

FOCUS FORWARD

How to Focus Your Mind in Order to Rid
Yourself of Distractions, Maximize Your Time,
and Achieve More

JUSTIN BYERS

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What is Focus?

“You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

~Mark Twain

What is focus? Why do we want it? What does it give us? Why do “focused” people seem to be happy in their lives? And how do we attain that sense of centeredness?

It is easy to see that many, if not most, of the successful people around us are those who possess focus, but how did they achieve it? And moreover, how do we achieve and maintain focus in an ever-scattered world filled with smart phones, internet distractions, television, financial worries, meddlesome coworkers, family responsibilities, and so on? These days, it can be hard to simply walk down a city sidewalk and not feel overwhelmed with advertising billboards, flashing signs, honking cars, and the ever-constant buzz of sounds, sights, and distractions. Surely, focus has become harder to attain in our lifetimes than in times past. Most of our grandparents never worried about attaining focus—they just lived their lives working constantly to get by. Today, even on a rural farm, people face more distractions than ever before due to the advent of technology and the proliferation of advertising.

When we think of the most focused people, we often think of athletes and actors, because their work is performed and easily visible. That hockey player on the ice is focused on the puck—he's not distracted with thoughts like, "Do I look fat in these pants?" or "Man, I hope that guy isn't about to smack me in the jaw..." He's doing his job and he's "in the flow." Likewise, the greatest actors are those who seem to have no concern for how silly they might look or whether their voice is inflected to the right pitch. They are consumed by the moment and by the circumstances surrounding them. In the "real world" where most of us reside, focus is usually seen by its achievements. "That CEO is a billionaire at age 24. Jeez. He must have been focused since he was 3 years old."

The truth is that the people who are the most successful and focused in their lives are generally doing something they are passionate about. They are seeking and going after clear objectives that mean something to them. But that doesn't mean that every step of the way is paved with glory or gold; rather, they still face the daily grind just like the rest of us. They still have to write and respond to petty emails; they still have to face their day-to-day lives with the distractions that we all do. But the successful ones know how to "keep their eye on the ball"

and not let themselves succumb to all the negativity buzzing around them. How do they do it? And how can we?

Focus is defined by the World English Dictionary as “a point upon which attention, activity, etc., is directed or concentrated, or “to fix attention; to concentrate.”¹

Likewise, another appealing and attainable concept is that of “flow.” Flow was defined by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi as the mental state in which a person performing an activity is fully engaged in a state of energized focus, involvement, and process. Flow is a state of concentrated motivation and single-minded immersion.²

So how do we achieve focus and flow in our daily lives? First, we must examine the elements of our existence that stand in the way of focus. I’ve already mentioned the obvious culprits: television, internet, smart phones, financial worries, and so on. These distractions are tangible, but in order to overcome the obvious, we first must examine our own roots and the components needed in ourselves to achieve balance, centeredness, and strength. Anyone can physically turn off a television set or a computer; but can we turn it off in our minds? Or do the emails, commercials, and facebook statuses keep scrolling across our brains long after the screen

has gone black? And just how does one effectively “shut down” those persistent worries about bills or jobs or relationships or responsibilities?

It is possible, but it requires taking a deep assessment of everything in our lives—of ourselves, our expectations, society’s expectations, and what we truly want out of life. The requirements for focus and for flow are beyond just mental—they are physical as well. Trying to attain focus when you haven’t had a good night’s sleep for a week is practically impossible. Just think of the countless television ads promoting sleeping medications in today’s world. How many people can be focused, when so many can’t get the mental rest needed to achieve it?

The manifestation of focus emerges from the physical to the mental. In order to clear our minds, we must first clear our bodies.

¹ Focus. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved November 28, 2012, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/focus>

² Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály (1996), *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and*

Invention, New York: Harper Perennial, ISBN
0-06-092820-4

The Physical Aspects of Focus

Physical tension is a tricky thing; it both prevents focus and results from a lack of focus. The same can be said of sleep deprivation. The more distracted and worried we become, the less capable we are of achieving restful sleep. The less we sleep, the more distracted we become. How do we break out of this cycle? By examining and beginning with the physical.

A 2007 study at Harvard Medical School and the University of California at Berkeley revealed that sleep deprivation enables a type of “disconnect” between the brain and emotions, causing subjects to become incapable of putting emotional events into perspective and thus leading to unsuitable responses.¹ Other studies have even linked sleep deprivation to psychosis and emotional disorders.

Remember the time you threw a phone against the wall because of a nasty email from your boss? Or when you screamed at a coworker because he was chewing gum too loudly in the next cubicle? It’s no secret that people become cranky from a lack of sleep—just look at children, or even pets for that matter. Proper REM sleep is necessary in order to even begin working on developing focus in our daily lives. Without it, we’re little better than a 3-year-old throwing a temper tantrum in the aisle of a toy

store, and we display about the same amount of perspective and focus. But without succumbing to the ever-growing pharmaceutical industry, how do we begin the process of “learning to sleep well”?

