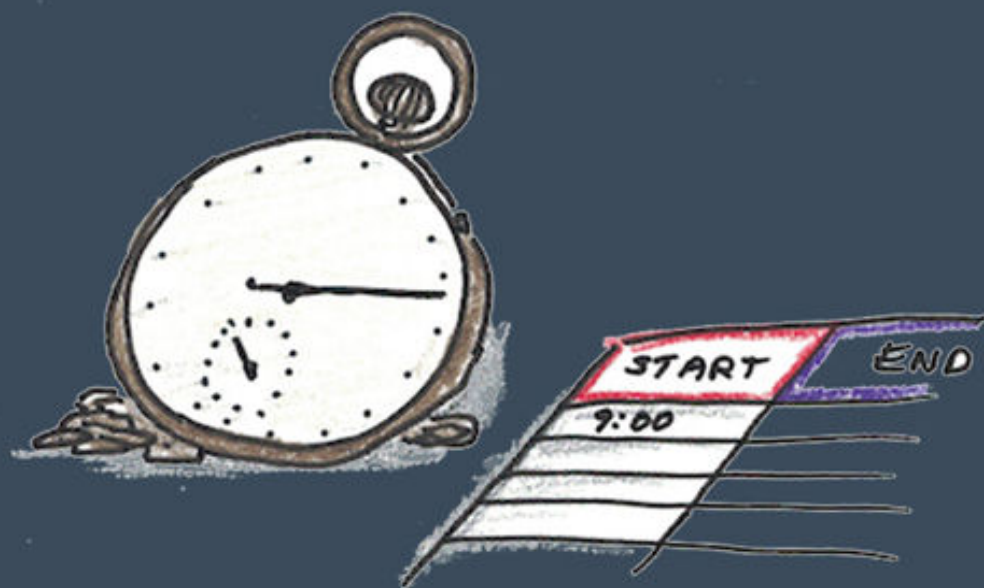


如何提升专注力

手把手教你用7项改变打造10倍速效率人生

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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO INCREASING YOUR FOCUS

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经营着世界上最大的学习博客之一

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Apply This Now

专注力是你最宝贵的资源之一。它就像一个乘数因子，让时间的价值翻倍。全神贯注的一小时与心不在焉的一小时相比，前者的价值可能是后者的十倍。

不幸的是，专注也很困难。令人分心的事情无处不在。即使没有干扰，也很难进入心流状态。

好消息是，专注力是一种可以培养的能力。如果你现在不擅长专注，可以通过一些改变以提高专注力。就像在健身房举重一样，你在训练精神肌肉使自己能够专注更长时间、以更高强度专注，以及更快进入专注状态，从而把更碎片的时间利用起来。

你可以做出很多改变来提高专注力，我之前也写过一些。在这本指南中，我想把它们全部汇总在一起，从而使任何想提高专注力的人都可以获得最佳效果。



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训练大纲

培养专注力的关键包括两部分：外在因素和内在因素。外在因素指改变所处的环境，使专注更容易、更有效率；内在因素指改变习惯、行为和思考模式，从而增强专注力。

你可以通过分别改变外部因素和内在因素提高专注力，但为了取得最大进步，你应该同时关注这两方面。甚至可以考虑在一个“专注月”中，逐一优化每一个内部和外部因素，从而使自己比以前更专注。

情绪在专注中起到重要作用，甚至比一般认为的还要重要。常犯的一个错误是在发现自己分心、疲惫或其他原因无法集中注意力时感到过分沮丧。改善专注力的道路不是一马平川，会有很多反复，因此重要的是不要因暂时的失败让你的整体动力蒙上阴影。

在这篇指南中，我将涵盖解决专注力问题的七个不同角度，同时附有在每一个方面获得提高的详细指导。

外部改进：

1. 消除分心的事物
2. 协商边界
3. 优化日程

内部提高：

1. 渐进式训练
2. 热身仪式
3. 克服冲动
4. 优化强度

即使此前你已经尝试了一种或两种改进方法，我建议把所有这些方法都试一试。每个人的情况都是不同的。对一些人来说，问题可能在于没有严格的边界，导致不停地被其他事情分心；对另一些人来说，可能是内部冲动的管理不善导致难以集中注意力。

外部改进

一、消除分心的事物

在专注力问题上，分心是最明显的问题，通常也是最容易解决的。具体来说，你想要找到一个专心的环境，最大程度减少打扰和诱惑。

打扰来自外部。虽然我们都可以想象图书馆最后方的角落和荒野中宁静的小木屋是不受打扰的，但最好的环境取决于什么能够打断你。

一般来说，提高专注力的艺术有两个方面。首先，你想要消除分心，从而防止自己脱离正确的轨道。对一些人来说，这意味着躲避到完全安静的环境中；对另一些人来说，外界噪音或背景说话声不会对他们造成干扰。我就在嘈杂的咖啡店做了许多工作，因为我可以屏蔽那些声音。

但第二个方面，是学会在不那么理想的环境中开始专注状态。这部分是可以适应的——如果你习惯了在不那么理想的环境中工作，你将培养出屏蔽干扰的能力。但在一开始，更加专注的需求通常比这更重要。因此，我建议首先优化你所处的环境，然后再扩展到训练自己在更差的环境中也能保持专注。在做更困难的事情之前，你希望自己有一个坚实的基础。

在我们这个智能手机和社交媒体的年代，诱惑通常是比干扰更严重的问题。如果你在家工作，你的房子也许比咖啡店更安静，但看电视或上网的诱惑可能是难以抗拒的。

和干扰一样，我们希望从消除诱惑开始。之后，我们可以训练自己更有克制力，从而即使同样的诱惑存在，我们依然可以完成工作。

以下是消除分心事物的一些步骤：

1. **创建工作空间。**可以是办公室、家里、图书馆或咖啡馆，它不一定是属于你的，只是一个你喜欢工作的地方。

2. **消除噪音和说话声。**如果你需要在一个嘈杂的地点工作，带上降噪耳机；否则，寻找安静的地方，将听觉和视觉干扰降到最小（背景环境中没有电视，也没有很容易偷听的聊天）。

3. **不要带手机（或网络）。**也许这些设备是你工作所必需的，但通常不是所有功能都需要。飞行模式可以避免必须设备上的干扰，但这不会阻止你向无聊屈服——最好把你不要的东西留在家里或放在另一个房间。

