

Focus:

The Ultimate Guide on How to Improve Focus and Concentration

Focus and concentration can be difficult to master. Sure, most people want to learn how to improve focus and boost concentration. But actually doing it? We live in a noisy world and constant distractions can make focus difficult.

Luckily, this page contains the best ideas and top research on how to get and stay focused. We will break down the science behind sharpening your mind and paying attention to what matters. Whether you're looking to focus on your goals in life or business, this page should cover everything you need to know.

You can click the links below to jump to a particular section or simply scroll down to read everything. At the end of this page, you'll find a complete list of all the articles I have written on focus.

I. Focus: What It Is and How it Works

First things first. What is focus, really? Experts define focus as the act of concentrating your interest or activity on something. That's a somewhat boring definition, but there is an important insight hiding inside that definition.

What is Focus? In order to concentrate on one thing you must, by default, ignore many other things.

Here's a better way to put it:

Focus can only occur when we have said yes to one option and no to all other options. In other words, elimination is a prerequisite for focus. As Tim Ferriss says, "What you don't do determines what you can do."

Of course, focus doesn't require a permanent no, but it does require a present no. You always have the option to do something else later, but in the present moment focus requires that you only do one thing. Focus is the key to productivity because saying no to every other option unlocks your ability to accomplish the one thing that is left.

Now for the important question: What can we do to focus on the things that matter and ignore the things that don't?

Why Can't I Focus?

Most people don't have trouble with focusing. They have trouble with deciding.

What I mean is that most healthy humans have a brain that is capable of focusing if we get the distractions out of the way. Have you ever had a task that you absolutely had to get done? What happened? You got it done because the deadline made the decision for you. Maybe you procrastinated beforehand, but once things became urgent and you were forced to make a decision, you took action.

Instead of doing the difficult work of choosing one thing to focus on, we often convince ourselves that multitasking is a better option. This is ineffective.

Here's why...

The Myth of Multitasking

Technically, we are capable of doing two things at the same time. It is possible, for example, to watch TV while cooking dinner or to answer an email while talking on the phone.

What is impossible, however, is concentrating on two tasks at once. You're either listening to the TV and the overflowing pot of pasta is background noise, or you're tending to the pot of pasta and the TV is background noise. During any single instant, you are concentrating on one or the other.

Multitasking forces your brain to switch your focus back and forth very quickly from one task to another. This wouldn't be a big deal if the human brain could transition seamlessly from one job to the next, but it can't.

Have you ever been in the middle of writing an email when someone interrupts you? When the conversation is over and you get back to the message, it takes you a few minutes to get your bearings, remember what you were writing, and get back on track. Something similar happens when you multitask. Multitasking forces you to pay a mental price each time you interrupt one task and jump to another. In psychology terms, this mental price is called the switching cost.

Switching cost is the disruption in performance that we experience when we switch our focus from one area to another. One study, published in the International Journal of Information Management in 2003, found that the typical person checks email once every five minutes and that, on average, it takes 64 seconds to resume the previous task after checking your email.

In other words, because of email alone, we typically waste one out of every six minutes.

The myth of multitasking is that it will make you more effective. In reality, remarkable focus is what makes the difference. (Image inspired by Jessica Hagy.)

II. How to Focus and Increase Your Attention Span

Let's talk about how to overcome our tendency to multitask and focus on one thing at a time. Of the many options in front of you, how do you know what to focus on? How do you know where to direct your energy and attention? How do you determine the one thing that you should commit to doing?

decision-making-tree

Warren Buffett's "2 List" Strategy for Focused Attention

One of my favorite methods for focusing your attention on what matters and eliminating what doesn't comes from the famous investor Warren Buffett.

Buffett uses a simple 3-step productivity strategy to help his employees determine their priorities and actions. You may find this method useful for making decisions and getting yourself to commit to doing one thing right away. Here's how it works...

One day, Buffett asked his personal pilot to go through the 3-step exercise.

