

Samuel A. Malone

# Focus, Persistence & Resilience

SAMUEL A. MALONE

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# **FOCUS, PERSISTENCE & RESILIENCE**

Focus, Persistence & Resilience

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuel A Malone is a self-employed training consultant, lecturer, moderator, examiner and author. He has published numerous journal articles in the fields of learning, study skills, personal development, motivation and management. He is the author of 21 books published in Ireland, the UK and worldwide on learning, personal development, study skills and business management. Some of his books have been translated into foreign languages including Russian, Spanish, Danish and Norwegian, and gone into second editions. His most recent book (2014) is titled *Awaken the Genius Within – A Guide to Lifelong Learning Skills* (Glasnevin Publishing, Dublin). He has a M.Ed. with distinction (in training and development) from the University of Sheffield and is a qualified Chartered Management Accountant (ACMA), Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA) and a Chartered Secretary (ACIS) and a member of the Irish Institute of Industrial Engineers. He is a Fellow of the Irish Institute of Training and Development (FIITD).

Previous books published by the author include *Why Some People Succeed and Others Fail* (Glasnevin Publishing, Dublin), *Learning about Learning* (CIPD, London), *A Practical Guide to Learning in the Workplace* (The Liffey Press, Dublin), *Better Exam Results* (Elsevier/CIMA, London) and *Mind Skills for Managers* (Gower, Aldershot, UK) and *How to Set Up and Manage a Corporate Learning Centre* (Gower, Aldershot, UK). The last two books became best sellers for Gower in their training and business categories. *Better Exam Results* proved to be a best seller for Elsevier/CIMA and is still in print 30 years after its earliest incarnation. Most of his books are available online from Amazon.co.uk.

The author's latest books have been published online by bookboon.com in 2018/2019 namely:

- The Role of the Brain in Learning
- How Adults Learn
- Learning Models and Styles
- Experiential Learning
- Learning with Technology
- The Ultimate Success Factor
- Memory Skills for Managers
- Series of Books on People Skills for Managers
- Series of Books on Creativity Skills for Managers
- Series of Books on Training Models for learning facilitators
- Series of Books on Marketing for the Non-Marketing Manager
- Learning Maps for Managers
- Lifelong Learning Skills

- Business Communications
- Reading Skills for Managers
- Learning from Mistakes
- Happy Managers: A Business Perspective
- Workplace Stress: A Guide for Managers & Employees Part 1-4
- Business Ethics for Managers
- Emotional Intelligence for Managers

# INTRODUCTION

Having the skills of focus, persistence and resilience are three ingredients for a successful career and life. Focus is directing laser-like attention on a single topic, while ignoring irrelevant matters or blocking out distractions. It is the discipline of being totally absorbed in a topic, to such an extent that you are unaware of anything else. The flipside to focus is distraction. The ability to pay attention is important not only for work, career, study, and professional effectiveness, but also to prevent errors caused by distraction.

Psychologists have identified five principles of effective focus. Being aware of the benefits will help you concentrate more effectively. You may want to increase focus and improve concentration, to perform better at work, pass your exams, increase reading comprehension and retention, or simply to make everyday life easier. Fortunately, the skills of sustained focused concentration can be learned. In fact, not only are they learned, but they are imprinted on the brain changing its patterns and physical structure.

The blocks to focus can be categorised into mental and physical. Mental blocks include lack of interest, procrastination, and low frustration tolerance. Physical include fatigue, lack of skill, and having an unclear purpose and plan. In any area of life, sport, study, career, work, or creativity, you can't achieve anything worthwhile without exercising powers of focus. However, you can learn to ignore distractions, making you more focused, creative, and productive. Mental skills training, such as relaxation, visualisation, goal setting, positive self-talk and focusing, are now considered essential for success in any endeavour.

Persistence is the quality of continuing going forward steadily despite problems, setbacks, difficulties, failures or obstacles. Persistence, patience and passion, are the hallmark of success. Patience is the ability to endure waiting without becoming annoyed, agitated, frustrated or upset, and to persevere calmly when faced with seemingly insurmountable difficulties. A passionate person is fully engaged and totally dedicated to whatever they undertake. Willpower is a combination of determination and self-discipline, enabling you to do something despite the obstacles encountered.

Resilience is the ability to recover quickly and bounce back, survive and flourish from the trials and tribulations of life. Resilient people are successful because they know how to pick themselves up from failure, recharge and reenergise, and start all over again. Those without resilience become helpless, discouraged and despondent, adopt a victim mentality or plunge into depression, and feelings of hopelessness.

The text is illustrated with acronyms, examples, inspirational quotes, anecdotes, diagrams and models to put the subject matter in perspective, and grasp the psychology behind the ideas. Each chapter begins with questions to arouse the curiosity of the reader, and finishes with five activities to improve focus, persistence and resilience skills. A summary learning map at the end of each chapter is a pictorial reminder of the key points. The book is designed as a practical tool for readers seeking to improve their focus, persistence and resilience skills.

Samuel A Malone

March, 2020



# 1 FOCUS

- What is focus?
- What is the flipside to focus?
- What are the principles of effective focus?
- What are the blocks to focus?
- How can I develop better powers of focus?

*'The weakest living creature by concentrating his power on a single object, can accomplish good results while the strongest, by dispersing his effort over many chores may fail to accomplish anything. Drops of water by continually falling, hone their passage through the hardest rocks, but the hasty torrent rushes over it with hideous power and leaves no trace behind.*

– Og Mandino

## 1.1 WHAT IS FOCUS?



Fig. 1 Focus

As children many of us were fascinated and amazed at the awesome power and strength of a focused beam of sunlight. With a magnifying glass you could focus a ray of sunlight on a piece of paper and burn a hole through it. The beam would have to be carefully aligned and concentrated, as the energy of a dispersed beam would be dissipated, and not have the same effect. On picnics you could start a fire using a similar process. Similarly, mental focus is directing attention on a single topic, while ignoring irrelevant matters or blocking out distractions. Focused concentrated attention is like a spotlight; we notice only what we see and concentrate on. It is the discipline of being totally absorbed on a topic, to such an extent that you are oblivious of anything else.

Focus is intense concentrated interest in action. A person is focused when their thoughts and actions coincide. It is making the mind do what you want, so that your energies are focused to the exclusion of everything else. It is a type of mental tenacity requiring perseverance, passion, and persistence in pursuit of a desired goal. Focus gives us the single-mindedness to block out all distractions irrelevant to the task at hand, or the problem being solved. This means that we are more likely to stick to the task and achieve what we want to do.

In sports, athletes are well aware of the link between focus and success in their chosen field. For example, a golfer will regain and retain focus by just concentrating on the shot, and ignoring all the distractions around them, including the clicks of cameras, and the shouts of spectators. Athletes who perform at their best report that they focus only on things that are under their control, and information that is relevant to the task at hand. A testimonial to the value of focus came from the British Open Champion golfer 2010 Daren Clarke. His career-best round of 60 in the 1999 European Open championship, coincided with a deliberate and sustained effort on his part to focus on only one shot at a time. Shane Lowry (Ireland) is the British Open Champion golfer 2019. He has devoted his career to golf and proves that with dedication, practise, sustained focused attention and skill you can achieve your dreams.

*'The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer.'*

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

### **State of flow**

To become the best they can be, athletes must continually challenge themselves by stretching their capabilities, going outside their comfort zone, and overcoming obstacles and doubts. They often describe the process of achieving total focus as being in the zone, or in a state of flow – a trance-like state in which time seems to slow down, or even stand still, and where they are totally absorbed by and unaware of anything else but the task at hand.

Religious mystics, such as monks and nuns, describe the flow state as being in 'ecstasy' while artists and musicians describe it as 'aesthetic rapture.' At a more mundane level, the rest of us can experience flow while working on an intensely interesting project, dancing, playing bridge, playing chess, conversing with a close friend, writing an article, or even reading a compelling and absorbing book.

Just like a sunbeam, flow is a source of mental energy that focuses concentration. Like most things it can be used constructively or destructively. Teenagers arrested for speeding, and others for brawling, robbery or burglary, will justify their misdeeds for the intense adrenaline flow and feeling of elation they experience while involved in their misconduct. Shoplifters often justify what they do due to the same phenomenon. Flow is the state as shown on the following graph in-between anxiety, frustration and fear of failure and boredom, routine and loss of interest. The task is challenging but not too difficult and is within your skill set.

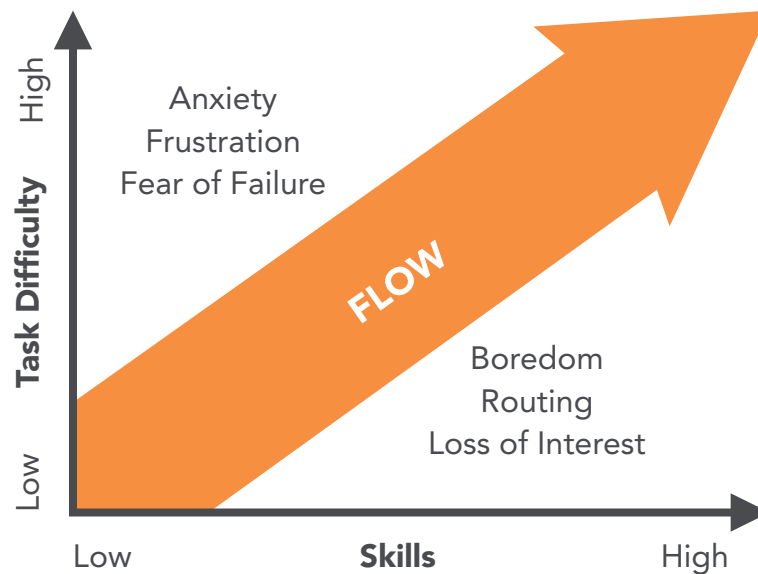
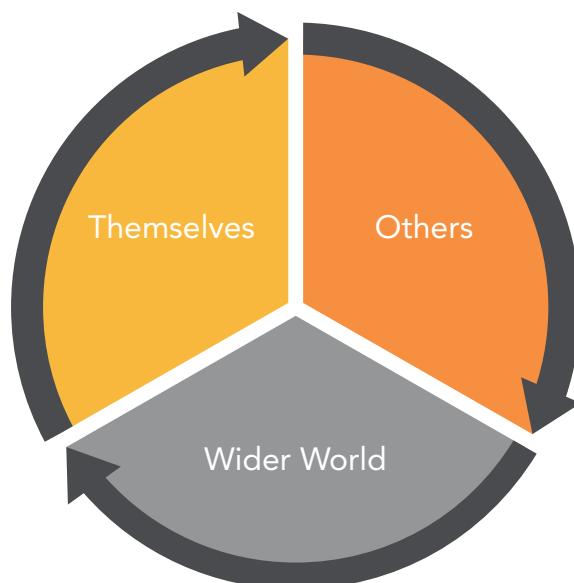


Fig .1.1 Flow

## 1.2 THE FOCUSED LEADER

According to Daniel Goleman, good leaders need to have the ability to focus in three ways:

- *On ourselves.* This includes self-awareness, being authentic and having good cognitive control. Without introspection and reflection, sound feedback would not be considered, and therefore, likely to be detrimental to our career and professional work.
- *On others.* This includes cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern. The ability to pay interested attention to other people is vital to success in all professions including law, accountancy, architecture, management, and medicine.
- *And on the wider world.* Leaders with a fuller understanding of how they focus on the wider world can improve their ability to devise strategy, plan, and budget, innovate, and manage organisations.



**Fig. 1.2** The Focused Leader

*Focusing on ourselves.* Emotional intelligence begins with self-awareness – the power of introspection to connect with their authentic inner selves to enable them to make better decisions. They must also trust their intuition or gut feelings, and not to ignore something that ‘feels right or wrong.’ British researchers with 118 professional traders and 10 senior managers at four City of London Banks made the following findings. The most successful traders, who made about £500,000, were neither the ones who relied entirely on analytics, nor the ones who just went with their intuition. They focused on a full range of emotions, which they used to judge the value of their intuition. When they suffered losses, they acknowledged their anxiety, became more cautious, and took fewer risks. The least successful traders, who earned about £100,000, tended to ignore their anxiety, and keep going with their intuition. Because they failed to heed a wider array of internal signals, they were misled.

Being authentic means paying attention to what others think of you, particularly people whose opinions you esteem, and who will give you candid feedback. This is important feedback to get so that you know how others perceive you. Cognitive control is the scientific term for putting one’s attention where one wants it, and keeping it there rather than mind wandering. Good cognitive control can be seen in people who stay calm in a crisis, don’t get rattled or agitated, and recover quickly from a debacle or defeat.

*Focusing on others.* Executives who can effectively focus on others are easy to recognise. They are able to find common ground, have opinions that are respected by others, and with whom other people want to work. They emerge as natural leaders regardless of organisational status or social rank. They have plenty of empathy for others which reveals itself in what is known as the empathy triad:

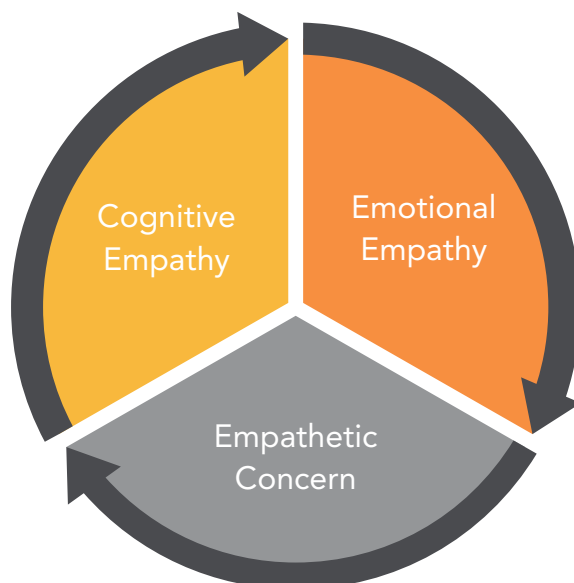


Fig. 1.3 Empathy Triad

1. *Cognitive empathy* – the ability to understand another person’s perspective or point of view. This is a skill which enables leaders to explain themselves to others in meaningful ways which helps get the optimum performance from their staff. It is aided substantially by an enhanced curiosity about how other people think and feel.
2. *Emotional empathy* – the ability to feel what someone else feels – they literally can feel other people’s pain. One expert maintains to possess this ability you need to understand your own feelings to really understand the feelings of others. To do this adequately you need to be able to read the body language of others in their voice, face, eyes, expressions, and other external signs of emotion.
3. *Empathetic concern* – the ability to sense not just how people feel but what they need from you. Research suggests that as people rise in the organisational hierarchy, their ability to maintain interpersonal relationships suffer. Empathetic concern requires us to manage our personal distress without numbing ourselves to the pain of others. Getting the right mix is important. Those whose empathetic feelings become too strong may suffer themselves by experiencing the pain of others. In the caring professions such as nursing, this can lead to compassion fatigue. In the case of executives, it can create distracting feelings of anxiety about people and circumstances that are beyond anyone’s control. But those who protect themselves by deadening their feelings may lose touch with empathy.

