and paying attention to details can be a challenge for adults who had cancer during childhood. Difficulty with these skills may have resulted from the treatments you had or the cancer itself. But like any skill, staying focused and paying attention can be improved with practice and with modifications to your home, work, or school environment. Here are a few tips to get you started.

**Physical Setting**

☑ Try to work in a physical setting with few distractions. By distractions, we mean anything that might pull your focus away from your work. For example, you might be distracted by noise if your office or work space is near a high-traffic area such as a break room.

☑ Ask for a work space in a quieter area or keep your door closed when people are coming and going in the hallways.

☑ If you work in a private office, try playing soft background music. If you are not in a private office wear headphones. Make sure that the music you select is mainly melody. Music with words will compete for your attention.

☑ Set up the furniture in your work area so that you face the wall rather than a window or the doorway.

**Personal Habits**

☑ Go to bed at the same time each work night and make sure that you get enough sleep to be rested and alert the next day.

☑ Set your alarm clock and get up at a set time each day. Leave for work early enough to arrive on time or a little early.

☑ Leave personal work at home or in the car. Run errands at night.

☑ Go straight to your desk or office when you get to work. Avoid the morning chit-chat around the coffee pot or water fountain.

☑ Ask family and friends to call you at work only when matters truly cannot wait until you get home. The same goes for e-mails to your work e-mail account.
Better Focus and Attention in Day-to-Day Work

Work Habits

☑ If you are distracted by phone calls during the day, put your phone on silent ring. Leave a polite message telling callers that you are working on a project. Promise to return calls when you take a break for lunch or by the end of the day.

☑ Turn off your e-mail alerts to avoid frequent distractions. Set scheduled times to review and respond to your e-mail. For example, you may want to read them first thing in the morning and 15 minutes before your lunch break.

☑ Before you leave work at night, write a “to-do” list for the next day. Refer to it as soon as you get to your desk and keep it posted where you can see it during the day. Check off each item as you complete it.

☑ Schedule breaks often and work until it’s time to take a break. Reward yourself with a brisk walk around the office or something to drink. Over time, you can stretch out the time between breaks.

☑ Work on the hardest or longest task when your mind is fresh.

☑ Keep work for each project in its own folder or place.

☑ Before changing tasks, write down what you were doing so that you know where to pick up when you start on it again.

Your Attention, Please!

Focus is half the battle. Attention is the other half.

Work slowly. Check your work often. Here is how you would improve attention to detail with a sample task such as proofreading a memo to your boss.

☑ Read one time all the way through to make sure that your message makes sense.

☑ Read again to check for spelling errors or typos. Take a ruler and place it under a line of text. Start at the right-hand margin and read backward one word at a time.

☑ Read a third time to check facts. For example, is the date right? Do you have all the names and job titles correct? If your memo has numbers, be sure that they add up.

☑ When you have checked your work, put a sticky note on top with the date and time. This way, you won’t spend time re-checking work that you have already completed.

Final words: Pat yourself on the back for starting and completing each new task. Remember: Beyond a certain point, it doesn’t do any good to keep pushing yourself. Think progress, not perfection!

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