

Concentration

Concentration has been defined as "the ability to direct one's thinking in whatever direction one would intend".

We all have the ability to concentrate some of the time. But at other times our thoughts are scattered, and our minds race from one thing to another. To deal with such times, we need to learn and practice concentration skills and strategies. To concentrate, we have to learn a skill, and as with any skill this means practice repeated day after day until we achieve enough improvement to feel that we can concentrate when we need to.

Our ability to concentrate depends on

- commitment
- enthusiasm for the task
- skill at doing the task
- our emotional and physical state
- our psychological state
- our environment

Commitment

We need to make a personal commitment to put in the effort needed to do the task in the way which we realistically plan to do it. If we just play at it in a half-hearted manner then it is much more difficult to take the task and ourselves seriously.

Enthusiasm

If we are interested in the task and enjoy doing it, then we find it easy to motivate ourselves to start. Once started, our feelings of involvement in the activity keep us going - we want to do it.

Skill

Knowing how to do something gives confidence that our efforts will be successful, so we don't have to deal with anxiety about will this work or not. Anxiety tends to impair concentration.

Our emotional & physical state

When we are in good physical condition - i.e. feeling rested, relaxed and comfortable - and our emotions are calm and benevolent, then we tend to be positive about things. This in turn raises self-esteem, which makes us more able to concentrate, if only because we don't have to worry about how awful we are or life is.

Our psychological state

For example, if we are in an obsessed or distracted state, our thoughts are pre-occupied, leaving little mental space to think about anything else.

Environment

It is much more difficult to concentrate if our surroundings keep intruding on our awareness, perhaps because it is noisy, too hot or too cold, the furniture is uncomfortable or the people around us are stressing out.

Expanding your concentration span

People sometimes refer to a concentration span: this is the time we can concentrate on a specific task before our thoughts wander. In learning concentration skills, we aim to extend our concentration span - bearing in mind that we will have a different span for different tasks. It cannot be expanded to infinity! Most people find their level for most tasks is about an hour; but for some people and some tasks, it will just be a few minutes, while for others it might be two or three hours.

The main barriers to concentrating are boredom, anxiety and day-dreaming. Thus in improving our concentration skills, we need to counteract these barriers. The following three skills are basic to concentration: if you want to improve your concentration, start by practicing them. They will be followed by further strategies which will allow you to build onto the basic skills.

1. STOP!!!

This sounds very simple, but it works. When you notice your thoughts wandering, say to yourself STOP and then gently bring your attention back to where you want it to be. Each time it wanders bring it back. To begin with, this could be several times a minute. But each time, say STOP and then re-focus. Don't waste energy trying to keep thoughts out of your mind (forbidden thoughts attract like a magnet!), just put the effort into STOP and re-focus.

To begin with you will do this hundreds of times a week. But you will find that the period of time between your straying thoughts gets a little longer each day, so be patient and keep at it.

2. Attending

This is about maintaining concentration and not giving in to distractions. It could be described as a sort of tunnel-vision, or as being focused: you keep your concentration on what is in front of you. If you are distracted, use the STOP technique to regain concentration. You can practice attending in many situations:

- e.g. in a lecture, if people move or cough, ignore them, don't look at them, actively exclude them from the link or tunnel formed between you and the lecturer.
- e.g. in a social situation, keep your attention solely on one person - what they say, how they look etc. - and ignore what is going on round about.

3. Worry time

Set aside one or more specific periods in the day when you are allowed to worry. It can help to set them just before something that you know you will do, to ensure that you stop worrying on time - e.g. before a favorite TV program, or a meal-time. Whenever an anxiety or distracting thought enters your mind during the day, banish it until your next worry time, and re-focus on to what you are supposed to be doing. Some people find it helpful to write down the banished thought: it is easier to banish a thought if you are sure you won't have forgotten it when you get to your worry time. It is important that you keep your worry time(s), and make yourself worry for the full time. If you find that you can't fill the time available, and then make a conscious decision to reduce it.

You may notice, particularly if you keep a list, that certain things keep reappearing: this is a fairly clear indication that you need to do something about them.

4. Active Learning

Everyone has their own distinct learning style. Some learn by reading and then asking themselves questions, others learn by making condensed notes and memorizing them, others learn by the associations they make to the material, and yet others retain a pictorial image of the material. Once you know your learning style, organize the material to suit it; if you don't, learning will be more of a struggle than it needs to be, and your concentration will suffer. Having your own learning style involves having your own internal 'language'; briefly, this means the words you use to translate and understand the material so that it has meaning for you. If you don't know how you learn best, try to analyze your experience either with someone who knows how you work, or with someone with expertise in this area.

