How to Improve Focus by Retraining Your Attention Muscle

I get a lot of emails asking the following question: “How can I improve focus and work/study for a longer period of time?”

Improving focus and getting more out of the day is the number #1 struggle of my readers and members. This makes sense, as they are already trying to be more productive. They are aware and now looking for solutions to improve focus.

But the same happens with friends. “There’s not enough time”, “I just have so much to do”, and “I can’t concentrate on a task for half an hour” are some of the things I hear all the time.

And the more I look, the more I find it. Literally everywhere.

People looking at their phones multiple times during a movie.

Opening email to search for a specific conversation only to forget about it seconds later.

Texting while driving (seriously?).

Our attention levels draw dangerously close to that of a goldfish. We lost our ability to concentrate. Focus is a lost art.

What’s really going on here?

Too much.

That's what's going on...

What Is Focus?

Focus is starting a task and maintaining your attention and effort until the task is complete. It's **doing one thing without being distracted** in the process.

It’s also referred as “flow”, a term popularized by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in his book “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience”.
People also refer to focus as the feeling of “being in the zone”.

Your mind is so immersed that you lose the sense of space and time.

“The successful warrior is the average man, with laser-like focus.” — Bruce Lee

As it happens with any muscle in our body, our mind is also trainable.

To improve focus, start looking at it as a muscle.

Focus and Concentration as a Muscle

Still with me?

You know when you exercise your muscles get tired and need rest? Or you try to find ways to convince yourself not to do the last rep? Or when you don’t even go to the gym at all (but you really meant to)...

The brain operates the same way.

To improve focus, you need to train your brain to focus.
Training equals long stretches of uninterrupted time focussed on a specific activity. When exercising, these are your **number of reps in a set**.

And training also means that you train this skill often. Your goal is to get into the state of flow multiple times per day. At the gym, these are the **number of sets you do**.

Sounds *simple*, right?

It's *definitely not*.

We live in an age of distraction, with constant interruptions and notifications. We have too much going on so our brain doesn’t know how to discern what’s truly important. It doesn’t know where to focus.

And because it doesn’t know the *where*, it doesn’t get trained on the *how*.

Have you started reading a long article only to click a link on it and switch tabs?

What about opening YouTube to search for a specific video and half an hour later find yourself watching a *cat riding a Roomba? (guilty!)*

How many tabs do you have open right now?

What about apps?

It's not *all* your fault.

Most of our **habits are a by-product of our time**. And our era is trying to eradicate our attention span...

**We’re Destroying Our Attention Span**

Television was supposed to be an entertainment device, something to distract us after a long day at work.

But companies quickly understood the potential of television to acquire customers and ramp up sales. And so television became the champion of a new culture of entertainment, one where we are *amusing ourselves to death*.

Television gave us thousands of images per minute so that the eye never rests and always has something new to see. We like new. We crave new.

It also presented us with new things that we didn’t ask but didn’t question. We didn’t question the daily news from all over the world that had little relevance to our lives. Or the commercials for new products for problems we didn’t even know we had.
Television just became. We accepted it as a culture, it became part of us.

With technology advancement came the computer, internet, and the smartphone. And this new technology only amplified this bias.

By connecting people throughout the world, these technologies made us hyper-connected. Everyone can post anything online. And so came news 24/7, status updates, and photos of our latest holiday.

Companies have perfected algorithms to capture and hold our attention prisoner. We carry slot-machines in our pocket, with infinite scrolling and notifications always demanding our attention.

These technologies are like fast-food to your brain: you now you shouldn’t consume them but the dopamine rush feels oh so good that you can’t help yourself.

No wonder we can't improve focus.

We've been training our attention muscle in all the wrong ways.

How to Train Your Attention Muscle

To improve focus, we must train our attention muscle in different ways. We need to train it to go deep, to stay focused for longer periods of time multiple times per day.

When you do so, that focus will carry to your work life, allowing you to achieve flow faster and perform big chunks of deep work.

Below is the 3-step plan when taking your brain to the gym.

1. Eliminate Before Optimizing

This is the simplest exercise at the brain gym: remove anything that is training your attention in seconds and not minutes or hours.

But first, a disclaimer: all of these are supposed to be entertainment. If your goal is to be amused, keep them. There's no sense trying to be a monk. If you like watching Netflix at night to chill, that's cool. But play is something to do in your free time, not all the time.

Here's a list of the most common offenders:

- there is good quality and bad quality TV. The one where the subject or context changes every minute is the bad one. Think reality shows and news
• TV news change every thirty seconds but when it comes to our printed media, we're not doing much better. 500 words followed by 500 words is a recipe for disaster. Skip 99% of the news online
• save it for play time. If you're going hardcore, from your life altogether.
• all the blips and notification are calling you from your pocket, as the One ring calls Bilbo Baggins

Switch your attention brain diet with long-form: books, documentaries, movies, and blogs with long posts.

2. Clear to Neutral

When you finish a meal at home, you wash the dishes and clean the table and tops, right? (right?)

You're already familiar with the concept of clearing to neutral. It's time to start applying it everywhere.

When you're done with your computer, close all the apps and browser and shut down.

If you're leaving the office, spend 5 minutes throwing everything unnecessary away and give your desk a clean.

But also clear to neutral during the day.

If you're reading email: open it, read it, then close it. No need to leave the browser or the app open.

Browsing social media? Open the app, browse, then log out.

Clearing to neutral helps you eliminate friction points and reduce your tendency to procrastinate.

You know what they say: if you open your computer and there are 23 open tabs, you're going to have a bad time.

