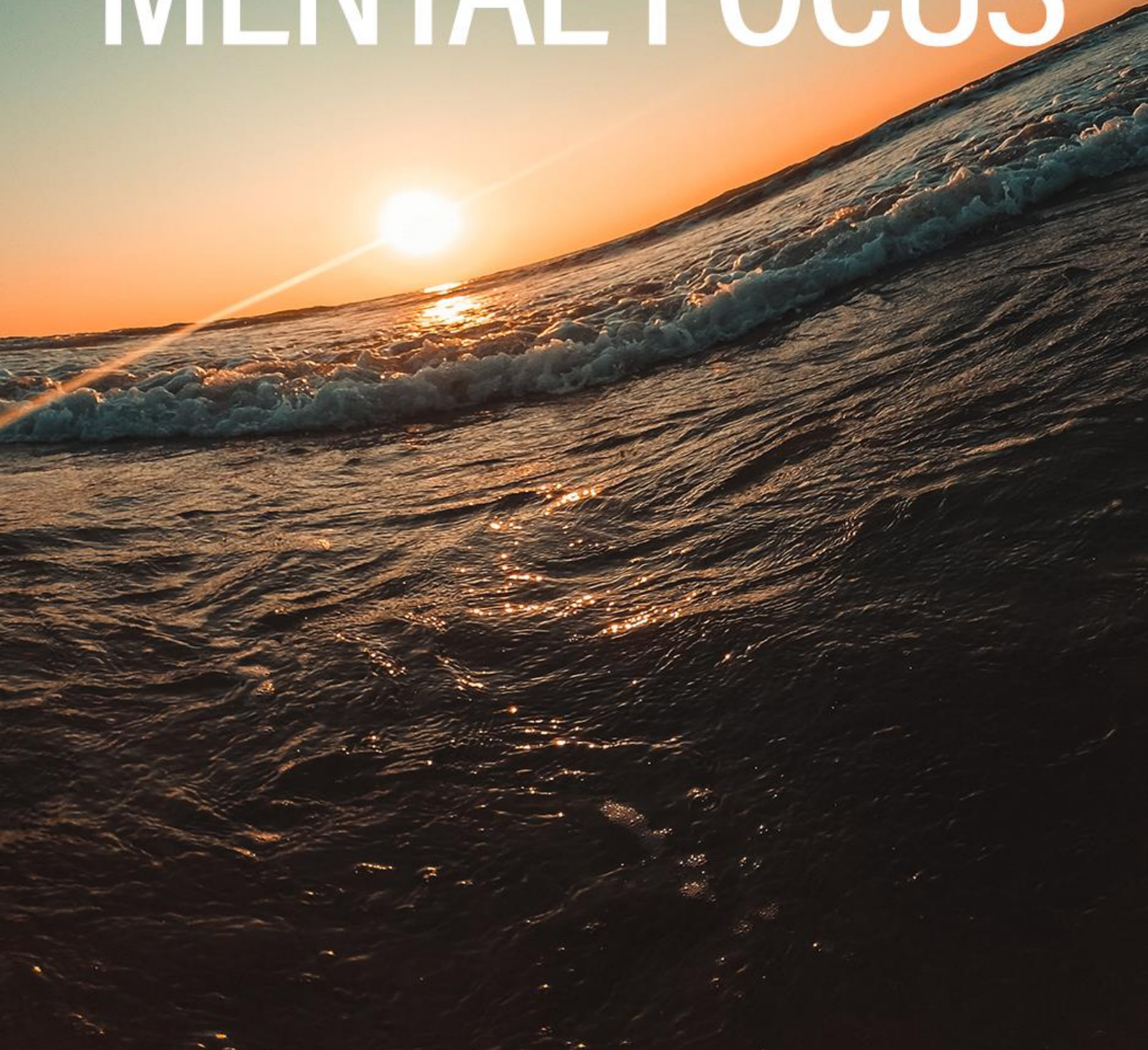


IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL FOCUS



Introduction

Everyone has been there. Your to-do list is a mile long. You sit down to get to work, but your brain just doesn't want to turn on. The more you try to force it, the more your attention wanders.

