

A CBT guide to concentration

Almost all of us have the ability to concentrate some of the time. But at other times our thoughts can be scattered, or our mind racing from one thing to another. One thing that can help us deal with such times 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

We need to make a personal commitment to put in the effort required.

Enthusiasm

If we're interested in the task and enjoy doing it, then we find it easy to motivate ourselves to start. Once started, feeling involved in the activity keeps us going - we want to do it.

Skill

Knowing how to do something can give us confidence that our efforts will be successful. Anxiety tends to impair concentration.

Our emotional and physical state

Being in a good physical and emotional condition can help us feel more positive.
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Our psychological state

If we are pre-occupied, it can affect our ability to think.

Environment

Some of us can find it more difficult to concentrate if our surroundings intrude on our awareness.

Expanding your concentration span

In learning concentration skills, we aim to extend our concentration span i.e. 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.

Some of the barriers to concentrating are boredom, anxiety and day-dreaming. Some CBT techniques for addressing these are:

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. To begin with, this could be several times a minute. But each time, say STOP and then refocus. Don't waste energy trying to keep thoughts out of your mind, just put the effort into STOP and refocus.

To begin with you may have to do this frequently but the period of time between your straying thoughts will get a little longer each day; it takes practice.

Attending

This is about maintaining concentration and not giving in to distractions, 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, for example: 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. - and ignore what is going on round about.

Worry time

Set aside a specific time in the day when you are allowed to worry. It can help to plan for this to be just before something that you know you will do, to ensure that you stop worrying on time e.g. before a favourite TV programme, or a meal-time.

Whenever an anxiety or distracting thought enters your mind during the day, banish it until your next worry time, and refocus on to what you are supposed to be doing. Some find it helpful to write down the banished thought, to make sure that you won't have forgotten it when you get to your worry time. It's important that you keep your worry time and use the full amount of time available. If you are unable to fill it, then make a conscious decision to reduce it.

If you find that things keep reappearing on your list, then it might show that you need to address them.

Active learning

Most people have a preferred learning style. Some of these preferences include: reading and then asking questions about the information; making condensed notes and memorising them; by associations made to the material; through pictorial images of the material. Identifying your own preferred way of learning means that you can organise the material to suit you, which will help you concentrate. If you don't know how you learn best, try to analyse 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. Practice with something that doesn't matter in terms of the task e.g. you could expand your lecture concentration span by practising listening to the news on the radio or watching TEDx talks.

- In between periods of concentration, move around, or think about something completely different - and fun - to give your brain a new focus.
- You can give yourself a reward appropriate to the level of concentration you have had to maintain.
- Perhaps use a hierarchy of questions to help you focus when reading reference material or listening to a lecture, rather than passively reading or listening. Try to write brief notes about the answers to your questions. Ask yourself how you will use the material, where it fits into what you already know, what new questions it triggers.
- Experiment with making your environment (including your computer) as distraction-free as possible.
- Try to do tasks that need most concentration when you are mentally and physically fresh. Or start by doing small tasks about which you feel more confident and gradually increase the level of difficulty. Work out when your best times are and make use of them.
- See if working with another person helps you keep focused on the task – you might re-engage one another by sparking off new trains of thought.
- Check, if you feel stuck, whether the problem is one of poor concentration or a lack of the necessary knowledge or understanding. If 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 by reviewing what you have done so far, considering whether it might help to switch to a new topic now.
- If you feel too tired to restart after a short break, review what you have done and where it fits into the overall task, and define where you need to pick it up again. If necessary, make a note of this. Then decide, before you stop, when you will restart the task.

How to concentrate on a topic which you don't like or which bores you

- Actively search for aspects of the subject that can be turned into useful information. You could do this by focusing on finding five central, important ideas to think about. Perhaps use mind-maps or spider diagrams to record the search and write test questions to summarise your learning after each study session.
- 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. You can deal with them as with other distractions, and banish them into your Worry Time, when you can question their reality.
- To check out the reality of your thoughts about yourself, try asking: What is the evidence for what I think? Are there alternative interpretations of the evidence that might be more realistic? What is the effect on me of thinking the way I do?

What action can I take to change the situation for the better?**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. You could 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. You might want to clarify your personal goals, but perhaps the question itself needs clarifying. Can you find additional information if you are unsure what is required of you?

Feeling overwhelmed

- Sometimes what we have to do can seem just too much for us to get our head around. It can feel like too huge a task to contemplate. If we feel inadequate it may seem like an impossible task. Look for ways of breaking the task up into smaller separate parts that feel more manageable. Then treat them as individual tasks, summoning up your concentration for each of them separately. Later, assemble them all together to make a complete whole.

Self-doubt

- If we don't discuss what we are doing with others it is very easy to wonder whether what we are doing is OK. This can lead us to feel ineffective and have self-doubts, which can impact on our concentration. Perhaps, talk to someone about your ideas and what you are doing. If this is not possible, try using the four steps mentioned under Negative Thinking to check out the worth of what you are doing.