Focusing on Concentration

Analogy: Attention is like an ocean wave; it rises and falls on its own.

Consequence: You will never stop daydreaming or becoming distracted.

Goal: to become better at re-focusing your attention when it sways.

In other words: to concentrate, not pay attention.

Elements of concentration

As we go through the elements of concentration, you will notice that many strategies involve self-reflection. The AA&CC's Daily Task Planner & Journal can help you with that. It is available on the AA&CC website. Here are the elements of concentration:

Environment

In the long run

- Self-reflect to know when and where you concentrate best on different tasks.

In the short run

- Create a good study environment:
  - o Gather the materials needed for the task o Eliminate potential distractions
    - ✦ To control phone and Internet use, try apps like FocusMe, Cold Turkey, or OFFTIME.
    - ✦ To block out noise, try apps like myNoise or Atmosphere: Relaxing Sounds.
  - o Create an appropriate amount of stimulation
    - ✦ Routine, repetitive and tedious tasks are best performed in highly stimulating environments where there are stimuli like music, bright lights and artwork.
    - ✦ Studying and problem-solving are best performed in calm, relaxed environments where there are few stimuli.
- Keep a notepad beside you so you can write down distracting ideas you get while you work.
  - o Try using note-taking apps like Evernote or Google Keep.

Task

In the long run

- Self-reflect to know how much concentration effort you must exert for different tasks and how long you can work on those tasks without needing a break. You will likely find that:

- tasks require more concentration effort when they are new, complex, boring, hard, or long; and when they involve learning/knowledge acquisition or stimuli of poor perceptual quality, such as text written in small font.
- tasks require less concentration effort when they are familiar, simple, interesting, easy, or short; and when they involve knowledge application or transferring material between documents.

In the short run

- Think: What, if anything, could you change about the task so that it requires less concentration effort?

- Review your notes before class and preview upcoming lecture content o When you take breaks from working on an unfinished task, summarize your current progress/goals on a sticky note. That way, you can remember where you left off when you return to the project.

- Choose which tasks to do based on your current priorities and interest level

- Chunk the task into smaller bits so you can focus on one bit at a time o The [UTSC Assignment Calculator](#) can help you with this

    - To learn more about task chunking, you might also want to watch the videos "[Timeboxing: Elon Musk's Time Management Method](#)" by Thomas Frank, or "[To Do Big Things, Take on Microprojects](#)" by The Art of Improvement.

In the moment

- Create variation in your study sessions. For example, you might… o arbitrarily pick one task to work on by entering the names of all your tasks into a randomizer like the [Random Name Picker](#) on Gigacalculator

    - take notes in different colours o periodically switch study locations

    - interleave your subjects. You can learn more about interleaving by watching the video "[Study Strategies: Interleaving](#)" by The Learning Scientists

- Use a pencil to guide your gaze while reading so your eyes do not have to work as hard

- Focus your concentration on the task within one minute of starting it o Tip: Set a timer to go off one minute after you start a task. When it rings, check to see if you are concentrating on your work.

- Practise active reading and learning o You can learn more about active learning in the video "[Active Learning](#)" by Monika Siepsiak

- Use drawings/diagrams/graphs/schemas/models to keep your mental imagery focused on the task. Here are some programs to help you with that:

    - [Canva](#)

    - [VisualParadigm Online Diagram Maker](#) o [Sketch.io](#) o [Mindly](#)

You

In the long run

- Maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle o To learn about the consequences of sleep deprivation on focus capacity, watch the video "[How Sleep Affects Your Brain](#)" by Dana Foundation

    o Explore the Centre for Clinical Interventions website, which publishes free self-help that you can use for your mental and emotional wellbeing

- Schedule time to address recurring personal concerns

- Learn to recognize when you are losing focus

In the short run

- Before beginning a task, assess your current concentration abilities and use that insight to guide your study goal

- Develop a positive attitude and an intrinsic motivation to work on the task o The AA&CC has a [Motivation tip sheet](#) on our website!

In the moment

- Practise positive internal dialogue. For example, say "I want to" instead of "I have to," "I can't yet" instead of "I can't," critically evaluate your worries and judgements, and let go of past mistakes.

- Take breaks o A quick guide for taking breaks:

    - ✦ Time them
    - ✦ Plan them
    - ✦ Take the ones you planned even if you feel that you can keep working
    - ✦ Take them regularly and when you become tired or your performance worsens
    - ✦ Use them to relax and physically move
    - ✦ Do not use them for activities likely to distract you
    - ✦ Briefly review your work when you return from them

Putting it all together: Task reflection

Before beginning a task, consider its priority and anticipate the amount of concentration effort you will need to complete it. Then, determine how to optimize your environment and work/break schedule for the task, and think about which focus strategies you could use to complete it.

Other resources

- Apps that turn focusing into a game:

    o [Donut Dog](#) o [Forest](#)

    o [Focus Plant - Pomodoro timer](#) o "FLIP – Focus Timer for Study" for your [phone](#) and [PC](#) o

[Focus Quest - Stay Focused, Study Timer, Focus App](#)

- The [Engross](#) app will track the progress of your focusing
- Many of the aforementioned apps will also block other apps and/or websites that distract you!
- These apps turn meditation into a game:
  - [Loner](#) o [Meditation Game](#)
  - [Infinity Loop](#)

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