

Introduction

There is plenty of advice available on how to increase your performance. One of the least talked about is the need for improved focus. You could call focus the secret ingredient to success. We face distractions every day. Our environment is filled with abundant stimuli, all vying for our attention and ensuring that we will lose focus and have difficulty in concentrating. These distractions make it difficult for us to perform at our optimal level.

Mental focus is the deliberate and conscious effort of keeping a mental spotlight on what we are doing. We block out distractions and hone in on what is important. However, that is not always easy. The problem with not focusing properly is not only that we feel out-of-control, but we experience a constant high level of stress, which can affect our health.

For many, trying to maintain concentration is a daily chore with which they struggle. If we want to succeed, we need to improve our focus, and luckily, that is skill that can be learned and

enhanced. The fact is, we have only so much mental energy to spare. It's a finite commodity. As that energy gets scattered in many directions, our brain simply rebels, as our body does when we expend too much physical energy.

The ability to focus on one task becomes lost. That's when we become stressed. Frequently, our ability to focus is directly related to our emotions. If a task – at work or at home – makes us nervous or anxious, we actively seek distractions. If a report the boss is waiting for fills us with panic, it's easier to divert our attention to checking email, making phone calls or chatting with someone at the water cooler than to concentrate on the report.

At home, when a serious discussion with a spouse is necessary, we may welcome the distraction of Facebook, Twitter and ESPN rather than face the unpleasantness ahead. We may not do this consciously, but there are times we certainly choose to invite distractions to keep us from focusing on something that is important. And as a consequence, our work and relationships suffer.

We will discuss how to keep a better balance between positive and negative thoughts and how to creative habits that help us develop a better focus on a daily basis. The good news is, focusing is not only a skill we can learn, it is also a choice we can make. This book is designed to help us make better choices to enable us to focus better.

Why We Need To Focus

Being in focus is a purposeful direction and control of our awareness to the present moment, where it is most needed. Never has this been more important than today, when there is such an abundance of ready distractions competing for our attention. So many of us feel anxious if we aren't checking Facebook updates, Twitter notifications and emails every few minutes. Unfortunately, this has turned into a chosen lifestyle for many. Our smartphone has become our lifeline.

We're on the phone while driving and posting on Instagram while grabbing a meal. Instead of focusing on what we are doing, we take pride in "multitasking." The problem with multitasking is that it doesn't allow us to do more, it merely dilutes and diminishes what we are already doing.

The good news is, our brain, like our body, can be enhanced and developed. And like our bodies, this takes patience, time and effort. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. Building our muscles is the results of daily habits, and the brain is a muscle.

We can train ourselves to improve our focusing power and perform better until it becomes natural and second nature. The better we become at focusing, the better we are able to control our thoughts and our actions.

Does mental chaos seem natural to you, like a car battling heavy traffic every day? Do you wonder how some people manage to get more done and do it quicker and better? These people face the same focusing obstacles we all do. Everyone does. They have merely trained themselves to overcome it instead of remaining a victim to information and anxiety overload.

Computers allow information to be processed at a speed that would have been unimaginable just decades ago. They have changed our lives. Unfortunately, our brains are still working at the same pace. That's why we are suffering from circuit overload. In effect, some of us exist in a perpetual mental traffic jam.

The more information we have, the harder we are forced to work. Some days, it can seem that we are controlled by our computers and social media instead of us controlling them. While we are constantly being interrupted by emails, tweets, texts and

coworkers in the next cubicle, our own mind can add to the dissonance as we try to focus on our work while our brain keeps replaying some painful past incident and other thoughts irrelevant to the present.

It's time we set sound mental boundaries. We've allowed our brain to run amok, and it's time to take back control. Sometimes, taking control of our mental focus is as simple as learning to say no. There are a lot of demands on our time. We are led to believe that doing more is the road to success, when in reality, it can lead to unfocused confusion. We need to actively and carefully choose on what we concentrate. A lot of times that means doing less, but doing it better.

If you're worried about paying the bills and an important report is due at work, you cannot focus on both and give the problems equal attention. If a loved one is facing serious health issues, and your thoughts are on getting a new job, you need to choose what is more important.

Making these critical choices starts with awareness. It's easy to push negative thoughts and emotions away and pretend they

don't exist. But those thoughts will remain in your brain, creating havoc with your ability to concentrate. The easiest way to handle these choices is by acknowledging them and saying, "I will think about this matter later and focus on what's really important now." This is setting a conscious boundary in your mind. The problem still exists, but by making a choice, it no longer serves as a distraction. Practicing mindfulness, as discussed in the following chapter, is a great help in accomplishing this.

