

Focus

by Kim Switzer

I don't think I've heard the word "focus" so much since I was in photography class. Everyone's talking about it—maybe because so many of us are feeling a lack of it. The productivity people say you need it, the creativity people say you need it, the education people say you need it. There's lots of talk about it and how you need it, but there's never that much on how to actually get it.



Since last month's article on procrastination, I've been looking at focus a lot. It's a subject close to my heart because as I delve into dealing with my procrastination habit, I have to acknowledge that the procrastination is coupled with—maybe even caused by—a lack of focus. So I'm looking at focus this month here and in my offline life.

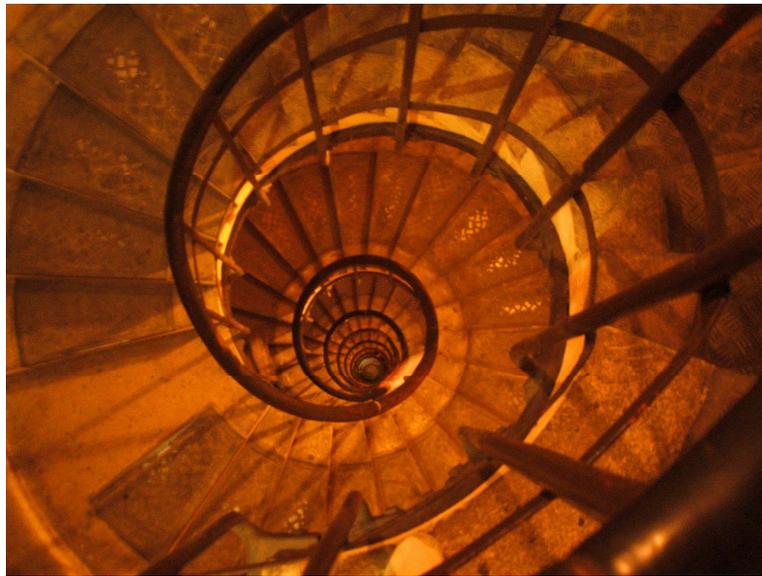
Before we get started, I want to offer one word of caution. Don't try to implement these ideas all at once, not on one day or even during one week. Start with what seems most useful to your particular brand of attention and procrastination issues and go from there. With that said, let's dive in. You may want to start your journey with this article on rebuilding attention span and focus: <http://lifelife.com/5596964/how-to-rebuild-your-attention-span-and-focus>

If you're working on fixing a lack of focus, start by asking yourself, "Why do I lose focus?" Knowing the "why" is important in this case because different whys will need different tactics for dealing with them. One other thing you might look at is why you don't want to focus, because it's often the case that we can't get going because some part of us doesn't want to. Sometimes, the answers to "why" and "why not" are the same, but there may be different issues on each side to look at.

I came up with several answers to the "why" question—I suspect this is going to happen for most of us. A big issue like lack of focus or procrastination is usually going to have multiple streams feeding the big, gushing river. My tactic is to start with the biggest issues keeping my attention fractured and then move on from there.

One reason my attention wanders is that I'm not exactly sure what I need to be doing to accomplish the task at hand. I don't really know what to do, so I do anything but settle down to try to figure it out. But since I know that I really want and need to be working on the task, I'm distracted and can't focus on anything else either, and I end up flitting from thing to thing, not settling on anything, not getting anything done. This also seems to be the biggest reason in my "why not" column. I seem to be having some anxiety, worrying that I'll get started on things but will come crashing to a halt because I don't know where I'm going beyond the next step or two.

Reason number two I have trouble focusing: the internet. A lot of what I do when I'm not sure what I need to be doing is internet "stuff." I check e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, the weather. Then I check for comments on my blog. Then I surf around a little more, read a good blog post, follow all the links there and follow the links I find from following links. And then it's three hours later, I'm even more stressed over not having done the original task I set myself, and my concentration drops even more because I'm too anxious to focus. Anxiety is right up there in the top three list of things that keeps me from focusing, so getting more anxious just makes the problem worse and turns it into a downward spiral.



I also think that lack of focus becomes a habit that grows and becomes more ingrained the more we do it. So, when I first started using the internet as a way to procrastinate I think I was able to return to my task sooner and easier. Now, I can literally find myself online, reading a web page, with no idea exactly when I opened that browser. But I also find that I can't manage to read through an entire article without hopping over to another tab to check something else before I go back and try to finish reading. I think this lack of focus builds on itself.

This is all sounding pretty grim, I know. It's not hopeless, though. I thought I was the Queen of Procrastination and Flightiness, and I am making headway. So don't despair. I

have several resources to share and a couple of things I've been trying that seem workable so far.



First, when you're trying to build focus you might keep telling yourself things like, "I need to stay off Facebook!" or "I need to stop checking my e-mail so much!" That's fine, but it's only part of the equation. Don't just know what you don't want to be doing, know what it is you **do** want to be doing. If you don't have a pretty clear idea of what you want to be doing, you'll find yourself at loose ends, and pretty soon you'll be back to doing the things you didn't mean to be doing instead of actually getting things done. make a list of the things you want to do. Be specific, be detailed. Something more specific will help you come up with more next steps after you get started. So, "I want to write a story about a girl with red and yellow hair and her spindly legged dog named Foofall," instead of just, "I want to write a story."

The next thing I've been trying for just a couple of days now is timed work. I've used this technique during [NaNoWriMo](#) by doing word wars (timed writing sprints competing with others for the highest word count), and it's carried me through to 50K during the past several Novembers. Now, it seems like it's actually useful for doing just about any kind of work. I highly recommend this one even if you don't try any of my other suggestions—it's a great technique, easy to implement, and it really does work.

Here are two web pages about how to use this idea:

First, a page about working in dashes: <http://www.43folders.com/2005/09/08/kick-procrastinations-ass-run-a-dash>

And then a page about the procrastination hack, which is a variant on the dash theme: <http://www.43folders.com/2005/10/11/procrastination-hack-1025>

As I mentioned in passing above, I run into anxiety issues when I'm unfocused and procrastinating on things that need to get done. I was having a hard time figuring out

how to work with this problem which is perhaps the biggest thing that sends me scurrying to the internet for some mindless surfing. Journaling can help with anxiety, but when I'm trying to settle down to work and am feeling to anxious and scattered to do it, I don't necessarily want to journal. I may not even be in a place that's good for journaling, and I may not have time to really settle in and write about how I'm feeling. I wanted something quicker and maybe a bit more concrete, something that could help me quickly settle my mind so I can get to work. Enter the mind sweep:
<http://www.43folders.com/2006/07/24/b2gtd-mind-sweep> I just discovered this technique this week, so I don't have anything to actually report on it, but it looks really promising.

Sometimes, though, all of these plans and great ideas don't keep you from accidentally jumping on the internet. What to do when that happens? Try setting one of these as your homepage (make sure your tabs all open your homepage, too, so you see this every time you open a browser page):

<http://www.marktaw.com/getbacktowork.htm>

<http://www.merlinmann.com/rightnow/>

I hope this helps you with your attention and focus issues. Let me know if you try any of these ideas. I'd love to swap stories!

Have a great, focused month! See you next time.