

Creating Mental Images

Objective

To create mental images to increase attention and focus and the likelihood you will recall information.

What to Know

Aphantasia is a condition where people are unable to visualize images in their mind, making it difficult to daydream, picture how to solve a math problem, remember faces, or recall information and memories. Researchers have found a relationship between aphantasia and ADHD.

Some people may have mild difficulty with mental imagery, while others may be unable to visualize anything. Symptoms include:

- trouble daydreaming or imagining future events.
- difficulty remembering faces or visual memories.
- poor reading comprehension.
- difficulty learning new information.
- difficulty understanding maps or spatial concepts.
- trouble solving math problems.
- reduced emotional response.

If you have ADHD, you may have trouble with mental imagery and visualization. This may be due to a deficiency in dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is involved in attention, motivation, and reward-seeking behavior. Or, there could be damage to the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that controls attention and executive function.

Creating mental images helps you pay more attention to what you see, hear, or read. When you create interesting images in your mind, the limbic system is stimulated by the new and interesting pictures.

Here are some suggestions to cope if you have problems visualizing images in your mind.

1. If you have difficulty visualizing images, use other senses to create mental pictures. For example, you can use your sense of smell or touch to imagine an object.
2. Use verbal cues and descriptive words to create mental images.
3. If you have trouble with reading comprehension, listen to audiobooks or use text-to-speech software.
4. Use mnemonic devices to learn and remember information, including rhymes, acronyms, and chunking information into smaller pieces.
5. Use external aids like flashcards or notes to create a visual representation of the information you can reference later.

6. Set aside time each day to practice generating mental images.
7. When you listen to something you want to focus on, pause to think about what it reminds you of (for instance, an animal, an object, or a location).
8. Connect words with images as much as possible throughout the day.
9. Make whatever you want to pay attention to more novel or interesting, so tune out distractions and create mental images.

What to Do

Consider the following scenarios and think about mental images you might create in each situation. Then, draw a picture and describe it in words.

1. Your friend is telling you about a new brand of shoes called Super Sneakers. He is raving about their comfort, style, and the rainbow of colors they are offered in. What is the mental image you will create? How will you remember the details if you decide to purchase these sneakers?



2. Your boss asked you to complete a big project by Friday. What images can you create as she explains the steps involved in completing the project? What can you do to focus on what she is saying so you do not forget the steps and you complete the project on time?



3. You are driving to a friend's home, and you get lost. You stop to ask for directions from someone, and they tell you to turn left at the yellow house and then right at the red fence. They tell you to go another 3 miles to reach the neighborhood where your friend lives. What is the mental image you will create?



4. You are at a gardening store, and the cashier suggests placing the tree you are purchasing in an east-facing spot on your property so it will grow better. What mental images can you create to remember this helpful information?



5. A friend introduces you to someone named Don Baxter from Wells, South Dakota. What mental image can you create to remember this person's name and where they are from?



Reflections on This Exercise

What are three things you can do to practice creating mental images to increase your attention and focus and the likelihood you will recall information?

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

Did this activity help you recall information? Why or why not?

What else can you do to help you more easily create mental images? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
