

Feeling Good

BATTLE OF THE SUPERFOODS

THE HEALTH APP EVERY WOMAN NEEDS



Focus!

Ever feel like you have the attention span of a fruit fly? These distraction-fighting techniques will help you snap to.

By Camille Noe Pagán



"I'M SO SCATTERBRAINED—I MUST have ADHD." It's a lament that doctors like Michael Coates, MD, are hearing more and more from adult patients, many of whom assume medication is the answer to their woes. Yet most people don't have ADHD, nor do they need a pill, says Coates, who chairs the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Wake Forest School of Medicine. "What they need is a better routine." In fact, only about 4.5 percent of American adults are estimated to have ADHD, according to a report in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. For the rest of us, feeling unfocused is not the result of a disorder or even a personality trait—it's simply a habit.

"There's never been another time in history when there was so much to be distracted by, and all our technology reinforces the feeling that you're missing out on something if you're not able to pay attention to a bunch of things at once," says Charles Folk, PhD, director of the cognitive science program at Villanova University. To regain your focus, a few tiny lifestyle tweaks may be all you need.

Swap Caffeine for Cardio

If you rely on triple lattes to pay attention, you'll likely find it harder to focus when you're not buzzed. "Your brain will begin to operate as though it requires caffeine to be alert," explains Coates. A more effective stimulant: exercise. Physical activity has been shown to sharpen focus, in people with ADHD and without, possibly because it can help trigger the release of chemicals in the brain that are thought to affect learning and memory. One report from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggests that aerobic exercise in particular may improve immediate and long-term functioning in regions of the brain relating to attention.

Drink More Water

A 2012 study in *The Journal of Nutrition* found that mild dehydration (so subtle that you don't really feel it) can lead to inattention. When women were less than 2 percent dehydrated (in this case, from not drinking enough water after exercise), their ability to



concentrate on a series of cognitive tests was impaired. "When the brain detects even the smallest changes in physiology, it may begin operating at a suboptimal level to get your attention," explains study coauthor Harris Lieberman, PhD, a research psychologist at the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. "Thirst is not the best measure of hydration, so a decrease in your ability to focus is an early warning signal that it's time to drink up."

Get Serious About Shut-Eye

"When a patient suspects she has ADHD, one of the first things I investigate is her sleep routine," says Vatsal G. Thakkar, MD, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine. "The inability to concentrate is often caused by a lack of delta sleep." Thakkar is referring to the slow-wave stage that precedes REM sleep; it's the time when the brain powers down, and some evidence suggests it's the period in which certain cognitive functions consolidate and strengthen. "If you're regularly dipping below seven hours, you're likely cutting into the delta phase, and this

can make it difficult to focus when you're awake," says Thakkar. His Rx: Get a solid seven to nine hours a night for at least two weeks. If your concentration doesn't improve, see a sleep specialist to determine if an undiagnosed disorder like sleep apnea might be to blame.

Wiggle Your Toes

Ever catch yourself nodding along absent-mindedly during a conversation as your brain flits to a million other things? "The frenetic nature of our society—constant updates via e-mail and Twitter, for example—provides some sort of excitement every few minutes, and we've become trained to expect that," says Olivia Fox Cabane, author of *The Charisma Myth*. "If we're not stimulated after a short period of time, we look around for something that will do the job. This is true whether we're reading a dull news story or involved in a conversation." To be a more attentive listener, Cabane recommends taking a moment to focus your attention on your toes. This mindfulness trick will instantly bring you back to the present—right where you belong. **Q**