

Improving Concentration

Concentration is often associated with effective learning, and something that we only notice when it is lacking. For example, we might not notice how good our concentration skills are when focusing on our favourite television program, however, our lack of concentration seems more obvious when we can't read more than a few lines of a text book before our mind starts to wander.

We all have the ability to concentrate some of the time. The challenge is to recognise it as a skill or set of habits that we can develop.

Our ability to concentrate depends on:

- Our interest in the subject or activity
- Our motivation eg. to finish a task
- Our level of relaxation or enjoyment
- The level of distraction either from our environment (eg. noise), or from our own thoughts.

Expanding your concentration span

Our concentration span, or time we can concentrate on a specific task before our thoughts wander, will be different for different tasks. By practising the following skills we can extend our concentration span:

- Actively notice when your thoughts begin to wander, then say STOP to your self and re-focus.
- Focus on one thing for a time and actively ignore other things going on around you (eg. in a lecture, focus on the lecturer and cut out any other noises such as people coughing).
- Set a goal for what you would like to achieve in a specific study session. eg 'In the next 45 minutes I will read and highlight the key points in this article'.

Other things that can help

Plan to concentrate by starting a study session with 'warm up' activities:

- Check that your place of study is comfortable and free of distractions
- Make sure you have all the books, notepaper, a glass of water or anything else you need.

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When you need a break, have a stretch, or walk around the room, refresh your eyes by changing the focal distance eg. by looking out the window.

- Tackle activities and tasks that require the most concentration when you are mentally and physically fresh. Know what times of the day you are most alert and plan to work on the more difficult material then.
- Playing particular types of classical music composed by the Baroque composers such as Handel, Vivaldi, and J.S. Bach has been found to induce the alpha state in our brain which is associated with relaxed alertness. This state of mind can aid the learning process.
- Read difficult material with a question in mind. This can help you sharpen your focus.
- Use the SQ3R technique:
 - start by Skimming the whole chapter, article or book;
 - then pose some Questions about what the author is trying to say;
 - then Read actively or think about what you are reading by searching for answers to your questions;
 - then Recite or answer the questions yourself in your own words;
 - then Review your notes and look for gaps in your knowledge.
- Set small, manageable study goals and tackle one at a time.
- Reward yourself with a pleasant activity after you have had an effective study session.

Dealing with specific issues

If you are having trouble concentrating because of personal worries, it can be helpful to set some time aside to focus on the problem. Perhaps make some time to talk to a friend, or contact a counsellor. After spending time sorting it out, relax and refresh yourself by changing tack (eg. going for a walk, watching TV) before sitting down to concentrate on your study again.

If your thoughts are wandering because the material is difficult to understand, it is a good idea to contact your lecturer and ask for clarification. You could also use a bulletin board if one is available to share ideas or questions with other students.

Conclusion

You know yourself the best, so recognise that there are times when you can focus better than at other times. Use this information to plan your study sessions. Start with a specific goal in mind and build up your concentration span by extending the time you spend on one task.

For further information contact the UNE Counsellors at:

Student Assist
Phone: 02 6773 2897
Email: counselling.service@une.edu.au
www.une.edu.au/counselling