

How to Train Yourself to Stay Focused

It's a common problem these days: switching between browser tabs and apps on your phone, checking social media and messages and email, thinking about the million things you have to do but putting them off ...

Anything but staying focused on one task at a time.

And it's hard to break out of the mental habit of switching, being distracted, letting the monkey mind jump from one shiny thing to the next.

So how do you train your mind to stay more focused? It's possible to get better at focusing, but I don't recommend expecting to be focused anywhere close to 100 percent of the time. Not even 80 percent, and perhaps not 50 percent. Just *more* than now, which is more than enough to see big differences in effectiveness in your day.

Recently I took on a coaching client, and his biggest area for improvement is focus. So I gave him a plan, and I'm going to share it with you here.

Start with the Why

Why should you care about this? It's best to give this a moment's thought before diving into any plan, because when things get uncomfortable, you have to know your Why. Otherwise you'll crumble at the first urge to switch.

This is important because constant switching and distraction leads to your time being frittered away, so that the day goes by and you've barely done anything important. You've procrastinated on the big tasks to take care of the little ones, and worse yet, squandered the day in distractions. Your life is too precious to waste, so you want to use your days better.

Staying focused on one task at a time, at least for some of the day, will help you get the important things done: writing, programming, studying, taking care of finances, creating of any kind, and so on. Those things tend to get pushed back, but staying on task will increase your effectiveness with the most important things by leaps and bounds.

If you're feeling stressed out by all you have to do, unhappy with your lack of focus ... then this one skill will help you turn that around in a big way.

So let's move on to the how.

The Method

It's fairly simple:

1. **Pick an MIT.** First thing in the morning, before you get on your phone or online, think about what you need to do. What would make the biggest difference in your life, your work? If you have several, it doesn't matter ... just randomly choose one for now. You can get to the others later. Don't waste your time in indecision, the point is to practice with one task. This one task you choose for today is your one Most Important Task (MIT).
2. **Do a 15-minute focus session.** As soon as you start working for the day (maybe after getting ready, eating, yoga/meditation/workout, whatever), clear away all browser tabs, applications, and anything you don't need for your MIT for today. Start a timer for 15 minutes.
3. **You only have two choices.** For these 15 minutes, you can not switch to anything else (no checking email, messages, social media, doing other work tasks, cleaning your desk, etc.). You can only a) work on your MIT, or b) sit there and do nothing. Those are your only options. Watch your urges to switch, but don't follow them.
4. **Report to an accountability partner.** My coaching client is going to succeed in large part because he has me to keep him accountable. Find a partner who will keep you accountable. Create an online spreadsheet or use an accountability app that they can see (he introduced me to Commit to 3, for example). After your focus session each day, check in that you did it.

That's it! One focus session a day for at least two weeks. If you do great, add a second focus session each day, with a 10-minute break in between sessions. If you have any trouble at all, stick to one session a day for the first month before adding a second.

After six weeks to two months, you should be fairly good at doing two 15-minute focus sessions, and you can add a third. Then a fourth when that gets easy. Stop there for awhile, and then add another session in the afternoon.

Some Important Tips

With that simple method in mind, I have a few key ideas to share:

1. Turn off your Internet. Like disconnect from wifi or turn off your router, or use an Internet blocker. Turn off your phone. Close your browser and all applications you don't need. This is the ideal method. If you need the Internet for your MIT, then close all tabs but the one or two that you need for the task, and don't let yourself open anything else.
2. If you turn off the Internet, keep a pencil and paper nearby. If you have an idea, a task you need to remember, anything you want to look up ... jot it on the paper. You can get

to those later. Don't allow yourself to switch.

3. Don't allow yourself to rationalize putting off the session. It's easy to say, "I'll get to it in a bit," but then you're putting it off until late morning, and then the afternoon, and finally you're doing it at 8pm just to say you did it. This defeats the purpose of the practice. Watch your rationalizations, and don't fall for them.
4. That said, don't aim for being perfect. There are some days when you just can't do it — for me, it's when I travel or have guests. If something big has come up where you don't have time, don't stress about missing a day. Get back on it as soon as you can. Worrying about keeping a streak going is counterproductive.
5. If 15 minutes is too long, just do 10 minutes. If that's too long, do 5 minutes.
6. Increase your number of sessions as slowly as you can. There's no rush to do more. Focus on building a solid foundation.

OK, you have the method. Now get on the practice!