

## **BONUS SECTION: MENTAL FOCUS**

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## **Why Mental Focus Is Crucial For Success**

Mental focus is the most important skill when it comes to success in any area of your life. It, more than talent or skill, will help move you forward and reach your goals, no matter what they are. To focus means to concentrate on a particular task or problem for a period of time. It's something you can get better at with practice. For now, let's look at exactly why mental focus is crucial for success and how it can help you get things done.

### **Focus Keeps Distractions At Bay**

Distractions are all around us. You sit down at your desk and end up checking email, browsing through Facebook, or getting lost on YouTube watching video after video. We get distracted by new projects, things that need taken care of around the house or the office, and of course by family members and coworkers. With all these distractions, it's a miracle we get anything done. There's always something else that demands our attention, or a fun new project we'd rather be working on.

This is where focus can make a huge difference and help you achieve your goals. Focus is like a pair of blinders. It helps you concentrate on the task at hand until it is finished.

### **Focus Keeps You From Making Mistakes**

Because you are not constantly distracted and you're giving your full attention to your book or other task at hand, you're less likely to make mistakes. Mistakes happen when your attention is divided and you're not fully immersed in the current task. Contrary to popular belief, we do not function as well when we multi-task—even if we believe we do.

Being focused, on the other hand, helps you concentrate. The end result is a better quality product, no matter what you're working on.

### **Focus Helps You Get More Done Faster**

Have you ever worked on a tight deadline? Let's say you have to finish a chapter for your critique group meeting or write a guest blog post that will bring in more readers. If you have that deadline in place, and the end result is a benefit to you, then you're more likely to focus on the needed task than to procrastinate and blow off writing until tomorrow.

## **Mental Focus In Business**

Learning to focus better and for longer periods of time on any business tasks will help you get more done in less time, do higher quality work, and become more successful overall.

Being self-motivated and focused is becoming more and more important. Whether you write books full-time or have to budget your writing with your day job, mental focus is essential to get anything done.

When you're working independently, particularly from home or in your own office, it's easy to get distracted. Most of us work on from our computers where Facebook and email are a constant source of temptation and distraction. Being able to focus on the things you need to get done will help you get your tasks completed in a timely fashion. This approach also gives you a leg up on your competition, who may not be as focused as you are.

Here are a few tips to help you get more mental focus while you're working.

### **Tip #1 – Cut Out Distractions**

Shut the office door, take the phone off the hook, stick your cell phone in a drawer and don't even think about opening your email program or anything else on your computer that could distract you. Instead, keep only the programs and files you need for the project you're currently working on open and get to work.

### **Tip #2 – Practice And Workout Your “Focus Muscles”**

Being able to focus for long periods of time is a required skill. Think of it as a muscle that you're working out. Start with making yourself focus 100% on a task for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. As this gets easier and easier, keep increasing the time until you can easily focus fully for 30 to 45 minutes at time throughout your workday.

### **Tip #3 – Take Breaks And Give Your Brain A Rest**

No one can give it 100% all of the time. Just as important as working on increased focus is taking regular breaks. Give it your all for 15 minutes, then get up and take a break. Get a glass of water, make a phone call, attend a meeting or check your email, then get right back to another 15 to 45 minute interval of focused work. Setting a timer can help with this in the beginning.

Give these tips a try and experience for yourself how much more you can get done when you increase your mental focus at work.

## Mental Focus In Your Personal Life

Our lives are busy. We're juggling families, households, jobs, and various social obligations, while constantly being distracted by media in one form or another. When it comes to our personal life, we have two options. We can let our surroundings take over and "go with the flow", or we can work on mental focus for our personal life and do the things we really want to do.

Yes, it takes time and energy to come up with personal goals and then figure out how to go about reaching them. Some days it's much easier to plop down on the couch and start bingeing our favorite Netflix series. And there are so many great series on Netflix! However, while there is a time and place for mental recuperation by binge-watching, binge-reading, taking a nap, etc., we don't want to wake up one day and realize we have missed out on life the last few years.

Working on mental focus outside of work and business helps you prioritize and make time for the people and things that are important to you. It helps you figure out a way to make it to your child's soccer game or play performance, enjoy your favorite hobbies, spend quality time with your spouse and close friends, while still having enough time to relax and watch a movie and get a good night's sleep.