Sleep deprivation and physical tension are intrinsically connected. In today’s world, more people work at computers than ever before in history. Fortunately, the industry for office supplies has evolved and developed ergonomic keyboards, desks, chairs, and so on. But even with these improvements, most people suffer from various aches and pains associated with sitting down all day and staring at a screen. And the methods for alleviating these kinds of discomforts are different as well. You can come home after a long day of waiting tables and soak your aching feet in a bath, but how do you relieve tension in your spine from sitting in a chair for eight hours?

It not surprising that with the growth of office jobs, there has also been a rise in yoga enthusiasts. The benefits of yoga include both physical and mental improvements because yoga releases tension in the body, encourages freedom of breath, and promotes a meditative state.² Regular yoga practice has been shown to improve mood, dissolve anxiety, and increase REM sleep.³ And specifically noted for the office

worker, yoga has been found to be 30% more beneficial for lower back pain than traditional care in clinical trials.⁴

Along with yoga, another method of eliminating physical tension is what is known as Alexander technique. Unlike yoga, Alexander technique does not focus on a spiritual element and is not a form of exercise. This method, developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander in the 1890s, is used as a tool to relieve tension in the body by re-educating the subject in how to achieve and maintain physical balance and thus freer breathing.⁵ Initially developed as a part of actor training, Alexander technique has been employed by a number of writers, performers, athletes, and everyday people to ease back pain and relieve bodily tension. Alexander teachers employ the use of mirrors and hands-on adjustments to instruct their students how to achieve balance and release in everyday movements from sitting and walking to lifting objects and engaging in athletics. These techniques increase fluidity and efficiency of movement, ease of breath, and a greater connection between the mind and the body.

The martial arts are a third method frequently used by those seeking both release from physical tension and clarity of mind. Like yoga, many systems of martial arts focus on a culmination of

the physical, spiritual, and mental self. Modern conceptualizations of martial arts training include T'ai chi, Taekwondo, Karate, Kickboxing, Judo, Jujitsu, Aikido, Bojuka, and Kung Fu, among countless others and hybrids which incorporate more than one style. Many martial arts from the East have a focus on the disciplines of meditation, breath control, and Zen philosophy.

Lastly, one of the most essential elements required for achieving physical connection, optimum rest, and ultimately, mental focus, is nutrition. Just as an athlete will suffer from gorging on pizza right before competition, the human mind is incapable of attaining clarity and focus when it is buzzing with caffeine, sugar, and empty calories. Does that mean that you can't have a cup of coffee to start your day? No, it just means that moderation is the key and the focus should be on ingesting nutritious foods that not only give you energy, but also promote brain function and mental concentration.

According to Fernando Gómez-Pinilla, a UCLA professor of neurosurgery and physiological science, "Diet, exercise and sleep have the potential to alter our brain health and mental function. This raises the exciting possibility that changes in diet are a viable strategy for enhancing cognitive abilities, protecting the brain

from damage and counteracting the effects of aging.” Gómez-Pinilla’s study showed that “[c]hildren who had increased amounts of omega-3 fatty acids performed better in school, in reading and in spelling and had fewer behavioral problems.”⁶

Omega-3 fatty acids are polyunsaturated fatty acids commonly found in marine and plant oils. Common sources for omega-3 fatty acids include fish and fish oils as well as some plant oils, including flaxseed oil. Omega-3’s are not the only nutrients shown to improve cognitive function. “Researchers report in the journal *Annals of Neurology* that women who ate berries more frequently over a period of years showed slower decline in brain functions such as memory and attention when they got older than women who ate them less often.”⁷ Other super foods shown to influence both physical and mental health include peaches, unsweetened cocoa, almonds and other nuts, acai berries, quinoa, green leafy vegetables, peppers, sprouts, and barley.⁸

These studies go to show that you ultimately are what you eat. Consuming processed, chemically-laden foods with little nutritional value doesn’t contribute toward a focused mind or a fluid body. On the other hand, eating well and attaining freedom from physical tension can and will

promote better sleep, which in turn opens the door to greater focus and a healthier emotional system.

¹ Thomas, M., Sing, H., Belenky, G., Holcomb, H., Mayberg, H., Dannals, R., Wagner JR., H., Thorne, D., Popp, K., Rowland, L., Welsh, A., Balwinski, S. and Redmond, D. (2000), Neural basis of alertness and cognitive performance impairments during sleepiness. I. Effects of 24 h of sleep deprivation on waking human regional brain activity. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 9: 335–352.

