

# Learning Skills Services Student Development Centre

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## Improving Concentration

### Are you having trouble concentrating?

Your problem may be one, or some, or all of the following:

- You're not organized
- You're procrastinating
- Your comprehension is poor
- Your work environment is poor
- You're neglecting your physiology
- Your mind just keeps wandering

### You're Not Organized

It's easier to concentrate on the task at hand when you have set aside specific times for your other tasks. If you're not organized, then you always seem to have too many things to do and you can't get going on any of them.

- Write down all of the academic tasks you have to do, breaking them into their component smaller steps wherever possible.
- Every weekend, make a realistic plan for the upcoming week.
- Every night, make a realistic plan for the next day. Don't make your plans too ambitious, or you will always be failing to get through your list. Success feels better than failure, so plan accordingly.

### Your Comprehension Is Poor

Your course details should fit together in a coherent way. If you perceive them as disjointed bits of information, then they will be difficult to comprehend and you'll likely have difficulty concentrating.

To aid comprehension, spend some time identifying the main ideas; otherwise, you're like a traveler without a map.

- Take your course outline and make a conceptual "map" of the main units in the entire course.
- For each chapter or unit covered, make a smaller map of the topics it contains.
- As you follow the course, keep track of where you are on the map, and anticipate what is coming.
- When you see the pattern of the course, your comprehension and concentration will improve.

### You're Procrastinating

So you get organized and you set up a schedule, but you keep avoiding your work and finding other things to do. Now what?

- **Re-visit your motivations.** Remember, your school work is an important part of your course; your course is an important step in achieving your degree; your



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degree will provide opportunities in life. Remembering the big picture can help you get started on school work, and thinking, "I want to do this" is a much healthier attitude than, "I should do this".

- **Develop a sense of progress.** Break your study task down into small, manageable chunks. Each time you sit down to work, set an objective for that study session, enjoy the accomplishment of getting it done, and do something fun to reward yourself for making progress.
- **Don't get drawn into perfectionism or fear of failure.** Just emphasize what you know, what you want to know, and what you want to express. Do your best, but don't waste energy on impossible ideals.
- **Don't get too isolated in your studies.** Talk about the material with instructors, friends, and other students.

### You're Neglecting Your Physiology

Remember, the mind and the body are not two separate things. To improve your concentration, get to know your own physiology better.

- **Nutrition** - It's hard to concentrate when you're living on coffee and junk food.
- **Sleep** - It's said that most people in our society are sleep-deprived to some extent. If this includes you, then your concentration is worse than it could be.
- **Time of day** - People have differing patterns of high and low energy throughout the day. Know your own patterns and plan your work accordingly.
- **Exercise** - A good workout sharpens the mind. If you skip out on exercise because of time restraints, your concentration will probably suffer.
- **Drugs** - Whether prescription, over-the-counter, recreational, or just your morning coffee, drugs affect your concentration. Pay attention and understand what effects drugs have on you.

### Your Work Environment Is Poor

Take a survey of your work environment.

- **Privacy** - Find ways to eliminate unwanted interruptions.
- **Noise** - Too much or too little can both cause problems.
- **Air Quality** - How's the ventilation?
- **Temperature** - Is it too high or low?
- **Comfort** - Watch your posture and support. Avoid sleep-inducing positions.
- **Clutter** - Get everything off your desk except the work that you're doing.

### Your Mind Just Keeps Wandering

Think of concentration as presence of mind. When your mind is jumping from one topic to another, it is typically a case of ideas and images from the past and the future impinging on the present. When these distracting extra thoughts come to you, what can you do? In some cases, personal issues need to be addressed before you can concentrate properly. If so, think them through, talk to a friend, or make an appointment

with **SDC's Psychological Services**. Many times, however, you can improve your concentration with a bit of practice.

When distracting thoughts arise, you can follow them, but this can lead to aimless mental wandering. You can try to shut them out, but they'll probably just keep nagging you. Your best strategy may be to relax and let them fall away by themselves.

1. With practice, you can learn to drop extra ideas before they pull your attention away from the present activity.
2. To ground yourself and achieve presence of mind, it is also helpful to pay attention to your breathing. Regular, deep breathing helps to re-unite your mind and your body, and brings you back to the present.

Both of these tips address what you can do in the moment when concentration is eluding you, but you can also engage in practices which, over the longer term, develop your ability to concentrate. Here are some suggestions:

- Meditation helps bring about a calm but alert mind, which is the basis for concentration.
- Yoga, Tai Chi, and other such practices are, in a sense, meditation with movement.
- Arts, crafts and music are good practices for focusing the mind, and can thus be helpful in improving concentration.
- Exercise and sports can bring about that same alertness and presence of mind.

Choose the techniques that suit you the best, and be aware of how the ability to focus and achieve presence of mind in daily activities is transferable to your academic pursuits.