4. **事先准备好你的环境。**需要喝水？插上充电器？忘记给某人发消息？开始专注时段前迅速检查一遍，从而减少你在专注变得困难时用这些常见事情做借口的倾向。

二、协商边界

他人是保持专注的最大障碍。同事想要聊天；收到脸书好友关于今晚派对的消息；听到熟悉的提示音，有新邮件需要查看。

这些干扰与上一条中讨论不同之处在于，它们通常包括一些社交义务，需要做出回应。你可以试着不理茶水间的八卦，但如果回复同事迟了，或是拒绝开始工作讨论，你可能就要遇到麻烦了。

这一步需要与周围的人进行沟通，从而让他们理解你在做什么，除非紧急情况尽量不打扰你。以下是可以采取的一些步骤：

1. 关上门。把自己和他人隔离开来立刻增加了外部干扰的障碍。如果有人需要敲门或打开门才能问个问题，他们在这样做之前就会反复掂量。开放式办公环境？耳机可以起到同样的作用。如果有人必须摘掉耳机或拍拍你的肩膀才能和你说话，他们也会三思的。

2. 告诉他人何时可以打断你。让别人知道哪些时段你计划用作主要专注时间，让他们在这些时段以外规定好的间隙来找你。这有巨大的灵活性。因此即使你的工作需要频繁交流，你依然可以让他人等到一小时的最后十分钟再来打断你。我经常

的做法是，把早上的时间留给专注地做事，鼓励他人在下午打电话或找我讨论。

3. 与上司/客户协调你的计划。拒绝交流可能在当时看上去无礼，但为了经理/客户的利益提高工作效率的计划就不同了。最好告诉他们你要做什么，获得他们的意见，以免事后尴尬。

4. 设置自动回复。如果立即回复邮件是标准做法，一条说明你检查邮箱时间的自动回复可能会有帮助。你也可以对短信/电话做同样的设置。许多手机都有一项特殊功能，可以在你开车时进行自动回复。你可以重新设置这项功能为手动开启，并发送一条客气的消息让对方知道你正处于专注状态，但如果有急事，他们也可以打断你。

协商边界通常比人们认为的要容易得多。困难的是能够主动提出不同的时间安排从而增进专注。许多工作环境中人们选择不同的时间安排是出于惰性，而不是因为有明确的理性依据。

三、优化日程

适当的专注时长就是你可用的时间的长度。如果你只能挤出半小时做一个小项目，这就是你的专注时间。如果你每天早上可以投入一整块四小时时间，那么好好利用这一馈赠。

优化日程安排的能力是指通过制定计划给自己更多专注的机会。一个可行的办法是重排日程。你可以批量处理一些任务，或者重新安排会议和电话的时间，给自己留下一天中的大块时间不受干扰。

即使无法重新安排日程，仔细考虑每天的安排也是有益的。有些时间会在不经意间流逝，而仔细地制定计划能帮助你发现并利用这些时间。知道你将有30分钟的空闲时间意味着可以在此期间完成一些工作，否则时间可能就溜走了。

下面是具体的做法：

1. 优化会议安排。如果你可以掌控会议和电话安排，试着将它们批量安排到一周或一天的某个时间段。我几乎把所有会议和电话都安排在后半周或下午进行。如果不能这样，我通常试着将电话安排在很早的时候，从而不会把我早上的时间切割成两半。

2. 看看一周的安排。每周日想好一整周的安排，计划要完成什么工作，预估哪一天可以全神贯注，哪一天可能有更多碎

片时间。在安排紧凑、能够最大限度专注的一天之后，接着安排比较零散、相对轻松的几天，要好过每天的强度都平均安排，结果某天因为计划有变而导致时间不够用要好。

3. 制定每天的日程。如果你有一个相对简单的日程，只有很少的关键任务，那么你也许只要划定核心专注时间就好了。当我陷入一个几乎占据我所有时间的大项目时，就经常这样做。但如果你要在许多不同任务间来回切换，那么一个将每个小时都分配好的计划可能更好，让你知道接下来要做什么。

4. 避免长期陷阱。许多忙碌的人会犯的一个错误是，相比于短期要做的事，他们更容易承诺遥远将来需要完成的任务。他们感觉自己当下太忙了，没办法接受更多任务，但几个月之后事情就会容易得多。然而从无例外的是，当长期任务变成了短期内要完成的事情，他们依然很忙，依然在从事一些不很重要的事。

5. 利用拖延。我总是拖延大量的工作，但我拖延的主要是那些推迟完成也没有关系的工作。推迟不需要专注的工作要好得多，使你可以完成需要专注的困难工作。如果事情开始堆积起来，就把它们集中到一天，一口气把零碎的事情都做完。优化日程安排主要是为了计划未来。临时管理时间是很难的，因为必须要考虑到情绪状态，可能并不适合高强度集中注意力。而规划未来则容易得多，因为你可以平静地决定分配注意力的最佳方式。

内 部提高

消除分心的事物、协商边界和优化日程很有用，但也仅限于此。最终区分有出色专注力和无法专注的人的，是如何应对自己头脑中阻碍专注的因素。

四、渐进式训练

想象你去健身房，看到卧推，告诉自己第一天要举起300磅，那么等待你的就是受伤和失败。

相比之下，许多人想要制定的计划所需的专注力远超过他们之前能达到的任何水平，当无法实现目标时，他们感到灰心失望。如果你很难在某项任务上坚持超过一小时，却计划明天连续做八小时，那么计划失败就不足为奇了。

渐进式训练的比喻对专注很有用，有两个原因。首先，专注力提高和肌肉生长之间可能确实存在可比性。随时间推移，更多时间专注可以增加整体的专注能力。尽管神经科学在这一点上尚未形成定论，但我认为这种提高很可能可以尝试性地解决专注问题。

其次，即使你深层的专注能力无法像二头肌一样增长，但习惯、行为、情绪以及其他任何与焦虑有关的能力都可以得到提高。这些方面需要时间和不断的调整来找到最合适的方式，因此渐进式的提高计划比一下子全部投入的更好。

以下是如何慢慢增强专注能力的方法：

1. 从测量当前的专注能力水平开始。花几天的时间，其间全部的安排就是工作，同时打开手机上的秒表功能。每当你停止工作去做其他事（电话| 洗手间| 上网），就按下停止键，看

看专注了多长时间。把几天中不同时间段的数值平均，这应该可以提供你的专注力真正处于什么水平，而不仅仅是你主观想要处于什么水平。

2. **努力增加专注时长。**你可以做的第一件事就是增加专注时长。如果你发现自己十分钟后就会分心，试着坚持到十五分钟。设置一个十五分钟的计时器，并说服自己在计时器响起之前不要切换任务。在你可以轻松地坚持专注至少一小时之前，这应该是主要任务。