The key is to pinpoint time wasters and focus on what's important to you. It may help to keep a time journal for a week or two. Grab a notebook and start jotting down what you do throughout the day. It's up to you if you want to track what you do at work as well. Make sure you track everything you do during your free time from the time you get up to the time you go to bed. If you're spending your morning drinking coffee and browsing the internet or watching a morning TV show, and that doesn't bring you the joy and fulfillment you want in your life, think about how you can spend that time better. Maybe meditation would help you feel less stressed throughout your day. Maybe spending that time working out would give you more time with your loved ones in the early evenings. Or maybe this might be a good time to get around to reading those books on your bucket reading list.

Keep a journal for a few days or even weeks and review were you're spending your time. The simple act of having to write it down makes you more aware of what you're doing. This alone will help you focus on each task. Next, make a list of things you want to change in your personal life, or even just a list of things you want to do more of. Maybe you want to take an hour each evening to read an inspirational book. Maybe you want to spend more time each year traveling. It doesn't matter what your goals are. The important part is that you set them and then work on a plan to make sure you can reach them. Then it's simply a matter of focusing on those tasks one at a time and managing your time wisely. You'll be pleasantly surprised not only by how much more you can get done in a given day, but also how much time is left to just relax and enjoy life.

## Find Out What You Need To Focus On

Before you can focus on a task, you have to know what you should be focusing on. After all, working hard on something that doesn't give you the results you want or need isn't helpful. The key is to make smart decisions, prioritize, and have a good idea of what you need to focus on today.

### Start With The Big Picture

Before you can start to focus, you need to have a good grasp of the big picture. Without this all-important first step, it's too easy to fall into a trap of doing busywork, or continuing to do the same tasks each day without seeing the results you want to get.

I'm sure you've experienced this in your own life. You go through the motions because that's how you've always done it. It's easier to stick to your habits than it is to sit down and figure out what the big picture is. Start by deciding exactly what it is you want to accomplish.

### Make A Plan And Come Up With A Strategy

Once you have that big picture or big goal in mind, it's time to make a plan for getting from where you're at now to where you want to be. In your personal life, that might mean figuring out how you can go from writing one book every year to writing two or more books in a year while maintaining your other life commitments.

It may be helpful to map it out on a piece of paper or with your favorite mind mapping software. Seeing all the pieces in one place and how they interconnect can be very helpful in the next step.

### Turn That Plan Into Action Items

Last but not least, it's time to turn strategy into action. Simple tasks you can get done one at a time. For example: writing a chapter, or a scene, while your main goal is to get the book finished. Take it one task at a time.

Once you have those individual steps, it will become much easier to focus on them one at a time and get stuff done.

### 3 Simple Focus Boosters To Keep You Sharp

Staying focused when you know you should be working on a task isn't always easy. With practice it becomes more of a habit, but try the tips below to boost your focus until it becomes second nature.

#### Write A To-Do List

When you have a clear objective, broken down into steps you need to do one at a time, it becomes much easier to focus. You know exactly what you need to concentrate on. When your task is done, don't waste time figuring out what comes next. You simply move on to the next item on your list.

**Remember:** Put the most important tasks at the top of your to-do list. Why? Because things at the bottom of your to-do list often never get done, and it becomes all too easy to procrastinate those items until the following day.

Before you sit down to get your focused work done, spend a few minutes figuring out exactly what it is you need to get accomplished. Even better, do it the afternoon or night before, so you are up and running first thing in the morning. Then before you call it a day, while everything about the project is still fresh on your mind, make out tomorrow's list.

#### Set A Timer

Nothing helps you focus better than a tight deadline. You can use the Pomodoro technique to work under short deadlines using nothing more than a kitchen timer. You'll be surprised how much it will help you focus and get more done in less time.

Grab a kitchen timer, or use an app on your phone. Decide what task you want to work on and set a timer for 25 minutes. Work fast and furious until that timer goes off. Take a 5 minute break and start another 25 minute work sessions. After three to four of these sessions take a longer break, get up, and move around.

#### Crank Up Some Tunes

If you find that your mind keeps wandering, or if you are working in a distracting or noisy environment, consider plugging in some headphones and listening to some music to help you focus. It can drown out the noise around you and help keep your mind on the job you're doing.

There is specific music out there that helps you focus, work, or study. Do a quick search on YouTube and try a few different ones. Classical or instrumental music in general also works well for a lot of people.

In the end it comes down to personal preference though. Listen to the type of music that gets you going and helps you stay focused.

## **Tools To Keep You Focused Throughout The Day**

Staying focused throughout the day can be hard. There are some things you can do and some tools you can utilize that will make it easier to concentrate and get things done. Here are five tools that will keep you focused throughout your busy day.