Not all focusing problems are that clear. Every day, we face dozens, if not hundreds of distractions. At the office, we may consider it necessary to check email every half hour, talk to anyone who comes into our office, and agree to take on any task we are given. Business seems to demand multitasking in order to achieve greater productivity. In reality, we are still doing one task at a time, but are shifting back and forth and devoting less attention to all tasks. We are focusing less, when we should be focusing better.

Multitasking is one of the major thieves of concentration power. Bouncing from one task to another makes us less efficient and robs us of needed energy. You may think you're being productive

by checking your email while calling a client, but in fact, you aren't focused on either task and are being less effective than you could be.

Get into the habit of listing your priorities and sticking to them, although flexibility will be necessary at times. A daily to-do list can help you sharpen your focus. Interruptions will still occur, but you can minimize their negative effect. Our brain is genetically geared to concentrate on one thing at a time. That is how we function best.

Multitasking actually slows down our thinking and decision-making ability. Consider that every task, no matter how unimportant, deserves your full attention. In the end, this mindset will help you accomplish more.

If necessary, put block on social media and create a schedule for when to check email and phone messages. Athletes and artists use the terms, "in the zone," to describe that ultimate state of mind

that allows them to focus only on their performance and become totally absorbed by it. At the office, it can be referred to as being “in the flow,” a term coined by psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi.

This flow starts by setting goals for yourself. Know each day what you want to achieve. These goals should be specific. “I will work hard today,” is much too vague to be effective. Actual goals would be, “I will finish that long report before lunch, then I will do 2 hours of research for the upcoming project.” This kind of specificity will make it much easier for you to keep your concentration on the task at hand.

It is easier to concentrate on what you are doing if you are confident in the results. One of the most effective confidence-builders is to visualize having completed the task successfully. Confidence is a positive belief in yourself and a desire to succeed. This can apply on any level of business.

A corporate leader requires confidence in his vision. So does the person who answers the company’s phone. All of us have experienced the difference between calling a company, only to be met with indifference, and getting a person who spends time

listening to us and makes an effort to find a solution to our problem.

Confidence challenges us to do our best at any task. Negative emotions, such as self-doubt, serve as a constant distraction as we keep questioning ourselves and our ability. Recognizing these emotion is the first step in dealing with them.

Staying in “the flow” and enabling full concentration means saying no to interruptions, distractions and negative thoughts. Anything but the task at hand can be handled at another time. Get into the habit of focusing on just one thing, whether it’s brushing your teeth, preparing dinner, or writing a memo to the boss. If other thoughts intrude, simple put them aside.

You can also increase your focus and concentration at work by doing less. As we have already pointed out, concentration involves choices. Choose wisely. Checking off your to-do list is a useful gauge of how well you’ve conquered distractions on any given day.

Focus and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a somewhat vague term for many people, invoking ancient Buddhist beliefs. While the practice of mindfulness does go back thousands of years and includes meditative practices, it is much broader. Mindfulness refers to a specific learned state of awareness. The more out-of-focus our mind is, the less we are actually aware of the immediate moment. Mindfulness keeps us in touch with the present.

Practicing mindful means living in the present. Many of us are controlled by past pain and future uncertainties in such a way we never experience the here and now. Our thoughts can naturally shift from today to yesterday to tomorrow. When we stress over bad sales, unpaid bills or failed past relationships, we effectively invite distractions into our minds instead of focusing on solutions to our problems.

Mindfulness allows us to control our meandering thoughts and shift the focus back to today. When we are trying to get something

done, a wandering, distracting mind can make it much more difficult. That's why establishing control over our thoughts rids us of distractions and helps us accomplish our needed tasks. Mindfulness is an inner voice that tells us, "Hey, this is what's important. Focus on this, not that." This effectively reduces our stress, which then helps us concentrate even more effectively.

Practicing mindfulness is using building blocks to a better, more effective you. One of the ways we can increase mindfulness is through meditation. Mindful meditation focuses our attention on our breathing as we let go of any intruding thoughts. This simple exercise, when practiced regularly, helps us control the way we concentrate.

Practicing mindful meditation is easy and very pleasant and relaxing. Just find a quiet place and take a comfortable seat. Close your eyes and just focus on your breathing. Put everything else out of your mind. Follow your breath as you inhale and exhale. If thoughts intrude, and they will, simply accept them without judgment and bring your focus back to your breathing.

This exercise is very powerful and effective in handling intrusive thoughts and emotions without being controlled by them. While you should set aside a specific time each day to meditate, perhaps 15 to 30 minutes, a short breathing meditation at your desk can bring you back in focus during stressful days at the office.