3. **接下来，致力于提高分心之后回到专注状态的能力。**当你被打断时，重置计时器，并试着敦促自己继续工作。你的目标应该是每次分心后都能继续回来工作。虽然思路中断可能干扰工作，但真正的秘诀是不要让中断长久地阻碍你工作。

4. **最后，努力提高你的专注速度。**这是你在更短的时间内“开启”专注的能力。这很难测量，但一种方式是看自己能否利用更小块时间完成一些工作。进入专注状态所需的“助跑”过程越短，就越能够利用生活留给你的碎片时间。

提高专注的每个维度的配方都是一样的：测量当前的专注能力，一点点努力提高专注能力并跟踪这些进步。只要你仔细遵循这些规则，让专注能力提高一倍甚至两倍都是可以做到的。

五、热身仪式

热身仪式是开始长时间专注前要完成的“起飞前检查清单”。可以是检查你准备了水，不需要去洗手间，手机已经关机，或者已经安排好自己不会被其他人打扰。

热身仪式很强大，因为它们也设置了特定的一种思维状态，甚至不仅限于仪式如何影响你的专注能力，实施仪式让你开始思考做真正的工作。

无论是否意识到，我们都不可避免地创造着热身仪式。这在你头脑中上演的小脚本，上面写着“没有咖啡我就无法开始工作”，或者“开始工作前我要先查邮件”。这里的关键是优化你的热身仪式，使它们取得最大效果，而不是因为条件不满足，热身仪式反而阻碍了你专注。

以下是你应该做的：

1. 你的仪式过于苛刻了吗？如果仪式的条件并不总能满足，也许你会想要降低特定活动的门槛，从而能够开始工作。今年早些时候，我留意到自己习惯了只有在去特定一家咖啡馆时才投入写书的工作，因为那是我写作时最喜欢的地方。但有时候我无法去那家咖啡馆，在那段时间我可能就会推延。我意识到需要让自己即使在家里也能重新适应专注。

2. 你能重新安排仪式的顺序吗？先发邮件或许是一个悠闲的开始，但是先完成最困难的事可能更有效率。在陷入一个舒服但未必最佳的仪式时意识到这一点，有助于你解决问题。试着马上开始工作，或利用你通常认为太短无法工作的碎片时间做些事情。

3. 随身携带你的仪式。如果你的仪式包含与特定时间、地点或环境没有紧密关系的想法或行为，那么在何时开始专注上你将有更多灵活性。从已有的热身仪式中分离出一部分可以与其他环境分开并进一步加强的。喝一口咖啡？闭上眼睛冥想几分钟？或许甚至仅仅让自己在心里回答“现在就做”，会是更容易实现的仪式。

4. 检验你的假设。仪式的力量部分是因为它们让我们适应专注。然而，这个习惯的行为模式很容易变成一种信念，即认为仪式的这些部分是专注所严格必需的（而非仅仅是你当前的触发器）。因此，你也许会想要尝试与现有仪式不同的其他工作方式，以建立起新的仪式。

无论我们是否想要，仪式都是存在的。思考你的专注仪式是为了避免不好的设计，在长期陷入拖延的重要情境或地点，不好的仪式设计可能阻碍你专注。但如果使用得当，仪式也是在需要的时候开始专注的强大触发器。

六、克服冲动

专注的技巧基本上可以归结为两种力量之间的张力：工作的欲望和停止工作的欲望。

专注的困难之处就在于工作的欲望通常很低，甚至可能还夹杂着焦虑或产生反感的负面情绪。相反，分心的事物可能很有诱惑力，停止工作的欲望可能很强。

提高专注力很大程度上就是认识到这些情感上的困难并克服他们。

克服过程的缺点在于，它通常是针对具体任务的。意思是说，这不是可以一劳永逸的事，而是会反复出现，需要你在事情变糟之前认识到它。

我最近在写一本书的过程中就遇到了这个问题。我头脑中不断跳出批评家会如何评价我的观点的画面，每当想到这，焦虑和负面情绪就让我无法专注。工作几分钟就可以克服这些，但每当碰到困难的部分，写作障碍都会让我拖延上好几天。

情绪反感给专注造成的困难比其他更严重，因为在忽略工作导致的痛苦足够强大，以致无法再拖延下去之前，你会避免做任何事。解决这个问题的唯一方式就是迎难而上。

如果你对需要专注投入的工作心生反感，以下是你应该怎么做：

1. **让自己暴露在恐惧中。**对我而言，就是找一些我想象着会批评我的书的人，先和他们聊一聊。就像噩梦一样，你需要先直面它的荒谬，然后它才会停止吓唬你。获得真正的反馈，即使那正是你所害怕的，通常可以消除你的反感。

2. **激发你的热情。**热情与反感之间的差别在于行动。如果你足够渴望一件事，这会推动你克服恐惧。从这个意义上说，动机可以帮你克服这些小问题（尤其是在你能接触现实并打消一些想象出来的反感之前）。花一些时间想象你的目标、想象你追求这些目标的原因，以及与积极的人交谈，都有助于天平向你有利的一方倾斜。

3. **系统性脱敏。**如果你对一系列任务长期感到反感，正确的解决办法可能是迎难而上。推自己一把，让自己处于一个感到极不舒服的情境，让那个任务（而不是随便什么你想要追求的目标）成为你的首要事项。随着你越来越多地暴露在这种情境中，不适最终会减轻。考试让你感到紧张？注册并参加你知道自己一定无法通过的考试。演讲让你感到抵触？加入演讲俱乐部（Toastmasters）并发表演说，直到演讲不再是什么大事。害怕批评？找人用最严厉的语词批评你的工作，重复上述动作，直到你不再感到糟糕。

专注的情感维度的另一个方面是想要停止工作或做其他事情的欲望。这是一个同样强大的驱动力，有时甚至是更为普遍的那个。许多人有太多感兴趣的事，热情过于分散，把他们的精力拉扯到不同方向，最终一事无成。

