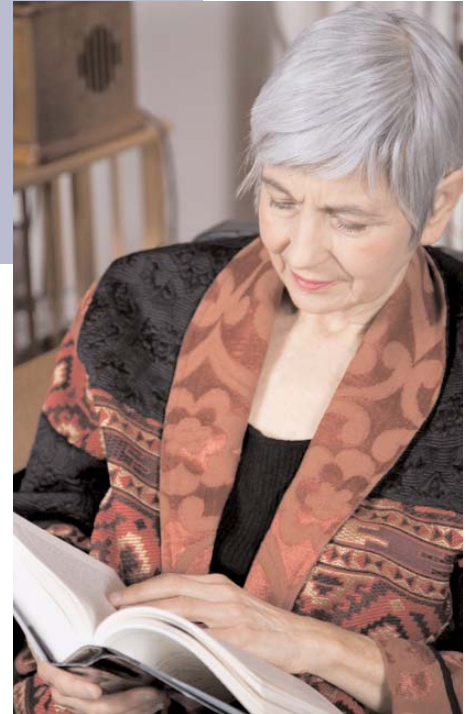


Improving Your Concentration: Three Key Steps

Concentration is your ability to work without letting people, feelings or activities get in the way. There are three steps to developing your concentration abilities:

- Establishing concentration
- Increasing concentration
- Developing the concentration habit

This fact sheet provides tips on how to develop each of these abilities.



ESTABLISHING CONCENTRATION

Be aware of external distractions and separate yourself from them. For example, give yourself permission to let your answering machine pick up calls and not to check your email while you're working on a task. Or, ask your family for an hour of uninterrupted quiet time.

Try to recognize these distractions and take care of them. Internal distractions such as thoughts, emotions, physical feelings, hunger and tiredness can interrupt your ability to focus. Do something about the things that are bothering you before you start the task at hand. For instance, if you know that you are hungry, eat before you start a task.

Stop distracting thoughts that pop into your mind as soon as you are aware of them. You can do this by "noticing" the thought, and then consciously bringing your attention back to the task at hand.

Keep a reminder pad handy. If something that you have to do pops into your head, jot it down to get it off your mind.

INCREASING CONCENTRATION

Plan to concentrate. How interested are you in what you are doing? If the answer is "not much," then try to come up with reasons for developing an interest. Will the project give you a chance to learn a new skill? Or might finishing it give you a sense of accomplishment?

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Fact sheet

Use a pencil or highlighter. Taking notes or highlighting key points are ways to keep yourself actively involved in a task such as reading.

Divide tasks into manageable parts. You will feel a sense of accomplishment more often, which can help you stay motivated and on task longer.

Plan breaks according to your concentration span. You are not a machine. Taking a walk or a lunch break will help clear your head.

If you find yourself losing focus, stand up. The physical act of standing up brings your attention to the fact that you're losing focus. It lets you stop the process and bring your thinking back to the task at hand.

Vary your activities. Change is often as good as a taking a break.



DEVELOPING THE CONCENTRATION HABIT

Like any other skill, concentration must be learned, practiced and developed. Here are some questions to help you get in a regular pattern of concentrating.

How long is your concentration span? Find out by recording your start time for a task like reading, and as soon as your mind begins to drift, record this time. Try this several times until you can gauge your average concentration span.

When is your concentration level at its best? Find a consistent time during the day when you know that you won't be interrupted and that your energy level meets the demands of the particular task. Then, try to use that time slot each day to work on that task.

What are the conditions that best allow you to concentrate? Allow yourself to be removed from distractions for set periods of time to try and accomplish work. A cleared-off desk, good lighting, some light music in the background – figure out what works for you. Make the atmosphere as inviting as possible for you to concentrate better.

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