For some, this is just an every once in a while type problem. For others, it can be an all-day, everyday struggle. The modern world is full of distractions. Even if you love what you do, there is always something more interesting you could be doing with your day. You live in a world where the next notification is just a second or two away. All of your devices are constantly begging for your attention.

So how do you cut through the digital clutter, overlook the flashing lights, and make your brain get to work? Improving your mental focus is as simple as "practice makes perfect." By creating a clear plan and establishing healthy habits, even the most distractable mind can cut through the fog and be productive.

1. Identify Clear Goals

The first step is to identify what you need your focus to be on. When you don't have a clearly defined goal, your mind will wander. Give your attention something to use as an anchor.

Sounds simple, right?. Sometimes defining goals is simple. Report A is due to the boss by 2 pm, which is the morning's only goal. But when you don't have a hard deadline for every item on your mile-long list, defining the goal can get complicated.

Make a process that you can use every day to help keep that to-do list organized.

- First, identify your priorities. Write down that to-do list. Whether it's handwritten or digital, the important thing is seeing everything laid out in front of you.
- Now that you have your priorities straight, put them in order of importance.

Tackle the most urgent ones first. The idea is to get those tasks that are the very highest priorities taken care of before anything else can get the chance to distract you.

- Make sure that everything you add to your to-do list gets separated into small steps. Then set aside small blocks of time to focus only on the specific things on your list. Set a timer if it helps you stay on track.
- Don't overextend yourself. That two-mile-long list of goals for the day isn't helping the matter at all. Long lists don't often get finished. So just put some of those less urgent things on the shelf. You can tackle them another day when they are more pressing.

Overextending yourself or not setting realistic expectations can do real damage to your focus over time. When you set unrealistic goals and then fail to meet them over and over, you are training your brain to expect failure.

Instead of a two-mile-long list, limit yourself to just the highest priority items. Remember that once you get those high priorities done, you can always come back and set a new list of goals.

1. Get Rid of Distractions

Eliminating distractions is a vital part of preparing your mind to be able to focus. Distractions in modern times are complicated and are a large part of the problem. Whether it's the notifications on your phone or something in your office, it can be impossible to pay attention to the task at hand.

So what might be distracting you? To get rid of it, you have to identify what it is.

Physical Distractions

You can easily anticipate and plan for physical distractions in advance. Often it's just a matter of having a consistent daily routine. Take the time to anticipate problems and solve them before they can affect your focus.

- **Hunger**

Always realizing you are hungry when you are trying to get started? Don't skip breakfast.

Even if you aren't the type to start your day with a meal, you can plan ahead and keep an easy-to-grab snack in your work area. Eat before you try to get started.

- **Temperature**

When you are too cold or too hot, it quickly becomes challenging to keep your brain focused on a computer screen. Ideally, you can control your environment's temperature and find that sweet temperature spot before it's time to get started. In reality, though, you might not have any control at all. You can still plan ahead.

Work in a chronically cold office environment? Keep a sweater or light jacket on hand to put on when you get a chill. Regularly feel way warmer than your co-workers? Keep a fan at your desk.

- **Noise**

Noise is another environmental element you might not always be able to control. It could be phones ringing at another desk or annoying music coming through the shared wall. Some individuals are quite easily distracted by any sounds, while others can tune it all out at will.

If you already know this is a thing that distracts you, consider putting on a pair of noise-canceling headphones when you need to focus on something.

Digital Distractions

Modern life has already begun the process of reprogramming our brains to an always-connected state. For many people, digital distractions prove to be the number one issue. However, you can plan for these distractions as well.

- **Phones**

Set your phone to "do not disturb" or turn the ringer off entirely. Put your phone away, out of sight altogether. Removing the phone not only prevents a potential caller from disturbing you as you try to focus, but it will also eliminate the temptation to look at smartphone app notifications as they appear on your screen.

- **Email**

Completely close your email program. Just as with your phone, your emails must be entirely out of sight before you can put them out of your mind. This might be an essential part of your to-do list. So set aside time specifically for emails, and feel free to ignore them while working on other things.

- **Social Media**

Social media is intentionally designed to keep you returning, over and over. The platforms are using psychology to keep your engagement. Every single time you engage, your brain gets a mini dopamine rush. This leaves you always wanting more, making social media one of the biggest drains on your mental focus.