以下是如何管理：

1. **检查你的坏习惯。**看看你养成的行为模式，哪些构成了主要沉湎的事物。Instagram？游戏？看手机？戒除这些坏习惯可以减少它们在心理上对你的吸引。

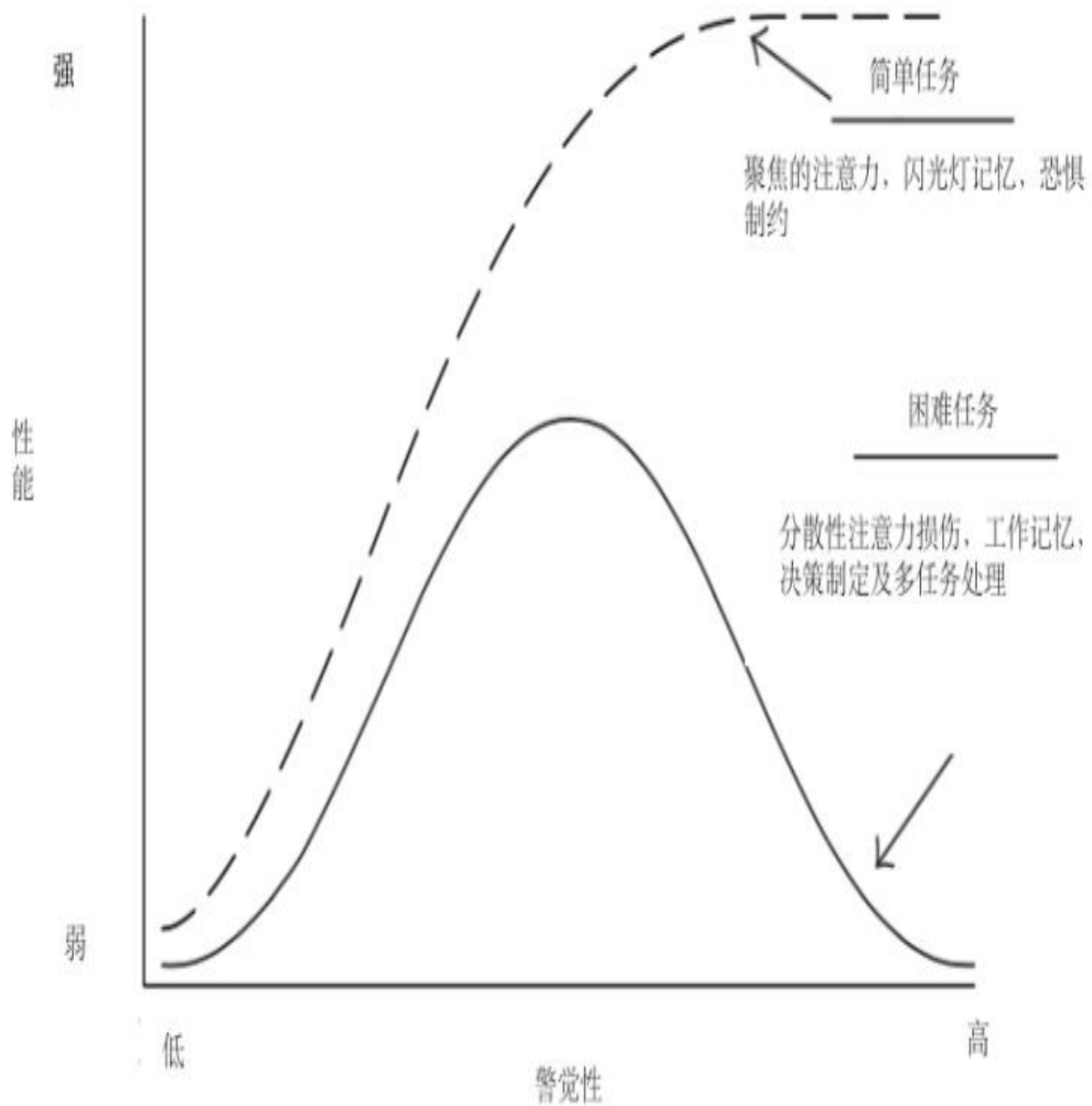
2. **把让你分心的东西关起来。**现在有许多工具可以控制你使用那些可能让你分心的东西。网站拦截器可以限制一天中特定时段对上瘾源的访问权限。当你想在没有电视和网络的环境下保持专注时，电子计时器可以让开电视和上网变得困难。

3. **不要回应。**最后，应对分心事物最强大的工具之一就是在你最渴望分心的时候不理它。这很难，但下一次想要分心时，渴望就会减弱。即使你只能简单地打断——在屈服之前等上几分钟——你也打断了这个模式并削弱了分心事物对你的控制。太多人聚焦于专注力容易的方面，而很少注意到专注力的情感方面。无法专注通常是由于强烈的厌恶和渴望情绪，这需要时间和有意识的努力才能消除，但认识到问题所在，永远是解决问题的第一步。

七、优化强度

数十年来，研究者已经知道你想要完成的任务的复杂性与最佳注意力强度之间存在一定的关系。

耶基斯—多德森定律（Yerkes-Dodson Law）表明，随着警觉性提高，任务表现呈倒U型变化。专注不足，则表现不佳；而太过激动，表现也会不如更平静的人。重要的是，表现曲线的最优点与任务复杂性之间存在某种联系，即相比于困难任务，简单任务不太受到过分警觉的影响。



可以通过一个类比来思考这个问题。专注就像闪烁的聚光灯，高度警觉（强烈的音乐、几杯咖啡等）就像使光束变得非常窄。如果对任务的思考可以整齐地包含在这束光中，那么这样聚焦的光束将很有帮助。

然而，如果你面临的是复杂的或创造性的任务，需要利用更发散的技能 and 记忆，那么这束高度聚焦的光线则过于脆弱。它需要在不同事物间飞快地移动，很容易在此过程中中断、转移。

对于特别需要创造性的问题解决，即使正常、放松状态的专注都可能限制过强以致无法想出解答。你可能需要更低水平的专注才能把解决问题所需的全部分散内容联系到一起。

因此，尽管在95%的情况下高度专注相对于心不在焉更好，但在一些情况下事实上可能适得其反。在另外5%的情况下，分散的注意力也许更有帮助，条件是分散的方式要正确。即使很少见，但这5%的情况通常是最重要的，因为创造性的突破通常具有远高于常规工作的价值。

进入有效的非专注状态的关键很简单：

1. 一直保持专注，直到被卡住。如果一个问题可以在更高的专注水平得到解决，那么继续专注整体上会更有成效；只有当专注无法解决问题时，有效的非专注状态才有意义。

2. 不，真的，一直保持专注，直到被卡住。在“卡住”的状态保持专注更长时间，将使你在精神上做好准备，在不专注阶段寻找解决办法，从而不会过早地神游四海，完全忘了这个问题。对于困难问题来说，被卡住五到十分钟比较好。