People who lack social sensitivity are easy to identify by others. They are the clueless among us and often say the most inappropriate insensitive things at the wrong time. An example is the CFO who is technically competent but bullies some people. He criticises rather than praises. He may freeze out others, and play favourites. However, when you point out this,

he shifts the blame, gets angry, or thinks that you're the problem. He is utterly unaware of his emotional shortcomings. On the other hand, social sensitivity appears to be related to cognitive empathy. These types of executives excel at overseas assignments, because they quickly pick up implicit norms, and learn the unique and subtle ways of a new culture. People who excel at organisational influence and politics can not only sense the power brokers, but also name the people whose opinions matter, and so focus on persuading those influential people who will persuade others.

*Focusing on the wider world.* Leaders with a strong outward focus are good listeners and good questioners. They can weed out distractions, and allow their minds to roam widely, free of misconceptions. They are visionaries who can sense the external consequences of local decisions, and how the choice made today will play out in the future. They are able to bring seemingly unrelated data together to inform their decisions. Strategy has two main elements: exploitation of your current advantage, and exploration of new ones. Exploitation requires concentration on the job at hand, whereas exploration demands awareness to roam widely and exploit new possibilities.

### 1.3 THE FLIPSIDE TO FOCUS - DISTRACTION

Distractions can be neatly categorised into two types: internal and external.



Fig. 3 Types of Distractions

Distractions prevent focus. Internal distractions tend to be psychological and emotional, such as thoughts in your head demanding immediate attention, feelings, doubts, daydreaming or absentmindedness, and physical sensations, such as pain, restlessness, or fatigue, which impedes our efforts to concentrate on the job in hand. You can control your thoughts and attitudes. You may not like what some people say about you, but it is a choice and yours alone if you decide to be annoyed, angry or ruminate on it. You could just ignore it and get on with your life. You can control your own mind, unlike the opinions or attitudes that other people have towards you.

### **Internal distractions**

We are all subject to the trials and tribulations, frustrations, and ups and downs of life on a daily basis. The difference between successful and non-successful people is how they react and deal with such events. It is important to remain positive. See setbacks in a positive light as challenges to be overcome and mistakes as learning opportunities. Internal distractions can also include a negative attitude such as a belief that you are unable to focus attention. This is counterproductive. If you've made up your mind that you can't do something, it is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and thus inevitable that it will happen.

A graphic example of a very costly internal distraction happened to golfer Doug Sanders. He missed a put of less than three feet which would have earned him victory at the 1970 British Open Championship, in St. Andrews, Scotland. Sanders had a lapse of concentration when his mind got distracted by thinking ahead about his victory speech, instead of focussing solely on the here and now – the task at hand. Similarly, Sonia O'Sullivan, the Irish 2000 Olympic silver medallist in the 5,000 metres event in Sydney, allowed her focus to slip in the 10,000 metres race. According to her interview after the event, the thought of the medal she had already won prevented her from focusing totally on the 10,000 metres race, and may have cost her a medal.

### **External distraction**

External distractions include daily hassles, environmental noises, the daily interruptions of phone calls, emails, text and tweets, and laptops demanding urgent attention. Unlike today, when I was growing up in Ireland in the 1950s there were very few distractions. Television hadn't arrived yet, and only the wealthy could afford private telephones. Our main sources of entertainment were reading, stories by the fireside, playing card games, board games, draughts and listening to the radio. Personal computers, computer games, mobile phones, and the internet were still in the distant unknown future.

Distractions interrupt your momentum, and it may take ten to twenty minutes or more to get your mind back on track again. In the work environment, people spend about a third of their time dealing with unplanned interruptions. In relation to environmental noises, a camera click is reputed to have interrupted and adversely affected Tiger Woods focus and performance in the 2002 American Express World Championship, in Mount Juliet, Ireland.

In relation to mobile phones, users are often oblivious to the fact that phone interruptions disrupt their line of thought, and ruin the rapport created in a conversation, by showing a lack of consideration, respect, and empathy to the other person. With regard to texts and tweets; a more disciplined approach, such as allocating special times during the day to deal with them, would eliminate this constant and intrusive source of distraction, while at the same time increasing your personal productivity. Email is probably one of the biggest distractions and time-wasters in modern life. This can also be chunked and dealt with at the end of the day.

Browsing the internet and texting during meetings, rather than focused attention to work tasks, is a major source of distraction, increased risk, and mistakes at work. We can't study, listen, converse with others, work and play when our attention is divided. Matt Richtel, in his book, *As Doctors Use More Devices: Potential for Distraction Grows* highlights cases such as a neurosurgeon making personal calls during an operation, a nurse checking airfares during surgery, and a poll showing half of technicians running bypass machines had admitted texting during a procedure. It's no wonder that hospitals have cases brought against them for inefficiency, carelessness, medical negligence, and malpractice. Laptops can also be a source of distraction in college. Laptop usage in class has been associated with poor learning outcomes, and students reporting feeling distracted by their own screen as well as their neighbours. Some students browse online during lectures. At meetings, it is common to see people checking screens, texting and emailing while someone is talking or making a presentation. Apart from anything else this is thoughtless, inconsiderate and unmannerly. Unless we time manage these interruptions effectively, they will take over our lives, disrupt our plans, and we may finish up not achieving anything worthwhile.



## 1.4 DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

The following will help you deal with distractions:



Fig. 1.4 Dealing with Distractions

- *Stay positive and in control.* A positive attitude will help you focus and protect you from distractions and keep you in control.
- *Look for the benefits in each situation.* In life, rather than focusing on the downside within every setback, look for opportunities for personal growth and advancement.
- *Self-talk.* Remind yourself that distractions do not have to absorb you. You can exercise control over your thoughts, and so you can refuse to be obsessed by them. You have the free will to change them, if you wish to do so, and substitute positive for negative thoughts. Self-talk is used extensively as a motivational device in business, athletics and team sports.
- *Always have a plan B.* Have contingency plans in place to deal with the unexpected, so that you are mentally and physically prepared for the unlikely. If you mentally and physically rehearse on how to handle the unexpected, you are less likely to get stressed on the day when you have to cope with them. Research shows that groups exposed to distractions during practice sessions do better than those who are not exposed or prepared for such situations.

## 1.5 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE FOCUS

Psychologists have identified five principles of effective concentration. The acronym **FLASH** will help you easily recall the five principles:



Fig. 1.5 Principles of Effective Focus

1. ***Focused attention.*** The word ‘attention’ comes from the Latin *attendere*, meaning ‘to reach toward.’ Focus requires mental effort and absolute sustained focused attention. You must intentionally plan and prepare to focus, rather than hope it will happen by chance. We have all experienced daydreaming or mind wandering when doing research, reading or studying. This problem can be overcome by writing down beforehand two or three specific questions you want answered, before you start reading a non-fiction book, or studying a textbook or notes. This will programme the mind in advance for what you want to find out and thus what is to come. This can be achieved by using learning maps.
2. ***Look for control.*** This is about mental discipline. Being in control means you are on top of the game. You lose concentration when focused on irrelevant matters or factors outside your control. These could be future or past events not relevant to the task at hand. Schoolchildren in the USA when confronted by an upsetting problem are told to use the following technique to handle it simply and successfully. They are told to think of a traffic signal. The red light means stop, calm down, and think before you act. The yellow light means slow down and think of several possible solutions. The green light means try out a plan, and see how it works. Thinking in these terms allows the children to move away from emotional impulses to logically driven deliberate behaviour and systematic problem-solving.



Fig. 1.6 The traffic light technique

3. *Anxiety.* You are anxious or worried that your focus will be disrupted or interrupted by negative thoughts and evaluations. Anxiety disturbs working memory with unnecessary worries disrupting and impairing concentration. Anxiety may induce a negative psychological state, triggered off by obsessive intrusive thoughts, doubts, uncertainties and worries, about imagined personal weaknesses, anticipated problems which may never happen, and potential threats in the environment.
4. *Specific and relevant.* You are focused when you concentrate on actions that are specific, attainable and relevant, and under your control. Your mind is focused optimally when there is no difference between what you are thinking, and what you are doing. This means that your mind is cleared of irrelevant obtrusive thoughts, and the focus is centred only on what is important and feasible at that specific moment.
5. *Have only one thought at a time.* You can only consciously focus on one thought at a time. Our short-term memory or working memory is limited to about seven plus or minus two items at a time. This means that multitasking is a major source of distraction despite claims to the contrary.

## 1.6 BENEFITS OF FOCUS – MINDFULNESS

*‘What do I mean by concentration? I mean focusing totally on the business at hand and commanding your body to do exactly what you want it to do’.*

– Arnold Palmer

Knowing the benefits of focused attention will help you concentrate with more strength, determination and effectiveness. It will also give you a reason and motivation to acquire the skills of focus. Focus is essential for anybody who wants to be a high achiever, and succeed in life.

Mindfulness will improve your focus, and help you live in the present moment, and get rid of distractions. It doesn't mean you live for the moment. Rather it means that you live the moment. Mindfulness can best be described as an awareness of our inner and outer worlds, including thoughts, emotions, sensations, actions, feelings, sounds, or surroundings as they exist at any given moment. Briefly, it can be described as the ability to observe your brain in action. It is easy to forget that we exist only in the present moment, with no direct experience of either the past or future.

### How to become more mindful

The following will help you become more mindful. Just think of the acronym **SLIM**:

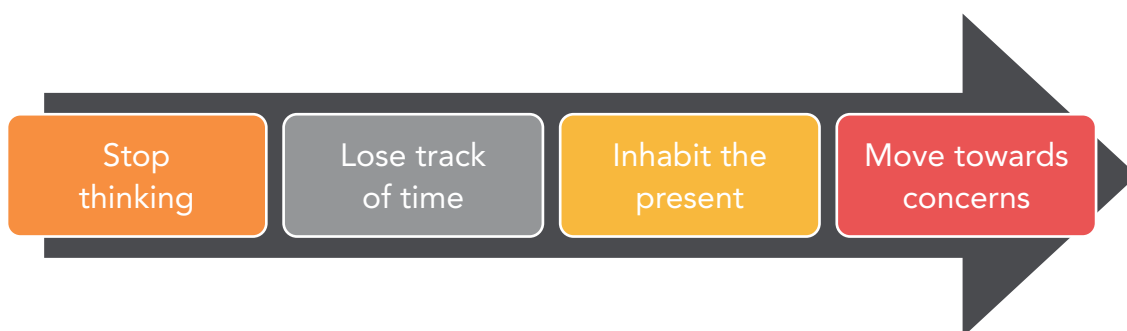


Fig. 1.7 Benefits of Focus

- *Stop thinking about your performance to improve it.* Thinking intensely about what you're doing actually makes you worse. When dancing if you think you have two left feet you are likely to fall over yourself. When driving you don't need to consciously think about the clutch, accelerator and brakes. These are automatic responses enabling you to free your mind on the traffic conditions ahead of you. Focus more on what's going on around you, rather than the mental self-obsessed

derogatory undermining chatter going on in your mind. This will help you become less self-conscious, and stop you from self-evaluation and self-criticism. You are part of the human family rather than an isolated individual. Learn to focus on other people rather than yourself.

- *Lose track of time by becoming totally absorbed in what you are doing.* This is known as flow where concentration is so focused that you forget about the passage of time and are only aware of the here and now. Flow results in increased happiness and job satisfaction. To reach the state of flow you need to set a goal that is challenging, outside your comfort zone, interesting, and doable, and so not impossible to achieve. The challenge will motivate you, but if it is too difficult you will get disheartened and give up. The task should be in line with your capabilities, so that you do not feel unduly stressed, while at the same time not so easy that you get disinterested and bored. You should get direct and immediate feedback, so that you can adjust your behaviour and learn from your mistakes.
- *Inhabit the present moment in order to avoid worrying about the future.* Mindfulness is where your attention is geared to the present moment. Often, we are so engaged with thoughts about the future and the past that we forget to enjoy what we are experiencing right now. Relish or savour what you're doing at the present moment, such as breathing fresh air while walking in the countryside, sipping a cup of coffee, tasting your food, conversing with a friend, enjoying a pastry or taking a shower. If you live in the moment you are more likely to be happy, as negative thoughts usually concern future or past events. Mindfulness decreases ego so that you are less likely to feel slights to your self-esteem, and more likely to accept things at face value. It also makes people feel more connected and centred or empathic towards each other, and thus improves relationships.
- *Move towards what is bothering you.* It is better to accept a problem and deal with it, rather than ignore and run away from it. We naturally try to resist unpleasant thoughts, feelings and sensations. When we are heartbroken, maybe because of a failed relationship, we resist our feelings of heartbreak. As we get older, we try to recapture our youth, rather than growing old gracefully. An example of this mid-life crisis phenomenon is where people often do silly things, such as dressing inappropriately for their age, to make them feel young again. However, in many cases, negative feelings can't be avoided and trying to do so only magnifies the pain. For example, if you're sad, you can accept the feeling, label it as sadness, put it aside, and then direct your attention to something else.

You can dispassionately observe your thoughts, perceptions, and emotions go through the mind without getting involved and obsessed with them. Thoughts are just thoughts; you don't have to believe them or do what they suggest.

*'Mindfulness can be summed up in two words; pay attention. Once you notice what you're doing, you have the power to change it'.*

– Michelle Burford

## 1.7 OTHER BENEFITS OF FOCUS

The acronym **APSIS** will help you remember the other benefits of focus:



Fig. 7 Other Benefits of Focus

- *Accomplish goals.* Good focus will help you stay on course, complete a task on time, and achieve your goals. This will give you motivation and job satisfaction, and you could impress the boss! Remember, it is important to enjoy the process of getting there, so celebrate the completion of interim stages on the journey to your goals as well. Celebration keeps you happy and motivated.
- *Productivity.* Focus is the key to productivity. Concentrated focused attention helps you get things done more efficiently and effectively, with less mistakes, and savings in time. At work you should concentrate solely on getting one task done at a time rather than jumping purposelessly, like someone with a grasshopper mind, from one thing to another.