Focus and Procrastination

Procrastinators frequently have a great deal of difficulty in concentrating. We put off something important, then we become overwhelmed with stress. As we've discussed, stress is what makes it difficult to concentrate, because it remains in the background. You've put off paying bills or making crucial calls? You know you have to act, but you avoid doing anything.

The problem will not go away. Instead, it will nag at you incessantly. It will be on your mind while you try to concentrate on work, interfering with your thoughts. Procrastination is fueled by fear, and fear is a negative emotion that will keep you out-of-focus.

We procrastinate for many reasons. Usually, we're afraid of making mistakes or that we won't live up to expectations. Better to do nothing than to fail. So, again, we invite distractions into our lives. It's easier to read a few interesting blogs than to focus. At least, it's something we know and can deal with.

To stop procrastinating, we need to become aware of our avoidance tactics when it happens. This is where being more mindful can help us. When we become aware of trying to avoid a task, we need to stop then and there and deal with what is making us uncomfortable.

Our ability to concentrate will increase tremendously when we take start facing what makes us nervous and deal with it. Think of something you have been avoiding, such as working on a major report that will become due. Pick a short time limit, perhaps 15 minutes, and focus on nothing but the report.

For just 15 minutes, nothing exists for you but that report. You won't finish it, but you will get started. Do this again the following day. Fifteen minutes is a time limit with which you can deal. When it becomes more comfortable, increase the time span.

Tackling something we need to do in small increments makes it easier to keep our concentration sharp. It becomes less threatening to work on something for 15 minutes than for an entire afternoon. Just knowing you're doing something will

alleviate much of the anxiety. And you'll be sharpening your focus every time you do this.

Learning how to concentrate is a learned skill, and every time you make the effort, you will become better at it. Soon, handling unpleasant tasks in such a manner will become a habit.

To stop procrastinating and rid yourself of the fears that keep you from being able to concentrate fully, try the following:

- Become aware of what you do when you procrastinate. Do you call friends? Spend time on Facebook? Play computer games? Knowing what your triggers are will enable you to stop.
- As we have discussed, break down a large task into smaller tasks. Concentrating on one thing for a short period of time will make it easier to focus for longer period.
- Create small deadlines for yourself. If spending the day cleaning the house seems intimidating, set aside half an hour where you concentrate on only one area and nothing else.
- Stop waiting for the perfect time to start. The time will never be perfect, so get started now.

- Many times, we delay starting a task because we're afraid our ability isn't good enough. The need for perfection is invariably paralyzing, and we end up delaying a task for fear of failure. While we should always do our best, the need for perfection can have the opposite effect. It's impossible to concentrate when all we can feel is fear. And fear makes concentrating almost impossible. Make a conscious decision to do the best you can. It will stop the mental paralysis and clear the way to better focus.

You Can't Concentrate If You Don't Feel Good

By now, you realize that concentration takes a lot of mental energy. When we don't feel our best, our energy level becomes low. We find it difficult to muster the ability for razor-sharp concentration. For optimal health, both physical and mental, you will find the following habits very helpful.

- You may not see the connection between the food you eat and your ability to concentrate, but your brain needs proper nutrition in order to function. A diet of fast foods, sugar, unhealthy fats and preservatives will affect not only your body, but your mind. Seek out plenty of fresh produce, lean proteins, fish high in omega 3 fatty acids, nuts and berries. These foods will give you the necessary energy and nutrition to make concentrating easier and natural.

- You won't be able to concentrate when you are sleep-deprived and tired. Eight hours of sleep isn't a luxury, it is a necessity to keep your mind functioning.
- When our energies are scattered, exercise is usually the first thing we give up. Regular exercise will increase your ability to maintain necessary concentration when you need it. This doesn't mean you need to spend two hours at the gym every day. Take a walk at lunchtime, take the stairs instead of the elevator, park your car a few blocks away from where you are going. Just keep moving, and your brain will thank you.
- Before going to bed, create a to-do list for the next day. This list should be specific and list everything you need to accomplish. This clarifies what tasks need to be done, and makes it easier to concentrate on one task at a time.
- Take a break. We've been discussing how to heighten your concentration level and getting more accomplished. However, downtime is necessary for your body and brain to reboot. Even if you are busy, a ten or fifteen-minute break will clear your mind and enable you to focus better when you resume the task.

Better Focus Boot Camp

The mind, like the body, can get flabby and lazy. And like the body, your mind will strengthen with regular exercise.

Welcome to your mental boot camp.

If you simply plod along and let your mind move in any direction it wants, your brain muscles will weaken and atrophy. You need to take control and whip those muscles into shape so that focused concentration becomes second nature.