3. 允许自己不再钻研这个问题，但也不要专注到其他事情上。我推荐“聪明”地休息一下，可以是散步、冥想、安静地坐

着、喝水或其他不需要耗费心力的事情。与其他人聊天格外有用，因为这会改变你之前独自解决问题的模式。

4. 在此期间，考虑事情，但不要试图控制你的意识以寻求解答。你会希望思绪徘徊一会儿，但之前专注思考这个问题所做的准备意味着你有解决问题的驱动力，让你不会彻底迷失。可以这样想，让你的光束尽可能地宽广分散，从而选择没预想到的、范围更广的路径解决问题。你不会想要专注在一些分心的事物上，因为那会让你注意力的光束保持聚拢，但专注在无助于解决问题的思考领域。

应该花多少时间在这种心不在焉的专注模式上，又应该花多少时间在更常规的专注模式上，取决于你面临的问题。但认识到专注的强度与所要解决问题的复杂性之间的关系是很有用的，从而可以最大化专注的有效性。

现在就行动

你想提高专注的能力吗？我建议留出一个月的时间致力于提高这项能力，具体做法可以包括：

1. 组织工作空间，消除分心的事物。
2. 与周围的人沟通，尽量减少打扰。
3. 提前规划以充分利用时间。
4. 测量专注力，逐渐提高持久性、灵活性和速度。
5. 检查当前的热身仪式并进行调整，使其更有效用。
6. 自我诊断为什么拖延，并进行调节避免诱惑。
7. 在恰当的时候利用有效的非专注时段解决创造性问题。

如果你应用了所有这些想法，并系统地应用了一个月，你将很可能大幅提高最重要的那类工作的产出。即使你在专注方面已经做得不错，依然有机会进行提高：开始专注前是否浪费了太多时间？是否因为潜在的恐惧或焦虑而避免某些类型的工作？也许你擅长利用大块时间专注，却浪费了一天中出现的半小时左右的碎片时间？（更d书f享搜索雅 书.YabooK）

Focus is one of your most valuable resources. It acts as a multiplier on the value of your time. An hour of absorbing focus can be worth ten times that of a distracted one.

Unfortunately, focus is also hard. Distractions are everywhere. Even when they aren't, it can often be difficult to get into a state of flow.

The good news is that focus is a capacity you can develop. If you're not good at focusing now, you can make changes to improve your ability to focus. Like lifting weights at the gym, you're training your mental muscles to be able to focus longer, more intensely and engage it more quickly to make use of shorter bursts of time.

There's a lot of different changes you can make to improve your capacity to focus, and I've written about some of them previously. However, in this guide, I wanted to compile them all together, so anyone looking to improve their focus could get the best results.

Training Overview

You can improve your ability to focus by tackling any one of these parts separately. But for the biggest gains, you should look at all of them simultaneously. You may even want to consider a “Month of Focus” where you go through and try to optimize each of these so you can focus better than before.

Emotions play an important role in focus, perhaps a bigger one than is commonly suspected. One mistake to make is to get overly discouraged when you’re distracted, tired or otherwise can’t focus. The road to improvement has many dips and bumps, so it’s important to not let short-term failures cloud your overall drive to improve.

In this guide, I’m going to cover seven different angles you can approach the problem of focus, along with a systematic guide for improving each of them:

External Improvements:

1. Eliminating distractions.
2. Negotiating boundaries.

3. Optimize your schedule.

Internal Improvements:

4. Progressive training.

5. Warm-up rituals.

6. Overcoming impulses.

7. Optimizing intensity.

Even if you' ve tried one or two of these before, I suggest applying the full range. Every situation is unique, so for some people there problem might be porous boundaries causing unending distractions, for another it' s managing internal impulses that makes focus so much harder.

External Improvements

1. Eliminating Distractions

Distractions are the most obvious problem when it comes to focus, and they are often the easiest to fix. In particular, you want to find an environment for focus that minimizes both interruptions and temptations.

Interruptions come from the outside. While we can all imagine the tiny nook in the back of a library or silent log cabin in the wilderness as being interruption free, the best environment depends on what has the ability to interrupt you.

In general, the art of improving focus here has two dimensions. First, you want to eliminate distractions, so as to prevent yourself from getting derailed. For some people, that will mean retreating into total silence. For others, ambient noise or background chatter won't interrupt them. I get a lot of my work done at a noisy coffee shop because I can tune it out.

The second part, however, is learning to turn on focus in less-than-ideal environments. Part of this is

conditioning—if you get used to working in a less-ideal environment, you’ ll cultivate the ability to tune it out. However, in the beginning, this is usually outweighed by the need to focus more. Therefore, I suggest optimizing your environment first, and branching out to training in harder environments later. You want a solid foundation before you start making things harder.

Temptations are, in our smartphone and social media age, quite often a bigger problem than interruptions. If you work from home, your house may be quieter than the coffee shop, but the temptation to watch television or surf the web might be overwhelming.

Like interruptions, we want to start by eliminating temptations. Later, we can train ourselves to succumb to them less, so that we can still get work done even though those same temptations exist.

Here’ s some steps for eliminating distractions:

8. **Create your working space.** It can be at the office, home, library or coffee shop. It doesn’ t have to be yours, just the place you like to work.

9. **Eliminate noise and chatter.** If you need to work in a noisy place, get noise-cancelling

headphones. Otherwise, seek out quiet places with minimal auditory and visual distractions (no televisions in the background, or conversations that are easy to follow).

10. **Leave the phone (or internet) behind.** Devices may be necessary for your work, but often the full suite of features isn't. Airplane mode can avoid distractions on mandatory devices, but that won't prevent you from giving in to boredom—best to leave things you don't need at home or in another room.

11. **Get your environment ready beforehand.** Need a drink of water? Plug in your charger? Forgot to text someone? Do a quick check-off before you start your focus session so that you'll be less inclined to use one of these common things as an excuse when focus gets tough.

2. Negotiating Boundaries

Other people are the biggest obstacles to focus. A colleague wants to chat. You get a Facebook message about that party tonight. You hear the familiar ping of new emails that demand a look.

The difference between these interruptions and those previously discussed is that they very often include some social obligation to respond. While you can try to ignore the water cooler gossip without consequences, a delayed reply to a colleague or refusal to initiate a work discussion may run you into trouble.

This step requires communication with those around you so that they understand what you're trying to do and are less likely to interrupt you if it's not an emergency. Here's some steps to take:

12. Close the door. Shutting yourself away immediately increases the barriers to interruption. If someone has to knock or open a door to ask a question, that makes them think twice before doing it. Open office? Headphones also help do the trick. If someone has to pull them off you or tap your shoulder, this works similarly.