² Birdee, Gurjeet S. et al. "Characteristics of Yoga Users: Results of a National Survey." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. Oct 2008, Volume 23 Issue 10. p1653-1658

³ "Yoga's ability to improve mood and lessen anxiety is linked to increased levels of a critical brain chemical, research finds". *Sciencedaily.com*. 2010-11-12. doi:10.1089/acm.2010.0007. Retrieved 2012-11-28

⁴ Tilbrook Helen E et al. (2011). "Yoga for Chronic Low Back Pain: A Randomized Trial". *Ann. Intern. Med.* 155 (9): 569-578. PMID 22041945

⁵ Rootberg, Ruth (September 2007). Mandy Rees. ed. "Voice and Gender and other contemporary issues in professional voice and speech training". *Voice and Speech Review*,

Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc, Cincinnati, OH 35 (1): 164–170.

⁶–Nauert PhD, R. (2008). Healthy Food Can Improve Mental Health. Psych Central. Retrieved on November 28, 2012, from <http://psychcentral.com/news/2008/07/10/healthy-food-can-improve-mental-health/2587.html>

⁷–Park, Alice (April 26, 2012) “Brain Food: Berries Can Slow Cognitive Decline”. Time Magazine. <http://healthland.time.com/2012/04/26/brain-food-berries-can-slow-cognitive-decline/>

⁸–Pratt, Steven, MD, author, Superfoods RX: Fourteen Foods Proven to Change Your Life, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

The Mental Aspects of Focus

On a small scale, “focus” can be equated to having the capacity to listen to one person in a conversation while being able to “tune out” other distractions such as television noise, other people talking, visual stimuli, and the internal traffic of thoughts and worries. On a larger scale, focus can be seen as a person’s ability to achieve their life goals without falling prey to pitfalls like disappointment, internal and external criticism, and the everyday obstacles that are presented through chance. There is little difference between these two standards aside from time. Acquiring focus on a small scale leads to the capacity for focus on a larger scale.

The capacity to focus is inherent across the spectrum of the animal kingdom, as it is a necessity for survival. A deer in a wooded forest has an instinctual ability to pinpoint sources of danger (predators) from sources of non-danger. Most actors would rather be thrust onstage without knowing their lines than be forced to perform alongside a cat or a dog—because animals notoriously steal the audience’s attention due to the fact that their focus is so much sharper than ours. We focus on that which IS focused—which is also why most people who exude a sense of focus are inexplicably magnetic. Actors and athletes who exhibit this quality are

compelling to watch; they display a lack of inhibition to action; they are driven toward a set objective and we want to see them achieve that objective. The same applies to the focused people that we encounter on a day-to-day basis. We may not be able to identify what it is that makes them compelling—but somehow they are. They seem to be impervious to the worries and distractions that consume most people. They are not staring at their cell phones constantly or tugging at their clothing self-consciously. They appear to be stronger than us, more relaxed than us, and more intense than us.

For some of these people, focus has come naturally. They instinctively understood it at a young age just like the cat who instinctively knows how to silently stalk a mouse. For most, though, it is a strength that they have developed over time and through a number of means. Just like the physical elements that lead to greater focus, the mental elements of focus can be cultivated, exercised, and improved upon. I stress the physical first, because those components are necessary in order to begin developing greater mental and emotional flexibility.

Meditation is a practice that has been previously mentioned in examining yoga and the martial arts. Meditation refers to a broad variety of practices that aim to induce a mode of

consciousness that is beneficial to mental and emotional clarity.¹ The benefits of meditation are manifold and largely dependent upon the type of meditation practiced; they can include a greater sense of spirituality, compassion, self-awareness, patience, focus, and emotional well-being. Meditation can also be perceived as “New-Agey” or “alternative” to some, due to the fact that meditation’s rise in the West grew largely out of the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Many people believe themselves incapable of meditation after trying it once or twice, and thus turn away from the practice out of frustration.

Whatever societal or personal barriers may stand between you and the practice of meditation, I urge you to give it a chance. Meditation can be as simple as lying on your bedroom floor and doing nothing for five minutes a day or as concentrated as attending classes, seminars, or workshops. It can involve complex postures or done while walking (as in *kinhin*) or performing a simple task (as in *samu*). Researchers from Harvard, Yale, and MIT conducted studies which showed an increased thickness of the cerebral cortex in the practitioners of Buddhist Insight meditation. The cerebral cortex plays a key role in memory, attention, perceptual awareness, thought, language, and consciousness.² The studies also indicated that regular meditation practice may slow the age-related thinning of the

frontal cortex, the part of the brain which controls voluntary movements of specific body parts.³ The practice of meditation is also linked to self-discipline, another attribute that allies closely with focus.

Meditation can help to clear the mind of distractions, worries, and self-criticism. It can also lead to a sense of inner truth, which is necessary in order to completely and effectively examine your life, your goals, and your actions.

“It is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be a reason the more for us to do it.”

~Rainer Maria Rilke

¹ Lutz et. al; Slagter, HA; Dunne, JD; Davidson, RJ (2008). "Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation". Trends in cognitive sciences 12 (4): 163–9.

