

## Focus: Master the art of concentration | Tools & tips 1



To improve  
your focus,  
notice when  
you lose it

# Mind Your Mind

The vast majority of our actions in a day are automatic. Automated behaviors require far less energy than having to pay attention to small details every time these actions are performed. The energy-hungry human brain favors automatic processing as an energy-saving measure.

Therefore, changing or improving any of your habitual actions, no matter the area, necessarily starts with bringing awareness to automatic patterns. You cannot change or improve anything unless you're aware of what you're actually doing to begin with. The same is true of focus.

For the most part, we expect to be naturally focused, and become upset when we are not. But have you ever paid attention to how the process of focusing actually works?

Typically, there are four phases of attention and distraction that happen every time you try to focus:



1

First, you choose a focus. For example, a report you need to write. You set out to write it with the intention to finish it within a given time frame.

2

Sooner or later your attention wanders. This is not something you plan or wish for, it simply happens.

3

At some point you become aware that your attention has wandered. You 'catch' yourself being out of focus.

4

At this point you make a choice – go back to the original task or drop it and focus on something else.

Whether you go back to Step 1 and re-focus on your report or choose a different task to focus on, the same process will repeat itself over and over again.

Note that Steps 1 and 4 are more conscious acts – you make a choice regarding the action you take. But Steps 2 (distraction) and 3 (suddenly becoming aware of being distracted) simply happen. Distraction is not a conscious choice.

This is where awareness comes into the picture. By paying attention to the process,

especially the less-conscious parts of it (Steps 2-3), you will 'catch' yourself wandering off-theme sooner, go more quickly back to Step 1 and tend to stay there longer, in full focus. In other words, by observing mindfully how, why and when in the process you get distracted, your ability to focus and re-focus will gradually improve. Awareness of your automatic mind-wandering habits will increasingly sharpen your ability to stay on task.

# Reflection: Your Current Focus Habits

Take a moment to reflect on your focus performance during the last week.  
Mark your answers on the scales below.

## 1. How well were you able to direct your attention to your tasks at hand?

I could not focus on what I was supposed to do

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

I was perfectly capable to focus on the tasks at hand

.....

## 2. How concentrated (fully focused) were you while working on your most important tasks?

I was constantly distracted

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

I was fully focused the whole time

.....

## 3. How often did you choose a new task as a consequence of being distracted?

I switched tasks continuously

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

I stayed fully focused on the original tasks

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## My recurrent distractors in the past week were

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The 'Circles of Attention' model on the following page will help you understand where in the focusing process your recurrent distractors fall, and, by extension, where the most room for improvement is likely to be found.

# Circles of Attention Model

The model below was developed by German sport psychologist Professor Hans Eberspächer with the goal of helping top athletes recognize the level(s) of distraction that they were most likely to be struggling with. Although originally developed for sport performance, this model has since been successfully used in mental training for other professionals in high pressure jobs, such as surgeons and military personnel.

**To improve your focus you must first become aware of how, why and when you lose it.**

This practical model helps you understand the levels at which the most common distractions occur, and recommends appropriate strategies to deal with them.

Circle 1 represents your full focus, best performance and ideal use of your brain's working memory. The further away you move from Circle 1, the more challenging it becomes, and the more energy it takes, to return to the task at hand.

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Circle 1 (Me and my task) - full attention to the task in hand. Centered, focused, in the here and now. **Taking charge, thinking, executing.**

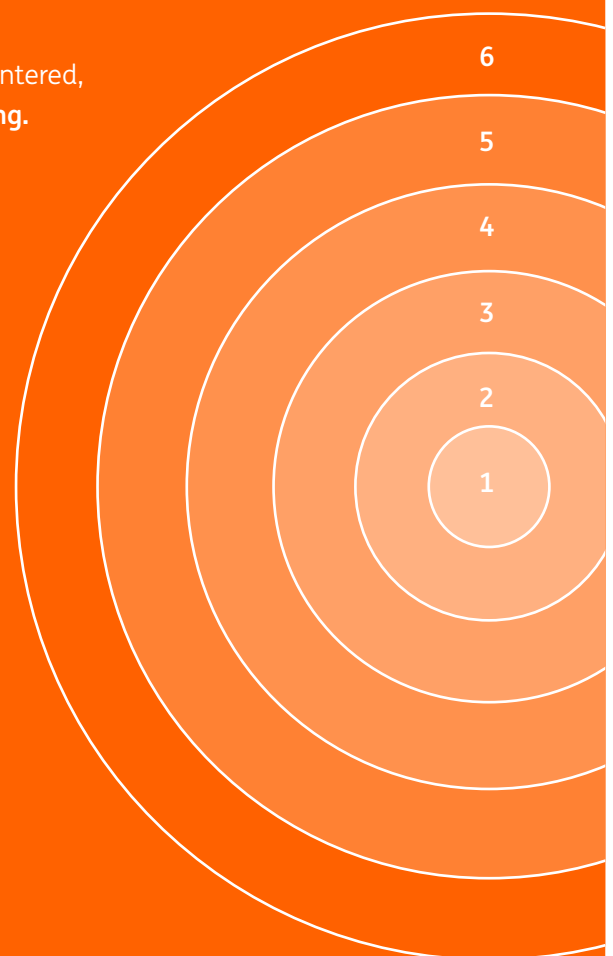
Circle 2 (Direct distractions) - minor interruptions, such as noise, voices, digital notifications, or neutral/insignificant thoughts that pop up in your mind. **Realization that your focus shifted due to an external or internal cue.**

Circle 3 (Gap between expectations and reality) - things work out differently to how you expected them to be. **Surprised, Frustration, irritation.**

Circle 4 (Success and failure) - thoughts wander away: will I be able to perform? Will I succeed or fail in completing the task at hand? **Anxiety, unease.**

Circle 5 (Consequences of failure) - What will happen if I under-perform? what will the others think of me if I don't perform? **Worry, self-doubt.**

Circle 6 (Purpose) - 'What am I doing here?' I'd better stop altogether and try another time. **Giving up.**



# We can do it!

You set out with Step 1 in mind (full focus on the exercise) and may have found yourself distracted a few times while processing this text (Steps 2). You may have noticed your drifting away (Step 3), but you managed to re-focus and complete the exercise. We hope you were able to get some insight into your common focus pitfalls along the way.

Staying fully focused 100% of the time may be a far-off goal in daily life, but taking conscious control of your attention span and improving it is a do-able objective. This is what we aim for in the upcoming Focus block, where we will share and try out practical tools to improve and maintain more consistent focus.