STEP 1: Buffett started by asking the pilot, named Mike Flint, to write down his top 25 career goals. So, Flint took some time and wrote them down. (Note: You could also complete this exercise with goals for a shorter timeline. For example, write down the top 25 things you want to accomplish this week.)

STEP 2: Then, Buffett asked Flint to review his list and circle his top 5 goals. Again, Flint took some time, made his way through the list, and eventually decided on his 5 most important goals.

STEP 3: At this point, Flint had two lists. The 5 items he had circled were List A, and the 20 items he had not circled were List B.

Flint confirmed that he would start working on his top 5 goals right away. And that's when Buffett asked him about the second list, "And what about the ones you didn't circle?"

Flint replied, "Well, the top 5 are my primary focus, but the other 20 come in a close second. They are still important so I'll work on those intermittently as I see fit. They are not as urgent, but I still plan to give them a dedicated effort."

To which Buffett replied, "No. You've got it wrong, Mike. Everything you didn't circle just became your Avoid-At-All-Cost list. No matter what, these things get no attention from you until you've succeeded with your top 5."

I love Buffett's method because it forces you to make hard decisions and eliminate things that might be good uses of time, but aren't great uses of time. So often the tasks that derail our focus are ones that we can easily rationalize spending time on.

One goal

This is just one way to narrow your focus and eliminate distractions. I've covered many other methods before like The Ivy Lee Method and The Eisenhower Box. That said, no matter what method you use and no matter how committed you are, at some point your concentration and focus begin to fade. How can you increase your attention span and remain focused?

There are two simple steps you can take.

Measure Your Results

The first thing you can do is to measure your progress.

Focus often fades because of lack of feedback. Your brain has a natural desire to know whether or not you are making progress toward your goals, and it is impossible to know that without getting feedback. From a practical standpoint, this means that we need to measure our results.

We all have areas of life that we say are important to us, but that we aren't measuring. That's a shame because measurement maintains focus and concentration. The things we measure are the things we improve. It is only through numbers and clear tracking that we have any idea if we are getting better or worse.

When I measured how many pushups I did, I got stronger.

When I tracked my reading habit of 20 pages per day, I read more books.

When I recorded my values, I began living with more integrity.

The tasks I measured were the ones I remained focused on.

Unfortunately, we often avoid measuring because we are fearful of what the numbers will tell us about ourselves. The trick is to realize that measuring is not a judgment about who you are, it's just feedback on where you are.

Measure to discover, to find out, to understand. Measure to get to know yourself better. Measure to see if you're actually spending time on the things that are important to you. Measure because it will help you focus on the things that matter and ignore the things that don't.

Focus on the Process, Not the Event

The second thing you can do to maintain long-term focus is to concentrate on processes, not events. All too often, we see success as an event that can be achieved and completed.

Here are some common examples:

Many people see health as an event: "If I just lose 20 pounds, then I'll be in shape."

Many people see entrepreneurship as an event: "If we could get our business featured in the New York Times, then we'd be set."

Many people see art as an event: "If I could just get my work featured in a bigger gallery, then I'd have the credibility I need."

Those are just a few of the many ways that we categorize success as a single event. But if you look at the people who stay focused on their goals, you start to realize that it's not the events or the results that make them different. It's the commitment to the process. They fall in love with the daily practice, not the individual event.

What's funny, of course, is that this focus on the process is what will allow you to enjoy the results anyway.

If you want to be a great writer, then having a best-selling book is wonderful. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of writing.

If you want the world to know about your business, then it would be great to be featured in Forbes magazine. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of marketing.

If you want to be in the best shape of your life, then losing 20 pounds might be necessary. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of eating healthy and exercising consistently.

If you want to become significantly better at anything, you have to fall in love with the process of doing it. You have to fall in love with building the identity of someone who does the work, rather than merely dreaming about the results that you want.

Focusing on outcomes and goals is our natural tendency, but focusing on processes leads to more results over the long-run.