- ***Studying.*** Good focus will help you improve concentration and retain more in formal studies or at work. This will help you to study more effectively by learning and remembering more in less time and pass your exams. This will boost your career and signal you out as an ambitious person who knows what they want and who wants to succeed in life.
- ***Inventions and works of art.*** Focus has its uses as meticulous attention to detail is required in many fields such as accountancy, finance, economics, law, quality control, computer programming, science, engineering, architecture, drawing and artistic endeavour. We would not have electric light, and the information and communications technology revolution which followed, if great scientists like Edison had not been so innovative, focused, dedicated, determined, and persistent in their work. Similarly, we would not have penicillin, and the medical revolution which followed, if Fleming had not noticed the mould in a dish in his laboratory in 1928, and had the curiosity and tenacity to pursue it rather than ignore it. Great poets such as John Milton, W.B Yeats, and Robert Frost would not have spent months perfecting their poetry, often spending weeks searching for the most expressive and appropriate word, if they hadn't exceptional powers of patience, concentration and attention to detail. Great artists, musicians, sculptors, and architects would not have produced masterpieces if they hadn't spent weeks and weeks perfecting the tiniest detail of their paintings, music, sculptors, and architectural designs.

*'One reason so few of us achieve what we truly want is that we never direct our focus; we never concentrate our power. Most people dabble their way through life, never deciding to master anything in particular'.*

– Anthony Robbins

## 1.8 BLOCKS TO FOCUS - MENTAL

One of the ways of improving our powers of concentration is to become aware of the blocks to focus on, such as mental and physical so as to take action to counteract them. Some of these include:

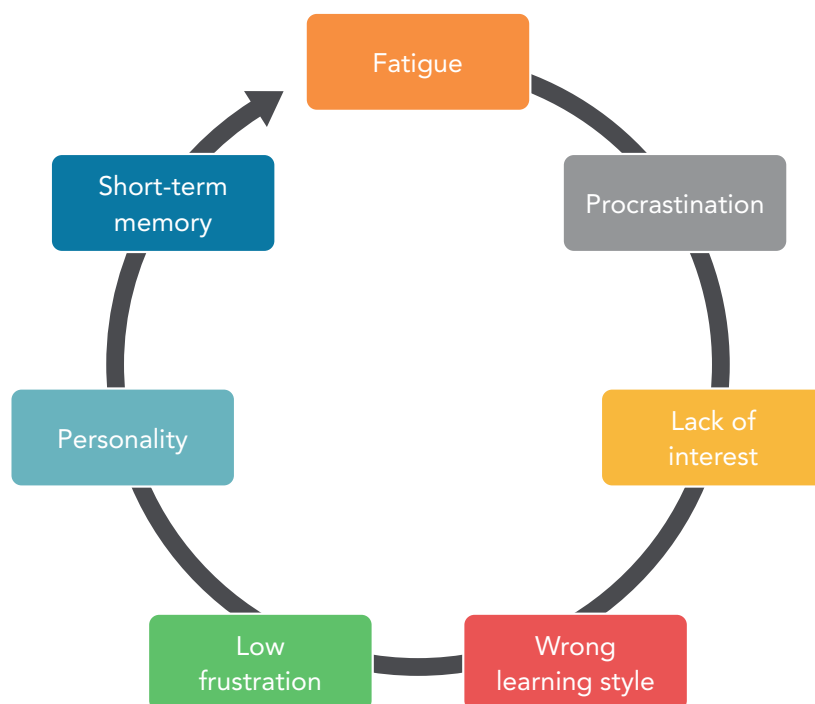


Fig. 1.9 Blocks to Focus – Mental

- Fatigue, stress, anxiety, or poor health.* It is widely known in psychology that anxiety often leads to depression, impairs attention, and adversely affects performance and productivity. If you are in poor health and in pain, the associated worry, anxiety, and discomfort is likely to negatively affect your physical and emotional energy levels and powers of focus. In fact, you may be so consumed with the pain that you are unable to think of anything else except health-related issues. If you are working all the time or studying for long periods, without taking the opportunity to take breaks for rest, restoration and recreation, it is likely that you will become mentally and physically exhausted. For example, if studying, you should take breaks every 30 minutes or so. It is essential that you take breaks throughout the day to recharge your batteries. Small breaks where you do some physical exercises are fine preferably in the fresh air. Sitting down for long periods of time is not good for you. Your body is made for movement. Obviously, if you are tired all the time for no apparent reason, you should consult your medical practitioner. It is well known that depressed people obsess unnecessarily about their worries, and find it difficult to concentrate.



- *Procrastination.* This means continually postponing tasks that you should be attending to right now. Human nature encourages us to do the enjoyable and pleasant tasks first, rather than the difficult and distasteful but critical and relevant tasks, which are postponed. Procrastination diverts you from high priority tasks, with the delusion that you will be able to tackle the task more effectively tomorrow, or that the sun will be brighter, things will be better, and you will be happier. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has facilitated the process of procrastination because of the variety of engaging distractions and entertainments available 24/7, such as television, mobile phones, emails, and the social internet networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Psychologists maintain that the real elephant in the room is a low tolerance for frustration. You avoid the task because of a negative perception, and a feeling that you can dodge the discomfort through postponement and diversion.
- *Lack of interest.* If you are inherently interested in something you will find it absorbing, motivating, effortless, and a pleasure to do it. On the other hand, if you are disinterested in something you will find it a chore, difficult to focus on, and will look for any excuse for postponing and not doing it. Thus, interest and motivation are strongly interlinked. An intense focus on specific interests or goals induces a flow state, which in turn elicits feelings of achievement, happiness and well-being.
- *Inappropriate learning style.* There are three basic learning styles; visual, audial and tactile, or in more down to earth terms; seeing, hearing and doing. Most people have a preference for one style over another, although we all use a combination of styles from time to time. Some people like to read books and study notes. Some like to learn from demonstrations, and engage in hobbies giving them hands-on practise. Some like to listen to CDs and lectures, while others like to view DVDs and look at diagrams and pictures. Use the learning style that you feel most productive and comfortable with.
- *Low frustration tolerance.* Some people have grasshopper minds, jumping from one thing to another often-craving constant excitement and stimulation. They are unable to practise the discipline of *delayed gratification*, or the ability to do without in the short-term so as to reap the benefit in the long-term. This is part of the instant gratification and spend mentality on which modern consumerism is built. Instead learn to avoid acting in impulsive thoughtless ways.

- *Personality.* People with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have exceedingly short attention spans, and are easily distracted and restless. If you find yourself constantly late, disorganised, anxious, forgetful, and overwhelmed by your responsibilities, you may have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. ADHD affects many adults, and its wide variety of frustrating symptoms can hinder everything from your relationships to your career. It is surprising the number of people who have ADHD and are unaware of it. The good news is that once properly diagnosed and treated ADHD can be controlled and successfully dealt with. Learn to manage the symptoms of adult ADHD, turn your weaknesses into strengths to begin succeeding on your own terms, leading productive and satisfying lives.
- *Short-term memory.* Our short-term memory can only hold between 5 and 9 or even less items at a time. This means that when it comes to focus that we only have a limited amount of working space in our memory. Sometimes, if you can't remember something it means that you weren't paying attention in the first place. Thus, if we want to concentrate effectively, we must learn to focus on relevant cues. For example, it has been found that sprinters trained to use race plans with interim times for stages are more motivated and run faster than those without this training.

## 1.9 BLOCKS TO FOCUS - PHYSICAL

The following are some of the physical blocks to focus. The acronym **MAUL** will help you remember the physical blocks to focus.

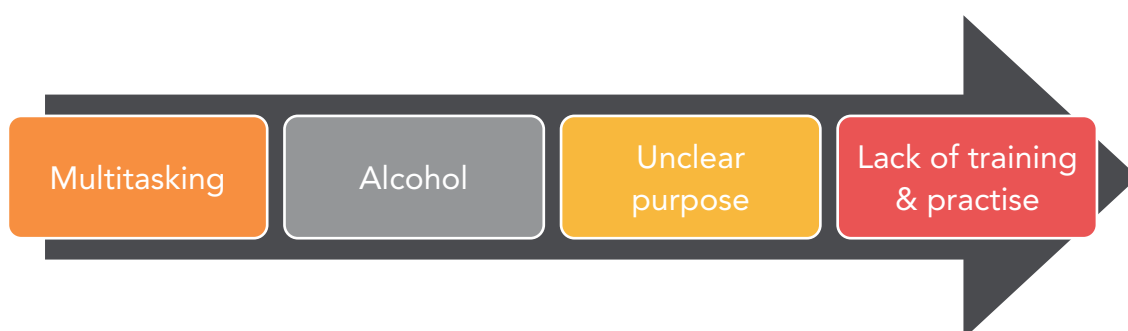


Fig. 1.10 Blocks to Focus - Physical

- **Multitasking.** Despite conventional wisdom, multitasking slows you down, and the divided attention involved facilitates distraction and mistakes. Technically, we can multitask – listen to the radio and do the house chores at the same time or even carry on a conversation while driving at the same time. However, the mind can only completely focus and concentrate on one thing or thought at a time. Research at Stanford University compared the effectiveness of multitaskers with non-multitaskers. It found that multitaskers performed poorly at recognising changes in their environment, and filtering out irrelevant information. They are more likely to miss important information and cues, and less likely to retain information in working memory, which impairs problem-solving, decision-making and creativity. Moreover, the multitaskers took longer to switch between different tasks, and were less efficient at juggling problems. Switching cost is the disruption in performance experienced when we switch our focus from one thing to another. One study, published in the International Journal of Information Management in 2003, found that the typical person checks email every 5 minutes and that, on average, it takes 64 seconds to resume the previous task after checking email. This suggests that our attention span is finite. When you multitask, you prioritize the execution of one task at the expense of another. With routine tasks you may not notice any fall off in performance. However, when a task involves significant brain power, it's impossible to sustain both at high levels of performance. Multitasking is almost always less efficient, and more error-prone than performing the same task alone. This is why it is illegal to use a mobile phone when driving – it is unsafe because your attention is divided and may cause accidents. According to the World Economic Forum multitasking has the following effects:



Fig. 1.11 Effects of multitasking – World Economic Forum

- **Alcohol.** As anyone who has tried to study or write after taking alcohol knows; alcohol adversely affects concentration making it almost impossible to think logically, stay focused, and study and work effectively. Before the breathalyser, this is why police asked drivers, thought to be intoxicated, to walk a straight line. In any event, you should never drive after drinking. Also, excessive drinking

kills off valuable brain cells, diminishing future capacity to focus and learn effectively. In addition, alcohol may cause, among other things, cancer, heart disease, lung disease, liver damage and chronic pancreatitis. Drinking can be a happy social experience, but consuming large amounts of alcohol over a long period may lead to serious health complications.

- *Unclear purpose or plan.* A goal provides motivation and a focal point for your concentration, while a plan provides a systematic route for its accomplishment. Pursuing excellence in any field of human endeavor requires you to focus on the goal you want to achieve and the route you need to take to do so. As the saying goes: 'If you don't know where you're going, you're liable to finish up somewhere else' and sometimes in a place that you really don't want to be.
- *Lack of training and practise.* Concentrated, focused attention on one subject at a time is not a natural capacity that we are born with. Like any other skill it must be diligently learned, practised, acquired, maintained, and nurtured. This will take persistent effort over 20 days until it becomes an automatic unconscious habit. The brain changes in line with where you place your attention. So, if you practise focus a part of your brain will become specially activated to do so. It is better to acquire the good habit of focus, rather than the bad habit of inattention, distraction and mind wandering. Replacing bad habits of focus with good habits involves four states: *recognition, replacement, repetition, and retention*. First recognize your bad habits and replace them with good habits. Then repeat this process until the good habits are firmly retained and the bad ones replaced. As bad habits are created over a considerable period of time, it will take a similar period of time to replace them with good habits.

*'I never could have done what I have done without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one subject at a time'.*

– Charles Dickens

## 1.10 CONSEQUENCES OF POOR FOCUS



Fig. 1.12 Poor Focus

You cannot achieve anything worthwhile in life without exercising your powers of concentrated focused attention. I couldn't write this book if I hadn't the ability to plan, research, think, reflect and focus. When writing I focus on one chapter at a time. Within chapters, I concentrate on perfecting each section. Sections should follow on logically from each other. Within sections I focus on perfecting each paragraph, and making sure that paragraphs are pertinent, and in line with the theme of the section, and in a logical sequence. Within each paragraph I focus on getting each sentence right. I try to make each sentence as reader friendly as possible. In each sentence, I try to choose the most suitable words in order to get my meaning across clearly and concisely.

I couldn't have successfully studied and passed examinations for degrees and professional qualifications without the ability to focus my concentration for long periods of time sustained over many years. I couldn't surf the net, drive long distances, and find my way around, or hold my own in a conversation, without the ability to focus. Indeed, I couldn't even enjoy a movie, book or play, visit a museum or art gallery, and get a job done satisfactorily without being able to focus. A lack of focus has caused sports people to lose tournaments and games, with dire personal, reputational, career and financial consequences.

### **Car and plane accidents caused by a lack of concentration**

Many mistakes and accidents are caused by inattention and lack of concentration. Lapses are a major cause of car accidents. As previously indicated, distractions can be classified into two types: - physical and mental. Physical distractions include eating, drinking, conversing, and fiddling with the radio and CD player while driving. A few years ago, I witnessed an accident where a young lady driver crashed into a parked car. She leaned down to get her

handbag while driving, and momentarily lost control of the car causing considerable damage to her own and the parked car. About 10 years ago, on a stretch of road on the way into the picturesque village of Adare in Co. Limerick (Ireland) I was rear-ended. The young man who did the damage said he was mind wandering and daydreaming at the time. He had just come off a motorway onto a narrower stretch of road and absentmindedly failed to adjust his speed to the new driving conditions.

A major physical distractor is using the mobile phone while driving. Studies indicate that driving, while using the mobile phone, shows similar impairment as motorists who drink-drive over the limit. Some studies show that a person using a mobile phone is 40 per cent more likely to crash, while those texting while driving are 60 times more likely to crash. Consequently, the use of mobile phones while driving is recognised as dangerous and has thus been banned in many jurisdictions throughout the world.

Mental distractions include loss of focus due to work worries or family concerns, children fighting or arguing in the back seat of the car, or inattention created when a driver gets angry over the perceived dangerous driving of other drivers. Tempers flare causing road rage and drivers may be tempted to engage in more aggressive and dangerous driving. Another is when a driver is running late, breaks the speed limit, and engages in inappropriate and dangerous manoeuvres to make up for loss of time.

Similarly, aeroplane accidents are sometimes caused by a lack of focus and teamwork in the cockpit. Murphy's Aviation Law dictates that pilots get distracted at the most inopportune time. For example, a busy pilot taxiing his plane along several rows of aircraft reached down for his checklist, momentarily interrupting his line of sight. During this momentary distraction, he struck three other aircraft causing considerable damage and cost. Thankfully, nobody was injured except the pride of the pilot. On the farm, on construction sites, in factories and in the workplace, accidents lead to loss of productivity, injuries and even deaths. Health and safety law are in place attempting to prevent accidents from happening.

