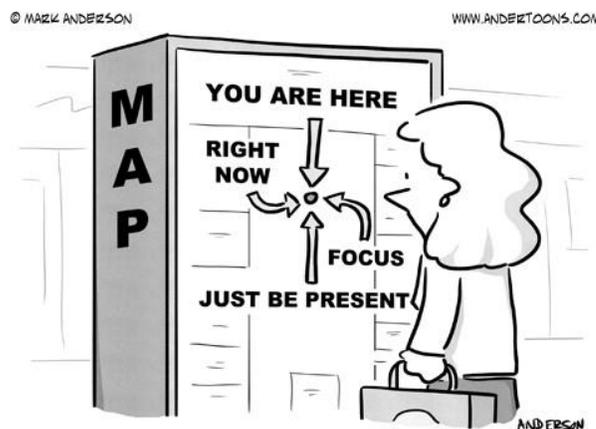


It's hard to focus

Schoolwork. Life. The news. No wonder you're having trouble concentrating. The good news is that focus can be learned and sharpened, especially if you follow these tips. As spring break approached it will be a perfect time to think about these tips and how you are going to implement them moving forward.



What could be going on? As Principals, everything is going on!

- You're trying to do too many things at once.
- Your school or personal office environment (including technology) is creating distractions or interruptions. You need to practice focusing, as you would to build any other skill.
- You're feeling tired, hungry, or stressed.
- You're distracted by a deeper issue that is bothering you, both professionally and personally.

Ways to handle it:

1. Prioritize your own physical needs.

Yeah, yeah, you need to eat right, exercise, and get a good night's sleep in order to function as a human being. We know all of this. So why do so many busy people still deprive themselves in these areas? Often, it's because you're not giving yourself permission to prioritize your own needs over other things, like the pile of work in front of you, demands from your family, school, or school districts' requests.

Small changes can make a big difference in your mind's ability to concentrate. Be sure to:

Eat healthy meals and snacks. If you have good food at the ready, you're less likely to find yourself at the bottom of a potato chip bag. And don't skip meals — it drains your energy and makes you more likely to make poor food choices when you do eat. This is not as easy as it sounds as we have supervision during lunch and then have to deal with the lunch hour hijinks. It is important to make time to eat and hopefully eat with your colleagues a few times per week.

Move during the day. Even if you exercise before or after work, make a point to get up from your desk several times a day to take a short walk or to stretch and reset. Walking can be an excellent morning or afterschool activity!

Prioritize sleep. Maintain designated sleep hours and develop an evening ritual, like reading or a short meditation, to prime your mind for sleep. We all know it, but do we choose to do it?

2. Identify and minimize your school office distraction triggers.

You're just getting started on an important task when an email pops into your inbox. You're almost done replying when a teacher asks you a question. You answer, then swing over to a social media feed for a quick news check before the district report on your desk snags your eye —right, you need to respond to that by Friday. Then, before you know it, an hour is gone, and you're still pecking away at that important thing you wanted to finish by now.

While you can't eliminate every potential distraction and interruption — principals or often need to be responsive throughout the day — you can take steps to minimize the things that tend to derail you when you're trying to get things done. Consider:

- ♦ Reducing real-time notifications, like texts, group chat, email, or social media either by turning them off completely (if you can) or for a short period while you're trying to focus.
- ♦ Quitting software applications you're not using.
- ♦ Closing extra web browser tabs (or saving them to return to later).
- ♦ Putting your phone in a drawer — for some, the mere sight of their phone is enough to draw their attention.
- ♦ Clearing your workspace of excess papers and knickknacks. Using
- ♦ headphones or desk speakers to reduce ambient noise distractions.

Note: If you go offline or away from your workplace for a period of uninterrupted work, let your admin team and other relevant colleagues know that you'll be unavailable and when you expect to return and respond.

3. Choose one task at a time to work on.

Are you still heroically trying to multitask? You're probably not as good at multitasking as you think you are, and it's hurting your productivity and increasing your stress. When you have multiple things screaming for your attention, ironically, the best thing you can do is stop work altogether — and take a few minutes to decide which *single thing* to focus on right now.

To help you determine and stay focused on that one thing:

- ♦ **Be proactive setting your top priorities.** Each week, spend 30 minutes identifying the three to five most important things you need to get done. Each day, schedule your most important tasks and do your best to stick to the schedule.
- ♦ **When a new task inevitably pops up, determine whether to let it interrupt you.** Is it more important or urgent than your top priorities? If so, stop what you were doing and shift your focus. If not, don't try to multitask — instead, write it down so that you can put it out of your mind for now.
- ♦ **Batch small tasks in 30-minute blocks at the end of your day or between meetings.** This way, you can tackle the little five-minute requests all at once, rather than letting them slice up your attention when you're trying to do something more important.

4. Set up a system of time goals and rewards to build your ability to focus.

Instead of beating yourself up when you can't concentrate, give yourself a small, doable time goal — then a reward for making progress.

Select an achievable time duration, whether that's five minutes or 30. Set a timer for that duration and focus exclusively on that task. If you remember that you need to do something else during that period, write it down and get back to your selected task. When the alarm sounds, treat yourself — to a short walk or stretch, a snack you like, or just about anything you look forward to.

You can then set the timer again (and complete as many work/reward cycles as you like) or set the timer for a longer duration. If you're feeling momentum and motivation for the task you're working on, continue untimed.

5. If you're having trouble powering through, take a real break.

When your mind is overburdened or if you've been working nonstop for too long, you'll be more productive if you stop for a breather.

There is such a thing as a “good” break and a “bad” break, in terms of helping your brain recharge and refocus:

- ♦ **Good breaks:** Taking a walk, stretching, closing your eyes to daydream, taking a few deep breaths, chatting with colleagues about life outside of work, or anything else that you enjoy or that doesn't take much mental effort.



- ♦ **Bad breaks:** Catching up on emails, reading the news, making appointments, running errands, or anything else that feels like a mental chore.

Bonus: You don't need to find a "natural" stopping point in order to take an effective break. Some people find that stopping in the middle of a complex task actually makes it easier to pick it back up later and see it through to the finish.

6. Reduce your information intake.

If you're the type to ping-pong between social media feeds, news stories, and educational blogs every day in the name of staying in the know, you could be overloaded with so much information that your brain is depleted by the time you ask it to focus on hard tasks.

Consider limiting yourself: Check news or social media feeds only a certain number of times per day or week, or for a limited duration so that you don't end up mindlessly surfing. Or, unsubscribe from educational newsletters that you open and only skim but never actually get value from.

7. Acknowledge deeper issues that could be affecting your focus.

Sometimes, life comes at you from all sides: You get a text that a family member is sick. Five minutes later, you learn that a first year teacher's class you're overseeing isn't going well. Meanwhile, you're still stewing about an earlier tense exchange you had with a parent — why don't they trust you?

If stress from a deeper issue is hurting your ability to concentrate, don't try to ignore the situation. Instead, take a few minutes to identify what's weighing on your mind. You might even make a list of all of your worries, then categorize them by what you can and can't control.

For those things you *can't* control, acknowledge how you feel about them and take a few deep breaths — this won't make the problems go away, but it will help clear your head. And for the list of things you *can* control, identify one proactive step you can take (e.g., call your family member, meet with stakeholders about the project difficulties, or draft thoughtful questions for your next 1-on-1 with your boss). Then schedule or immediately do that task so you can return to what you were focusing on.

If you want more information on FranklinCovey Time Management or a one-day workshop, please contact the Professional Learning and Development Department at your very own BCPVPA by going to: www.bcpvpa.org