III. Concentration and Focus Mind-Hacks

Even after you've learned to love the process and know how to stay focused on your goals, the day-to-day implementation of those goals can still be messy. Let's talk about some additional ways to improve concentration and make sure you're giving each task your focused attention.

How to Improve Concentration

Here are few additional ways to improve your focus and get started on what matters.

Choose an anchor task. One of the major improvements I've made recently is to assign one (and only one) priority to each work day. Although I plan to complete other tasks during the day, my priority task is the one non-negotiable thing that must get done. I call this my "anchor task" because it is the mainstay that holds the rest of my day in place. The power of choosing one priority is that it naturally guides your behavior by forcing you to organize your life around that responsibility.

Manage your energy, not your time. If a task requires your full attention, then schedule it for a time of day when you have the energy needed to focus. For example, I have noticed that my creative energy is highest in the morning. That's when I'm fresh. That's when I do my best writing. That's when I make the best strategic decisions about my business. So, what do I do? I schedule creative tasks for the morning. All other business tasks are taken care of in the afternoon. This includes doing interviews, responding to emails, phone calls and Skype chats, data analysis and number crunching. Nearly every productivity strategy obsesses over managing your time better, but time is useless if you don't have the energy you need to complete the task you are working on.

Never check email before noon. Focus is about eliminating distractions. Email can be one of the biggest distractions of all. If I don't check email at the beginning of the day, then I am able to spend the morning pursuing my own agenda rather than reacting to everybody else's agenda. That's a huge win because I'm not wasting mental energy thinking about all the messages in my inbox. I realize that waiting until the afternoon isn't feasible for many people, but I'd like to offer a challenge. Can you wait until 10AM? What about 9AM? 8:30AM? The exact cutoff time doesn't matter. The point is to carve out time during your morning when you can focus on what is most important to you without letting the rest of the world dictate your mental state.

Leave your phone in another room. I usually don't see my phone for the first few hours of the day. It is much easier to do focused work when you don't have any text messages, phone calls, or alerts interrupting your focus.

Work in full screen mode. Whenever I use an application on my computer, I use full screen mode. If I'm reading an article on the web, my browser takes up the whole screen. If I'm writing in Evernote, I'm working in full screen mode. If I'm editing a picture in Photoshop, it is the only thing I can see. I have set up my desktop so that the menu bar disappears automatically. When I am working, I can't see the time, the icons of other applications, or any other distractions on the screen. It's funny how big of a difference this makes for my focus and concentration. If you can see an icon on your screen, then you will be reminded to click on it occasionally. However, if you remove the visual cue, then the urge to be distracted subsides in a few minutes.

Remove all tasks that could distract from early morning focus. I love doing the most important thing first each day because the urgencies of the day have not crept in yet. I have gone a little far in this regard in that I have even pushed my first meal off until about noon each day. I have been intermittent fasting for three years now (here are some lessons learned), which means that I typically eat most of my meals between 12PM and 8PM. The result is that I get some additional time in the morning to do focused work rather than cook breakfast.

Regardless of what strategy you use, just remember that anytime you find the world distracting you, all you need to do is commit to one thing. In the beginning, you don't even have to succeed. You just need to get started.

Where to Go From Here

I hope you found this short guide on focus useful. If you're looking for more ideas on how to improve your focus and concentration, feel free to browse the full list of articles below.

All Focus Articles

This is a complete list of articles I have written on focus. Enjoy!

[The Ultimate Productivity Hack is Saying No](#)

[How Experts Figure What to Focus On](#)

[Zanshin: Learning the Art of Attention and Focus From a Legendary Samurai Archer](#)

[Warren Buffett's "2 List" Strategy: How to Maximize Your Focus and Master Your Priorities](#)

[How to Get Your Brain to Focus on What Matters](#)

[How to Stay Focused When You Get Bored Working Toward Your Goals](#)

[How to Focus and Concentrate Better](#)