### **Reflection and sustained focused attention**

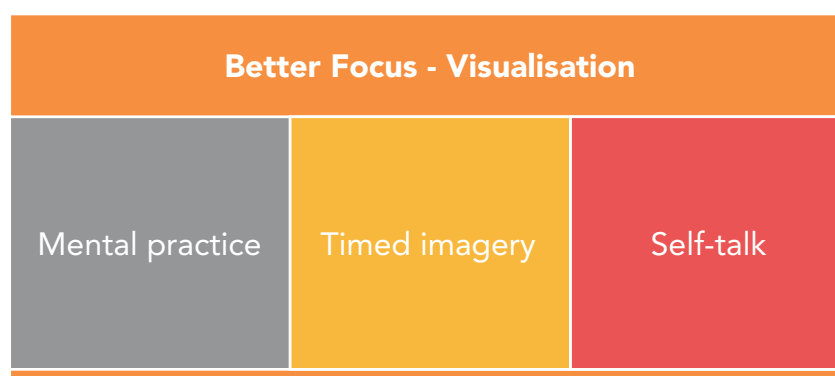
People who lack focus are unable to reflect and learn from past mistakes, and find it difficult to visualise and plan for the future. Reflection is possibly our greatest source of learning. People should learn how to organise their time, so that they can actually spend some time thinking, reflecting and planning. We need time to think on how we could do things better and work more carefully, safely and effectively. Sustained focused attention is needed for success in any walk of life. Even the greatest person would not achieve much if they lacked focus, reflection and effort.

Companies that diversify too much away from their core business often end up bankrupt. Those who concentrate on what they are really good at doing, or stick to the knitting, are usually more successful. The graveyards of business are full to capacity with the corpses of those companies who failed to abide by this principle by diversifying too widely.

*'Great entrepreneurs focus intensely on an opportunity where others see nothing. This focus and intensity will help to eliminate wasted effort and distractions. Most companies die from indigestion rather than starvation, i.e. companies suffer from doing too many things at the same time rather than doing too few things very well.'*

– Naveen Jain

## 1.11 BETTER FOCUS – VISUALISATION



**Fig. 1.13** Better Focus - Visualisation

- *Mental practise or visualisation.* Mentally practise what you want to do in your mind's eye before actually doing it. When you do it your attention will be more focused and intense. Imagery will help you prepare in advance for hypothetical scenarios, thereby ensuring that you won't be distracted by unexpected events.



Visualisation can help you focus on what's relevant in a particular situation. Sports people often practise their moves in their minds before they actually do them on the course, pitch or on the track. Using visualisation, a golfer can decide where the ball is going to land before he strikes it. He may evoke a technicolour image of its flight, and a mental and physical expectation of how it will feel to send it flying to its target. He is using the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, where conscious plans are made to send instructions to the more primitive cerebellum and motor cortex, which automatically control the muscles.

- *Timed imagery.* Some of the best athletes in the world have even put a stopwatch on their imagery to ensure their timing and pacing is exactly what they want. For example, Alwyn Morris, with his partner Hugh Fisher, won gold and bronze medals in canoeing at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. They claim to have used timed imagery when preparing for the event. Similarly, Alex Bautmann, double gold medallist in swimming, at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, and world record holder, did timed imagery. In more recent years, Aaron Rodgers, the famous American quarterback for the Green Bay Packers, and AP Male Athlete of the year 2011, attributes his success to the power of visualisation. To quote from Rogers: 'a lot of those plays I made in the game, I had thought about. As I lay on the couch, I visualised making them.' Similarly, a business person can practise the pacing and timing of their presentation in their head before doing it. Remember, mental rehearsal is almost as effective as actual practise.
- *Self-talk, trigger words and actions.* Psychologists recommend that trigger words should be clear, concise, concrete, vivid, and phrased positively, to yield maximum results. Self-talk and trigger words are used by athletes such as golfers and tennis players, and is said to enhance focus. Trigger words, which are a fast-track meditation technique, are a signal to the brain that attention must shift to a state of present focus. This trigger can be anything like tugging on your shirt, putting your thumb and forefinger together, or scratching your nose. Tennis players often use trigger words such as 'split' and 'turn' which they claim leads to improved performance, and enhanced concentration on the court. Surveys of athletes report that they use trigger words for staying focused. For example, Serena Williams, the world-renowned tennis player, and former world number one, uses trigger words to help her concentrate effectively while on court.



## 1.12 BETTER FOCUS - TECHNIQUES

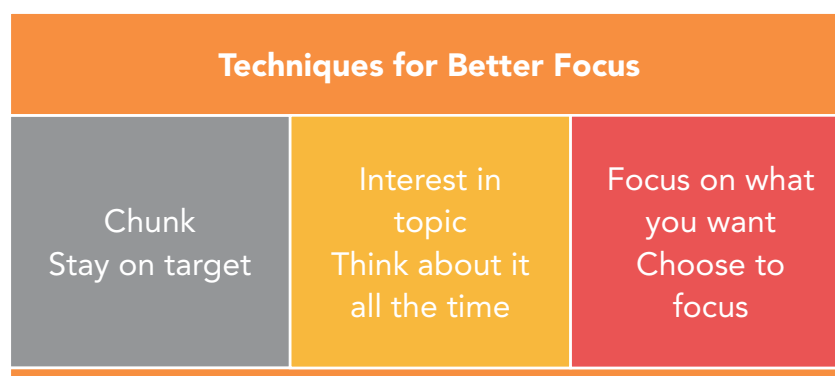


Fig. 13 Techniques for Better Focus

- *Chunking or divide and conquer.* Focus on one step at a time. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time! This will keep the task manageable, retain your interest, and keep you focused and motivated. For example, when writing a report, article or term paper you could start with ‘create an outline.’ Furthermore, you can improve short-term memory by grouping long numbers or long lists of data into smaller chunks. This is a well-known technique for remembering anything including telephone numbers.
- *Stay on target.* Avoid distractions such as gossiping with colleagues, interrupting yourself continuously to attend to email, aimlessly surfing the internet, using Facebook or YouTube while at work, and making phone calls individually rather than chunking them together in the afternoon. Organise your time by designating a certain time of the day for looking at emails and attending to phone calls.
- *It is easy to focus on a subject that you are passionately interested in.* Enthusiasm and interest create motivation and job satisfaction. Marie Curie (1867-1934) was totally dedicated to physics and went on to win two Nobel Prizes despite prejudice against women scientists at the time. From 1922 she concentrated on finding practical medical applications for her radioactivity which today is used to treat cancers. Ironically, she died in 1934 from the effects of radioactivity exposure endured over a dedicated working lifetime.
- *Think about your topic all of the time.* Andrew Willis, when recalling the degree of intense focus and determination that eventually yielded the proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem said: ‘I carried this problem around in my head basically the whole time. I would wake up with it first thing in the morning. I would be thinking about it all day, and I would be thinking about it when I went to

sleep. Without distraction I would have the same thing going around and round in my mind.’ Einstein had the same approach to problem-solving – pure dedication and focus.

- *Focus on what you want rather than on what you don’t want.* Psychologists have found that when we focus on not wanting something to happen, we are actually making it more likely to happen. For example, try not to think about a pink elephant, and see how difficult it can be! Psychologists believe that if you are told not to think about something the unwanted thought or action is exactly what happens. In one experiment with Australian Rules footballers, players became more aware of the umpires when told not to pay attention to them. Clearly, this finding raises doubts about the effectiveness of asking athletes not to worry about an important forthcoming sporting event or outcome. In fact, it is likely to be counterproductive, as telling them not to worry is likely to make them do the opposite and worry more.
- *Choose to focus.* Intentionally choose to concentrate in order to focus more effectively. You can take a horse to water but you can’t make it drink! If you really want to focus you must first choose freely to do so. Michelangelo (1475-1564), who painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican, was a renaissance sculptor, painter and architect, a man of genius comparable to the great Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo had a remarkable ability to focus his thoughts and energy on the task at hand. Often while working he would forget to attend to his personal needs. He would eat very little, would sleep on the floor beside his unfinished painting or statue, and continue to wear the same clothes until he finished his work. Newton, who came up with the Law of Gravity, had a similar degree of focus. Those who knew him said he was completely obsessed with his thoughts.

*‘Success in any endeavour requires single-minded attention to detail and total concentration.’*

– Willie Sutton

### 1.13 BETTER FOCUS – PSYCHOLOGICAL

There are four ways of doing this. Create a challenge, think in terms of benefits instead of difficulties, persevere or stick to the task, and practise thought control through mindfulness.



Fig. 1.15 Better Focus – Psychology

- *Create a challenge.* If something is too easy it kills motivation because it doesn't present a challenge and take you out of your comfort zone. Challenge has been defined as the amount of mental effort that we must exert to perform an activity. You need to create a challenge to get you out of your comfort zone, so that your capabilities will be stretched, motivation maximised, and your enthusiasm and interest engaged. It is the difficult and seemingly impossible things that really develop us, and spur us on to spectacular greater achievements.
- *Think benefits instead of difficulties.* What's in it for me! (WIIFM). Answering this question will help you create a positive attitude of mind. We are all inherently selfish and like to know how the task is likely to benefit us. More importantly, what will you lose if you don't settle down and focus on getting the task done? This might include a failed exam, a missed deadline, broken appointment, and loss of money or professional prestige. Having an emotional reason for concentration will help you focus more intensely.
- *Perseverance and focus go together.* You must focus your attention on what you need to do until you accomplish your goal. Persistent people never take their eye off the ball, and are determined to succeed, despite repeated setbacks, obstacles,

and failures. They are not afraid to make mistakes, but learn from them, never lose heart, and keep on going against all the odds. Giving up half-way through is not an option. Winners are not quitters. Abraham Lincoln is always linked to determination and perseverance in the face of adversity and difficulty. He lost eight elections before becoming President of the USA. He always refused to quit. He was capable of great physical and mental discipline. His mind and body were in perfect harmony.

- *Thought control through meditation.* Meditation means paying attention in a particular way, and is something we are all capable of doing with the right mental approach and disciplined practise. Meditation is a discipline for training the mind to develop greater calm and focus. Buddhist meditators have developed the technique of meditation over 2,500 years, and it is only in relatively recent times that the West has woken up and started to adopt the practice. Buddhists know how to control the direction and flow of their thoughts. We can do likewise if we choose to modulate our moods, regulate our emotions, focus our attention, and increase our ability to use our brain power more productively. Just paying attention to your breathing for a few minutes is a simple way of meditating. Most of us take our breathing for granted. But as an experiment, clamp your thumb and forefinger over your nose, close your mouth, and see how long it takes before this becomes very uncomfortable, and you have to stop. It doesn't take very long to realise how breathing is so important to our lives. Train your mind through meditation to control your thoughts. The mind and body are interconnected. Whereas many of us train our body to do various things we seldom train our minds. Our thoughts tend to be disorganised and scattered, jumping from one thing to another. When we try to focus our attention on one thing it tends to drift to something else, so that we find it extremely difficult to reach a state of mental calmness. Meditation is just not for reducing stress in our lives, but will help us to improve our relationships, be happy, kind, more creative, and focus our attention more intensely and effectively.

## 1.14 BETTER FOCUS – FOR STUDY

We can improve our study skills by priming our mind with questions, playing soft classical music in the background, being aware of our circadian rhythms, having targets, taking mock exams and prioritising.



Fig. 1.16 Better Focus for Studying

- *Prime your mind with questions.* This gives you a purpose and framework for reading. We learn best when seeking out answers for pertinent questions. In addition, make sure the study environment is safe, secure and non-threatening, clear from clutter, comfortable, ventilated, quiet and free from distractions, and conducive to learning. Decide whether you prefer to study on your own or in a group. You may prefer to study in the company of others. Studying with others may refresh your interest, and spark off new ideas, and see things from new perspectives. Take short breaks every half hour so as to recharge your batteries, and maintain your concentration level. Occasionally, take a short walk in the open air to refresh and reinvigorate your body and brain.
- *Music.* It has been found that background music enhances the efficiency of individuals who work with their hands. For example, in a study of surgeons it was found that background classical music increases their alertness and focus. It did not cause distraction because music and skilled manual work activates different parts of the brain. Similarly, classical background music, particularly baroque or nature sounds, aids learning and concentration in the classroom and in the workplace. Keep the music soft, so that it doesn't end up distracting

you. On the other hand, it has been found that stimulating music can be a source of distraction. More importantly, the music must be personally chosen and enjoyable. Some people find lyrics distracting. There is music specifically made to improve your concentration, commercially available (check Google for online resources). Even cows feel calmer, more stress free and relaxed when they listen to music, and hence produce more milk, according to *Modern Farmer* magazine, quoting a study conducted in 2001. They did not show improvement in milk production while listening to rap or techno songs; however, when they listened to soothing songs like *Bridge Over Troubled Water* and *Everybody Hurts*, they showed an increase of three percent in their milk production. Apparently, the music distracts them allowing them to remain calm, while facilitating the release of oxytocin, a stress reducing hormone. The magazine suggests classical music like *Concerto for Flute* and *Harp in D Major* by *Mozart*, and songs like *Perfect Day* by *Lou Reed*, to increase milk production. It seems to be a case of different strokes for different folks, as some people find any kind of music a distraction when learning.

- *Circadian rhythms.* Each of us has a unique biological clock, as regards levels of focus and tiredness, which varies throughout the day and during the week. Some of us are larks – more alert in the morning, while others are owls – more alert in the afternoon. In addition, people classified as larks tend to be introverts who are conscientious, introspective and driven; while on the other hand, owls are more often impulsive outgoing extroverts. In the morning larks have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol than do owls, which may account for their energy. That's the time when they are most productive as they have more energy in the morning. In comparison, owls' heart rate is higher in the afternoon, which perhaps is the reason they are mentally sharper and more energetic as the day goes on. In fact, focus peaks mid-afternoon. That's why lots of people schedule business tasks in the afternoon, including interviews, emails, phone calls, Skype chats, data analysis and number crunching. Teenagers and young adults tend to be owls, as any parent will testify to when they endeavour to get their offspring off to college in the morning. On the other hand, because of hormonal changes and adherence to strict early work starting and routine times, most people become larks as they get older. Determine your own biological clock, so that you can pick the appropriate time of day when it is the optimal time to study or do complex work, requiring mental energy, stamina and sustained focused attention.