- Be a kind drill sergeant. Just as you need to build up your physical stamina gradually, you'll be building your mental muscles slowly. If you overdo it, you are far more likely to become discouraged and give up.
- Give yourself timed tasks. Start with just five minutes and concentrate totally on what you are doing. Stop and rest. Five minutes of intensive concentration can be labor-intensive.

After a break, do another five minutes of concentration. Double the time each day, so that your ability to concentrate grows slowly but surely. At this easy pace, you should be able to single-mindedly concentrate on a task for over an hour in less than two weeks. It will have become a natural habit!

- We discussed the importance of lists. Now that you're in boot camp, you'll take it a step further. Make of list of your favorite distraction tactics – social media, talking to friends, cooking, shopping – whatever you know you do when you are in avoidance mode. Keep this list handy. Whenever you find yourself tempted to indulge yourself, make a conscious decision to step back. Don't turn on any social media, and don't start any activity that will keep you from your primary task. This will take willpower. However, once you become aware of how you invite distractions into your life, it will be easier to resist temptation.
- Make sure 15 to 30 minutes of mindful meditation becomes a regular part of your day, regardless of how busy you are. The power of meditation to quiet your mind and enhance your ability to concentrate is enormous. A study using 140

volunteers in a 2-month meditation program showed that each participant had measurably enhanced his or her ability to concentrate.

- Mindfulness has a powerful effect on the brain, so practice being mindful every day. It involves slowing down and become totally aware of what you are doing using all your senses. If you are eating, notice the color, aroma, texture and taste of the food instead of simply gulping it down. When walking, take a few minutes to really notice a flower, a rock, or any other object. How does it feel to the touch, how does it smell, how do you feel holding it? These exercises create a heightened awareness that will hone your focus to a razor-sharp edge.
- We've discussed the importance of physical activity to help your brain improve its concentration abilities. In boot camp, you'll be challenging your brain until it has the mental equivalent of 6-pack abs. Read a classic novel that requires you to actually concentrate. Do crossword puzzles regularly. Learn to play chess or a musical instrument. These activities

sharpen challenge the mind and sharpen the brain muscles very effectively.

- Develop better listening habits. Just hearing what someone is saying is not the same as listening. Active listening requires concentration and using all your senses and full focus. Don't just hear the word, but be aware of the tone and body language of the speaker. This is mindful listening, which engages your entire brain.

In Conclusion

The choice whether to actively live a focused or unfocused life is yours. One of the problems with focus is that it isn't really encouraged in today's world. In many ways, it is discouraged. We are told that we must balance job, relationships and leisure time because each is important in our lives. At work, we are told to take on multiple assignments and complete multiple tasks at the same time. We are also told we should be "networking" with our coworkers instead of concentrating on our work.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to get ahead on the job, while at the same time having a satisfying social life. But there are times we need to become single-minded in order to succeed. That means concentrating on just one thing. In today's world, that can be challenging.

We can focus all we want, but if we focus on the wrong thing, we don't accomplish what we set out to do. That is why it is important to prioritize. If we want to succeed, we first need to know on what to focus.

If we are constantly torn between different tasks, we are adding needless stress to our life. We are unable to function optimally when our concentration is being torn in different directions. It's critical to prioritize your goals in order for each to receive your complete attention. If you don't, you'll be spending a lot of time in a mental fog.

In addition to a daily to-do list, have a weekly review list. Things come up, and you need to remain flexible. If you've planned on finishing a report, but your daughter's important recital pops up during that scheduled time, you may need to make changes. By having a weekly schedule, you can shift things around when necessary without stressing out and become unable to concentrate on both important matters.

Create habits that will help you keep your power of concentration at a high level. As discussed, a to-do list is essential. In addition, creating habits at work will help keep you focused. Have a time for checking and answering emails and stick to it. Have another time for taking and returning phone calls.

Know your own body rhythm. Some people function best in the morning. If that is you, prioritize your most challenging task first thing. Allot a certain amount of time to concentrate on that task, then move on to the second item on your list. Prioritizing can reduce a lot of stress and enhance your ability to concentrate when your energy is high.

When you go through life unfocused, you get less done yet work harder, because distractions scatter your energies. It is virtually impossible to be and do your best when you spend much of your time in a mental fog. People will stop relying on you, because you can't always honor your commitments. You disappoint employees, families and friends alike.

You will never know how much you are capable of if you don't actively focus your mind on what you are doing. Our time here on earth is finite. Why not use it to the best of our ability by increasing our awareness, focus on what really matters, and enjoy all of life's abundance rather than settling for scraps.

Are You Looking For An Extra-Edge To Boost Your Focus?



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