Other things that can help

- Once you know what your concentration span is for a specific activity, decide whether it is acceptable or whether you need to train yourself to expand it - e.g. a listening concentration span of 10 minutes and a lecture of 50 minutes is a mismatch! To expand your concentration span, just try to keep focused for a little longer each time by using STOP! and Attending. Practice with something that doesn't matter in terms of the task: you could expand your lecture concentration span by practicing listening to the news on the radio.
- In between periods of concentration, do things to change your physical and mental activity. You could move around to boost your circulation if you have

- been sitting, or you could think about something completely different - and fun - to give your brain a new focus.
- Give yourself incentives and rewards appropriate to the level of concentration you have had to maintain. Quite often they can be linked to the things that usually distract you. If you dream of sitting out in the sun when you are in a library trying to study, make your reward a period of sun-worship (with the appropriate sun-screen cream).
 - Be 'active' in mental activity! Use a hierarchy of questions to help you focus when reading reference material or listening to a lecture, rather than passively reading through it or listening and hoping that something will stick - and then write brief notes about the answers to your questions. Ask yourself how you will use the material, where it fits into what you already know, what new questions it triggers.
 - Ensure that your environment aids concentration - reduce distractions but don't be so comfortable that you nod off.
 - Do tasks that need most concentration at times when you are mentally and physically fresh: concentration is harder to maintain when you are tired. This means you need to know the times of day when you work best; people vary as to when is their best time.
 - Experiment and see whether working with another person helps you keep focused on the task. It can often refresh interest in the subject by sparking off new trains of thought which then re-involve you in the task.
 - Check if you feel stuck whether the problem is one of poor concentration rather than lack of the necessary knowledge or understanding - and if it's the latter, do something about it.
 - Don't look for an easy answer in stimulants such as caffeine. They only have a short-term effect of making you feel alert, and too much or too long an exposure can have serious effects on your physical and mental health.

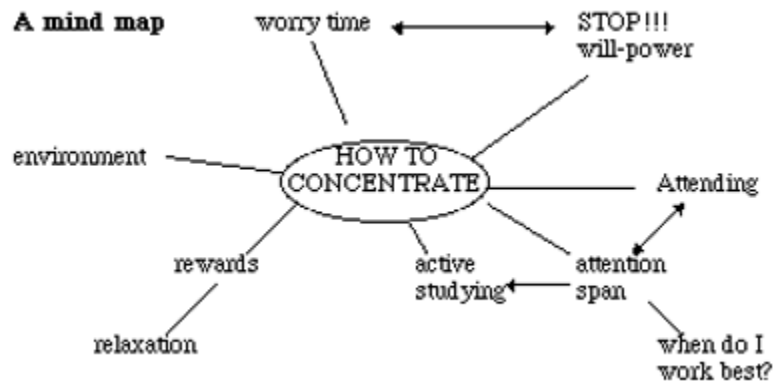
Combating specific problems with concentration

1. When you have been concentrating well but your brain now feels saturated.

Take a short break and then recharge your mental batteries by reviewing what you have done so far, considering whether it might help to switch to a new topic now. If you feel too tired to restart after a short break, review what you have done and where it fits into the overall task, and define where you need to pick it up again. If necessary make a note of this. Then decide, before you stop, when you will restart the task.

2. How to concentrate on a topic which you hate or which bores you.

Actively search in the material for aspects of the subject that can be turned into useful information (and might even be interesting!): you could do this by focusing on finding five central, important ideas to think about. Use mind-maps or spider diagrams to record the search, and write test questions to summarize your learning after each study session.



Focus on the personal rewards of completing the topic satisfactorily (even if it's only to be rid of the task) and build in treats to reward yourself as you progress through the task. If all else fails, see it as a personal challenge - don't let it beat you.

3. Day-dreaming

Use the STOP! technique and Attending to counteract it. Perhaps, make being allowed to daydream a reward after a period of concentration.

4. Negative thinking

Loss of concentration can lead to negative thoughts about yourself. Deal with them as with other distractions, and banish them into your Worry Time, when you can check out their reality.

5. Being vague

If you are not quite sure what you are supposed to be doing or why you are doing it, it will be difficult to maintain concentration. You could try to define the task in terms of its content and purpose, and then to make a realistic estimate of how much time and effort will be required to do it.

6. Feeling overwhelmed

Sometimes what we have to do is just too much for us to get our heads around. When we think about it, it is too huge a task to contemplate and our feelings of inadequacy take over. Both contribute to losing concentration because it all feels impossible. In such circumstances, look for ways of breaking the task up into smaller discreet parts that feel manageable. Treat them as individual tasks, summoning up your concentration for each of them separately. It then doesn't need so much effort to fix them all together later on to make a complete whole.

7. Self-doubt

Intellectual activity takes place mainly in the brain and is thus not shared without making a special effort. If we don't discuss what we are doing with others, it is very easy to wonder whether what we are doing is OK. This can lead us to feel ineffective and fragile, which in turn can become self-doubt. You need to reduce or banish your doubts if they are not to interfere with concentration. If it isn't possible to discuss what you are doing with others, you could try using the four steps mentioned under Negative Thinking to check out the worth of what you are doing.

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