

11. Systems Activity: Three Types of Attention

Everyone's day moves through phases, and you're probably no different – there are times when you're fired up and raring to go, there are times when your energy levels are just average and there are times when you feel your attention is low and your motivation dips.

These three phases happen to everyone during a working day. You're not unusual if you have low energy levels or can't concentrate; if you catch yourself looking around you and seeing others hard at work, remember they're no different to you – just in a different phase of their day.

Some people can predict when they're going to be feeling fired up (it might be the mornings, it might be after breakfast or after exercise) and when they're going to feel slower. Others haven't noticed a pattern, but once they pay attention they see one emerging. For others, it's totally random.

Graham Allcott, founder of Think Productive (<http://thinkproductive.co.uk>), uses the following definitions for the three states:

1. Proactive attention (fully focused, fired up, feeling fresh).
2. Active attention (plugged in, ticking along nicely).
3. Inactive attention (flagging, fried, foggy).

He argues that really successful people get work done in all three states. They don't give up when they're in state 3, they just switch tasks.

Make a list of all the tasks you've got on your plate at the moment. Think of everything – homework, reading, essays, revision, upcoming tests, college interviews, etc.

Now categorise them. Complex and challenging tasks go in 'proactive attention'. When you feel fully focused, fired up and fresh, you tackle those. Regular tasks go in 'active attention'. They're tasks to get on with when you feel you're ticking along nicely. Repetitive tasks that are pretty easy go in 'inactive attention'. When you're feeling fried or foggy, you switch to those tasks.

Proactive attention	Active attention	Inactive attention
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Keep the list with you for a week or two. Whenever you're about to start working:

- » Check your energy levels. Sit still for a second and listen to your body. Decide which attention state you're in.
- » Review the list of tasks you've got to do that suit your attention level. If there are none in that column, find one from the next column and tackle it.

After a week or two, see whether you can observe patterns in your attention levels. Really good learners have noticed these patterns in themselves and sequence their tasks beforehand.

November Activities

Final Thoughts

One way to log your attention is by colour coding. Use green for proactive attention, amber for active attention, and red for inactive. You could use a grid that looked something like this:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8–10am							
10–12							
1–3pm							
3–5pm							
6–8pm							
8–10pm							

We’ve found that certain people move through predictable phases of attention. Some start the day full of energy, but dip slowly as the day goes on. Others respond to food (!), feeling more sluggish after lunch, for example. Others have worked out ways to jump into proactive attention before doing an important piece of work.

This last skill is really valuable. *If you can boost your attention, you can get more work done in less time.* Try experimenting with boosting attention. We’ve spoken to students who do the following:

- Exercise just before work:** A run, a walk, a quick jog around the block, even an intense burst of star jumps!
- Music just before work:** A loud burst of motivating music with headphones on.

Other pre-work rituals: Some students talk about tidying their work spaces to get ‘in the zone’, or having a hot shower, or getting changed or a quick ten-minute burst of game-playing (bright, colourful puzzlers work way better than long, complex strategy or RPGs).

Use the space below to record your experiments and plans: