

## **Fidget to Focus II**

### **An update on sensory-motor strategies to assist focus during dull, monotonous, or boring events!**

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**“Just one more round of Nintendo and I’ll be done with my homework!”**

Years ago, a friend with dyslexia and ADHD approached me with an experience that sparked my interest. I listened carefully as her story unfolded. In graduate school, her reading load was extensive; it would take her 2 months to get through the textbooks. With her struggles with reading comprehension and working memory, she would read passages over and over again. She received an accommodation of "Books on Tape" which helped a little, but she still averaged about 2 months to finish listening to one book. Not much help. Despite her best efforts, she was overusing and wearing out her rewind button. She would quickly lose interest and her mind would wander. Frustration finally won out. After rewinding the tape a hundred times she got tired of trying again and again. She clicked on Nintendo. Feeling guilty, she planned to still try to get some reading done but decided to try doing both at the same time. This could be fun, after all, she often found herself doing five things at once. She turned off the sound of Nintendo, kept the book on tape running and began playing Nintendo while listening to her book. To her surprise, she found it much easier to listen to the books and retain the information while playing her game. In fact, with this newfound strategy, she has been able to complete her books in about 2 weeks. In general, she found that she could be very focused on her reading as long as she has an interesting and stimulating fidget/arousal strategy.

**WAIT!** Before you go out and purchase Nintendo, consider this...

The purpose of this article is not to necessarily supply the answers but present you with a few compelling and exciting questions that hopefully will allow you to draw your own conclusions. This is based upon the life stories of many adults with ADHD who can often describe experiences in ways that children can not. I hope to challenge some of the traditional assumptions about what strategies you choose and how you apply the strategies you use.

We are told to take large boring projects and break them down into smaller projects. This assumes that taking things one-step at a time will make you more effective, efficient and possibly on time. Unfortunately this tends to have the effect of creating many small boring projects and is limited in its effectiveness. Despite best efforts, the experience is still one of having trouble getting started and putting things off to the very last minute. This struggle is consistent for most folks with ADHD.

Rather than persistently pursuing a path of destruction such as “Just try harder!” it is time to try a different path. It is time to consider **Fidget to Focus**.

Why is it that we often hear “I can concentrate on my studies better while I’m listening to the radio”?

Why am I at rest, calm and focused when I’m in motion?

Why can I focus better when I’m standing?

Why do I doodle and pace while I’m on the phone?

Why does a vibrating pillow work, not to relax, but focus me?

Why when others are calm and centered during meditation, I have hiked a mountain range in my mind’s eye?

Why can I be so successful writing a paper in those early morning hours before the deadline when I couldn’t think of a thing to write weeks or even days before? A time others refer to as procrastination.

Why am I very good at channel surfing, that is, accurately following 4 TV events simultaneously?

Why can I pay attention longer in boring lectures, if I can keep moving my foot or leg, doodling, or playing Tetris?

Why does listening to “white noise” while doing my construction job improve my time on task by 35%?

Why is it that concentration improves for some ADD children and adults while they are chewing bubblegum?

Why, Why, Why?

You may be asking yourself similar questions right now from your own life experience. Before we go further, let me give you a little background!

**BOREDOM VERSUS INTEREST:** For anyone with ADD, there is an ongoing and unidentified dilemma of whether this event is boring or interesting. If something is boring, it is very difficult to do. In fact, it may seem impossible. Often things must be interesting before they can be accomplished. Boredom is the kiss of death. The difficulty is maintaining your interest to complete the task. In other words, keeping focused. Interest equals focus with ADD. Russell Barkley discussed this from an inhibitory model. This means that focus means the ability to inhibit competing attractions in our environment. When we are not focused we often experience boredom or difficulty staying focused or interested. What does work is maintaining interest in the task. What seems to be out of the loop is really how important something is. This is where ADHD gets very challenging. Despite how important something is, it isn’t necessarily interesting. Many problems can arise when that paper has to be completed, it’s due 7 am tomorrow morning, you haven’t quite started on it, and you decide to join your friends for a late sandwich at the deli. This paper can effect your entire grade and yet you put off the task a little while longer for fear that you may once again sit in front of your computer with a blank screen. What’s boring is “I’ve got two weeks to finish this project, so I’ll break it down into several more boring steps. What’s interesting is a 7 am deadline and it’s midnight the night before the project is due. What’s boring is watching one sit-com from beginning to end. What’s interesting is channel surfing, watching 3 shows simultaneously. In relationships, what’s boring is having a nice conversation. What’s interesting is challenging someone else’s thoughts, feelings or behaviors, which may possibly lead to a disagreement or argument. What’s