² Kandel, Eric R.; Schwartz, James H.; Jessell, Thomas M. (2000). Principles of Neural Science Fourth Edition. United State of America: McGraw-Hill. p. 324. ISBN 0-8385-7701-6.

³ Cranson, Robert W., et al. "Transcendental Meditation and improved performance on intelligence-related measures: a longitudinal study." Personality and Individual Differences 12.10 (1991): 1105-1116.

Practical Approaches to Achieving Focus in Our Daily Lives

Now that we've looked at the definition of focus and the physical and mental components of it, let's take a look at some practical, everyday methods that can be implemented in order to develop, cultivate, and maintain focus. The following is by no means a comprehensive list of every tactic that can be used to develop daily focus, but it is a starting point. Ultimately, only you can determine what works for you. However, I suggest that you at least give each of these methods a chance before determining that it doesn't apply to you.

Physical Organization

It is little surprise that working in an organized space creates a greater sense of focus in our work, but it is often one of the things that can be overlooked—especially when we are feeling overwhelmed. For those of us who work from home, this is of even greater importance. Having a clearly defined workspace in the home is essential for the work-at-home writer, designer, or artisan. This doesn't mean that you have to set aside a home office if you're tight on space; what it *does mean*, though, is that whatever space you use is dedicated to work during the specified

time you set aside. This means no friends stopping by to chat, and preferably no children running through the space. If you're a mommy-blogger, set aside your work time when your children are gone to school, preschool, or have a task that will occupy them for a set time. Realistically, not everyone can afford daycare or nannies. That's where creativity comes into play. Designate a period of time when you are the freest from distraction. Some bloggers write at night after the family is in bed; while this is reasonable, you must ensure that you are getting adequate sleep, because again, a lack of sleep means a lack of focus. If you work in an office, this task is easier—simply pare down everything on your desk to what is needed. A photograph or two is fine, but some people's desks are so overwhelmed with knickknacks and mementos that one wonders how they are able to remember they're at work. Clear away what objects around you are unnecessary, and you'll be surprised at how much clearer your mind feels.

Sleep

Ah, that ever-important element of sleep. As someone who has struggled with insomnia most of my adult life, I can vouch for how frustrating sleeplessness is and its effects on our mental and emotional health. That said, I have learned a few tricks to help with insomnia. If you are having

difficulty sleeping and are tossing and turning nightly, don't just lay there and suffer. While on occasion you might put yourself back to sleep, more often you will exacerbate the problem by attempting to force it. Get out of bed. Read a book in another room. Take a warm bath. Have a cup of hot tea (decaffeinated!). Don't punish yourself for an inability to relax—instead, treat yourself like a friend, and try to help the matter without criticizing it. The physical elements discussed previously (yoga, martial arts, breathing exercises, etc.) will help those suffering from sleep deprivation because they enable more centeredness and relaxation in our waking lives, leading to a greater ability to relax at night. Some people opt to go the route of medication, although most often medications address the symptoms without addressing the cause. If the cause of your insomnia is an underlying worry or stress about your job, sleeping pills aren't going to do much good. You might sleep, but I find that when I force sleep with internal battles going on, I'm just going to have nightmares and wake up feeling less rested than before. So address the battles inside of you—don't opt for the easy answer in pharmaceuticals. Lastly, establish a clear routine at bedtime. This will help prepare you for restful sleep and will create an atmosphere freer from stress. Stop doing your work (if you work from home or have brought work back from the office)

a few hours before bedtime. Limit your television viewing, especially at bedtime. Trying to sleep with the nightly news flashing in your mind is no good! Take a warm bath before bedtime, and have some tea or another soothing beverage. Alcohol is not conducive to sleep, even though we may think it makes us sleepy.

Meditate Daily

Meditation, along with physical activities like yoga and martial arts, focuses our minds and our bodies and creates a greater sense of unity and connection within ourselves. There are many schools of meditation and many methods. Find what works for you. Meditation is a solitary activity, although you can of course attend classes and seminars to learn different techniques. I like meditation because there is no “right” answer to it; the key to meditation is to free your thoughts. Resistance is futile in the process of meditation, so when you try fighting yourself, you will ultimately get nowhere. Accept the floating thoughts that come into your mind, and allow yourself the freedom to let them go. Keep trying when you feel like you are failing, and don’t give up. Perseverance is one of the key qualities of focus, and it is a quality that is developed over time. Devote 20 minutes each day to meditation, and stick to it even when you feel like it is a waste of time, is boring, or is

impossible. The fact that you're dedicating this time to yourself should make you feel special. It is time for you to be solely one with yourself.

Keep a Journal

Like meditation, journaling can help us clear our mind of the peripheral thoughts and worries that consume us by laying them out clearly on paper. "Stream of consciousness" has different meanings and is addressed in the Yogachara school of Mahayana Buddhism as a theory of the mind.¹ In the literary world, stream of consciousness refers to both a style of writing and a method. Writing by method of stream of consciousness means letting go of all preconceived notions of "writing well," and instead just letting your hand and mind do the work freely. Allow yourself to write without thinking and without judgment of any finished product. This is YOUR journal, not a school essay. Allow yourself to free-associate and to ramble. Don't look at your writing after you finish it; rather, give it a week or more and then go back and take a look at your internal thoughts.

