

Introduction

Concentration is an elusive state of mind. Ironically, the more you think or worry about concentration, the less you're actually concentrating on the task at hand. That's why strategies to improve concentration usually approach it indirectly, by focusing on the elimination of distractions.

While there are few "quick fix" solutions for improving concentration, the first step is usually the same, whether you're having difficulties or just want to enhance your present ability. A thoughtful analysis of what distracts your concentration will often indicate the most effective course of action for improving it. A summary of typical disruptions is presented here to provide a framework for understanding your particular situation. For more detailed information on how to improve concentration, make an appointment with a Counsellor in Student Services in Abbotsford or Chilliwack.

The Disruptions

Study Location

First-year students, especially those living in residence, often find concentration difficult because of noise, roommates, or an uncomfortable environment. Living at home or off campus can also present unique challenges. Knowing where to find a quiet, comfortable, and distraction-free place to study is one of the simplest and most effective means of facilitating concentration. The Library is an old favourite, and sometimes the study room in your residence hall or an empty lounge, classroom, or meeting room can work well too.

Physical Distractions

Irregular sleep, exercise, and eating patterns can be the unsuspected cause of concentration difficulties. Many students don't realize the strong connection between physical health and intellectual functioning. Finding a regimen that works for you and sticking to

it can help to maintain your brain at its physiological peak. Time management strategies such as planning study periods around your body's energy highs and lows will ensure that your physical ability to concentrate will be at its best.

Self Talk

Many people are not aware that as we perform tasks, including studying, we talk silently to ourselves. "Self talk" can be motivating - praising accomplishments, helping to sort out what to do next, monitoring progress and achievement. However, if it becomes overly evaluative or critical, self talk can have a negative effect on concentration. Have you ever started to write a paper, then given up in frustration because you can't even get through the first paragraph? An overly critical "inner editor" may be the culprit. Comparing your abilities to that of other students and having unrealistic expectations about how long or well you "should" be able to concentrate may also contribute to negative self talk. With coaching, you can learn to manage this distracting internal chatter.

Motivation

Students who recover from academic difficulties and go on to succeed at university often define their ability to turn things around in terms of motivation: "You must want to be here." "You must know why you're here." Sometimes difficulties with concentration can be attributed to uneasiness about a course, a major, or just being at university. Strategies for dealing with difficulties in motivation range from a simple goal setting exercise to a detailed self-appraisal. Your Student Services Counsellor can provide valuable guidance in helping you clarify your work and career goals.

Personal Issues

You'll be one of the lucky few if you can make it through university without having to cope with studying through some personal disaster. Even something as commonplace as a breakup with a

boyfriend or girlfriend can cause a major disruption in the ability to concentrate. For the most part, these disruptions are short term, and the ability to concentrate normally returns quickly. Serious situations, or minor ones which carry on, warrant outside help. Free, confidential assistance with personal issues is available through the Counselling Department.

Some students find that designating a time to think about a problem can help reduce the amount of time that their mind spends wandering. For example, when you notice that you're not concentrating, say to yourself something like, "I'll think about that at 4 o'clock." Then, at 4 o'clock or whatever time you choose, sit down and think through whatever is bothering you. Using a strategy like this can help you to stop blaming yourself for not concentrating and get you quickly back to work.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford – 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack – 604-795-2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Links to Resources Elsewhere:

More information on improving memory and concentration can be found at these sites from Virginia Tech University at:

<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/concentr.html>

Concentration: Some Basic Guidelines

Control of the Study Environment

Remembering

Study Distractions

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Collaborative Group Work

Learning from Lectures

Learning from Textbooks

Managing Nervousness During Oral Presentations

Reading and the Web

A Classic Method for Studying Texts: SQ4R

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