

Concentration

Almost all of us have the ability to concentrate some of the time. At other times our thoughts can be scattered or our mind can race from one thing to another. One thing that can help us deal with this is to learn and practice concentration skills and strategies. As with any skill, this requires regular and consistent practice.

Our ability to concentrate depends on a range of factors including the following:

- *Commitment* - Are you willing to put in the effort required to complete the task?
- *Enthusiasm* - What motivates you to complete the task?
- *Skill* - Do you have the skills and knowledge to complete the task?
- *Our Emotional and Physical State* - Are you physically/emotionally up for completing the task?
- *Our Psychological State* - Is your brain preoccupied with something else?
- *Environment* - Are you in a location that allows you to concentrate/focus on the task?

Expanding Your Concentration Span

In learning concentration skills we aim to extend our concentration span—the time we can concentrate on a specific task before our thoughts wander. We might have a different span for different tasks. This will vary for each individual.

Here are some barriers to concentrating on a task and ways to resolve those issues:

Day-dreaming

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.

Attending

This is about maintaining concentration and not giving in to distractions by focusing directly on what's in front of you. If you are distracted, use the STOP technique to regain concentration. You can practice attending in any situation.

In a lecture: If people move or cough, ignore them. Don't look at them. Actively exclude them from the attention that you are giving to the lecturer.

In a social setting: Focus your attention solely on one person—what they say, how they look, etc. Ignore what is going on around you except for the individual you are focusing on.

Worry Time

Set aside a specific time in the day when you are allowed to worry. It can help to plan this time to be 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 anxious or distracting thought enters your mind during the day, banish it until your next worry time and refocus on what you are supposed to be doing.

Active Learning

Most people have a preferred learning style. Identifying your own preferred way of learning means that you can organize the material to suit you which will help you concentrate. If you don't know how you learn best, try to analyze your experience either with someone or by learning more about learning styles.

Other Things That Can Help

- If your listening concentration span is 10 minutes and you want to expand your concentration to take in a 50 minute lecture, just try to keep focused for a little longer each time by using STOP and Attending strategies.
- In between periods of concentration, move around or think about something completely different and fun to give your brain a new focus.
- Give yourself a reward appropriate to the level of concentration you have had to maintain.
- Experiment with making your environment (including your computer) as distraction-free as possible.
- Complete tasks that need the most concentration when you are mentally and physically fresh. Complete small tasks that you feel more confident with and increase the level of difficulty. Figure out your best times.
- Work with another person so that the two of you can “re-engage” one another.
- If you are stuck, check whether the problem is one of poor concentration or instead a lack of the necessary knowledge or understanding. If it is the latter, how can you address this?

Combating Specific Concentration Problems

When You Have Been Concentrating Well but Your Brain Now Feels Saturated

- Take a short break and recharge your mental batteries.
- If you feel too tired to restart after a short break, review what you have done, where it fits into the overall task and when/where you need to start up again.

How to Concentrate on a Topic That You Don't Like or That Bore You

- Actively search for aspects of the subject that can be turned into useful information.
- 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.

Negative Thinking

- Loss of concentration can lead to negative thoughts about yourself. Deal with them in ways similar to other distractions and banish them into your Worry Time.
- To check out the reality of your thoughts, try asking:
Am I thinking realistically or am I just focusing on the negative?
What is the effect/outcome on me when focusing on the negative? Does it help the situation?
What action can I take to change the situation for the better? What CAN be done?
What is in my control?

Being Vague

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

Feeling Overwhelmed

When the task at hand seems too large, look for ways of breaking the task up into smaller parts that feel more manageable. Treat them as individual tasks by concentrating on each of them separately.

Self-doubt

When we don't talk to others, it is very easy to wonder whether or not what we are doing is OK. This can lead us to feel ineffective and have self-doubts which also impacts our concentration. Talk to someone about your ideas and what you are doing.