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by Using Your
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Being able to [focus helps us succeed](#). Whether it's focusing inward and attuning ourselves to our intuitions and values or outward and navigating the world around us, honing our attention is a valuable asset.

All too often though, our focus and attention get hijacked, leaving us feeling frazzled, forgetful, and unable to concentrate. In my coaching work with executives, these are the kinds of statements I most often hear when they've lost their focus (I may have uttered a few of them myself):

- "I feel completely overwhelmed."
- "My workload is insane, and there's never enough time to get things done when I'm in meetings and dealing with urgent issues all day long."
- "I'm mentally exhausted from the pressure and constant distractions in my office. I just can't seem to focus."

[Constant distractions](#) and a lack of time certainly interrupt our focus, but stress also plays a major role.

Chronic stress floods our nervous system with cortisol and adrenaline that short-circuits [important cognitive functions](#). Researchers have studied the negative effects of stress on focus, memory, and other cognitive functions for decades. The findings are consistent – short-term stress raises cortisol levels (the so-called stress hormone) for short periods and can jump-start our adrenalin and [motivate us to perform more efficiently in response to impending deadlines](#). Long-term stress, however, can lead to prolonged increases in cortisol and can be toxic to the brain. [Scientists also suspect](#) that high levels of cortisol over a long period of time are a key contributor to Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

When we can't focus at work because of distractions, it may lead us to feel stressed about not being productive, which then causes us to focus less, further feeding the cycle. Unfortunately, most of us don't notice our focus declining until we become completely overwhelmed. When mental and emotional exhaustion sets in, it further drains our ability to focus, concentrate, and recall information.

Fortunately, there are things we can do to break the cycle. I've found in [my research](#) that one of the reasons [why some people get burned out and others don't](#) is because they use their emotional intelligence (EI) to manage their stress. You can use these same competencies, in particular self-awareness and self-management, to improve your focus. Here's how.

Start by using your self-awareness to help you notice several things:

- **Why you feel stressed or anxious.** Before you can deal with stress, you need to know what's causing it. As simple as it may sound, it can be helpful to make a list of the sources of your stress. Write down each thing in your life and at work that's causing you anxiety. You might categorize items into things you have the ability to change and things you don't. For the stressors in the latter category, you will need to figure out how to [change your attitude toward them](#).
- **How you lose your ability to focus.** According to clinical psychologist Michael Lipson, you can [learn to sharpen your focus](#), by understanding how exactly your concentration strays in the first place. By paying attention to the patterns that lead to your lack of focus, you can begin to develop your ability to dismiss distractions and stay with your original point of attention.
- **How you feel when you can't focus.** Does it make you anxious when you can't recall information when you need it – perhaps during a job interview, a high-stakes presentation, or an important client meeting? Do you feel tense and dazed when you're racking your brain trying to find just the right words for an important email? These can be clues that you're more stressed than you may realize, and that your inability to concentrate is causing even more stress.
- **When you lose your ability to focus.** If, for example, you find yourself worrying yourself sick over something while you're driving 65 mph on the highway with a car full of kids, you're putting yourself and others in real danger. This can be a wake-up call to bring your attention back to what you're doing and make a decision to think about your concerns later.

Once you've increased your awareness of what's causing you stress and how and when you lose your focus, you can use the following strategies, which depend on your self-management abilities, to make better choices that keep you focused.

- **Do a digital detox.** In its [2017 Stress in America survey](#), The American Psychological Association (APA) found that “constant checkers” – people who check their emails, texts, and social media on a constant basis – experience more stress than those who don't. More than 42% of respondents attribute their stress to political and cultural discussions on social media, compared with 33% of non-constant checkers. While it may feel impossible to take a cold turkey break from technology, the APA says that periodically unplugging or limiting your digital access can be great for your mental health.
- **Rest your brain.** Most of us have experienced sleepless nights caused by ruminating over past events, or fears and anxieties about the future. But when you add a few of these nights together, [sleep deprivation can set in](#), making it more difficult to focus, and more challenging to receive and recall information. [Our interpretation of events and our judgment may be affected, too](#). Lack of sleep can negatively affect our decisions because it impairs our ability to accurately assess a situation, plan accordingly, and behave appropriately. Committing to the recommended 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night may seem impossible when you're stressed and overworked, but [the payoff is worth it](#).

- **Practice mindfulness.** The [research on mindfulness](#) is clear and compelling. Having a mindfulness practice decreases our tendency to jump to conclusions and have knee-jerk reactions we may regret later (and potentially cause more stress). Neuroscientist Richard Davidson says that “[Mindfulness boosts the classic attention network in the brain’s fronto-parietal system that works together to allocate attention.](#)” In other words, mindfulness is key to emotional resilience, which is a key contributor in our ability to quickly recover from stress. Don’t worry, you don’t have to be a serious yogi to practice mindfulness. You can find some simple methods for everyday people [here](#).
- **Shift your focus to others.** When we fixate on our own worries and fears, it can take our attention away from those we care about. Studies ([mine included](#)) show that shifting our focus to others produces physiological effects that calm us and strengthen our resilience. If you pay more attention to other people’s feelings and needs, and show concern for them, you can not only take your mind off of your stress but also [reap the benefits of knowing that you’re doing something meaningful for someone you care about](#).

Too many people feel like they need to work harder when they struggle to focus. [But this strategy is likely to backfire](#). Instead, pay attention to the causes of your stress and inability to focus and then take actions that promote improvements in the specific brain functions that drive concentration and awareness.

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