Often, when we allow ourselves to just regurgitate all of the jumbled thoughts in our heads without judgment, it has the effect of diminishing those worries by clearly defining them. An unarticulated worry can wreak havoc

on our ability to concentrate and focus; by articulating it, we are essentially saying “This is something I can deal with. This is something that has a name now. This is not as gigantic or overwhelming as it seemed to be.” Dream journals are another great concept, and you can easily incorporate them into your regular journal. Keep the journal near you while you sleep; when you wake up, write down your dreams immediately. Don’t think about them too much—just write what you remember. Did a color stand out? What animals were in the dream? What did you feel like in the dream? Later, go back and read about your dreams with a clear mind and no judgment again. What do you gather from the dream? Does it signify something in your life that you haven’t addressed? Dreams are our subconscious minds speaking to us in symbols and metaphors. Quite often, we can learn a great deal about our emotions, inner thoughts, and worries by looking closely at our dreams.

Develop Hobbies that Satisfy You

Hobbies are an important part of a well-rounded life because they are something we pursue for fun alone. A “hobby” is defined as “an activity or interest pursued for pleasure or relaxation and not as a main occupation.”² Therefore, choose a hobby that has nothing to do with your principle occupational goals. Choose something that

makes you excited and challenges you. Hobbies can vary from competitive sports (softball, baseball, basketball, etc.) to more solitary sports (rock-climbing, hiking, fishing, kayaking) to collecting (stamps, coins) to activities like cooking, sewing, crocheting, and gardening. The main point of having a hobby is that it is a gift to yourself; it is any activity that you thoroughly enjoy for the activity's sake alone. People who have hobbies that they enjoy are self-satisfied and more centered. They have something to look forward to outside of pursuing their profession; therefore, minor failures or struggles in the workplace are not as obsessed over and are seen with greater perspective. We do not have "to live for" our jobs or for our families; we can find fulfillment in a great number of places; realizing that through hobbies is rewarding on multiple levels.

Get Closer to Nature

In the past fifty years, life on this planet has changed considerably. In the past twenty even, we have gone from a much simpler world to a much more socially complex one. One of the biggest catalysts of this change is in the form of cell phones. While we often don't realize it, the invention of the cell phone has changed the way we communicate with the world in millions of ways. Before cell phones, if you were away from

your home or the office, you were inaccessible to the rest of society. If you were driving your car to the grocery store, there would have been no concern about your boss calling you to discuss next week's meeting. If you went on a family trip, you were indisposed and the answering machine might take your messages, but you wouldn't. Cell phones have changed our accessibility to the world, and in doing so, have made us a more flustered, scattered, and distracted culture. It seems that many times a year now someone walks into traffic or falls into a manhole while texting. What an absurdity! If the distraction of cell phones makes walking down the street a danger, just think of the effect they have on our mental and emotional sanctity. It is not a reasonable prospect for most of us to throw out our cell phones, so how do we learn to let them exist in our lives without overwhelming us?

Learn to take time away from the chaos. Taking time to leave behind the technical world and immerse yourself in nature will help you gain perspective in your life. Staying focused with constant beeps and buzzes is difficult, so give yourself a break every now and then. Take a hike in the woods without your cell phone—or if you're afraid of getting lost, turn it off. If you live in a city, take a day off and get on the train to somewhere that feels free of civilization. Even

Central Park has corners that feel removed from the buzz of New York City. But moreover, leave behind the laptop, the cell phone, the e-reader. Take a book, or just take in the nature around you. When I lived in New York and felt overwhelmed with the city, I'd often take a train to Coney Island in the dead of winter when there were few tourists. There, I'd just stroll the boardwalk and sit watching the waves until I felt centered enough to go back. Taking a break from the Internet and social media is important too—because it is important to experience real-time as opposed to “Internet time.” When I find myself getting frustrated waiting for ten seconds for a page to load, I realize how fast-paced our world has become. Sometimes it's good to step away from that pace and think about how time is different for a tree or a wave or a grain of sand.

Take a Personal Vacation Day

Along with getting closer to nature, taking a mini-vacation can do wonders for your perspective. If you can't get to the forest, the beach, or even the park, take your vacation indoors and dedicate a whole day to relaxing. Known in many circles as “mental health days,” most people appreciate taking time off work and responsibilities to rejuvenate. Some people go to the spa and get a massage; others create their own atmosphere of pampering at home.

