

How to Stay Focused, Calm, and Productive

By Nicole Wolfe, B.S.

We've all been there: it's 5pm, you're exhausted from a whirlwind of a day, but you haven't really accomplished anything. With ever-increasing demands being made on your time, you're answering phone calls, responding to an onslaught of emails, and multitasking to complete a never-ending load of projects.

When you're trying to balance so many things, it is nearly impossible to really buckle down and focus effectively on your work. Instead of actually completing what you need to finish, you spend the entire day starting and stopping task after task. By the time you leave the office, you're miserable and tense; your mind is in overdrive as you anxiously try to control the chaos.

Looks Like Bruce Could Use Some Calm



Click on the image to view this clip.

With our plates so full these days, it is easy to fall victim to this frenzied and unproductive approach. Luckily, researchers have found a powerful—albeit counterintuitive—solution that will make you more effective and less stressed: mindfulness meditation. Now, before you start imagining drum circles and people chanting “ohm,” hear me out. You’ll see that mindfulness is a form of meditation that is effective and easy to implement, even during your already busy day.

There’s a great deal of research that shows that people who practice mindfulness are both more productive and more happy than those who do not. Specifically, researchers at Yale found that meditators’ minds were more focused throughout the day—not just when they were meditating—and that these individuals experienced far fewer of the distracting thoughts that kill concentration. A Harvard study found that a wandering mind creates twice as much unhappiness as actually doing something that you don’t particularly enjoy. This is largely because our minds tend to wander toward negative thoughts, and this produces additional anxiety and unhappiness. What this means is that your ability to be happy at work has little to do with what you’re doing and everything to do with your ability to remain focused on the task at hand.

Mindfulness avoids the ill effects of the wandering mind by training the brain to focus more intently. Mindfulness is simple: it’s the process of making certain that you are “mentally present.” Mindfulness requires you to live in the moment and to focus solely on what you’re experiencing (rather than on what you are thinking).

How to Stay Focused, Calm, and Productive

Practicing mindfulness actually trains your brain to maintain this focus all the time. As you gain control of your attention, your default mode becomes one of focus and calm.

Training your brain to be mindful ensures that you spend more time making progress on your work and less time jumping from task to task. You'll do a better job of getting through your dizzying workload, and you'll leave the office calm and collected. Here are five strategies that you can use to be mindful of the moment and to train your brain to maintain focus for the long term.

#1: Stop multitasking.

Researchers at Stanford University have shown that individuals who multitask are less able to pay attention and more easily distracted by irrelevant information. Although you may think that you are getting things done twice as fast when you're multitasking, the constant distraction involved means that you are actually far less productive than if you focused on a single task.

Try working on only one task at a time: this is the key to being mindful, and it will allow you to be in the moment and to remain focused on the task at hand. To make this easier, make a list each day of what you need to accomplish, and then choose one task at a time; this will help if you are worried about forgetting all of the tasks that you need to complete that day. If the other things on your list come to mind while you are working on your chosen task, just remind yourself that they are already on your list so they will get taken care of, and then let the thought go. If you think of new things that you need to do, just jot them down on your list, and then go back to your current task.

Even when you are only working on one project at a time, you are probably multitasking by checking your email, sending text messages, and answering the phone. Removing these distractions is just as important as removing any other ones. Every time you see a new email pop up or your phone rings, it pulls your mind away from the task at hand. Eliminate these distractions by turning them off, and then add checking your email and phone messages to your to-do list. These tasks will have their moment, and you can allow yourself to be present with just one task at a time. You will not only complete your work much faster, you'll be happier and more focused in general.

#2: Just breathe.

The easiest way to begin practicing mindfulness lies in something that you have to do everyday anyway: breathing. The practice of being in the moment with your breathing will begin to train your brain to focus solely on the task at hand. After enough practice, your brain will begin to learn how to focus without becoming distracted, and you will soon be able to apply this new skill to other experiences.