boring is making lists. What are interesting are yellow post-it notes everywhere. So, why the dichotomy you ask? To understand this is to understand what is occurring in the brain of someone with ADD.

**UNDERAROUSAL** We think the brain of an ADD person is basically under-activated or under-aroused. Mel Levine, MD calls it “Almost Sleepy”. The particular areas involving activation include in part the right hemisphere, the prefrontal cortex, the basal ganglia, the thalamus, the hippocampus, the locus ceruleus, and the reticular formation. Each one of these areas plays a critical role in the interpretation, transfer, manipulation and organization of sensory information in the brain. Under-arousal is generally considered to be an under representation of critical neurotransmitters that facilitate the transfer of electrical impulses, which in turn represents a thought or action. There continue to be a great deal of questions about how this process really works. However, by watching and learning, we are beginning to understand one very important part of the process, under-arousal seeks arousal. There is a homeostasis in our neurobiological system that attempts to increase the lack of arousal. People use their own built in sensory mechanisms for self-arousal, which from an ADHD perspective allows one to increase and therefore, improve their focus. In essence, our distractibility is really attractability to interesting things around us, and our restlessness is not an expression of trying to get out our fidgetiness to become calm, but rather an attempt to self-arouse to become focused.

**SELF-AROUSAL** The strategy of self-arousal is not new. It cuts across cultures, across language barriers, and across time. Here are some natural strategies used for arousal. Chinese exercise balls manipulated in the hands claim to increase focus and attention. We use rhythm as a source of focus in ceremonies. Intensifying music signals the climax of a movie and we pay closer attention to the scene. Acupuncture activates the tactile system of pain and pressure to channel and focus body energy. Runners are aware of feeling calmed and more focused after a long run. Occupational therapists have known for years that increased sensorimotor arousal in an underaroused state can facilitate an increased state of alertness. Businesses, hospitals and manufacturing plants have know about the arousing impact of colors, (fire engines) textures (plants, wallpaper) and yes even smells; (How many of you have not been able to resist the cinnamon buns in the mall when you smelled them cooking?). Speaking of classrooms, the author of *Unicorns Are Real* noticed that some children could spell standing at the chalkboard when they could not spell sitting at their seats.

Many mechanisms exist that allow us to maintain a facsimile of focus throughout our day. Often this is done by persistently maintaining a range of arousal strategies varying from arguments to doodling to fidgeting to chewing gum. John Ratey points out in his early article entitled “The Foibles, Frailties and Frustrations of Attention”, “...there is a neurobiological need for conflict and trauma in part in an effort to stay active in a relationship.” While many mechanisms are sensory based, there are also non-sensory arousal mechanisms that are common to us. These tend to be more bio-chemically based and include items such as coffee, herbs, spices, vitamins, drugs, medications, and even two large glasses of water prior to bedtime.

**SIMULTANEOUS SENSORY STIMULATION STRATEGIES** This is the short-term modulation of a dysregulated system. Just as it implies, two or more senses are used simultaneously to allow for increased focus during dull, boring or monotonous events. Currently it appears that the adjustment is short-lived and does not have permanent impact. However, it is an ongoing adjustment for how you are coping at the time. It is a strategy to increase your focus during boring or tedious events. Think about it this way:

You are suddenly thrust into an environment where you are challenged to complete a large project over a period of time and finish ahead of your competition. You feel confident the project is clearly within your reach and charge off with little worry or concern about completing it ahead of the competition. With the excitement at hand, you stay up late working many hours in your first few weeks to accomplish the project. When others offer to help, you respectfully reject their offers knowing that this will be quite easy for you to accomplish. Your competitor, on the other hand, has chosen to break up the large project into a series of small projects, which will be accomplished week by week. Your competitor has been taught a very important rule that many people live by, "Slow and Steady Wins the Race". As you approach the end of your project, boredom begins to set in. You have a hard time getting motivated, and getting started in the morning on your project. In fact, you catch yourself napping more often, and playing interesting games on the computer rather than completing your project. Time slips by and one morning you received a call from your boss saying that your competitor has scheduled an appointment to present his project. In haste you scramble to finish the last part of the project, grab your charts, and hurry down to the boss's office to schedule your meeting. As you walk in, your competitor is walking out with the big smile on his face. Suddenly, you realize that once again you lost the race not because of ability but because of your inability to stay focused when projects get tedious or boring.

Rather than having this scenario repeat itself one more time, let's try something different! What if you began to take advantage of all your sensory input? Begin experimenting with simultaneous self-arousal mechanisms to help you focus. Let me share some examples with you that have made a difference in the lives of others with ADD.

### *Movement strategies*

**Wiggling, rocking or moving during a dull or tedious event like listening, studying or talking.**

Wiggling toes

Balancing on back two legs of a chair

Rocking, rhythmic movement

Doodling

Running, walking

Pacing

Driving a car...fast.

An arm extended to fall asleep

Standing

### ***Touch Strategies***

#### **Holding, feeling or handling something during a dull or tedious event.**

Fidgeting with hair, coins, keys  
Clicking a pen/mechanical pencil  
Tapping/drumming fingers  
Knitting, sewing  
Cooking, kneading, stirring  
Silkies to rub

### ***Sight Strategies***

#### **Watching, noticing, or tracking something during a dull or boring activity.**

Glancing out a window  
Channel surfing  
Playing video games  
Using colorful tools  
Noticing details in the environment

### ***Sound Strategies***

#### **Listening to or hearing something, while doing something dull or boring.**

Music; rhythmic music, loud or soft music  
White noise  
Whistling, humming  
Talking to yourself

### ***Taste Strategies***

#### **The taste of something during dull or boring events.**

Tart candies  
Taste of adrenaline  
Taste of fear  
Spearmint flavors  
Spices like ginger in foods  
Hot peppers

### ***Mouth Strategies***

#### **Putting something in the mouth during a boring event.**

Smoking  
Biting nails  
Chewing on buttons, sleeves  
Licking, sucking or biting lips  
Chewing on pens, gum or ice  
Sucking on hard candy

### *Smell Strategies*

#### **The aromas noticed during tedious or boring events.**

Flavored pens

Fresh crisp air

Air fresheners

Cinnamon rolls in the mall.

More recently, these strategies have surfaced:

Proprioception.....body in space, yoga, Aikido

Vestibular.....balancing and rocking motions, Aikido

Tactile.....pain, temperature, pressure, texture, Aikido

Cognitive.....intensifying the awareness of time, stopwatch, kitchen timers

Affective..... increasing emotional accountability with a personal assistant

In general the most common themes include that fact that the brain is not just underaroused but is best described as dysregulated. Newest information and observations suggest that not only arousal is helpful but also rhythmic arousal is even more helpful. Not everyone is the same. Some use visual to assist auditory signals like playing a repetitive game like Tetris on a *Game Boy* during a boring lecture to maintain focus on the speaker. Others use auditory arousal to assist visual input like listening to loud, rock music while reading boring textbooks. As strategies are developed, it is important to identify ones' own primary and secondary sensory modalities. Until the time when this is known, it is best to use a multi-sensory approach.

Going back to our earlier example, you were left standing at the door just short of success and failing to do what you promised. What Simultaneous Sensory Stimulation Strategies have you become aware of that would best assist you in completing this task?

Do you have your own examples of effective Simultaneous Sensory Stimulation Strategies? Share them with me at [DocRotz@DocRotz.com](mailto:DocRotz@DocRotz.com) at Lifespan Development Center.

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