Regardless of what you choose to do on your “mental health day,” enjoy it, don’t rush it, and turn off the computer and the cell phone. I know it may seem relaxing to play “Farmville” all day from your bed, but you’re not achieving a sense of centeredness when you have a message screen and countless flashing ads in front of your eyes. Instead, read a book, write, and enjoy a hobby. Appreciate having a day of peace as opposed to a day of perpetual activity.

Create Bad Artwork

By using the term “bad,” I’m not implying in any way that you aren’t the next Rembrandt or Picasso. I say “creating bad artwork” in the sense that there is no expectation for it to be good. Just like journaling, your artwork is your own and does not have to be displayed in order to be meaningful. It can be phenomenal, or it can be “ugly.” It doesn’t matter. The purpose of creating bad artwork is to free yourself of expectation and criticism. Some people find that writing in a stream of consciousness manner is limiting to them, while scrawling with crayons on sketch paper is freeing. Allow yourself to doodle, draw, color, paint, or sculpt—whatever gives you the most freedom and satisfaction. Don’t expect it to be good. Expect it to be enjoyable. And let yourself enjoy the simple act of self-expression without judgment or criticism. Creating artwork,

even if it is just scrawling in a children's coloring book, helps to develop focus. Many mommy bloggers I know use coloring books to give their children something to occupy them while they write. In doing this, they can often buy off an hour or two of silent focus. Art has the same effect on adults when we allow ourselves to quietly engage in it for enjoyment. If you're feeling overloaded with too many tasks, take a few moments to draw or color and see if you don't feel a little less overwhelmed.

Get into the Habit of Making Lists

Putting ideas, goals, and daily objectives down on paper helps immensely in our ability to achieve them and remain focused. These lists or outlines can and should range from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic. What are your ultimate goals in life? What are your immediate goals for the day? I recommend keeping these outlines separate, but they are ultimately connected. Make one list of what you want to achieve in life and keep this list in your journal or somewhere for yourself. You can refer back to this list and remind yourself of what it is you want, and you can then assess whether you are on the correct path or not. Make a daily list of what you need to accomplish during the day, and mark off each objective as you reach it. I've been known to always list "Wake up" on my daily

“To-Do List” just so that I feel accomplished when I mark it off. It might be silly, but it has helped me feel motivated to conquer the rest of the list when otherwise I might not have. Be realistic about your goals—both in the long-term and in the short-term. If “Write a novel” is on your daily to-do list, you’re not going to feel very accomplished when the day is ended and you didn’t achieve your goal. If “Write five pages” is your objective, you will feel immensely better even if you just wrote four by the day’s end.

Give yourself breaks in your daily scheduling. I find that when I create a daily to-do list and I keep it simple and focused on what the most essential tasks are, I manage my time better and am able to take those periodic breaks to refocus. Most people work best in small bursts with periodic breaks in-between. Start trying to manage your time so that you work for an hour and then take ten to twenty minutes of downtime. When you return to your work, you will be more focused.

Along with creating daily and long-term lists of goals, another form of lists that are greatly effective are lists of ideas. I often find that when I do take that break after working for an hour, ideas come flooding to me. The same is true for the daily vacation or the nature trip. When the

pressure of the computer screen is not there, ideas begin to flow more freely. So, if you don't want to lug around your personal journal all of the time, I recommend keeping either a small notepad or even just a sheet of paper with you. When you have ideas, write them down. Later, when you're back at home, you can add these thoughts to your journal or apply them to your work. Lists can seem to some people to be rigid or structured, but in actuality, keeping lists gives us greater freedom because we're not trying to retain things in our head. It allows us to give a thought precedence and then to move on.

Play Games that Stimulate Your Mind

When most people think of games today, they think of the proliferation of mind-numbing games on their cell phones, social media, and the Internet. These games indeed can be a distraction to our daily lives. But that is not to say that there are no advantages to playing games. After all, let's admit it: the reason those games are a distraction is because they're fun. Games can allow us to have focus on something challenging and engaging—and the objectives are simpler and easier to digest than the objectives in our lives. We can learn from games if we compare them to the objectives we seek in work or in our personal goals. Knocking that little red bird into the green pig is a simple action—but it replicates

the actions that we want in our lives. If becoming a successful businessperson is your goal, then you simply have to figure out how to aim in order to achieve that objective. Engage in games that make you think, exercise your focus, and challenge you. Give yourself a set amount of time to just “play around,” and don’t let this time interfere with “work time.” I use Internet games as a reward for personal achievements in my daily routine. If I’ve written a set number of pages or achieved focus on an essential task for an hour, I’ll play a game for a few moments. Then I’ll go back to work. Giving yourself rewards throughout the day for even minor successes can increase your motivation and your focus.

Create Challenges to Keep Your Work Fun

Along with giving yourself personal rewards for your achievements, another way to increase focus in your workday is to create your own personal challenges and games within the work itself. Whether you’re developing a spreadsheet, a PowerPoint presentation, an essay, or a database, there are ways to create fun in your work environment. Be creative.

