Whole Student Learning Series
How To Minimize Distractions And Stay Focused

One of the more common concerns expressed by medical students is a tendency to be easily distracted while studying. Distractions draw attention away from the task at hand and can result from a variety of internal or external sources. Attention is a cognitive function that allows us to select appropriate stimuli, while filtering out others, maintain concentration, and interact with space and time. Attention is a critical first step in creating a long-term memory; therefore, distractions can severely hamper learning. Our level of distractibility at any given time can be influenced by such things as boredom, hunger, worry, stress, anxiety, tiredness, physical discomfort, presence of environmental stimuli (noises, sights, smells), and easy access to other, perhaps more enjoyable, activities. Avoiding or minimizing distractions involves recognizing that you have a choice and can exert control over your circumstances.

Note: Most students who find themselves unable to stay focused on their work do not have AD/HD; however, if you have a family history or feel strongly that you might have an attentional deficit, we strongly recommend that you seek professional help for diagnosis and treatment.

TIPS FOR MINIMIZING OR AVOIDING DISTRACTIONS

Structure your life
1. Establish a regular study routine
2. Have a designated study area
3. Set study goals, plan your strategy, and manage your priorities
4. Set reminders and use a timer to keep you on track
5. Take frequent short breaks, e.g., 10 minutes per hour, and do something different, such as moving around; even more frequent breaks may be necessary when you’re tired

Control your study environment
1. Select a study location / environment that minimizes competing stimuli (e.g., a quiet location)
2. Make sure you have everything you need nearby so you aren’t distracted by looking for things
3. Don’t “multitask”; turn-off electronic devices when possible or restrict your access with website or software blockers, don’t listen to music that makes you want to sing along

Address your state of mind
1. Center yourself to prepare for each study session
2. Be present; when you feel your attention drift remind yourself to “be here now”
3. Schedule worry / think time; set aside a specific time each day to allow yourself to think about the things that tend to interfere with study and then remind yourself of that time when a distracting thought interrupts your concentration
4. Change study topics every one to two hours to keep your brain engaged and alternate study activities, e.g., switch between reading and more active learning methods
5. Reward yourself for completing a task

References:
   http://bmb.oxfordjournals.org/content/65/1/21.full
3. SelfRestraint (PC), SelfControl (Mac), Focus (Mac)