- *Targets.* Have a start and finish time, as that which can be done at any time is usually not done at all. Deadlines concentrate and focus the mind. Remember Parkinson's Law, which states that work expands to fill the time available for its completion. This suggests that you will spend more time than necessary to complete a job if you haven't strict deadlines, constraints and guidelines for getting it done. *The Law of Inertia* states that a still body tends to stay stationery. On the other hand, *the Law of Momentum* states that a body in motion tends to stay in motion. Getting started and keeping up the momentum is often the most difficult part of getting any study or job done. So just do it! Get going and start it now!
- *Students can learn to focus more effectively in examinations by taking mock exams* beforehand in simulated conditions, and practising doing likely examination questions. If you are lucky enough to do the exam in the same room that you practised in you have an added advantage. It has been found that such students do better in their exams. However, there is one proviso. Despite all the preparation you put in you cannot replicate completely what will happen in a competitive situation, or dealing with the unlikely and unexpected question that pops up in the examination. Nevertheless, careful planning and anticipation is better than not being mentally and physically prepared. In addition, when studying, good posture on a comfortable chair will keep you alert and improve your focused attention.
- *Prioritise.* When studying create a 'to do list' which prioritises tasks that you need to study or do during the day. Categorise your list into 'must do,' 'should do,' and 'nice to do.' Tackle the 'must do' items first, which you can designate anchor tasks, the 'should do' items next, and the 'nice to do' items last. The anchor tasks are the mainstay that holds the rest of the day in place. This will concentrate the mind on what's important and what needs to be done on an urgent basis. In the work situation, you can use the same technique to improve your time management.

## 1.15 BETTER FOCUS – PHYSIOLOGICAL

This includes sleep and nutrition, listening, practice, emotional state, and simulation.

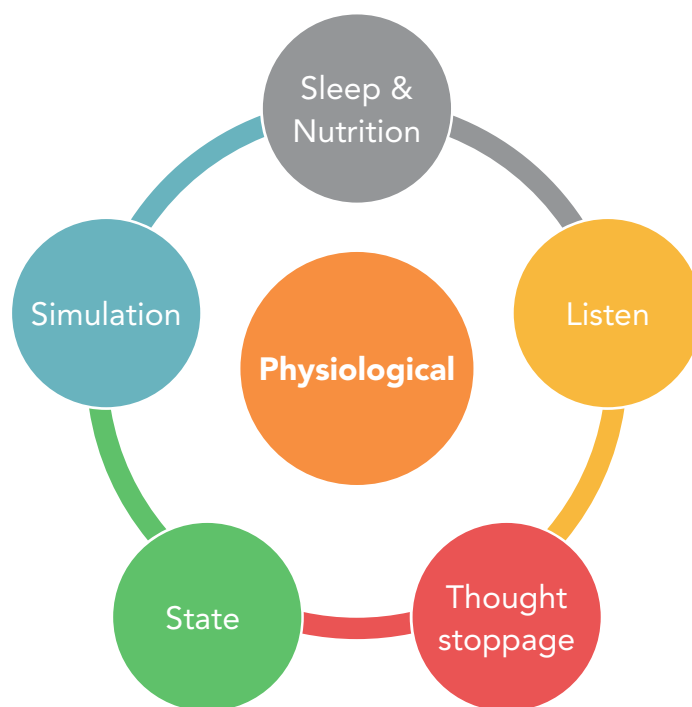


Fig. 1.17 Better Focus – Physiological

- *Sleep.* A good night's sleep will help you to focus your mind better. During sleep the brain is busy repairing itself and consolidating memories. You can't concentrate with a tired, stressed and frazzled brain. The average person needs 8 hours sleep per day and this is equivalent to spending a third of our lives asleep. The late Prime Minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher, thought that sleep was a waste of valuable time, and is reputed to have only slept for 4 hours each night. The late US President Kennedy believed in taking naps in the afternoon to refresh his mind and restore his energy. Some people recommend a power nap of 20 minutes in the afternoon to maintain their productivity. Many people suffer from a sleep deficit, resulting in problems ranging from fatigue, drowsiness, gloomy moods to impaired decision-making, reduced creativity, reckless behaviour, and paranoia. Healthy sleep must contain REM (rapid eye movements) periods – times when you dream. This is why alcohol-induced sleep is not restful because it interferes with the REM pattern. Dreams can aid our creativity and imprint our memories. Paul McCarthy of the Beatles dreamed the song *Yesterday*, woke up and wrote it down. It became one of the best-selling songs of all time. Dreams may help us integrate and consolidate knowledge, and inspire us to achieve great things. During our dreams, our brains are making



sense of the world, discovering new links and associations between existing memories, looking for patterns, formulating rules, and even solving problems. Some people have a Eureka moment shortly after waking up from sleep. That is why it is so important to have a pencil and notebook ready on the locker near your bed, as otherwise you will forget the important moment. Many inventions are said to have been inspired by such moments.

- *Nutrition.* Your brain needs proper food to thrive and survive. Despite its small size in relation to total body weight, your brain needs a disproportionate amount of energy and nutrients to keep functioning in a healthy way. It uses more energy than any other body organ accounting for up to 20 per cent of the body's total. In a new study by the National Academy of Sciences USA they found that two thirds of the brain's energy is used to help neurons fire or send signals. The remaining third, however, is used for housekeeping, or cell health maintenance. What you eat significantly affects the way the brain works and how it retains its focus and concentration. For optimal focus, it is recommended that you trade in your standard American diet (SAD) for the healthy Mediterranean diet with its unprocessed fibre packed foods. It is widely agreed that this is one of the healthiest ways of eating for optimum body and brain health. In addition, your brain needs plenty of water to keep hydrated. Even mild dehydration results in shrinkage of brain tissue and temporary loss of concentration and memory. A little caffeine can improve concentration, alertness and productivity. But remember, caffeine is a psychoactive drug, and therefore, should be used judiciously.
- *Listen with your right dominant ear to improve your concentration.* Your right ear is connected to the left side of the brain which is the language and logical centre. This means that your hearing is superior in the right ear; so try to use this for listening. When you are listening to someone, give them your total and undivided attention. Don't let your eyes wander elsewhere or indeed your mind, while the other person is talking. Apart from anything else this demonstrates courtesy, interest and respect. Focus on what the person is saying, and give no heed to anything else. Do not interrupt, and do not finish the other person's sentence. You should keep the conversation going by asking intelligent relevant questions that show you are tuned in and paying attention to the speaker. It is much easier to talk than to listen. Listening will improve your concentration skills and, in the process, you may make friends and learn something new! When studying take plenty of breaks to retain your focus and concentration.

- *Practise thought stoppage when distracted*, and refocus quickly on your original task. Say to yourself 'Stop' to redirect your thoughts when you are straying, and then bring them back gently to where you want them to be. Keep doing this to restore your focus. Some experts maintain that there are four components to focused attention: (1) Continuous selective attention on a chosen object such as your breath, a candle flame, a stone, mantra, or a prayer. (2) Sustaining focus by constantly monitoring the quality of attention. (3) Detecting and recognising the mind-wandering and then restoring and redirecting attention to the mantra and (4) Disengagement or releasing this distraction, and returning to the mantra. The goal of training attention through concentration is to stay focused continuously and completely on the mantra while resisting any distractions by competing demands. Concentration brings structural changes to the brain which means that concentration gets easier with practise.
- *State*. Get in the right physical, psychological and emotional state. It is difficult to focus when you are cold, worried, anxious, angry, or upset. As well as preventing obesity and keeping your heart healthy, simple exercise like walking daily, will improve your circulation, memory, attention and concentration. Many top-class athletes engage in pre-performance routines to get them into the right mental state before they perform key tasks. For example, tennis players tend to bounce the ball a preferred number of times before serving. Similarly, rugby place kickers like to adopt a unique physical stance, and go through a systematic personalised idiosyncratic series of steps, before kicking the ball (hopefully over the bar) for a penalty shot, with the intention of blocking out any distractions from the crowd. These routines help sports people to focus on the present moment, rather than on past or future events.
- *Simulation*. Psychological experiments have proved simulation or doing a dress rehearsal works. Athletes can learn to focus more effectively and deal with distractions in real-life pressure situations by simulating them in similar conditions. Many adverse, unsettling or unexpected conditions, can be overcome if they have already been simulated and experienced in practise sessions beforehand. Earl Woods, the father of the famous golfer Tiger Woods used simulation techniques on his son when he was a very young boy. Today Tiger Woods claims he still benefits from the strategies and tactics of dealing with distractions that his father taught him as a child. Even astronauts prepare carefully for their trips in space by undergoing simulated training which mimics the conditions they will find in space.

*'When you write down your ideas you automatically focus your full attention on them. Few if any of us can write one thought and think another at the same time. Thus, a pencil and paper make excellent concentration tools.'*

– Michael Laboeuf

## 1.16 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 1

Focus is like a spotlight; we notice only what we pay attention to. Focus is intense interest in action. A person is focused when their thoughts and actions coincide. Focus gives us the single-mindedness to get rid of all distractions irrelevant to the task at hand. You lose concentration when you are focused on irrelevant matters or factors beyond your control. Knowing the benefits of focus will motivate you to focus more effectively.

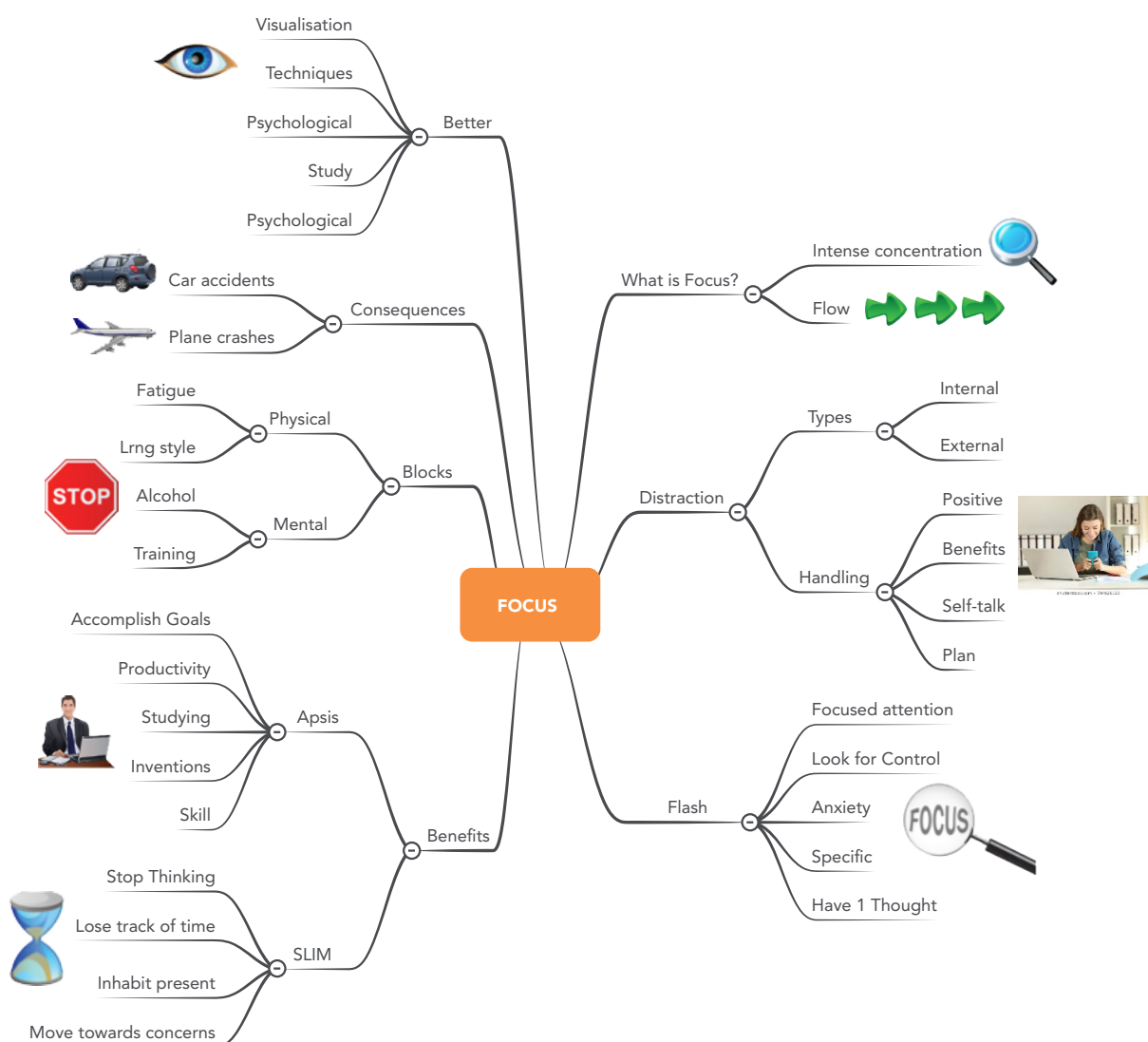
One of the ways of improving your powers of focus is to become aware of the blocks to concentration, so that you can take appropriate action to counteract them. A lack of focus has resulted in students failing examinations, managers making poor decisions, companies going bankrupt, and sports people losing tournaments and games with personal, professional, reputational, and financial consequences. You can achieve better levels of focus through mental and physical approaches.

## 1.17 FIVE ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE FOCUS SKILLS

1. Always have a clear purpose or plan. Goals provide a purpose, while a purpose gives you a focal point, and a plan provides a systematic route for accomplishment. Intentionally plan and prepare to focus rather than hope it will happen by chance.
2. A simple everyday technique of improving your focus is to listen more attentively. By focusing on what the other person is saying you will improve your listening and concentration skills and win friends and influence people.
3. Practise the technique of mental rehearsal or visualisation. Sports people practise their moves in their minds before they actually do them on the pitch, course or tennis court. Students practise their examination technique through mock exams, and by going through the actions they will perform in the examination room. Business people practise their presentation skills through mental rehearsal before they speak in public. It has been proved that mental rehearsal is almost as effective as actual practise.

4. Practise thought stoppage when distracted by irrelevant matters, and factors outside your control to refocus quickly on your original task. Say to yourself 'Stop' to redirect your thoughts when daydreaming or mind-wandering, and then bring them back gently to where you want them to be. This means that your mind is cleared of irrelevant thoughts, and the focus is centred only on what is important at that specific moment.
5. Simulate what you actually go through in practise. Athletes learn to focus more effectively and deal with distractions by physically going through the process beforehand that faces them, provided it mimics as closely as possible the conditions in which they will perform.

## 1.18 SUMMARY LEARNING MAP OF CHAPTER ONE



## 2 PERSISTENCE AND RESILIENCE

- Why is persistence important to success?
- What is the link between patience and persistence?
- What is the significance of passion?
- Why is willpower so important?
- What is resilience?

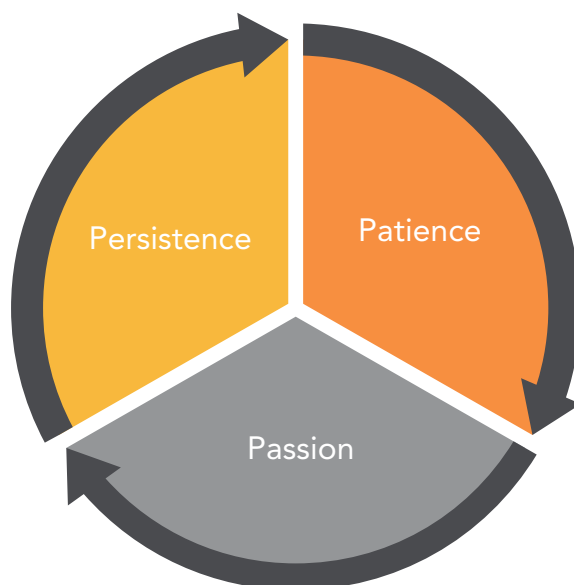


Fig. 2.1 Persistence, Patience & Passion

### 2.1 PERSISTENCE

Persistence, patience and passion are all interlinked. Persistence is the quality of going forward steadily or obstinately despite problems, setbacks, difficulties, failures or obstacles. Failure is often due to insufficient application or a lack of self-efficacy or belief in one's self. People fail because they give up even after one attempt. Some people even give up when they are on the threshold of success – if they stayed with it a little longer, they would succeed. Great people overcome great adversity with great mental strength, physical stamina, courage, determination and character. They do have setbacks and make mistakes, but they learn from them and keep on going. They never take their eye off the target, and are determined to succeed despite repeated failures. Persistence is not about doing the same thing over and over again, but may involve changing your habits, accepting new challenges, learning new skills, and adopting a different approach to reach your goals.

The Wright Brothers, Wilbur (1867-1912) and Orville (1871-1948) had many setbacks before they became the first to fly in a powered aircraft at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1903. Orville stayed in the air for only 12 seconds and initially covered just 120 feet, but by the end of the day they had both made successful, longer flights. The human brain is designed to solve problems, and sticking to the task and working hard will eventually achieve seemingly impossible objectives. In the case of flying it took a few hundred years of persistent human thought and endeavour. Leonardo da Vinci, the renaissance artist, had studied the mechanics of flight as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century but unfortunately at the time the technology was not in existence to help him. Although getting airborne in a hot air balloon was achieved in 1783 it took two bicycle repairmen with vision, determination, and persistence to achieve powered flight in 1903.

Persistence pays off in the end. Admiral Robert Peary made 7 unsuccessful attempts to reach the North Pole, until finally he succeeded on his 8<sup>th</sup> attempt. NASA failed 20 times during their first 28 attempts to send rockets into space. Robert Pirsig wrote *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* - a book which became a best seller and sold millions of copies. He claims that the manuscript was rejected 121 times before it was published in 1974, which must be a world record for rejections. Tawni O'Dell, the famous author produced 6 unpublished manuscripts after 13 years of writing. Her first novel 'Back Roads' was published in January 2000. In an interview Tawni gave the following advice "Never give up on your dream."

Talent is a necessity but only part of what goes into making a successful writer. Perseverance is all important. If you don't have the desire and belief in yourself to keep trying after you have been told you should quit, you'll never make it." Jimi Hendrix was a famous guitarist and rock star. The value of perseverance was instilled in Jimi by his father. He practised playing his guitar so much that he eventually became a virtuoso. This was despite the fact that he was unable to read music; was left-handed, and learned to play the guitar with his right hand.

*"Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong."*

– Ella Fitzgerald

## 2.2 PATIENCE



Fig. 2.2 Patience

Patience is an aspect of persistence. It is the ability to endure waiting or delay without becoming annoyed, agitated, frustrated or upset, or to persevere calmly in the face of slowness, obstacles, provocation and difficulties. It is the philosophy that everything comes to him who waits. It is the ability to create calm in our life and stay connected, when all around you are panicked, distressed, and in disarray. People with patience are in control over how they react to situations. Patience is an attitude of mind and a habit you should develop. In times of hardship and disappointment patience will help you put things into perspective, keep on going, and remain in control rather than get annoyed, upset or stressed. Don't get frustrated by things over which you have no control as patience, wisdom and humility go hand in hand.

Patience and dogged determination may see you through in the end. A classic example is Grandma Moses (1860 – 1961) an American, who was self-taught, took up painting in her late 70s, and continued painting into her 90s, proving that it is never too late to learn. Despite having no formal training her paintings earned worldwide acclaim. During the 1950s, her exhibitions were so popular that they broke attendance records all over the world. Life magazine celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday by featuring her picture on the front cover of its September 19<sup>th</sup> 1960 edition. She received numerous awards including an honorary doctorate from Philadelphia's Moore College of Art. Edna Kenny, the previous prime minister of Ireland, spent 36 years in opposition before becoming prime minister in March 2011. He became the leader of the Fine Gael party in 2002, and survived several challenges to his leadership from within the party before he retired.

Andre Kertesz, (1894 – 1985) the famous photographer, was in his 80s before he finally gained public recognition. In his early years his unorthodox style prevented him from gaining wider acceptance, and during most of his life he felt unrecognised as a photographer. Today he is considered one of the most prominent figures that photojournalism has ever produced. In 1982 he was awarded the National Grand Prize of Photography in Paris, as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual George Washington Award from the American Hungarian Foundation the same year. Like Grandma Moses he was also awarded an honorary doctorate for his outstanding contribution to photography.

Ian Fleming (1908-1964) was a British author, best known for his novels about the British agent 007 and spy, James Bond who has been immortalised in film, and has fascinated, intrigued and entertained millions over the years. He had a varied background as a journalist, banker, stockbroker and Naval Intelligence Officer before he became a novelist, and introduced the world to James Bond as a late bloomer at the age of 45. He went on to write twelve novels and nine short stories, and his books have sold over 100 million copies worldwide. He obviously had got the ideas for his iconic books from his experience as a British Naval Intelligence Officer. His career proves that people at middle age can reinvent themselves, and discover and exploit talents that they were unaware of.

*"Patience is waiting. Not passively waiting. That is laziness.  
But to keep going when the going is hard and slow – that  
is patience."*

– Unknown



## 2.3 PASSION



Fig. 2.3 Passion

Passion has been defined as a strong inclination towards something that people like, or even love, find important, and in which they invest time and energy on a regular basis. It is much easier to stick to the task if you are passionate, interested, committed, conscientious, and enthusiastic about what you are doing. A passionate person is fully engaged, deeply involved, and totally dedicated to whatever they undertake. A strong passion points out the means to achieve what you desire and thus ensures success. Passion is considered a desirable trait in all fields related to achievement and performance such as work, entrepreneurship, management, research, learning, and sports.

When you have a passion to do something you begin to see the possibilities and resources all around to help you achieve your purpose. Passion provides you with the purpose, energy, drive, commitment, persistence and enthusiasm to pursue what you want to do. Sometimes it may even prevent you from sleeping at night because of the excitement, enthusiasm, childlike wonder, and anticipation of what you want to do the following morning. Those with a passion for their work look forward to getting up in the morning, while those without a passion dread going into work.

Tanya Streeter is passionate about her free-diving, the sport of plunging deep into the water without tanks or other breathing equipment. She is a world champion free-diver and has set nine world records. She was inducted into the Women Diver's Hall of Fame in March 2000. For a while she held the overall 'no limits' free-diving record, with a depth of 525 feet or 160 metres, greater than the men's record. An average person can hold their breath for one minute while Streeter can do it for six minutes. After giving birth in August 2008, Tanya Streeter officially retired from free-diving.

Charles Atlas (1892-1972, born Angelo Sicilano, through passion, hard work, and determination built up his body from a 97-pound weakling to became known as ‘The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man,’ and founded a multi-million-dollar business exploiting his famous brand. He claimed that he was bullied and harassed incessantly when he was a vulnerable underweight skinny youth. His famous cartoon advertisement featured on the back page of numerous comics and magazines over many years. It depicted a bully kicking sand in his face at the beach in front of his girlfriend. Of course, he goes home ashamed, demoralised and dejected but determined and inspired to do something about it, and sometime after returns to the beach as a confident, well-developed muscleman. He then confronts his tormentor to win the admiration and respect of his girlfriend. Whether true or not, this story inspired many a male teenager to take up bodybuilding. Atlas trained himself to develop his body from that of a scrawny thin person to eventually becoming the most famous muscleman of his time. Even today the company he founded continues to market fitness programmes. Charles Atlas became a role model for other skinny and underdeveloped men, and an inspiration for later bodybuilders including Arnold Schwarzenegger who went on to become a famous Hollywood actor and US governor.

The flipside of passion is obsession. This is rigid and harmful persistence when it would be more sensible to give up and do something else. Addiction-like behaviour, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), burnout, increased injury risk among athletes, and other undesirable outcomes are some examples. Workaholism, alcoholism, and compulsive gambling, spending and hoarding are common phenomena of modern life causing much harm and distress to those afflicted.

The defining characteristic of compulsive spending is that the spending feels irresistible and out of control. Such people continue buying even when doing so causes them emotional, financial and personal distress. They continue to spend even when they can’t afford to, and even when the things they buy are of no use to them. Compulsive hoarding is characterised by excessive acquisition of and an inability or unwillingness to discard large quantities of objects that clutter up the living areas of the home, causing significant distress, embarrassment, and inconvenience. People with an obsessive passion have an uncontrollable urge to partake in something that they find important and enjoyable, but at the same time, harmful. They find it very difficult to give up their compulsive activity, even when it would be the best thing to do for them and their family.

*“Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion.”*

– Hebbel

## 2.4 WILLPOWER

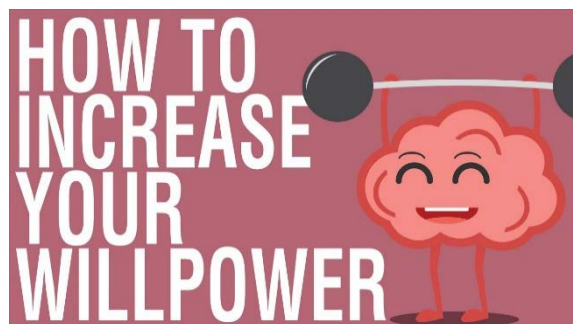


Fig. 2.4 Willpower

Willpower is a combination of determination and self-discipline that enables you to do something extraordinary despite the difficulties involved. People bring much unhappiness and distress to themselves because of their failure to control unhealthy urges, impulses, and habits such as smoking, drug taking, and excessive eating and drinking. Some people have more willpower than others, and thus are better at doing the good sensible things and avoiding the bad things. People develop willpower from practise. Willpower is like a muscle; the more you exercise it the stronger it becomes. If people want to develop their willpower, they must practise self-denial. If an athlete wants to build up strength, they must eat a healthy diet, avoid alcohol, go to the gym regularly, and exercise with weights. If you want to lose weight you must exercise more and eat less. If you want to avoid drug taking you must have the discipline to say no.

Research has found that willpower is important to leadership success. One compelling study for this was a longitudinal one tracking the fates of 1,037 children born during a single year in the 1970's in the city of Dunedin, New Zealand. For several years the children were given a battery of tests of willpower, including the psychologist Walter Mischel's famous 'marshmallow test.' This gave children a choice between eating one marshmallow immediately, and getting two by waiting 15 minutes. In Mischel's experiments, roughly a third of children couldn't resist the temptation and ate the marshmallows immediately. Another third held out for a while longer, and a third managed to make it through the entire quarter hour.

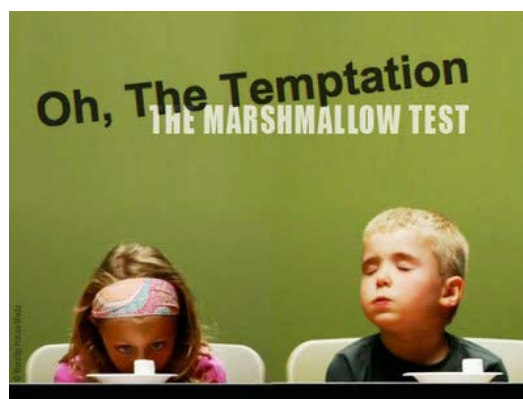


Fig. 2.5 Marshmallow Test

Years later, when the children were in their 30s, and all but 4% of them had been tracked down again, the researchers found that those who'd had the self-control and discipline to resist the marshmallow longest were significantly healthier, more financially successful, and more law-abiding than the ones who were unable to resist the temptation of immediate consumption. In fact, the statistics showed that a child's level of self-control was a more powerful indicator of financial success than IQ, social class, or family circumstance.

Mischel maintains that how we focus holds the key to exercising willpower. Three sub-varieties of cognitive control are at play when self-restraint competes against self-gratification:

- The ability to voluntarily disengage your focus from an object that you dearly want.
- The ability to resist distraction so that you don't gravitate back to that object;
- The ability to concentrate on the future goal, and imagine how good it will feel when you achieve it.

As adults, the children of Dunedin may have been held hostage to their younger selves, but they need not have been, because the power to focus can be developed and improved with practise.

There is a downside to willpower in that we may stick to a project longer than is desirable. Some business people fail to disengage from a pet project because they feel that they will lose face even when the signs are evident that it will not succeed. Instead they throw good money after bad and increase their losses. In finance this is called a sunk cost. It is sometimes better to walk away rather than throw good money after bad. Others are reluctant to move away from a successful project because of ego considerations even when it is finished. Some managers are reluctant to delegate the tasks that won them the recognition and promotion in the first instance.

*"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."*

– Mahatma Gandhi

## 2.5 RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY



Fig. 2.6 Adversity

The way people react to extreme debilitating adversity is normally distributed. On one end, are the people who fall apart in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and even contemplate taking their own lives. In the middle are most people. They first react with symptoms of depression and anxiety, but within a month or so are back where they were before the trauma. That is resilience. On the other end, are people who show post traumatic growth and increased positivity. They too, first experience depression and anxiety, often exhibiting full-blown PTSD. However, within a year they are better off than they were before the trauma. Post traumatic growth is a stage beyond resilience. It includes an increased appreciation of life, close intimate relationships, networks of supportive friends, finding new opportunities, and increased spiritual development.

Resilience is the ability to recover quickly, bounce back, adapt, survive, transform, and flourish from challenging or threatening circumstances such as the severe distress, stress, trials, tribulations, hardships, and frustrations of life. Resilience unfolds over a lifetime and can differ in line with gender, culture and age. In childhood and adolescence resilience is greatly helped by a supportive family, parental guidance and community help, providing children with role models and good values enabling them to develop effective coping skills. In adulthood, prior adversity and overcoming challenges, provides a resource of coping skills to fall back on providing a protective barrier to traumas. Adults have had the opportunity to develop coping strategies over many years, which help them to deal with daily stressors and prolonged adversity. However, adults as they grow old may experience additional stressors like declining health, bereavement, taking care of their elderly parents, money problems and the difficulties of loneliness caused by social isolation. Culture may foster values of service and loyalty to family and morality that strengthen social relationships and provide people with a sense of meaning and purpose to handle conflict and war situations.