Check your social media platform of choice, and then sign out. Turn off app notifications for your social platforms if it is necessary. You might also want to consider developing the habit of not using any social media apps or websites for pre-set periods of your day.

Can't get started without dealing with all of your online distractions first? Plan for that in advance also. Set a time limit to allow yourself to deal with each of those areas. Then set a timer. Allowing yourself time to "get it out of your system" will help keep your mind from dwelling on what you could be missing online.

2. Stimulate Your Brain

Studies have shown time and time again what humans have known for centuries. There is a link between coffee and cognition.

Caffeine can wake up the brain and make it easier to focus. Reaching for a Cup of Joe might be just what is needed to get things moving.

You might want to save this one for the days when you are struggling just a little bit more. But if coffee/tea is a regular part of your day, make sure you aren't accidentally skipping your morning cup. Caffeine "withdraw" might be relatively mild, but it can still cause the brain to fog over or even give you a wicked headache. Neither of those things is going to help you focus on the task at hand.

Can't do caffeine? Search out other natural snacks that can help with your cognitive skills. Walnuts, avocados, and even chocolate can help boost your brainpower. These each has natural properties that may help with your focus.

Of course, eating or drinking the wrong things can also sap your brain's energy and focus power. Watch out for treats or sodas with high sugar levels, as these can cause your blood sugar to fluctuate. This drains your energy level, making you feel sleepy or sluggish.

3. Try Some Background Music

After you have been so careful to limit physical distractions, this one might seem like it shouldn't work. Isn't listening to music a distraction? Of course, for some people, it can be a significant distraction. If that describes you, then skip this one. But research has shown that playing music in the background, primarily instrumental music, can help focus the thoughts.

Do you already know you are one of those rare people distracted by even instrumental music? Consider playing some white noise instead. If you choose to put on some background music, be sure that it is something you enjoy listening to; otherwise, it is unlikely to help. So, yes, you are still allowed to get annoyed when the guy next door starts blaring his music while you are trying to work.

4. Take Breaks

So, you have tried all of this stuff. It is working a little, but you still find your mind wandering once you've been at it a while. Of course, it does! The human brain craves novelty. After sustained periods of focusing on anything, your brain starts seeking out something new. That's where a short break can re-energize your brain and can refocus your attention.

Do:

- Take a walk around the office or even walk outside for some fresh air. Walking allows you to stretch your legs out and get your blood pumping.
- Get something to drink, grab a snack, or visit the restroom if needed. Skipping your body's physical needs now might make them a distraction once you try to get back to work.

Don't:

- Be tempted to look at your voicemails, emails, or app notifications. Digital distractions can completely derail your time, attention, and energy.

Like everything else, plan for these breaks so they don't become a problem all on their own. Before you start work on anything, break your project into smaller "bites" and plan on taking short breaks between the different parts. Doing this, you are likely to find that you return to your work with a revitalized ability to pay attention to the task at hand.

Improving mental focus is something anyone can achieve. Managing your environment and establishing effective routines are the most critical factors. Practicing these techniques day in and day out will help establish them in your daily routine.

You might also consider any other changes you might need to make in your lifestyle that could be contributing to the problem. Eliminating distractions and improving the comfort of your workspaces alone might not be enough.

If you are not getting enough sleep at night, it may prove incredibly difficult to improve your focus. Many adults in today's world are doing well to get 6-7 hours of sleep at night. What you are eating and even how often you exercise can also play a vital role in your focus. That is why the best long-term plans for improving your mental focus should include a healthy diet and regular exercise. Be honest with yourself so you can determine if you need to make any changes.

Also, don't be afraid to reach out for help if your efforts are not yielding the results you would like to see. There is no need to deal with this alone. Talk to a doctor or a therapist who can help you rule out any other underlying causes. By seeking professional advice, you can also be more confident that you are on a path that can resolve your concerns.

Finally, make sure that you believe can improve. Regularly telling yourself that you can't get better at something has been shown to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don't allow yourself to believe that changing any bad habit is impossible. Instead, have an "I Can Do It" mindset. This is the first and most crucial step towards gaining control of your focus. Start everyday armed with a clear plan, clear expectations, and a positive attitude.