### **Plans, Lists, And Outlines**

One of the best tools to help you stay focused is a piece of paper and a pen. Use this to make sure you stay on track and always know what you should be working on. Make plans, draw up outlines and work with lists. A Daily to-do list or a checklist for a particular project can be a great tool to help you stay productive and focused throughout the day.

### **Timers and Deadlines**

Work will expand to fill the time you allot it. Therefore, it's important to set deadlines. Figure out how long it should take you to do a particular task, or even an entire project, and come up with some deadlines for yourself.

A kitchen timer, or a countdown timer on your phone can also be very helpful. Set it for 30 to 45 minutes and get to work. When the timer goes off, get up, move around, give yourself a short little break and then sit down for another focused session of timed work. This is the origin of the Pomodoro technique.

### **Exercise**

It may be weird at first glance to think of exercise as a tool to help you focus, but it can make a big difference. Not only does it give you a bit of a mental break and is just overall healthy and good for you, a little bit of exercising throughout your workday also gets the blood flowing, and gets more oxygen into your system.

The next time you feel stuck or unproductive, get up and move around. Do a few sit-ups, or take a quick walk on your lunch break. You'll be pleasantly surprised how much of a difference it can make.

### **Clean Food and Plenty Of Water**

What you eat is just as important. Eat a healthy diet and fuel your body with good, clean food. Don't overdo it at lunch. You don't want your body to be so busy digesting that big plate of pasta that you feel like you need an afternoon nap. Eat a healthy breakfast, keep it light at lunch time, and then enjoy your dinner.

Make sure you drink plenty of water throughout the day. Dehydration can cause headaches and keep you unfocused for hours on end.

## **Rest and Sleep**

Last but not least, make sure you get plenty of sleep. Rest and relaxation are crucial for keeping mentally alert and focused during the day.



## Mental Focus Works Like A Muscle... You Need To Train It

When you first start to work on improving your mental focus, it's hard. You can only fully concentrate for 15 or 20 minutes at a time. You're easily distracted and when you force yourself to focus for extended periods of time (with the help of a kitchen timer), it feels exhausting. That's ok. Things will become easier with practice.

Think of mental focus as a muscle that you need to train regularly to get better. That's why using lists and timers can be so helpful. They are your training tools that help you push a little harder, stay focused a little longer, and go a little further each time you "work out".

They also help you measure your progress. Without a timer and a record of what you've accomplished, it's hard to see those small changes and improvements you're making. It's hard to measure how long you've concentrated and how much you've gotten done.

But when you're using a timer, you'll start to notice that you can set it for 25 minutes instead of 15 minute increments and stay focused. You'll also notice that it gets easier and easier to concentrate and work hard for 30 minutes at a time before you're ready for a break.

As with physical exercise, mental exercise is something you need to do regularly, or you'll start to slip back. Does that mean you have to work on mental focus for 8 hours a day? Of course not. You don't have to work out that long to stay fit and healthy either. Aim for one or two focused sessions of 30 to 45 minutes a day. That will be enough to keep you sharp and will help you throughout the rest of your day.

First though, you need to get your brain into shape. Grab a timer, set it for 15 or 20 minutes, and do what you can to stay focused during this time. Shut the office door, take the phone off the hook, and cut out any distractions. Then work until that timer goes off. How hard was it? Did you struggle towards the end? If so, make it a goal to do a few of these shorter sessions throughout the day.

If you find remaining focused for 20 minutes easy, bump it to 30 minutes. Then get to a point where you can work back-to-back 30-minute sessions with just a short break in-between. Keep pushing yourself and you'll be amazed how quickly this mental training starts to pay off.

## Relaxation Is An Important Part Of Mental Focus

This may sound a little counterintuitive, but if you want to improve mental focus, you have to make sure you get plenty of rest and relaxation. In other words, it's easy to overdo things and work too hard. These lead to lapses in concentration and make any mental focus seem impossible.

Start out by doing what you can to get a good night's sleep. I don't have to tell you that it's much harder to concentrate on anything if you've been sleeping poorly, or only managed to get a few hours of rest. Our brains need long periods of rest to process information and "make room" for you to focus on something new the next day.

While burning the midnight oil may seem like a great way to get more done and stay productive, the opposite is true. Yes, you can power through a long night to finish a project every once in a while, but it isn't sustainable for the long run. Do it when you absolutely have to, but get in the habit of getting good sleep the rest of the time. Your brain and your body will thank you.