Boys and men are more prone to the negative aspects of risks, such as violence, substance abuse, and low socioeconomic status. In comparison to girls, they are subject to cultural pressures toward stoicism (endurance of pain or hardship without showing feelings or complaining) and machismo (aggressive masculine pride demanding toughness). These may promote unhealthy behaviours, and prevent them from seeking support, compared to girls and women, who are more likely to seek emotional support, confide in others, and less likely to engage in violence. However, some research has suggested that girls and women are less resilient than boys and men following exposure to natural disasters. On the other hand, cultural ideals may give males the incentive to maintain good health and provide for the family. Education provides intellectual resources such as life-skills training, planning, self-reflection and personal responsibility, and additional protection against the problems presented by natural disasters.

Resilient people pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again. Some may have the inherent advantages of good intelligence, education, physical attractiveness, easy temperament and supportive family and peer relationships. They may have good mentors and role models to look up to. They consider difficulties, setbacks and stress as a normal part of life, and something that makes them stronger, more resilient, and harder to face, whatever the world throws at them. Those without resilience become helpless, despondent, adopt a victim mentality, or plunge into depression and feelings of hopelessness.

We all experience the vicissitudes of life from our favourite football team losing a match, becoming ill, suffering bereavement or divorce, not getting a desired promotion, and being made redundant. Every day we read news reports of people experiencing and overcoming cancer, heart attacks, house fires, plane crashes, car crashes, accidents, natural disasters, wars and conflicts, and vicious unprovoked assaults. In parts of the world people courageously deal with natural disasters such as tsunamis, hurricanes, typhoons, tornados, earthquakes, bush fires, or floods are not unusual. Many business people who go bankrupt reinvent themselves, and against all the odds start afresh, and go on to build a successful business all over again. Why is it that some people can overcome overwhelming odds, survive and thrive, while others fall into despondency and despair?

The difference that makes the difference is the way that people respond to these events. People who survive adapt successfully to the challenging or threatening circumstances, and manage to grow and develop. They become stronger, more resilient, and able to deal with more difficult problems. They are usually blessed to have come from decent supportive loving families. They begin to appreciate more the important things in life such as family and friends, and that life is too short not to follow your dreams. For example, when Hurricane Andrew, a powerful category 5 storm, struck Florida in 1992, it caused devastation of \$26.5 billion and killed 23 people. An equivalent tropical typhoon in Bangladesh in 1991 caused over 100,000 deaths, and the displacement of millions of people caused by flooding.

In Florida, resilience from strong government and charitable institutions, early warning systems, planning, and a high capacity to deal with the crisis confined the impact to manageable proportions. On the other hand, the vulnerability of people in affected areas of Bangladesh caused a far greater human disaster. Obviously, adaptive and resourceful action can be increased through planned purposeful action. Consequently, Bangladesh has reduced mortality in the past decade, linked to typhoons and flooding, by careful planning focused on the most vulnerable areas. As Friedrich Nietzsche said what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and often wiser.

Hurricane Katrina, which occurred on 29 August 2005 and cost 1,200 lives, was the costliest storm in US history with an estimated \$108 billion in property damage. Its effects are still felt today in New Orleans and coastal Louisiana. It hit land as a Category 3 storm with winds up to 120 miles per hour. Its widespread destruction, death toll and extensive evacuation left survivors with enormous material, financial, physical, human and psychological damage. Survivors struggled with bereavement and separation from friends and family, huge property damage, and job loss. The aftermath of the storm exposed a series of deep-rooted problems. These included: controversies over the federal government's response, difficulties in the search and rescue efforts, and a lack of preparation for the storm, particularly in relation to the city's levee system. Katrina's victims were mostly low income African American, with many of those who lost their homes facing years of hardship. According to President Barack Obama, 'What started out as a natural disaster became a man-made disaster – a failure of government to look out for its own citizens.'

The experience of African-American survivors of Hurricane Katrina highlights the importance of social relationships, neighbours, community spirit, and spirituality in providing resilience in the face of adversity. Community relationships and family interactions provided emotional support, aided trauma processing, and helped the psychological recovery of survivors. Faith can often help people to make sense of senseless events, and provide them with meaning and purpose at a time of crisis. Hurricanes provide an example of once-off natural disasters which show a drop-off of trauma once the danger has passed. This is in contrast to on-going conflicts like Palestinians have to endure. The conflict with Israel has gone on intermittently for 50 years with entire generations exposed to hatred and political violence. PTSD, depression, and other forms of psychological distress have manifested with the occurrences of violence.

Protective mechanism, such as social support networks, strong emotional ties with parents, trust in adults, and ability to engage in active coping were all important factors in Palestine, just as they had been for children exposed to Hurricane Katrina. Findings showed differences in the way boys and girls coped with the trauma. Boys were more likely to externalise feelings and 'act out' their frustration in the form of political action such as throwing stones. Adults gave their struggle meaning through political participation resisting the Israeli occupation. On the other hand, girls were more likely to internalise emotions and develop anxiety symptoms, and went on attending school as usual.



Some children from dysfunctional families, who despite having experienced poverty, homelessness, violence, war and conflict, illness and appalling abuse, go on to live happy, successful, and productive lives. On the other hand, others are overwhelmed by their problems and become alcoholics and drug abusers. However, there is evidence that supportive, sensitive early concerned caregivers in infancy and childhood can increase resilience, and reduce the effects of growing up in a toxic environment. Parental oversight and helpful mentor relationships play a significant role in keeping many children on the straight and narrow away from substance abuse, violence and alcohol rather than falling into criminality. In addition, it is important that such children have a meaningful relationship to call and rely on in times of need. Rather than being a fixed trait, it is thought that resilience develops over time in response to the right supportive background.

Bill Clinton, the charismatic former President of the United States (1993-2001), is an example of someone who rose above adversity; some of his problems were outside his control, while others were self-inflicted. He was inspired to pursue his dream of becoming US President by his role model, President John F. Kennedy. He bounced back from growing up in an alcoholic home, and won the presidency after losing big elections earlier in his career. He survived the self-induced character assassination brought on by his sexual indiscretions during his term of office, and endured repeated persistent questions, just like his role model, about his morality.

Brian Keenan, who emerged from captivity with resilience and strength after four and a half years, has become an inspirational role model for many people. On the morning of the 11 April, 1986 Keenan was kidnapped by Islamic Jihad. After spending two months in isolation, he was moved to a cell shared with the British journalist, John McCarthy. He was blindfolded throughout most of his ordeal, and was chained hand and feet when taken out of solitary confinement. Keenan recounts his experiences in a book titled *An Evil Cradling*. His example suggests that each of us have a reserve of resilience that can be called upon when we need it most.

In his book titled *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor E. Frankl tells how he developed the resilience to survive the concentration camps, set up by the Nazi regime during the Second World War, by imagining a worthwhile happy future for himself. He realised to survive the terrible conditions experienced in the concentration camps he had to find hope for the future, and a purpose for living. He imagined himself giving a lecture after the war on the psychology of the concentration camps, so that outsiders could understand what he and others had suffered and been through. By creating some goals for himself, and occupying his mind with hope and an imagined future, he was able to rise above the terrible sufferings continuously endured and experienced on a daily basis. To quote Frankl: 'We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless dire



situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed.’ Freud, expressing similar sentiments, maintained that a critical difference between ordinary grief and acute depression is that people experiencing ordinary grief anticipate a future meaningful life where they will again be happy, whereas those with acute depression are preoccupied with a grim and hopeless future.

J.K. Rowling is the author of the Harry Potter fantasy series. The books have sold in excess of 400 million copies, and are the basis for a series of popular films. She is renowned for her resilience in overcoming a series of setbacks such as a broken marriage, disapproval from her parents, and as a single mother struggling to raise her daughter, to becoming a best-selling author, well-known personality, and multi-millionaire. She went back to her first dream of writing because she had nothing left to lose, and something to gain. She is one of the richest women in Britain as well as being one of the most respected and admired. She was once the recipient of welfare payments, but is now estimated to be richer than the Queen of England. In October 2010 she was named the most influential woman in Britain by leading magazine editors. She is living proof that people who follow their dreams despite adversity can become successful provided they work hard and have the talent, ability, and willpower to do so.

*“I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot.....and I missed. I have failed over and over again in my life. And that’s precisely why I succeed.”*

– Michael Jordan

## 2.6 RESILIENCE FOR SUCCESS



Fig. 2.7 Resilience for Success

Resilience is probably one of the most important characteristics for success in life. George Washington (1732-1799), the founding father and first president of the United States, defeated Great Britain the world’s most powerful military nation at the time against all the odds. His army suffered from a shortage of food, supplies and ammunition, and he

personally served without pay. At times he even used his own money to pay his troops. He overcame political in-fighting, betrayal, and threat of mutiny from his own troops. He endured more losses than victories, but nevertheless had the resilience to keep going against a superior force. He realised that defeats are only temporary setbacks, and something you can learn from, while continually keeping focused on his long-term goal of independence from Britain. You may lose the battle but win the war, and he certainly lost more battles than he won. He persevered through eight years of setbacks, extremely cold winters, suffering and defeats, to ultimately win independence from Britain for the United States of America. He is remembered for his patriotism, principled leadership, integrity, honesty and selfless devotion to his men and to public service. He became the automatic and unanimous choice for the first president of the United States and served two terms. He then retired quietly and modestly to his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Andrew Wiles spent more than thirty years trying to solve Fermat's Last Theorem, a problem that had defeated mathematicians for 350 years. He was only 10 years old when he came across and became fascinated with this problem. In 1993, after 7 years of intense work and more than 15,000 hours study, Wiles presented his proof to a conference of fellow mathematicians in England. However, some of his peers found several small errors in his work. Nevertheless, he didn't get frustrated or discouraged, and after a further year of hard work, Wiles answered his critics. The Princeton professor attributes his success not to his brains but to his persistence. It is passion and commitment that will help you endure, and deal successfully with the setbacks that inevitably occur in any long-term project. Committed people are curious, passionate about learning, willing to challenge the status quo, and prepared to experiment with new approaches to solve a problem until they are eventually successful.

Genius alone does not guarantee success. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) in his diaries claims that an entire symphony appeared intact in his head. This particular passage is often quoted, but the next paragraph where he says he spent months refining and perfecting his work is usually ignored. Just like anybody else famous composers spend many years of training, hard work, and practise perfecting their craft often from a very young age. There is a ten-year rule which states that on average it requires 10 years of hard work and constant practise before people become expert in a particular area. This is an average figure only and many people have spent 15 years or more improving their art before they become proficient and well-known. We only hear about them when they are successful and famous, not realising all the hard work and persistent application over many years that lies behind their success.

The ability to persist in the face of obstacles is an essential ingredient to this success. Thomas Edison the famous inventor is said to have made 10,000 attempts before he successfully made a functional light bulb surrounded and supported by a dedicated team. When confronted by reporters about how he felt about failing 10,000 times, he retorted that he didn't fail but merely discovered 10,000 ways that wouldn't work, and so was becoming closer to a successful outcome.

Some people believe intelligence is fixed, while others believe it is malleable and a work in progress. Those who accept that intelligence is fixed are less resilient as they don't believe that they can learn from their mistakes, and thus don't see the point in trying again and again when they fail. They fear failure and take it personally. Those who accept that their intelligence is a work in progress are more resilient, and have no fear of failure because they see it as a learning opportunity to get better. They believe that hard work will be rewarded, and is just as important to success as intelligence.

Dyslexia is not a handicap to many people and does not prevent them from reaching their potential. Research shows that entrepreneurs are five times more likely to suffer from dyslexia than the average person. Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic has dyslexia, as does John Chambers the CEO of Cisco Systems who allegedly can't even read his own email. Nevertheless, these people went on to become highly successful managers, and did not let dyslexia limit their potential.

*"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."*

– Calvin Coolidge

## 2.7 RESILIENCE & MENTAL TOUGHNESS

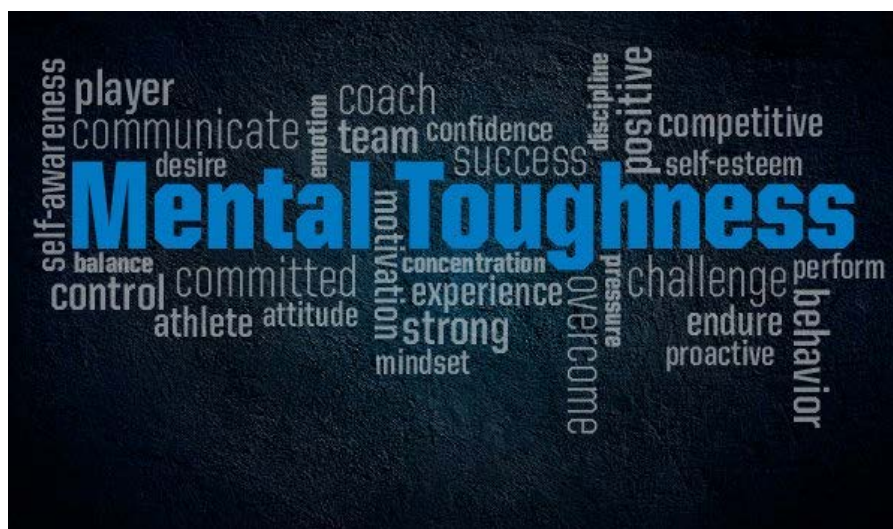


Fig. 2.8 Mental Toughness

Gary Player (born 1935) a South African is one of the greatest golfers of all time. He came from a poor background, and his mother died from cancer when he was only eight years old. Despite this, player has won over 165 tournaments on six continents over six decades. He was elected to the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1974. He is renowned for his mental discipline, true grit, integrity, sound family values, and devotion to keeping healthy and fit. When he travelled to England in 1955, he was advised that he was unsuitable to become a professional golfer, and should take up some other career instead. At 5 feet 7 inches and 150 pounds he was considered too small for a professional golfer. Regardless, and against all the odds he returned to England the following year and won the Dunlop Masters the first of his 13 South African Opens. Together with Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer, he dominated world golf during the 1960s and 1970s earning them the title “The Modern Triumvirate.”

