



Improving Your Concentration

By KSU Counseling Services

Concentration: the ability to direct one's thinking in whatever direction one would intend.

We all have the ability to concentrate -- sometimes. Think of the times when you were engrossed in a super novel. While playing your guitar or piano. In an especially good game of cards. At a spellbinder of a movie. Total concentration.

But at other times your thoughts are scattered, and your mind races from one thing to another. It's for those times that you need to learn and practice concentration strategies. They involve (1) learning mental self-regulation and (2) arranging factors that you can immediately control.

Training Your Wandering Mind: Learning Mental Self-Regulation for Improved Concentration

Improving concentration is learning a skill.

Learning a skill takes practice... whether it is shooting baskets, dancing, typing, writing, or concentrating. Do not confuse these strategies

with medicine. When you take a medicine, it acts on the body without your having to help it.

Concentration strategies require practice. You probably will begin to notice some change within a few days. You'll notice considerable improvement within four to six weeks of training your mind with some of the skills that follow. And that's a short period of time considering how many years you've spent not concentrating as well as you'd like.

Begin by practicing these techniques:

1. Be Here Now,
2. The Spider Technique, and
3. Worry Time.
4. Then try any of the Other Mental Strategies that sound promising to you. Give them an honest try -- use them for at least three days. If you notice a little change, that suggests that the skill will be valuable and, with continued practice, will greatly improve your concentration. There are also Other Factors You Can Change now in your environment that may be helpful.

Be Here Now

This deceptively simple strategy is probably the most effective. When you notice your thoughts wandering astray, say to yourself "Be here now" and gently bring your attention back to where you want it.

FOR EXAMPLE: You're in class and your attention strays from the lecture to all the homework you have, to a date, to the fact that you're hungry. As you say to yourself "Be here now" you focus back on the lecture and maintain your attention there as long as possible. When it wanders again, repeat "Be here now" and gently bring your attention back.

You may notice that your mind often wanders (as often as several times a minute at times). Each time just say "Be here now" and refocus. Do not try to keep particular thoughts out of

your mind. For example, as you sit there, close your eyes and think about anything you want to for the next three minutes except cookies. Try not to think about cookies...When you try not to think about something, it keeps coming back. ("I'm not going to think about cookies. I'm not going to think about cookies.")

When you find your thoughts wandering, gently let go of that thought and, with your "Be here now," return to the present.

You might do this hundreds of times a week, if you're normal. But, you'll find that the period of time between your straying thoughts gets a little longer every few days. So be patient and keep at it. You'll see some improvement!

The Spider Technique

This is another strategy that sounds deceptively simple. But it is the basis for concentration because it helps you to maintain your concentration and not give in to distractions.

Hold a vibrating tuning fork next to a spider web. The spider will react and come looking for what is vibrating the web. Do it several times and the spider "wises up" and knows there's no bug and doesn't come looking.

You can learn that. Train yourself not to give in to distractions. When someone enters the room, or when a door slams, do not allow yourself to participate. Rather, keep your concentration on what's in front of you.

Use the "Be here now" technique to help you regain concentration when you do become distracted momentarily.

Practice this in a variety of settings, such as:

In lecture classes practice letting people move or cough without having to look at them - just let them "be out there" while you form a tunnel between you and the lecturer.

When talking with someone keep your attention on that person, look at his face, and

note what is being said. Let the rest of the world just be "out there."

Worry or Think Time

Set aside a specific time each day to think about the things that keep entering your mind and interfering with your concentration. For example, set 4:30 to 5:00 p.m. as your worry/think time. When your mind is side-tracked into worrying during the day, remind yourself that you have a special time for worrying. Then, let the thought go for the present, and return your focus to your immediate activity.

There's research on this, believe it or not! Persons who use a worry time find themselves worrying 35 percent less of the time within four weeks. That's a big change!

The important steps are:

1. Set a specific time each day for your time,
2. When you become aware of a distracting thought, remind yourself that you have a special time to think about them,
3. Let the thought go, perhaps with "Be here now," and
4. Be sure to keep that appointment with yourself at that special time to think on the distracting thoughts of the day.

Other Mental Strategies:

- Tallying your mental wanderings. Have a 3 x 5 inch card handy. Draw two lines dividing the card into three sections. Label them "morning," "afternoon," and "evening." Each time your mind wanders, make a tally in the appropriate section. Keep a card for each day. As your skills build, you'll see the number of tallies decrease. And that's exciting!

