

Focus Training

by John J. Bowman, Ph.D.
Sport Psychologist

“Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably why so few people engage in it.”
Henry Ford

Whether it is focusing on an idea or maintaining proper body position during physical exercise, keeping your mind on one thing is not easily accomplished. Yet, the ability to focus on a specific internal or external event at just the right time is the quintessential skill for self improvement. Biologically speaking our conscious attentional mind is capable of processing 8 to 12 thoughts per second. This capacity represents nature's way of helping us adapt to an ever changing environment. However, in our present culture adapting requires "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form of one of what seems like several simultaneous possible objects or trains of thought" (William James, 1890).

The ability to focus and concentrate is indeed a mental skill which is in part learned, and through practice can be improved. In this article we will explore several different strategies currently employed in focus training. They will range from the simple to complicated, and be derived from both Eastern and Western approaches.

In the Art of Mindful Living, Thich Nhat Hanh masterfully expounds on how Eastern meditative techniques can be applied to everyday situations. His philosophy emphasizes the numerous benefits of being mindful (focused) on what you are doing while you are doing it. One of his basic focusing exercises employs a commonly accepted principal in focus training. This principal holds that it is easier to concentrate on a physical sensation than on a thought. This exercise is called breathing in and breathing out. You begin with focusing your attention on the sensation of taking air into the lungs and as you are doing this silently say to yourself this is my in breath. Then as you exhale, pay close attention to the sensation of letting air out of your lungs and silently say to yourself this is my out breath.

If you like, you might try doing this exercise right now. That's right, just stop reading for a few moments and be mindful of your breathing as you take air in and let it out Pause Many people who use this simple focus training exercise are pleasantly surprised at how quickly they can attain a subtle yet powerful internal focus and disconnect from other thoughts or experiences that were present moments before. This exercise is an excellent introduction to the capacity we have to focus and the type of awareness associated with being highly focused.

Taking a more complex and scientific perspective, Dr. Robert Nideffer (1993), a leader in sport attention research, suggests that there are two independent dimensions of attentional focus: Attentional width and Attentional direction. Attentional width refers to the number of stimuli on which a person is focusing and ranges from narrow to broad. A narrow attentional focus involves focusing attention on just one or a few stimuli, which a broad attentional focus involves focusing attention on a large number of stimuli. Focusing on a specific muscle as you stretch would be an example of narrow attentional focus while listening to a symphony would be an example of broad attentional focus.

The second dimension of attentional focus is attentional direction. This refers to whether a person is focused internally or externally. An internal directional focus is when a person directs their attention inwardly on their own thoughts or feelings. An external attentional focus involves directing attention outwardly toward the environment.

These four types of attentional focus can be combined in a two by two matrix to form four distinct focusing strategies: broad-internal, broad-external, narrow-internal, and narrow-external. By recognizing that focusing can be employed in these different ways it allows us to train how we focus to more effectively meet the demands of a given situation. Earlier in this article you were introduced to the exercise breathing in and breathing out. This exercise required a narrow-internal focusing strategy. Riding your bike on a municipal road would be called a broad-external strategy.

Dr. Nideffer recommends attentional focus training which engages you in exercises that approximate the attentional demands of the tasks you wish to improve upon. His research has shown that this specificity of focus training greatly enhances both focusing skills and subsequent performance.

One application for improving performance that employs Dr. Nideffer's focusing strategies is known as Focus Planning. Focus Planning resembles any other type of planning (i.e. daily schedule, vacation) in that it describes a series of events in a particular order. Unlike vacation planning where these events may be sightseeing attractions, or lodging dates, focus planning is an itinerary of what you will be focusing on at different times or places over the course of an event. In other words, a focus plan directs when and where you will shift your attentional focus from one pre-determined thought to another. Most of us have used focus planning when we remind ourselves to remember to stop for milk when we pass the Seven-Eleven. However, focus planning can be even more helpful in situations that require a high degree of effort and/or concentration such as sporting events or artistic performances.

In summary we can conclude that increasing the ability to focus one's attention involves a number of processes from simple to complex. Exercising the mind's capacity to focus in these different ways leads to both increased concentration and mental flexibility. As in all mental training, persistence and regular practice will bring about the best results.