Assess and Reassess

Lastly, and most importantly, self-assessment

and reassessment is vital to developing, maintaining, and implementing focus. If you are ultimately miserable in your profession, you will never attain focus or happiness in that profession. Assessment is not judgment. To judge yourself for past error is not to improve—it is just to beat yourself up for something in the past. Assessment, on the other hand, is evaluating what worked and what didn't, and what direction you should take next. Some people undertake a new hobby and realize that they would be happier pursuing that hobby as their profession than the one they have chosen. If that is the case, assess what is needed to pursue what it is that you truly love. If being a banker has been making you miserable and you would rather be a charter fisherman, then figure out how you can go about pursuing that dream. Honestly assess in your life what gives you satisfaction in and of itself. If your proposed objective involves something that you feel will bring you wealth, love, beauty, popularity, or power, take a closer look. The popularity, power, and attractiveness that you seek will more likely be found in the pursuit of something that you truly love than in the pursuit of something for money alone. Again, think of those focused people and their magnetism—that magnetism arises because they are pursuing a passion. Find your passion, and follow it. If you must stay in a profession that you aren't wild about, embrace the hobbies that

you do care for. People change, and opening your mind to possibility is never a bad thing. Examine and reexamine what you want, and keep a notepad ready in case a new idea swims your way. Focus is not about rigid structure—it is about having the perspective and flexibility to adapt to change while maintaining concentration on what ultimately is of the greatest importance to you.

¹Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun*. Routledge 2002, page 193.

²hobby. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved December 01, 2012, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hobby>

Summary and Review

Attaining focus is an objective that reaches people in all walks of life, from the student hoping to attain academic success to the businessperson seeking professional achievement to the artist's goal of creative expression. Today's technological world has introduced more distractions than people have faced ever before, but with it, has also produced more job opportunities, creative outlets, and social connectedness. In order to develop and maintain focus today, we must learn how to find balance in our lives. We must learn how to discipline ourselves to step away periodically from the buzz and beeps of cell phones, internet sites, and social media. And finally, we must assess and reassess what we want out of life, and the different actions we can take to achieve those goals.

Taking the time to improve our self-awareness, inner creativity, and sense of emotional well-being are the first steps to achieving focus. These goals can be attained by a variety of methods, from yoga and meditation to journal-writing and nature hikes. Focus comes from within, and when we learn to assess our lives without judgment, we can then determine what we want and how to attain it.

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How many times have you thought, “There are not enough hours the day” or, “Where did all my time go today?” Do you lie in bed at night, feeling as if you barely finished anything? Are you rushing from place to place to accomplish things, only to realize you’ve only finished a few of the things you wanted to? Have you caught yourself putting off tasks again and again, which causes you to feel like you are in a huge heap of disorganization?

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You'll marvel at the simple yet powerful techniques which will dramatically change how you deal with your days. Get what YOU want out of YOUR day by picking up *Time Control: How to Stop Time Destroyers, Eliminate Procrastination, Create an Effective Schedule and Reclaim Your Life* today at Amazon!



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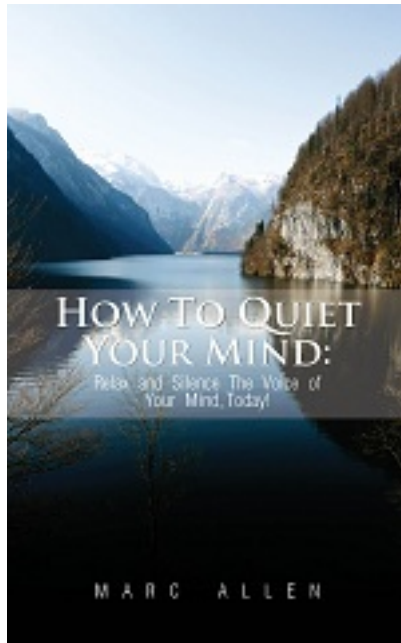
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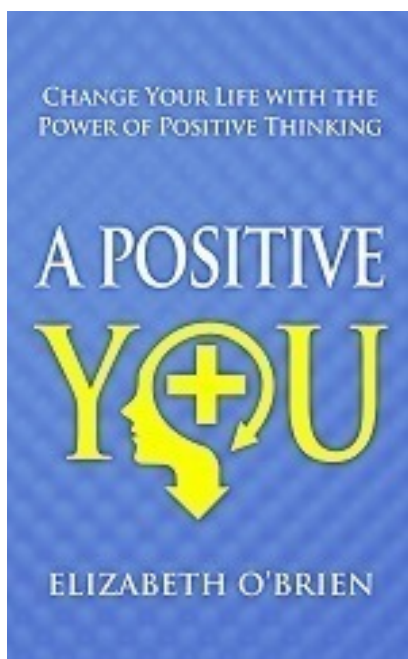


A Positive You: Change Your Life with the Power of Positive Thinking - Elizabeth O'Brien

Have you always wondered why some people seem to sail smoothly through life, and others struggle and never reach their full potential? More often than not, the difference comes down to just one thing: their thinking. Those who have success truly are optimists and positive thinkers. Those who struggle, hit impenetrable roadblocks, and never get ahead are generally thinking too negatively, and it holds them back.

