



Dopamine has been called the “motivation molecule,” as it helps provide the drive and focus needed to get stuff done. Dopamine is also involved with the “pleasure system” of the brain and functions to create a feeling of enjoyment and a sense of reward in order to motivate performance.

Any sort of reward, such as getting food, having sex, making money, earning praise, or reaching a goal increases dopamine and the feeling of pleasure.

Being easily distracted and having trouble focusing and finishing tasks can be signs of early deficiencies.

What Is Dopamine?

Dopamine is a type of neurotransmitter. Your body makes it, and your nervous system uses it to send messages between nerve cells. That's why it's sometimes called a chemical messenger.

Dopamine plays a role in how we feel pleasure; it brings about positive feelings based on a certain action. It's a big part of our unique human ability to think and plan. It helps us strive, focus, and find things interesting.

Dopamine and Memory

Dopamine's two primary functions are motivation and movement, but dopamine also plays a role in other cognitive functions such as memory and focus.

Though dopamine is not produced in the prefrontal cortex area of the brain, dopamine secretions in that area help facilitate memory processing. This is a highly delicate function, so even the slightest variation in the number of dopamine secretions in the area can severely impact your memory.

Dopamine can also explain why we best remember things that interest us. When something is interesting to us or excites us, we get a spike of dopamine because the experience of learning about that thing is pleasurable. The dopamine secretes in the prefrontal cortex, so our memory is activated, and we are more likely to remember whatever we're learning about. When we find the subject boring, we don't have the same dopamine spike, so there is less dopamine in the prefrontal cortex. It is harder for us to remember what we learned.

Dopamine and Focus

Dopamine naturally responds to the optic nerves (those used for vision) to help you focus your attention on a specific activity. When we are visually focusing on something, dopamine can help us keep things in our short-term memory. It is thought that low levels of dopamine in the prefrontal cortex may contribute to attention deficit disorder.

How to Boost Dopamine in Brain-Healthy Ways

Meditate

Sometimes the best way to do something is by doing nothing. Specifically, you do nothing physically, but in your mind, you're trying to sort out your thoughts. Meditation, prayer and simple self-reflection are all linked to increased dopamine levels.

Try Something New

Dopamine production is actually triggered when we find something new and exciting in front of us. That could be eating a new kind of food or visiting a new place. It could be meeting new people.

Another way to get your dopamine going is by starting a new hobby, but not just any hobby. It needs to be one that requires you to focus. It can be anything from assembling LEGO sets doing complex jigsaw puzzles.

Listen to Music

Studies have shown that if you listen to music you really enjoy, the brain releases dopamine as a response. Good music triggers our pleasure centers, just like when eating good food.

Make Music

Singing, performing and creating music also has its own reward. In particular, it's also a way to get more dopamine into your system. So, brush up on your piano lessons or bring down that ukelele from the attic to get your dopamine boost.



Do Creative Things

Have you noticed that when you're deep into a creative work, you enter a state of hyper-focus where you feel you can do anything? That state is called flow and it's something that dopamine helps you achieve.

Increasing dopamine can be as simple as taking up a creative hobby like photography, crafting, knitting, or drawing.

Making a List and Checking it Off

As you embark on learning anything new, or even doing tasks, make a list of your small steps to achieve your goal or tasks to complete. Dopamine is also released after you finish something, whether it's a big job or a small task. It follows, then, that if you want more dopamine "hits", break down those big jobs into smaller ones.

The important thing is to set those goals and list the tasks. It's much more satisfying, dopamine-wise, to check stuff off a list physically. Nothing is more satisfying than ticking off something as done.

Exercise, good quality sleep, healthy human contact, getting plenty of sun and a healthy diet also help increase the production of dopamine, which can help you focus better, learn more easily, and retain information more reliably. All of these are also steps I've outlined in "Don't Let the Memories Fade" to improve all-around cognitive function, so now is as good a time as any to incorporate as many of them as possible into your lifestyle!