13. Tell people when to interrupt you. Let people know which hours you plan to use for your prime focus time and ask them to interrupt you in defined intervals outside it. The flexibility here is enormous, so even if you're in a job which requires frequent communication, you might even ask people to wait until the last ten minutes of the hour to interrupt you. I've often done this by reserving morning hours for focus and encouraging calls|discussion in the afternoon.

14. Coordinate your plan with your boss/clients. A refusal to communicate can seem rude in the moment. A plan to improve your productivity for the benefit of your manager|clients is not. Better to talk about what you want to do, and get their input, before forcing an awkward moment later.

15. Set up an autoresponder. If immediate emails are the norm, an autoresponder indicating your email-checking hours might help. You can do the same with texts|calls. Many phones have a special feature that automatically replies when you're driving. You can rework this to be turned on manual and deliver a custom message letting people know that you're in focus mode but they can cut through if it's an emergency.

Negotiating boundaries is usually a lot easier than people assume. The difficulty is being okay with taking the initiative to ask for a different setup in order to increase your focus. Many working environments settle on different options out of inertia, not because there's a defined rationale for them.

3. Optimize Your Schedule

The right length of time for focus is the time you have available. If you only have half an hour to squeeze in on a side project, then that's the time you have. If you can devote a block of four hours every morning, make the best of that gift.

The ability to optimize your schedule is to use planning to give yourself more opportunities for focus. One way this can be done is by reorganizing. You may batch certain tasks or rework your schedule for meetings and calls to leave large swaths of the day untouched.

However, even if such reorganization isn't possible, there's still an advantage in being deliberate with your schedule. The deliberateness of making a plan helps you recognize and act on moments in time which might otherwise get lost. Knowing you'll have a certain thirty minute chunk free means you can get some work done when otherwise that time might slip away.

Here's how to do it:

16. **Optimize your meetings.** If you have control over meetings and calls, try to batch them to certain periods of the week or day. I do nearly all my meetings and calls later in the week and later in the day. If I can't, I often try to schedule the call quite early, so it doesn't cut my morning time in two.

17. **Look at your week.** Every Sunday, go through your week and plan out what work you'd like to do. Estimate which days you'll be able to focus intensely and which will be more fragmented. A more intense day, when you have optimal focus, followed by lighter days which are more fractured is better than trying for average intensity all days and coming up short when the fractured day gets derailed.

18. **Plan out your daily schedule.** If you have a relatively simple schedule with few key tasks, you may want to define your core focus hours and leave it at that. I often do this when I'm deep on a big project that takes up all my time. If you're juggling many different tasks, however, you will benefit from making a plan which allocates every hour of your day, so you can know what to expect.

19. **Avoid the long-term trap.** One error many busy people make is committing to things in the far future

more readily than they would in the short-term. Right now, they feel, they are so busy that they couldn' t take on any more, but months from now things will be easier. Invariably, the long-term becomes the short-term and they' re still busy and also committed to something that isn' t very important.

20. Use your procrastination. I procrastinate on tons of work all the time. However, I try to procrastinate mostly on the things which are okay to delay. It' s far better to procrastinate on things which don' t demand your focus, so you can do the hard work which really does. If those things start to pile up, batch them into one day and get caught up on random errands in one go.

Most of optimizing your schedule is about looking ahead. Managing your time in the moment is hard because you have to deal with your emotional state, which may not be up for intense focus. Planning the future is a lot easier because you can calmly decide what is the best way to allocate your focus.

Internal Improvements

Eliminating distractions, negotiating boundaries and optimizing your schedule are helpful, but they only go so far. Ultimately, it's dealing with the obstacles to focus inside your own mind which separates those who have excellent focus and those who do not.

4. Progressive Training

Imagine going to the gym, seeing the bench press and telling yourself you're going to lift 300 lbs. the first day. That's a recipe for injury and failure.

In contrast, many people aim for schedules with amounts of focus far in excess of anything they've pulled off before, and then feel disappointed they couldn't pull it off. If you struggle to focus for more than an hour at some task, and you plan to do it eight hours straight tomorrow, you can't be surprised when your plans fail.

The metaphor of progressive training is useful with focus for at least two reasons. First, there may be a real parallel between focus and muscular development. More time spent focusing may increase a general capacity for focus which improves over time. Although the neuroscience isn't settled on this point, I think there's a strong enough possibility for this kind of improvement to tentatively approach the problem this way.

Second, even if your deeper capacities for focus don't grow like a bicep, the habits, behaviors, emotions

and literally everything else surrounding focus can improve. These things take time and tweaking to figure out, so a progressive schedule for improvement is a better idea than going all-in.

Here's how you should slowly build up your capacity:

21. **Start by measuring your current capacity.** Spend a few days where all you do is work and keep a stopwatch running on your phone. Then, whenever you stop working to do something else (calls| bathroom| internet) press Stop and see what the number is. Averaged over a few days and different sessions, this should give you a realistic picture of where your focus is, not just where you'd like it to be.

22. **Work on building your focus duration.** The first thing you can work on is building up your duration for focus. If you find yourself getting distracted after ten minutes, aim for fifteen. Set a timer for fifteen minutes and convince yourself to not switch tasks until it dings. Once you can comfortably get up to at least an hour consistently, this should be the main priority.

23. Next, work on your ability to return to focus, after a distraction. Whenever you get interrupted, reset your timer and try to push yourself to keep working further. Your goal should be to get back to working each time you get distracted. Although the mental interruption can derail your work, the real secret is to not let it permanently stall you.

24. Finally, work on building up your speed of focus. This is your ability to “turn on” focus in shorter periods of time. This is harder to measure, but one way to do it is to give yourself shorter chunks of time and see if you can get some work done. The shorter a runway you can take off from, the more you’ ll be able to make use to the fragments of time that life gives you.

The recipe in each dimension of focus is the same: measure your current ability, make small efforts to improve and track those improvements. Doubling or tripling your ability to focus is doable, provided you’ re careful in following these rules.

5. Warm-Up Ri tual s

A warm-up ritual is your pre-flight checklist you go through before you start focusing for a big session. It may be checking that you have water, that you don' t need to use the bathroom, that your phone is turned off or you' ve set yourself up to not be distracted by other people.

Warm-up rituals are powerful because they also condition a certain mindset. Even beyond just how the ritual impacts your ability to focus, enacting the ritual primes you to start thinking about doing real work.

Inevitably, we all create warm-up rituals, whether we think we are or not. It' s the little scripts in your head that say things like, “ I can' t start work without my coffee,” or, “ I check emails first before getting to work.”

