

Paying Attention to What We Pay Attention To

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What would your life be like if you were able to focus your attention on three priorities for a week? What if you were able to concentrate and focus on those activities, in spite of distractions?

“In the final analysis, the quality of our life depends on our ability to consciously choose who and what we give our thoughts, interests moments and emotions to.”
— Author Sam Horn, in *Conzentrate: Get Focused and Pay Attention – When Life Is Filled With Pressures, Distractions, and Multiple Priorities* (2000).

Few people understand what concentration means, or how important a role it plays in our lives. Life consists of what we pay attention to. If we focus on meaningful, positive things, we'll have a meaningful, positive life. If we focus on meaningless, negative things, we'll have a meaningless, negative life. This is simplistic and also enduringly profound: one of life's great truths.

“Our experience is what we attend to.” —William James

If we chronically multi-task and engage in scattered thoughts, we will have scattered, chaotic lives. Even if we aren't one of those who have ADD (Attention-Deficit Disorder), the fast-paced world we live in is very distracting. We are constantly bombarded by information, e-mail, phone calls and news. The ability to focus and to concentrate on one thing at a time is a necessary strength we all need to develop.

“We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.” — Buddha

“This – the immediate, everyday, and present experience – is *it*, the entire and ultimate point for the existence of a universe.” —Alan Watts

Concentration helps us focus on and in the moment, instead of frantically rushing from moment to moment.

The Pareto Principle says that 80 percent of our results comes from only 20 percent of our efforts. That means that only about 20 percent of our activities actually provide the results we are looking for.

This is true for business as well as for social and family activities. In that case, if we devote more time and energy to the crucial 20 percent of our activities, we would accomplish more, have better relationships, and more life satisfaction. However, in order to do so, we would have to prioritize, focus and concentrate. This means we would have to say “no” to the people, places and things that are distractions from our goals and real purpose in life.

Five Keys to Concentration

In today's distracting environments, it is not easy to stay focused. Here are five essential keys to concentration and focus, taken from Sam Horn's book *ConZentrate: Get Focused and Pay Attention--When Life Is Filled With Pressures, Distractions, and Multiple Priorities* (St. Martin's Press 2000):

1. Concentration is the ability to be single-minded. Focusing on one task at a time is difficult because we all have so many things to do. It means we have to temporarily ignore some things in favor of others. Deferring other projects doesn't mean they're not important, only less so for the moment. It requires making choices as to priorities and scheduling.
2. Concentration is interest in action. Can you think of a time when you were so engrossed in an activity that you became one with it? All sense of time disappeared. All outside activities were unnoticed. Athletes call this the zone. Others, a state of flow.
3. Concentration is mental obedience. It means harnessing our thoughts, focusing on what is needed, and saying "no" to outside distractions. At times, the mind can be unruly, like a rebellious teenager. We must develop the ability to say to our mind "no, not right now," and carry on. Realize that your mind probably prefers play to work. However, you would not give candy to your child each time he or she asked. You might try using the Premack Principle, which involves doing something pleasurable after a task is completed.
4. Concentration is staying power. The ability to persist in spite of distraction, opposition, discouragement and counterinfluences is the key to attaining what we want in life. That means coming back after getting distracted. It also means completing an activity even though it may not be perfect. It includes the ability to keep on in spite of making mistakes. It is keeping on keeping on, persisting, correcting, continuing and coming back.
5. Concentration is mindfully managing our TIME:
T = Thoughts
I = Interests
M = Moments
E = Emotions

Sam Horn, in *ConZentrate*, explains the usefulness of this acronym in looking at time and what it means to us:

Time, when we think back over our life, is not really remembered in days, months, years, but rather in moments. Specifically those moments in which our thoughts, interests, and emotions were fully engaged in a person, place or process.

If we reframe our concept of time, we can remove our compulsion to race through life. Instead of thinking there's never enough time, we realize we have all the time we're going to get...right now. We come to understand the best way to make the most of our time is to make the most of this moment.

The Power of Priority

Try the *Power of 3* for one week. Identify three important activities (making phone calls with clients, spending time with your children, clearing off your desk) that would bring you some quality results in your life. This is more difficult than it appears, because everyone has more than three things that need prioritizing. But only choose three. Then spend 80 percent of your efforts attending to these three priorities for one week.

Yes, this means saying “no” to other people and activities. However, at the end of the week, you will be amazed at the results. You will discover that you can do much more than you thought, if you focus and concentrate. For one thing, since this exercise is only for one week, you can give yourself permission to say “no” to distractions. You discover that not only is it easier than you imagined, but how much more you are capable of doing. The following week, you can revise your plan, pick three other priorities or expand on the same ones and refocus.

Working with Your Coach

What are you paying attention to? What are your biggest distractions? What if you were not distracted for a week? What three things that, if you were to focus on them, would bring you quality results this week? Try exploring with your coach and identify the 20 percent of your efforts that bring you 80 percent of your results.