Filled with tips and techniques to give you that shot of optimism you occasionally need, “A Positive You: Change Your Life with the Power of Positive Thinking” will show you how to become a positive thinker and reap all of the benefits life has to offer.

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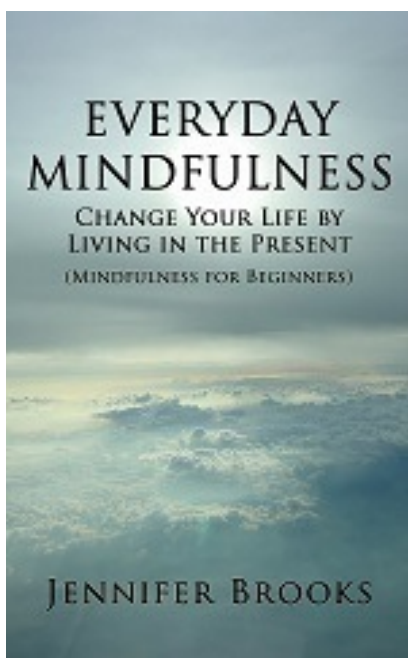
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Living in the Present (Mindfulness for Beginners) – Jennifer Brooks

Stressed out? Burnt out? Just plain tired of trying to keep up with the frenzied pace of the world? What would you say if I told you that in just a short 20 minutes a day, you can change that stressed state to one of serenity and peace?

The answer is mindful meditation, which has been used for thousands of years by wise individuals worldwide. Now, all the benefits these people “claimed” they were receiving are being verified through rigorous clinical studies. If you’re searching for a new way of living, a second chance at living life more fully, then mindful meditation is for you. Why waste another moment of your life dwelling in the past or worrying about the future? Isn’t it time you start living in the present?

Get *Everyday Mindfulness: Change Your Life by Living in the Present* today and gain the secrets that meditation holds to bring you a happier and healthier life!



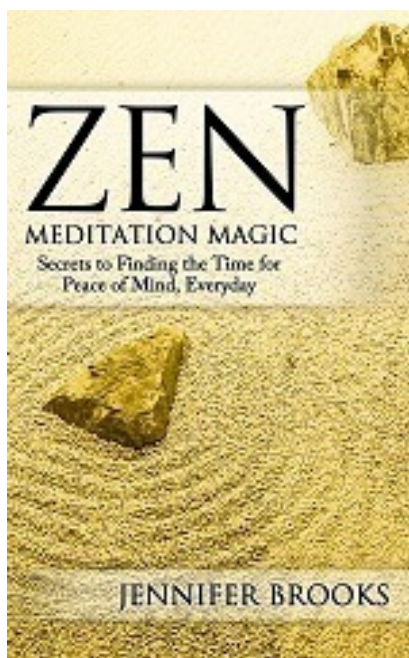
Zen Meditation Magic: Secrets to Finding the Time for Peace of Mind, Everyday – Jennifer Brooks

Did you always want the benefits of meditation without the required twenty to thirty minutes of sitting “doing nothing?” Perhaps you would love to meditate but find it difficult to relax your body long enough? Or maybe it’s your mind that careens out of control, refusing to think of “nothing?”

Zen Meditation Magic: Secrets to Finding the

Time for Peace of Mind, Everyday is your complete guide to Zen meditation. Whether you have ninety seconds (the time of a red light at a busy intersection) or twenty minutes, you can find a Zen meditative practice you can use to improve your overall health and give you the ultimate feeling of peace of mind.

Pick up *Zen Meditation Magic: Secrets to Finding the Time for Peace of Mind, Everyday* today and obtain the benefits of a Zen lifestyle!



The Problem is YOU: How to Get Out of Your

Own Way and Conquer Self-Defeating Behavior - John Burke

This book won't help you with self-defeating behavior. It's easier to spend your life procrastinating, sabotaging relationships, not finishing tasks, fearing failure, and keeping other bad habits than it is to change. Just stay the way you are.

This is how the voice of self-defeating behavior works on you. It works against your goals and interests in a way that you never get what you want. Opportunities are missed, your habits continue, your relationships don't flourish, and your life becomes one big regret.

Inside *The Problem is YOU: How to Get Out of Your Own Way and Conquer Self-Defeating Behavior*, we reveal exactly what these behaviors are and the steps to conquer each and every one of them. The result? A positive attitude, achieving what you want, and getting more out of life.

[Click here to start reading this book today and free yourself from all the habits that are holding you back from living the life you truly deserve.](#)

THE PROBLEM YOU IS YOU

How to Get Out of Your
Own Way and Conquer
Self-Defeating Behavior

JOHN BURKE

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