The key here is to optimize your warm-up rituals so that they are maximally effective and don' t lead you into situations where they prevent you from focusing because conditions aren' t right.

Here' s what you should do:

25. Is your ritual too demanding? You may want to lower the threshold for certain activities if those won' t always be present in order for you to work. Earlier this year, I noticed I was conditioning myself to only put in work on my book, if I went to a certain coffee shop, because it was my favorite place to write. However, sometimes I couldn' t go there, and so I might procrastinate in the intervening period. I realized I needed to recondition myself to start focus, even if I was at home.

26. Can you reorder the ritual? Email first may be a leisurely start to the day, but doing the hardest things first is likely more productive. Noticing when you' ve fallen into a comfortable, but suboptimal ritual, can help you fix the problem. Experiment with starting work right away, or working in chunks of time you' d normally dismiss as being too short to work.

27. Carry your ritual wherever you go. If your ritual involves certain thoughts or actions which aren' t tied deeply to a particular time, place or set of circumstances, you' ll have a lot more flexibility about when you can apply focus. Isolate parts of your existing warm-up routine that you might be able to

reinforce more strongly and detach from other circumstances. Sip of coffee? Closing your eyes for a few minutes to meditate? Maybe even just conditioning yourself to respond to saying “ Do it now,” in your head might be a more accessible ritual.

28. **Test your assumptions.** Part of the power of rituals is that they condition us to focus. However, this conditioned pattern of behavior can easily turn into a belief that those parts of the ritual are strictly necessary for focus (rather than merely being your current triggers). Therefore, you may want to experiment with different ways of working that violate your current ritual in order to establish new ones.

Rituals exist whether we want them to or not. The power of thinking about your focusing ritual is to avoid maladaptive designs, which prevent you from focusing if in important situations, or places where you have encoded procrastination for too long. Used properly, however, a ritual can be a powerful trigger to start important focus when you need it.

6. Overcoming Impulses

The skill of focus basically boils down to a tension between two different forces: the desire to work and the desire to quit.

What makes focus hard is that the desire to work is often low, and may even be associated with anxiety or negative feelings that create a feeling of aversion. Distractions, conversely, might feel tempting and the desire to quit might be strong.

Improving focus is largely about recognizing these affective obstacles and reconditioning them.

The downside of this reconditioning process is that it is often task specific. Meaning it's not something you do once and are done with forever, but something that may come up again and again, and which you need to recognize before it gets too bad.

I recently had this problem when writing a book. My imagination kept bringing up images of what a critic might say of my arguments, so whenever I thought about it, I'd get anxiety and negative feelings that pushed me away. These could be overcome by working for a few

minutes, but I'd often procrastinate for days with "writer's block" when I'd hit a hard part.

This aversive obstacle to focus is much more powerful than the others, because you are going to avoid working on something until the pain of ignoring it becomes so great that you can't procrastinate any more. The only way to handle this problem is to deal with it head-on.

Here's what to do when you're faced with an aversion to doing the work you need to focus on:

29. **Expose yourself to your fears.** In my case, that meant seeking out some of the people I imagined would criticize my book and talking to them first. Like a nightmare, you need to confront the absurdity of it before it stops scaring you. Getting that actual feedback, even if it is everything you were afraid of, can often desensitize you to its aversive effects.

30. **Stoke your enthusiasm.** Action is the difference between the enthusiasm and aversion. If you desire something enough, this can push you over your fears about it. Motivation, in this sense, can help overcome those hiccups (especially until you can get contact with reality and diffuse some imagined aversions). Spending

time imagining your goals, visualizing the reasons you're pursuing them and having conversations with positive people can all help in tilting that equation in your favor.

31. Systematic desensitization. If you feel chronic aversion to a set of tasks, the right solution might be to approach it head on. Push yourself in a situation that would make you feel extra uncomfortable, and make that (not whatever goal you're trying to pursue) your main priority. That discomfort will eventually lessen as you're exposed to it more and more. Exams making you feel tense? Sign up and write exams you know you'll fail. Presentation gives you aversion? Join Toastmasters and give speeches until it's nothing. Afraid of criticism? Ask someone to critique your work in the harshest possible terms, rinse and repeat until it doesn't feel so bad.

The other coin of the affective dimension of focus is on the desire to quit or do something else. This can be an equally powerful drive, and sometimes is the one that's more prevalent. Many people suffer from excess and diffuse enthusiasm that pulls them in too many directions so they achieve little.

Here's how to manage that:

32. **Examine your vices.** Look at the patterns you've set up that constitute your main distraction addictions. Instagram? Games? Checking your phone? Cutting out these vices can reduce their immediate pull on your psyche.

33. **Box in your distractions.** There are many tools which exist now that can allow you to control your consumption of things that might distract you. Website blockers can limit your access to addicting sources to certain allotted periods of the day. Electric timers can make turning on your television or accessing the internet harder when you want to focus without them.

34. **Don't respond.** Ultimately, one of the biggest tools you can apply to dealing with the distractions is simply not to engage in them when you feel the desire to the most. This is hard, but it reduces their intensity for the next time. Even if you can simply interrupt them—waiting a few minutes before succumbing—you interrupt the pattern and weaken its grip on you.

