

Attention Training Technique

Wells 1990, 2000

The Attention Training Technique (ATT) uses sounds in a formal exercise to help us see thoughts, and our attention, in a different way, which will result in an increased ability to distance ourselves from unhelpful thoughts, and improve our ability to control our focus of attention. See Wells (2000) for the full description and protocol.

ATT uses three components:

1. Selective attention (practice time 8 minutes)
2. Rapid attention switching (practice time 5 minutes)
3. Divided attention (practice time 2 minutes)
 - o Total practice time 15 minutes



Sounds are used from within the room, and from outside the room – both near and far. A total of 6-8 sounds are suggested as targets.

The purpose of ATT is not to try to stop or distract from thoughts or feelings, but to simply practise focusing attention in a more helpful way. As in mindfulness, as thoughts or feelings come into the awareness, that's okay, it's just another 'noise', and we can simply refocus our attention to the target.



The exercise consists of fixing the gaze on a spot on the wall (whilst the therapist sits slightly behind the client during session). It's important to keep the eyes open throughout, whilst focusing on different sounds in the room, then sounds outside the room, and then progress to shifting attention between those sounds as directed. The final part of the exercise aims to widen out the attention by paying attention to several sounds at the same time.

Choose the sounds, inside and outside the room that you will focus on. Examples might include:

- Inside room

- o Therapist voice
- o Table tapping
- o Clock ticking
- o Heater / fan
- o Rubbing fingers



- Outside room

- o Birds
- o Building or roadworks
- o People talking
- o Music
- o Traffic



Example script (for therapist use, or make own recording for use at home)

1 Selective Attention

Keep your eyes open throughout the exercise, and fix your gaze on a spot on the wall. Now focus on the sound of my voice, and pay close attention to that sound – no other sound matters. Ignore all other sounds around you (*pause*). Try to give all your attention to the sound of my voice. Focus only on the sound of my voice. No other sound matters (*pause*).

Now focus on the tapping sound (*Sound 2*) that I make as I tap on the table. Focus only on that sound, no other sound matters (*pause*). Closely monitor the tapping sound. If your attention strays or other sounds, thoughts or feelings come into your awareness, simply refocus your attention to this one sound. Focus on the tapping sound and monitor the sound closely, filtering out other sounds – they are not important. Focus all your attention on that sound (*pause*).

Now focus on the sound of (*Sound 3*). Focus all of your attention on that sound. The other sounds do not matter (*pause*). Focus on that sound, paying close attention to it. Anytime your mind wanders, simply bring your attention back. This is the most important sound and nothing else matters. Focus only on the sound of (*Sound 3*). Give all of your attention to that sound. Continue to monitor that sound closely, pay full attention to that sound (*pause*).

Repeat for three sounds (Sounds 4 – 6) in the near distance, then three sounds (Sounds 7-9) in the far distance.

2 Rapid Attention Switching

Now that you have found and focused on these different sounds, I would like you to rapidly shift your attention between the different sounds as I call them out (*pause*).

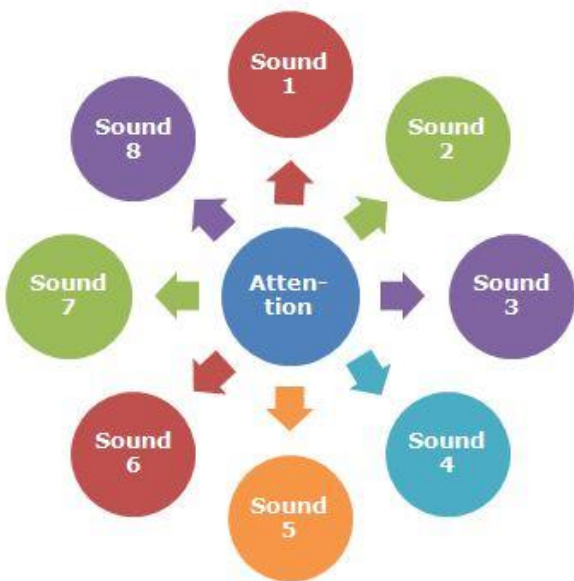


First, focus on the tapping sound, no other sound matters, give all of your attention to that sound (*pause*). Now focus on the sound of (*Sound 4*) outside of this room, pay attention to only that sound (*pause*).

Now switch your attention and focus on the sound of (*Sound 8*) outside this room, focus only on that sound, no other sound matters (*pause*). Now switch your attention to the tapping sound (*pause*). Refocus on the sound of (*Sound 3*) (*pause*), now back to the tapping sound. Now the sound in the far distance (*Sound 9*) (*pause*). Focus again on the sound of (*Sound 3*) (*pause*). The sound of (*Sound 6*) (*pause*), the sound of (*Sound 4*) (*pause*), the sound of (*Sound 9*), sound (*Sound 7*), sound (*Sound 5*) etc.

3 Divided Attention

Now, expand your attention, making it as broad and as deep as possible and try to absorb all of the sounds at the same time. Try to focus on and be aware of all of the sounds both within and outside of this room at the same time (*pause*). Try to hear all of the sound simultaneously. Count the number of sounds you can hear at the same time.



Okay, well done.

How many sounds were you aware of at the same time?

(If in session, discuss and feedback, exploring difficulties.)

Like with learning any new skill, it takes a lot of practice. Your mind will wander and be distracted – that’s normal, it’s just how the human mind works. Use the distracting thoughts as “background noise” to help make the exercise more effective.

The more you practise, the easier it will become.

Practise the technique twice a day, for 10 – 15 minutes at a time.