

Improve Your Concentration

Achieving Focus Amid Distractions

Source: "MindTools" - June, 2015

How many times have you sat at your desk and tried to focus on a task, only to find that your mind is wandering? Despite your best intentions, you just can't concentrate. We've all been in this familiar, frustrating situation, and it's something that can really undermine your performance.

In this article, we'll review strategies to improve your concentration and reduce your daily distractions.

Environment

Your personal work environment plays a large role in your ability to concentrate. The more comfortable and welcoming your environment is, the easier it will likely be for you to stay there and focus.

Here are some ideas for improving your physical environment:

- **Make sure you're comfortable** - Start by ensuring that your chair and desk are at the right height for you to work comfortably. If your chair is too high or your desk is too low, you'll be uncomfortable, and you'll be tempted to use this as an excuse to get up and walk away.
- **Put up pictures** - Viewing a natural scene or watching wildlife can help improve concentration. If you're able to put up pictures in your office or work area, then choose landscapes or natural images that you enjoy. This can help your focus, especially if you can see the pictures from your desk.
- **Shut out distractions as much as possible** - Listening to music can help, especially if it's instrumental music. Some people even use "white noise" apps - these produce a steady, non-distracting sound like ocean waves or falling rain. This steady background noise can drown out other noise, helping you focus better and ignore distractions.

Nutrition

Follow some simple nutritional tips:

- **Drink water** - Many of us don't think about drinking water while we're at work, yet dehydration can make us feel tired, irritable, slow, or even sick. When our brains don't have enough fluid, they can't operate at peak performance. Staying hydrated is an easy way to help improve your concentration during the day.

Eat breakfast - Start your day with a healthy breakfast. It's much harder to concentrate when you're hungry, so eat a well-rounded meal before you go to work. You can also help your concentration throughout the day by keeping healthy snacks at your desk. Almonds, whole-grain crackers, fresh fruit, and vegetables are good choices.

Improve Your Concentration

Achieving Focus Amid Distractions

Source: "MindTools" - June, 2015

- **Get up and move around** - Do you walk around during the day? If you're like many people, you probably don't move around enough. Research has shown that regular walking can help increase your focus during the day.

Mindset

Constant distractions, and the low productivity that's associated with these distractions, have become so commonplace in today's offices that doctors have even given it a name: Attention Deficit Trait, or ADT. And, they say that entire organizations can suffer from it.

Follow some of these guidelines to help focus your mind:

- **Set aside time to deal with worries** - Many of us have trouble concentrating during the day because we're constantly worrying about other things. It could be an approaching deadline for a project you haven't started, a new colleague who's causing problems, or just the amount of work on your desk. If you find yourself distracted by worries, then note these down so that you don't need to hold them in your mind. Then schedule time to deal with these issues.
- **Focus on one task at a time** - It can be much harder to focus if you take minibreaks (15-30 seconds) to answer emails, send text messages, or take quick phone calls. Some researchers believe that it can take up to 15 minutes for us to regain complete focus after a distraction.
- **Close your email box and chat program** - Let your voice mail do its job. If your office allows it, close your office door or put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign to let colleagues know you need to focus. (If you're a manager and you want to operate an open door policy, then consider working from home or from elsewhere for times when you need to focus.)
- **Switch between high- and low-attention tasks** - This can give your brain a rest after heavy concentration. For instance, if you spend two hours working on your department's budget, you'll probably feel tired afterward. You can recharge your energy by working on a low-attention task, like filing, for 15 minutes before going back to your budget.
- **Prioritize** - Having too much to do can be distracting, and this sometime causes procrastination. Or, you may quickly jump from task to task, creating the illusion of work - but in reality, you're not accomplishing very much. If you're not sure which tasks to start or which are most important, take 10 or 15 minutes to **prioritize** your **To-Do List**.

Improve Your Concentration

Achieving Focus Amid Distractions

Source: "MindTools" - June, 2015

More Tips for Improving Your Concentration

- **Take short breaks** - We can be masters at focusing, but eventually we're going to need a break. Our minds can struggle to focus intensely on tasks for eight hours a day. This is where it can be better to divide your work into one-hour segments, with a 5-10 minute break between tasks. This short break will allow your mind to rest before focusing again.
- **Do your hardest tasks when you're most alert** - This will help you maximize your concentration.
- **Use a phone headset** - If you have a headset for your phone, consider using it for a few hours each day. If your colleagues think you're on the phone, they're less likely to interrupt you.
- **Promise yourself a reward** - For instance, make a rule that if you focus intensively for 45 minutes on one task, you can take a break to get a cup of coffee when you're done. Little "self-rewards" can often be great motivators.
- **Schedule email downloads** - It can be tremendously distracting to have emails pinging into your inbox every few minutes - you're tempted to stop what you're doing, and answer them right away. If you can, schedule your email to download only a few times each day, and deal with all of your emails in one go.

Infographic

Click on the thumbnail image below to see how to improve your concentration at work, represented in an infographic:



Key Points

Sitting down to focus on one task can be difficult, especially when you're constantly interrupted.

To help increase your focus, start with a good breakfast, and drink plenty of water throughout the day. Don't multitask, close your door, and listen to music if it helps you concentrate.

Although it may sound somewhat counter-intuitive, taking short, regular breaks throughout the day can also help you focus.