As a teenager he read and was inspired by Norman Vincent Peale’s book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and Maxell Maltz’s book *Psycho Cybernetics*, and went on to apply the psychological principles to his game of golf, such as visualising and mentally rehearsing each shot in his head before he actually took them. In addition to his dedication to physical fitness he believed that mental discipline such as patience, resilience, focus, and determination were of prime importance to success in golf. He agrees that the real barrier to success is often in the mind. In 2000, he was voted the 8<sup>th</sup> greatest golfer of all time by Golf Digest magazine. He retired at the age of 73 on the 23 July 2009 having competed in the Senior British Open Championship at Sunningdale.

Sports psychologists maintain that mental rehearsal confers almost the same benefits on performance as an actual workout. People who combine physical with mental imagery training do better than those who just do physical training. Imagery can help people achieve

peak performance by mentally rehearsing successful strategies, and potential pitfalls before the actual event. A diver might mentally perform a double somersault with a half twist one final time as he prepares himself on the diving board. Duncan Goodhew who won an Olympic gold medal for Britain in 1980 would visualise each stroke in detail before he actually swam. A surgeon might run through a difficult procedure in his mind before he actually performs the operation. Arthur Schnabel, the famous Austrian concert pianist, claims that he spent more time practising by mentally rehearsing in his head than on the actual keyboard.

*"The harder you practice the luckier you get."*

– Gary Player

## 2.8 VISUALISATION & RESILIENCE



Fig. 2.9 Visualisation

Some experts maintain that visualisation is the key to resilience. Resilient people are strong at visualisation which is using your minds-eye to imagine an event, good or bad, and how to deal with the event when it happens. This takes the surprise element out of the event, and so they feel more in control and relaxed when the event, either positive or negative, happens. Visualisation induces positive thinking, tough-mindedness, and a can-do attitude. Visualisers are more likely to think positive thoughts, stop negative thoughts and if, they do occur, learn to reframe them into positive ones. However, if they are confronted by negative thoughts, they are able to control their sense of panic and anxiety through their visualisation, reframing, and deep-breathing exercises.

The techniques of visualisation and mental rehearsal are widely used in gymnastics, ice skating, tennis, golf, boxing, football, and other sports, and were popularised in the books named *The Inner Game of Golf* and *The Inner Game of Tennis* by W. Timothy Gallwey. Ben Hogan, one of the greatest golfers in the history of the game, claims that he mentally rehearsed each shot before taking it. He depended on what he called “muscle memory” to carry out the shot as he visualised it. These techniques are part of *autogenic conditioning* (a relaxation technique) created by a German psychiatrist Jonannes Schultz in 1932. For many years, in the 1940s and 1950s, German athletes dominated the Olympic Games, winning most of the medals. Many years later, their secret was discovered, and their success was attributed to the autogenic exercises they had been doing.

Dick Fosbury won the gold medal for the high jump at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. He is creator of the famous ‘Fosbury Flop,’ which is now the most popular high jumping technique. He attributes his success to the use of visualisation strategies. He describes the effects such practices had on his performance as follows: ‘I began to develop my new style during high school competition, when my body seemed to react to the challenge of the bar. I became charged by the desire and will to achieve success. Then I developed a thought process in order to repeat a successful jump: I would psyche myself up; create a picture; feel a successful jump; and develop a positive attitude to make the jump. My success came from the visualisation and imaging process.’

Muhammad Ali gained a mental edge over his opponents by psyching them out, instilling them with a doubt about their ability to defeat him, and thus psychologically undermining them before contests, to become the greatest boxer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before the Thriller in Manila (1975) Ali taunted Frazier with various slurs and poems. Frazier threw in the towel after 14 hard rounds. Ali famously claimed that he could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. He showed how a positive attitude can boost an athlete’s performance, and how psychological mastery can destroy the confidence of opponents. He always talked positive, and proclaimed to the entire world that he was the greatest.

*“The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It’s the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for its existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun.”*

– Napoleon Hill



## 2.9 SEVEN LEARNABLE SKILLS OF RESILIENCE

The following is based on the work of Dr Karen Reivich who has highlighted the learnable skills of resilience. These include self-efficacy, humour, optimism, causal analysis, risk, empathy and values.

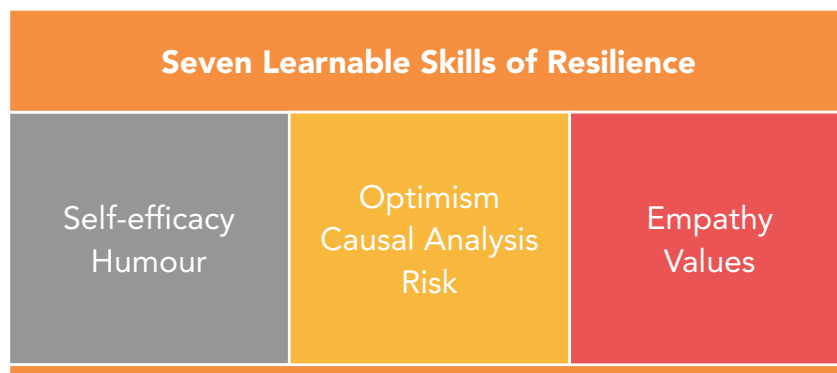


Fig. 2.10 Seven Learnable Skills of Resilience

- *Self-efficacy.* This is the self-confidence that you possess the ability, competence, and confidence to solve problems and succeed. It's about self-esteem, self-awareness, self-belief, and knowing what your strengths and weaknesses are. You know what you are good at, and this gives the strengths to draw on in order to cope in times of difficulty. You may have been fortunate enough to have interacted in the past with sensitive responsive supportive people, who reinforced your view of yourself as a worthwhile and significant person which helped your self-confidence to elicit positive responses from others.
- *Humour.* People who survive disasters, hardships, tragedy, serious illness such as cancer, and bereavement have a sense of humour. Often the humour is black but it does provide a sense of perspective which is realistic. They don't bemoan their bad luck, and the unfairness of the situation by saying 'Why me' and falling into a well of self-pity, listlessness, anxiety, hopelessness, despondency, and depression. Instead, they adopt the attitude 'Why not me.' They realise they are part of the human race, and subject to sickness and misfortunes just like anybody else. However, they have the resilience to bounce right back from their sickness or misfortune and get on with their lives. This makes them stronger and harder to face dire events if they happen to occur again in the future. Hardiness is a trait that includes a sense of control over one's life, a commitment to giving meaning to one's existence, and viewing change as a challenge rather than a threat. People who have successfully battled with cancer maintain that they made incredible friends during their bleakest moments giving them a meaning to their lives for the future. Instead of seeing the experience as 'awful' they look on it as a challenge to be overcome with the help of the medical profession and their friends and support networks.

- *Optimism.* Resilient people are realistically optimistic. They have their feet on the ground; know what they want, and consider the facts before they make up their minds – they look before they jump. They are realistic optimists, and avoid catastrophic thinking which may trigger panic, and impulsive behaviour. People with a positive outlook are receptive to the new and unexpected. They are more creative and better at creative thinking. Unrealistic optimists ignore the scientific based advice on the prevention of disease from unprotected sex, excessive eating, lack of exercise, drinking alcohol and compulsive smoking. They ignore the facts and believe bad things only happen to other people and not to them. When Hurricane Iniki battered Hawaii in 1993 those who survived best were those who took the advice of weather forecasters, and took preventative action by boarding up their properties and taking out adequate insurance. Similarly, it was resilience, passion, hard work and self-belief that kept Chester Carlson (1906-1968) the inventor of photocopying going. Twenty companies and the National Inventors Council rejected his work before his invention was finally accepted and became a worldwide phenomenon.
- *Causal analysis.* Resilient people solve their problems by applying a systematic problem-solving approach. They have the capacity for abstract thought, reflection, and adopt a flexible approach to problem solving. They know that for every effect there is a cause, and for every action there is an outcome. They know if they want things to happen in their lives, they must make them happen, and not rely solely on other people to make them happen. They define the problem, consider the facts, look at alternatives, pick the best alternative, and then implement their solution. Resilient people are able to improvise when confronted with unusual unforeseen situations.
- *Risk.* Resilient people are prepared to take appropriate calculated risks. They try out new things, accept that failure is part of life, and are willing to learn from their mistakes. As J.K. Rowling said, ‘it is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might not have lived at all.’ They are sensible enough not to undertake unduly risky projects. Few companies take their fire drills seriously because they feel that they are most unlikely to happen. One company that took its fire drills very seriously was Morgan Stanley. Its employees were fully drilled in what to do in a catastrophe. Their employees managed to stay calm and follow a well-practised drill. The company had 2,700 employees in the building when it was hit by the plane on that infamous date - September 11, 2001 at 8.46 am. Morgan Stanley started evacuating the building just one minute later, at 8.47 am. When the second plane crashed into the south tower 15 minutes later, Morgan Stanley’s offices were largely empty. The company only lost 7 employees despite receiving an almost direct hit.



- *Empathy.* Resilient people have a high emotional intelligence. They are aware of their feelings, know how to read the feelings of others, and know how to control and use their emotional intelligence to their advantage. They have the ability to get inside the minds of others, walk in their shoes, and see things from their point of view. This ability is essential for building up social rapport and relationships with others. They think before they react because they know that inappropriate words and behaviour will only add fuel to the fire and create enemies. Losing your temper only hurts you, and spreads like a contagious disease to infect the attitude of the people around you, storing up problems for you in the future. Instead, you should remain calm in the face of provocation. Consider issues in a thoughtful and rational way before you react. For good mental health, and to get through the challenging times, we need a support network for comfort and advice, in the form of family, good parental relationships, community, friends, peers, admired adults, teachers, managers, colleagues and personal counselling. It is our ability to form good interpersonal relationships and attachments to others that help us get through the difficult times. Resilient people are disciplined. Self-discipline is the ability to refrain from doing something detrimental to health and well-being such as smoking, drinking, eating to excess or wasting too much time on trivial pursuits.
- *Values.* Personal, corporate and cultural values give meaning to a person's and an organisation's existence. If you have a strong sense of personal values such as honesty, truth and loyalty you won't go far wrong. These may have been imbued in you naturally in the context of your parents, family, religion, and indigenous culture. Pharmaceutical giant, Johnson & Johnson, for instance, calls its value system, set out in a document given to every employee on induction, the Credo. James Burke, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson is an example of positive ethical leadership. During the early 1980s Tylenol crisis (when Tylenol was laced with cyanide in the Chicago area) he handled that crisis masterfully, recalling all Tylenol at a huge cost to the firm. He showed that the company put its value system – the Credo, and the health and safety of its customers, above that of making a profit. Similarly, Parcel company UPS talks constantly about its Noble Purpose.

*"In order to succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, to struggle together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life."*

– Albert Bandura

## 2.10 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER TWO

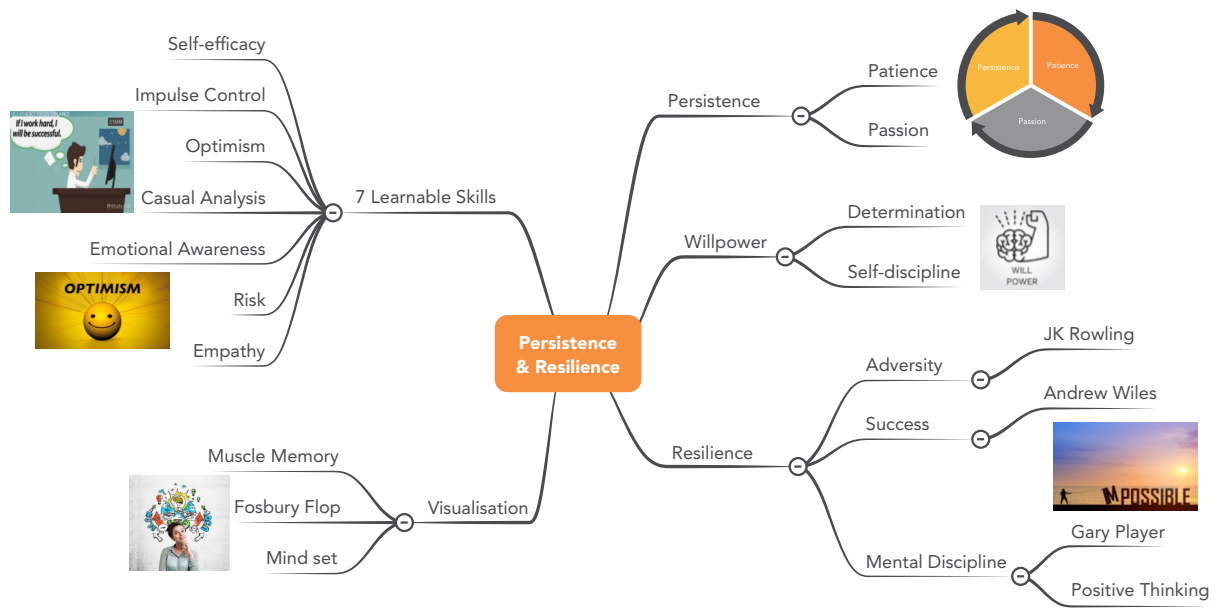
The quality of persistence enables you to stick to a task despite obstacles and setbacks. People fail because they give up too soon and even after just one attempt. Many people are on the threshold of success when they quit. We know that quitters are not winners. The deeds of many famous people, from many walks of life, suggest that hard work and persistence pays off in the end. Patience is the ability to endure waiting or delay without getting frustrated or upset. Passion is about being fully engaged, deeply involved, and totally dedicated to a meaningful pursuit. Willpower is having the determination and self-discipline to stay the course, and do what you want to do. Willpower is like a muscle; the more you exercise it the stronger it becomes.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from disappointment and failure to start all over again with hope and optimism. This suggests that successful people are resilient. Some experts maintain that visualisation is the key to resilience. Resilient people are strong at visualisation which is using your minds-eye to imagine an event, good or bad, and how to deal with the event when it happens. Those without resilience become hopeless and helpless, adopt a victim attitude, become despondent or plunge into depression. The seven learnable skills of resilience are self-efficacy, humour, optimism, causal analysis, risk, empathy and values.

## 2.11 FIVE ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE PERSISTENCE AND RESILIENCE SKILLS

1. Think about previous successes that you have enjoyed, reminding how you have overcome adversity in the past. Learn from your successes and failures. Make a list of these to reflect on and inspire you for the future.
2. Believe in yourself and recognise your strengths. See adversity as something that makes you mentally stronger, hardier, and more determined, rather than something that brings you down.
3. You can't control what happens to you in life but you can control how you respond to it. Resilient people adopt a positive attitude to pick up the pieces and start their lives all over again.
4. Study the lives and be inspired by the lives of famous people to see how they triumphed over setbacks and failures, and adopt them as role models.
5. Believe that in every obstacle lies an opportunity. It just requires thought and an action plan to exploit it.

## 2.12 SUMMARY LEARNING MAP OF CHAPTER 2



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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