Set aside five minutes each day to focus solely on your breathing. Close the door, put away all other distractions, and just sit in a chair and breathe. The goal is to spend the entire five minutes remaining focused on your breathing and not letting your mind wander. Think about how it feels to breathe in and out. This sounds simple, but it's hard to do for more than a minute or two. It's all right if you get sidetracked by another thought; this is sure to happen at the beginning, and you just need to bring your focus back to your breathing. If staying focused on your breathing proves to be a real struggle, try counting each

How to Stay Focused, Calm, and Productive

breath in and out until you get to twenty, and then start again from one. Don't worry if you lose count; you can always just start over.

This task may seem too easy or even a little silly, but starting with breathing is very important. Practicing with a simple task allows you to focus exclusively on the current task, which trains your brain to generalize this experience to other tasks. Eventually, you will be able to move on to focusing on more complex tasks without distraction.

#3: Have a mindful meal.

It takes time and practice for your mind to get into the habit of staying focused. When you've gained some experience with the breathing exercise, try practicing mindfulness during lunchtime (or during another meal that you eat alone). This is a great next step: it is slightly more complex than breathing, but it is still simple enough that you can successfully remain mindful.

Rather than just stuffing down food while you watch television, read, or answer emails, take the time to actually experience your meal. Sit in a quiet area with minimal distractions, and focus on each flavor of the food and each movement that you make while you eat. If your mind wanders to what you need to do after lunch or to other things that you need to do, just bring your attention back to your meal. Eating slowly is the key to this exercise; it is much more difficult to be mentally present when you feel rushed. This activity will help to train your brain, and it will also give you a stress-free break from your workday.

#4: Live deliberately.

It's easy to fall into the pattern of being pulled in a new direction by every random thought or interruption, but having your focus constantly disrupted and redirected

focus on the present, you have to be in control. If you are working hard on a project and your mind wanders to your grocery list, you are no longer in control of the situation, because you're no longer focused on the task you have chosen. Try to engage in activities more fully by deliberately choosing when to start them and when to stop them. If you find yourself suddenly preoccupied with something else, ask yourself, "Did I choose to do this?" Most likely, the answer will be no. Without realizing it, you've been pulled in another direction by a new thought. When this happens, just refocus on your chosen activity.

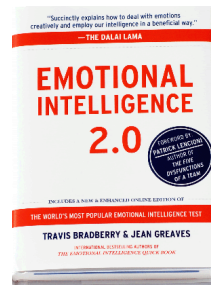
If you find it hard to make deliberate choices throughout the day, you may need to slow yourself down. It is especially challenging to be in control and focused if you are going a hundred miles an hour. Be sure to leave yourself enough time to think so that you can make conscious decisions about how to spend your time. If you rush through your entire day, you will find yourself jumping from one activity to the next. This will lead you to do whatever is put in front of you rather than to accomplish what truly needs to be done.

#5: Be realistic.

Having an unreasonable number of things to do over the course of a day makes it impossible to focus on each task fully. Having a realistic plan for what you can accomplish in a day will set you up to succeed at being mindful while you are working, and you'll get more done. Think about which tasks are really important, how long it's truly going to take to complete each task, and prioritize from there. You can't control your attention when everything feels like it's "do or die." Removing the less urgent and less important items from your to-do list allows you to relax and focus.

How to Stay Focused, Calm, and Productive

It is vital to be realistic about what you can accomplish. Give yourself a little wiggle room between tasks, and budget your time generously. You are not perfect, and it's unrealistic to expect that the entire day will proceed according to plan. Giving yourself a little extra time will prevent you from becoming distracted by unnecessary pressure. 🕒 *May 2012*



BUY IT FOR JUST \$24.99 AT
WWW.TALENTSMART.COM/BOOK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Nicole Wolfe, B.S.

Nicole Wolfe is a professional services consultant at TalentSmart. She received a distinction in psychology for her Bachelor of Science from Yale University where she developed an interest in emotional intelligence. Nicole's thesis research covered prosocial emotions in relationships, including gratitude and altruism. TalentSmart customers call on Nicole when they need help with an emotional intelligencetest, 360 degree feedback test, or DISC personality profile.