Taking breaks throughout your workday is another effective way to stay focused and get more done. Work hard in short bursts of time and then take little breaks. Go get a cup of coffee, move around your workspace for a few minutes, or just daydream and give your brain a short rest before diving back in. You can greatly benefit from breaks shorter than five minutes. Go chat to a coworker, or do something fairly mindless like filing or straightening up a few things on your desk. Then get back to your most important task at hand.

Just as important as short breaks are a few longer breaks throughout the day. Every couple of hours, take a 30 minute or longer break and walk away from your desk. Go to lunch, have coffee with a friend, or go for a walk outside. This gives your brain time to process what you've done so far and prepares you to last through the remainder of the day.

Last but not least, don't forget to do something fun and completely unrelated to your tasks at the end of the day and on weekends. Everyone needs balance in his or her life. You might find it a challenge to unplug at the end of a workday, but try doing so for your own productivity. You'll find you actually get more done in the end since you're able to focus when it's time to get back to work.

## Tight Deadlines Can Help You Focus and Boost Your Productivity

Deadlines are amazing. They are the single best thing for boosting productivity. I'm sure you've experienced this yourself. When you have a project that you know needs to be finished by 3pm in the afternoon, your focus increases, your concentration skyrockets, and you get as much work done that day as you do all week when you're not under a deadline.

This is so common in fact, that there's a natural law written about it. It's called Parkinson's Law and it states that – and I'm paraphrasing here – that work expands to fill the time allotted. If you have 2 hours to get a blog post written, it will take you 2 hours. If you only have 25 minutes because you want to head out to meet a friend for coffee, you get it done in 25 minutes.

The next question, of course, is whether tight deadlines cause reduced quality. They usually don't, unless the deadline is so tight that you have to cut corners right and left to meet it. The majority of the time, however, you can focus and concentrate on a reasonable deadline with great efficiency.

Deadlines force you to cut out any and all distractions as much as possible. That means you're interrupted less often and can keep a train of thought. Being focused helps you get into the "flow" where you're totally immersed in a project and the work seems to almost do itself. You're able to concentrate completely on the task at hand and do the best possible job.

Think about how you can build deadlines into your work. These can be self-imposed ones where you give yourself a set amount of time for each task on your to-do list, or you can ask a friend or writing critique partner to set deadlines for you and hold you accountable.

No matter how you do it, I encourage you to experiment with deadlines so you can see for yourself how much they can help you focus, concentrate, and do your best work in the shortest amount of time.

## Using The Pomodoro Technique To Keep Your Focus

Have you heard of the Pomodoro technique? It is a time management technique that helps you focus and concentrate. It allows you to get more done in less time and work very efficiently.

The technique was first developed in the 80's and is named Pomodoro ("tomato" in Italian) because of the cute tomato shaped kitchen timers that were all the rage for a while. The idea is to utilize a timer to force yourself to focus and concentrate in short bursts. It's a practice well worth trying for yourself.

To give this a try, you need two things. You need to know what you should be working on. A bit of planning and a written out to-do list will come in very handy. Then you need some sort of countdown timer. You can use a kitchen timer, your watch, the countdown timer on your stove if you're working at home, or an app on your phone. Search for Pomodoro in your smartphone's app store. There are several free and paid versions; pick which one works best for you.

Get comfortable at your desk, make sure you have everything you need, and then set a timer for 25 minutes. Work completely focused on the task at hand for those 25 minutes. Don't get up to go to the bathroom, don't check email, and don't let anything distract you from what you're working on. Just buckle down and focus for those 25 minutes.

When the timer goes off, wrap up your thought and then get up and take a short break. Walk away from what you're doing. It's helpful to actually get up and get some blood in your legs. Go get a glass of water, fix a cup of coffee, etc. Try not to spend more than 5 minutes on your "break". Then set a timer and work completely focused for another 25 minutes.

Rinse and repeat until you've gotten through three to four sets of 25 minutes of working and 5 minute breaks. Then take a longer break and get away from work for a bit. Take 30 minutes to go grab lunch, take a short walk, or take care of a load of laundry if you're working from home. This break will give your brain a rest and gets you ready for the next session of three to four sets of "pomodori".

## 3 Tips To Help You Get On Track When You're Losing Focus

Staying focused isn't always easy. No matter how much you practice, or how well you're usually able to concentrate, we all have days when it's hard to stay on track. Here are three simple little things you can do to get back on track when you're losing focus.

### Review And Reevaluate

When you find yourself struggling with focus, stop and take a minute to review what you're doing. Why are you struggling? Is it this particular task, or did you not sleep well the night before? Maybe you're getting sick, have a headache, or you can't stop the constant distractions.