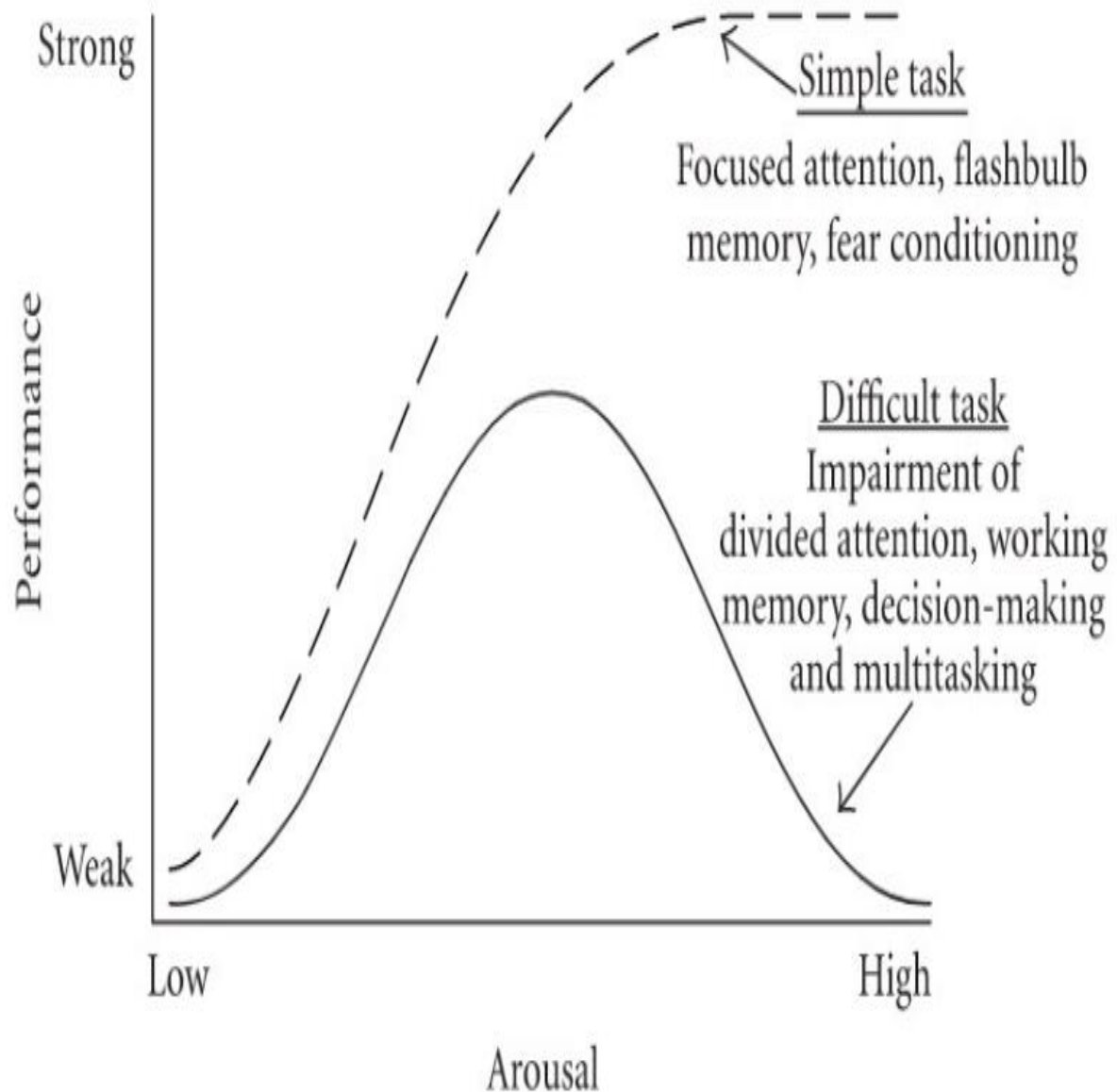
Too many people focus on the easy aspects of focus, and too little attention is paid to the emotional side of focus. Very often powerful aversions and cravings are responsible for our inability to focus, and these take time and conscious effort to weed

out. Recognizing what the problem is, however, is always the first step.

7. Optimizing Intensity

Researchers have known for decades that there is a relationship between the optimal intensity of attention and the complexity of the task you want to perform.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law says that increasing alertness has an inverted-U function on task performance. Not enough focus, and you perform poorly. Too much arousal and you're also impaired over someone calmer. Importantly, there's a relationship between the optimal top of this performance curve and the complexity of the task. Namely, simpler tasks suffer less from being overly alert than do complex ones.



One analogy to think about this is that focus is like shining a spotlight. A high degree of alertness (intense music, a few cups of coffee, etc.), is like making the beam of light very narrow. This helps if the thinking of the task can be neatly enclosed in that beam of light.

However, if you have a complicated or creative task, one that requires a more diffuse set of skills and memories which need to be drawn upon, then this highly focused beam is quite fragile. It needs to flit between things quickly and is more likely to break off and get distracted in the process.

For particularly creative problem solving, even a normal, relaxed state of focus may be too constrained to contain the answer. You may need to engage in a relatively low state of focus to be able to successfully pull together all the diffuse elements of thinking required to solve the problem.

Therefore, highly concentrated focus, while it is an improvement over absent-mindedness in 95% of cases, has some situations where it may actually backfire. In those 5% of cases, a distracted mind may be a helpful mind, provided it is distracted in the right way. Even if they are rare, these cases are often the most important, since creative breakthroughs often have disproportionate value over normal work.

The key to productive unfocus is simple:

35. **Focus until you get stuck.** If a problem can be solved at a higher level of focus, you'll be more

productive overall to continue. It's only when this fails that productive unfocus makes sense.

36. No, really, focus until you get stuck. Staying focused in the "stuck" state for longer is going to mentally prime you to work on a solution in the unfocused stage, so you don't want to prematurely wander off and forget about the problem altogether. Five to fifteen minutes of being stuck is good for a hard problem.

37. Allow yourself to stop working on the problem, but don't get focused on anything else. I recommend taking a "smart" break. This can mean going for a walk, meditating, sitting quietly, drinking some water or something that is otherwise not mentally engaging. Having a conversation with another person can be especially helpful, since it changes the patterns you were using to solve the problem individually before.

38. In this time, think about things, but don't try to control your mind towards a solution. You want it to wander a bit, but the priming given to focusing on the problem beforehand should mean you have an urge to solve it that keeps you from getting completely lost.

The way to think of this is like letting your beam of light go maximally broad and diffuse, to pick up wider routes to solve the problem than you might have otherwise envisioned. What you don' t want to do is focus on some distractor, since that will keep your attentive beam tight, but focused in an area of thinking that probably isn' t helpful.

How much time you spend in this absent-minded mode of focus and the more standard type will depend a lot on the problems you' re facing. It' s useful, however, to recognize how the intensity of focus relates to the complexity of the task you' re involved in, so that you can maximize the usefulness of your focus.

Apply This Now

Would you like to increase your ability to focus? I recommend setting aside a month in which you devote yourself to improving this capacity that can include:

39. Organizing your working space to eliminate distractions.

40. Talking to people around you to minimize interruptions.

41. Planning ahead to make best use of your time.

42. Measuring your focus and slowly building up the duration, flexibility and speed.

43. Examining your current warm-up routines and adjusting them to be more useful.

44. Diagnosing why you really procrastinate and conditioning yourself to avoid temptations.

45. Using productive periods of unfocus at just the right moment to solve creative problems.

If you applied all of these ideas, and worked through them systematically for a month, it's quite possible you could greatly increase your output for the kind of work that matters most. Even if you're already decent at focusing, chances are there are still things which could be improved: do you waste too much time getting started focusing? Do you avoid certain types of work because of hidden fears or anxieties? Maybe you're good at focusing for long chunks, but waste the slices of half an hour that come up during your day.

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