



## Practicing Focus Practicing Distraction

In a 2016 TEDx talk entitled *Unwavering Focus* Hindu priest and international speaker Dandapani reminds his audience of two fundamental learning principles: firstly, in order to do something we need learn *how* to do it, and secondly, in order to become proficient at something, we need to *practice* it. Dandapani goes on to say that while children are continually told by both parents and teachers how crucial the ability to focus and maintain attention

is to academic success (and it is) this skill is not taught to them at home or formally in schools.

The irony is that distraction, which we all know is hugely detrimental to academic performance, has been taught to us really well and most of us practice it a lot, every single day. The intuitive, user-friendly and easy to navigate interfaces of digital platforms like Email, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook have made superb teachers. And the fact that these can all be accessed via the Internet 24/7 means that we are able to practice distraction anyway and anytime (and we do). So we really shouldn't be surprised so many of us (and our children) are struggling to focus!

To have any hope of redressing the present epidemic of distractibility, we will need to start practicing distraction less, and start practicing focus more. A good place to start is with ourselves. If we learn how to improve our own ability to focus, we will provide a good example for our children to model on. The following are some simple proven ways to help you with this.

To reduce the size of your circle of distraction you need to take control of your digital life. A good starting point is to turn off all your non-emergency digital notifications, and to set a limited, scheduled number of times when you check your email, WhatsApp and other platforms, say 3 - 6 times a day. Unless you are already an avatar of self-control, you are more than likely checking in on these a whole lot more at present. Doing this will help your thinking and attention becoming less fragmented, and free up time and headspace other things – including practicing focus.

An excellent way to increase the size of your focus circle is to start a simple mindfulness or meditation practice. Andrew Huberman, a professor of neuroscience at Stanford University, tells us that research clearly shows that mindfulness and meditation practices are the most effective non-medical intervention to improve focus, and that regular short sessions can have significant and long lasting positive effects. My own experience practicing mindfulness and meditation has been incredibly positive, and absolutely endorses these research findings. If you haven't started a regular mindfulness or meditation practice I would suggest that you start one ASAP.

There are a myriad of different ways to practice mindfulness and meditation, but I would recommend starting by practicing the following simple breath work exercise for 10 minutes at least 4 times a week.

## **10 minute breath work meditation**

1. Find a comfortable quiet place free of distractions where you can sit or lie down.
2. Close your eyes and settle yourself for a few seconds
3. Inhale gently, slowly and deeply through your nose.
4. Exhale gently and slowly through your nose.
5. Ensure you exhale for slightly longer than you inhale.
6. Continue breathing in this fashion for a period of 10 minutes.

### **Guidelines**

Your stomach should rise and fall gently with each breath, and your exhale should be slightly longer than your inhale. This will activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which will help bring your body and mind into a relaxed state. Find a rhythm that suits you. As you breathe simply focus on your breath as you inhale and exhale. Feel the air travel through your nostrils, and your stomach rise and fall. If you experience your mind start to wander, or intrusive thoughts, don't get anxious - simply acknowledge them and gently bring your attention back to your breath. These should lessen as you progress with this practice.

Perform this practice at least 4 times a week together with implementing the strategies for managing your digital life, and you should start feeling calmer and more focused at the end of the first week, hopefully enough for you to want to make this a permanent practice.

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