Once you know what's causing you to lose focus, you can address it. Sometimes that means reworking the task, or getting more information so you can move on in a timely fashion. Sometimes it means admitting defeat and cutting yourself some slack, particularly if you don't feel your best. Do what you can but don't beat yourself up for not being at the top of your game.

### Pick One Task

Often, our lack of focus is caused by trying to do too many things at the same time. Make yourself focus on one simple task, get that done, and then move on to the next task. Choose wisely and then put on your mental blinders and get it done. Doing this will usually bring your focus right back and after getting through a few tasks you'll find that you can start to multitask if the need arises.

Overall, aim to start your day with a little planning and break your work down into tasks that you can accomplish one at a time. Multi-tasking may make us feel like we're working hard and making a lot of progress, but research shows again and again, that we can focus better and stay more productive by tackling one task at a time.

### Work In Shorter Bursts And Take Breaks

Some days you just can't focus as well or for as long as a period of time as you usually do and that's ok. No matter what the reason, accept it and find a way to deal with it. One way to do this effectively is to work in shorter bursts and take more frequent breaks. As mentioned earlier, use the Pomodoro technique and make it your goal to get more accomplished.

## **Trouble Staying Focused? This Might Help**

We all have days when we're struggling to stay focused on our work. One of the first things you should look at is distractions. There are various things and people that can keep us from concentrating and getting work done. Let's look at what shape and form these distractions may take, what you can do to cut them out, and how you can get back to staying focused.

### **Physical Distractions**

Let's start with the obvious. There can be all sorts of things that distract you in your office or around your desk. This could be your phone blinking each time you get a new social media alert or email. It could be your email program on your laptop notifying you of incoming messages. It could be your phone ringing, or that pile of files sitting on the corner of your desk that you know you need to deal with.

If you're working at home, the sink filled with dishes and the basket of laundry have a way of beckoning us to stop focusing on our tasks and attend to chores. But don't give in. Yes, dedicate some time to doing the household things you need to, but not when you sit down to write. It's far too easy to procrastinate if laundry, dishes, pets, email, etc. have your attention and take you away from writing.

### **Distracting People**

People that show up and distract you can be a little harder to deal with. You need to work with others, you want to cultivate friendships, and there are times when you have to deal with a family situation, no matter how big a deadline you have looming.

Setting expectations and making it clear to those around you that there are times when you need to shut your office door and get things done can help. If you can set aside a time and make a schedule so everyone knows what to expect and when, this can help. Let your family and friends know that you need to write in the mornings, but you'd be happy to call them back after lunch. Unless there is an emergency, don't let people distract you from your goal.

### **Mental Distractions**

Last but not least there are mental distractions. They can be the trickiest to cope with, since there isn't a way to shut them out completely. Thoughts pop into your head and it's difficult to concentrate sometimes. A way to combat this is to keep a recorder or notebook nearby. When something distracts you, write it down or record a note to remind yourself to deal with that thought/errand/etc. later, once you have finished your task.

## How A Brain Dump Can Help You Focus

Have you heard of “brain dump”? It’s a very effective exercise to help you clear your mind and allow you to focus. The big problem a brain dump addresses is the fact that we all have constant thoughts, ideas, questions, and concerns running through our brain. A brain dump allows you to consciously address them, get them on paper, and thus keep them from distracting you later on.

Here’s what you need to do a brain dump. Get a notebook, a pen, and set aside a little quiet time to do this. If you’re more comfortable typing, open a word document or the likes. That being said, there is some real value in going the old-fashioned way of pen and paper.

Start writing everything that comes to mind. Don’t judge, don’t edit, and don’t skip over anything. Any ideas for projects, to-dos, and the likes go in the notebook. Don’t try to sort or organize them. Just let them flow from your brain to the paper.

Take your time, don’t force it and take a breather ever now and again. This exercise can be quite exhausting, but it is incredibly helpful and freeing. Think of it like a reboot for your brain that dumps all the RAM memory. It frees up a lot of space and helps you focus on the tasks that are truly important without being distracted by random thoughts.

What you do with your brain dump is up to you. You can simply tear out the pages and stick them in a drawer. There’s value in the simple act of dumping them out of your brain.

You can also go through your brain dump pages a few days later and make lists of what you want to focus on.

Going through your brain dump allows you to sort and categorize the information into a format that you can work with, one task at a time. This is much more productive than having those random thoughts running through your head, taking up valuable brain space.

Do brain dumps as needed to help you stay focused and productive.