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- **Rest/Stretch Time** . Remember to take short breaks. Lectures are usually 50 minutes long, and that's about the length of time most people can direct their attention to one task. But, that's just an average. Your concentration time-span might be less (20-35 minutes) or longer (perhaps 90 minutes). When you take a break, oxygenate (get more oxygen to your brain)! Get up and walk around the room for a couple of minutes. When we sit for long periods, blood tends to pool in our lower body and legs (because of gravity). Our calves serve as pumps for our blood when we walk, getting blood flowing more evenly throughout the body. As a result, more oxygen is carried to the brain and you are more alert.
- **Change Topics**. Many students aid their concentration by changing the subject they are studying every one to two hours. You pay more attention to something that's different. And you can give yourself that variety by changing the subject you study regularly.
- **Incentives and Rewards**. Give yourself a reward when you've completed a task. The task might be small, such as stay with a difficult assignment until you've finished. An appropriate reward might be a walk around the block, a glass of water, or reading the day's cartoon in the newspaper. For those special projects such as term papers, design projects, or long book reviews, set up a special incentive. Upon completion, plan to give yourself a special pizza, movie, or an evening of TV.
 - Incentives and rewards can be overdone. Use them for the especially difficult assignment or longer projects. When you do use them, make the rewards something you ordinarily would not give yourself.
- **Increasing Your Activity Level**. Your concentration wanders more easily if you just read an assignment straight through. Instead, take the heading for each section and turn it into a question. For this section, that would be, "How can I increase my activity level while studying?" Then study that section to answer that question. Do this routinely. The questions give us a focus for each section and increase our involvement. Also, as you study an assignment, make a list of questions you can bring to class. Listen to the lecture for answers to those questions.
- **Shift position in your seat every so often**. Don't sit there frozen in one position. The move will help keep the blood circulating, sending more oxygen to your brain and helping you remain alert. Skydivers, rock climbers, tightrope walkers, and lion tamers don't have trouble concentrating! You probably haven't done any of those. But, think back to some time in your life when you had that calm, total concentration. Close your eyes and recreate that time. Visualize it, if you can. Feel how you felt at that time. Now, when you begin studying tonight, recapture that focused attention and see how long you can hold it. Does it feel as if that might work? If so, begin all your study sessions with the feeling and see how long you can maintain it. With practice, your concentration will get better and better.

Factors You Can Control Now

Chart your energy levels. When is your energy level at its highest? When are your low energy times? Study your most difficult courses at your high energy times. Sharpest early in the evening? Study your most difficult course then. Later in the evening? Work on your easier courses or the ones you enjoy the most.

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Now that's not what most students do. Instead, they put off the tough courses until later in the evening when they are more fatigued. It's more difficult to concentrate when you're tired. Reverse that. Hard courses at peak energy times. Easier ones later. This alone can help to improve your concentration.

Light. Make sure you have adequate light. It's essential to keeping your attention focused on what you are studying. So your eyes don't tire, use indirect lights (to avoid glare) and ones that don't flicker.

Chair and Table. Sit on a not overly comfortable chair at a table, not sprawled out on your bed. Your bed is where you sleep and dream.

Posture. Sit up straight to aid concentration rather than sprawled out in a similar-to-sleep position.

Clear away distractions. Don't have pictures where you'll notice them when looking up from your studies. Also, put out of sight any material for other courses. Seeing it can panic you a little about all you have to do. So put it out of sight.

Signs. Don't hesitate to put signs on your door. "I need the grades. Please let me study." "Please do not disturb." "Concentrating is tough. Help me by staying away." Some inconsiderate person will interrupt. Ask them to come back later. If they don't leave, practice ignoring them (See the Spider Technique above).

Take your phone off the hook. Yes, you might miss a call. But developing your concentration skills is important. It will be useful for the remainder of your life.

Where you study can make a difference. Think about where you concentrate best. Often it's difficult to study where you live, so look for a corner in the library that's quiet and facing a wall (not a door with people coming and going or a window with a distracting view). Some

students study better where they live. Find the place or places you find most conducive to concentration.

Background music? Research on productivity with music versus without music is inconclusive. If you think you need music, choose some with no lyrics and with relatively monotonous melodies. Baroque music is the best example. Something with words, a definite beat, a catchy melody, or one of your favorite pieces can easily divert your attention, often without your being aware of it at first.

Perhaps you might try "white noise" -- it masks out environmental noises and helps minimize distractions. Your radio can be an inexpensive source of white noise. Switch to FM and team to the high end of your dial. You should get a steady static or form of white noise, unless your radio is an especially good one. Or keep a fan running.

Enough time for everything? Ever find your study of one subject interrupted by worries about getting assignments in another course done? Or waste time trying to decide what to study? Take an hour or so and do a little planning.

First, estimate for each course the number of hours you'll need to study each week. Then work up a flexible time schedule. Include all your obligations (classes, meetings, meals, laundry, etc.). Then allocate specific time periods for studying particular subjects. When studying one course you won't worry so much about others because you'll know that you have time for them.

Be flexible in your schedule. If you need an extra hour on a subject, continue with it and then do a little juggling to make up the study time you encroached on. You'll probably need to modify your schedule from time to time.

If you would rather schedule smaller chunks of time, each Sunday plan the following week and

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change from week to week. Check to be sure you're getting study time in on all your courses.

Rewards for Concentrating. In summary, the rewards for improving your concentration can be priceless. You'll be delighted at your ability to recall information given in lectures. You'll find yourself accomplishing more in the same period of time. It can even affect your social life. Your special friend will appreciate your undivided attention and, in return, will give you undivided attention. So will other friends. Best of all, concentration skills help your self-confidence because you will realize how much more is possible when you can give your total attention.

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