Clearing to neutral helps “future you” get started.

3. One at a Time

Finally, the hardest exercise at the brain gym: to focus on one thing at a time.
In our fast-paced world, this is the Holy Grail. Your ability to stay focused on one thing at a time is the best exercise you can do to improve focus. By doing it consistently, you’ll train your brain to stay in flow for longer periods of time.

A simple tweak that works wonders is to **always work in full-screen mode**. This removes all other unnecessary distractions and put the only thing that matters in front of you. You can do it on anything — email, docs, Chrome.

**Improve Focus by Adjusting Your Defaults**

The final step in our journey to improve focus is to **adjust our defaults**.

90% of your daily decisions happen automatically, many **shaped by environment**. Thus, most decisions are a habit, not a deliberate choice.

And **habits can be developed** by shaping the invisible defaults of your life. To make smarter choices, design smarter defaults.

1. **Productivity**

   - Avoid decision fatigue early in the morning by choosing all your outfits for the week on Sunday night. One less decision every morning can go a long way
   - Only use a handful of to. It's easier to work with 3 apps than 10. Use “Swiss army” apps that can be adapted to different types of work.
   - Always wear headphones. I rate my as one of the best investments I ever made. Coworkers will think you can’t hear them and the barrier to interrupt you is much higher. Even when you do hear them, pretend you didn’t. Most of the times they won’t try a second time
   - Plan your entire week on Sunday. to allocate time for them
   - Listen to the same song on repeat. This will help you lose track of time and become more focused
   - Design for different types of work. By using location-based prompts and creating productivity spaces for certain types of work, you may find it easier to buckle down to your tasks
   - Request to work remotely for one day per week. Start by asking for a half-day, preferably mornings

2. **Email**

   - Disable email on your phone to stop checking it throughout the day. On the iPhone, you can delete your email account in Settings. For Android, you’ll need to disable the Gmail in App Settings
• Treat checking emails as you would any other tasks: a. Schedule specific times in your calendar to process email. Only check email twice per day: late morning and late evening
• Don’t check your email before 11 am. Spend the early morning performing on critical work that moves the needle on
• Train other people to respect your productivity, work, and by using an automatic response. Long-term sustainable email productivity is about selective ignorance. Let people know you’re checking emails less often in order to
• Default all communications to email. When a coworker interrupts you at your desk, gently tell him you’re working on something right now and if they can send you an email to remind you later. If someone wants to set up a meeting, make it a necessity to give you an agenda by email before phone calls and in-person meetings. Don't give people easy outs

3. Less Phone Time

• Disable all notifications. All. Of. Them. If it’s truly urgent, people will call
• Remove all infinity scrolling apps, such as social media and news
• Turn off all sounds. Vibration is a sound too. Go to and turn off the “vibrate on silent” feature. Then scroll down and set all the sounds and vibration patterns to “None”, except for your ringtone
• Always leave your phone in another room or in a drawer when working. Out of sight, out of mind
• Move all apps to the second screen and keep your home screen empty. Now you have to form an intention to use a certain app and consciously swipe to the right and start it
• Set your phone to airplane mode an hour before going to bed and only disable it after completing your morning routine. or immediately after waking up or just before going to sleep. As a bonus, flight mode saves battery life

4. Reduce Mindless Internet Browsing

• Go cold turkey on your phone and disable the browser app. On the iPhone, go into Settings, turn “Restrictions” on and then you can turn off Safari. For Android, disable Chrome in App Settings
• On the computer, start by removing infinity scrolling websites from your bookmarks bar and replace them with informative blogs and learning opportunities
• Install , a chrome extension that lets you block specific websites for a set period of time. You add websites to your blacklist with a few simple clicks. If you want to go hardcore, use to block websites for a specific time. You won’t be able to access those sites until the timer expires, even if you restart your computer or delete the application
• Save articles to read later with the . Choose “Simplified article” and save it to a notebook (I call mine “Read Later”). Batch reading of those articles during your leisure time.

5. Watch Less TV

• Rearrange the furniture in your living room to face the television. If you want to watch TV, you’ll need to move them.
• Remove the batteries from the remote so you need to walk up to the TV to turn it on and change channels or volume.

6. Read More Books

• Download Audible and always have one audiobook going for while you’re driving or on a walk.
• Download the Kindle app and always have one book going at a time.
• Instead of watching TV to fall asleep, read. Bonus: You’ll fall asleep faster since you’re not staring at a screen.
• Always have a book on the toilet so when you have to — uh, “go” — you’ll read instead of using your phone.

There are a lot more nudges and defaults strategies that you can use to shape the environment around you. In the words of Winston Churchill:

“We shape our buildings; thereafter, our buildings shape us.”

Another key strategy is to simplify. More options aren’t better, it’s worse. It depletes your willpower and leads to decision fatigue.

Keep your defaults as simple as possible: eat the same meals over and over again, read one blog post at a time instead of opening 10, own fewer things and love everything that you own.

As a rule of thumb: when in doubt, eliminate options.

Improving Focus Is a Process, Not One-Off

To improve focus, you must continue to exercise your attention muscle every single day.

It’s easy to fall into the old ways and get lost in that vortex of blipping notifications. It’s all around us, it’s hard to escape.
That's why you must be deliberate on how and where you use your attention. It starts by being more aware.

In the middle of doing something, stop and ask yourself: “Is this training my attention muscle to focus?”

If the answer is not a clear yes, adjust the task or how you are doing things.

In the long-run, your brain will thank you.

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