



Finding Focus

The secret to getting the right stuff done!

In a world full of distractions, many people don't struggle with planning their time – their diaries are organised, their calendars neatly colour-coded. The real challenge is that when the moment comes, they simply can't focus.

Activities that are important to us don't get done in the time or to the standard that we would like. Emails, messages, notifications or even just a restless mind pull us away from the task at hand.



If we really want to progress projects that are significant for our personal or professional lives we need to know how to manage our energy, our environment and develop our ability to focus.

Getting clarity on our priorities is an essential pre-requisite for deliberate focus.

Notice that some things can be done quickly, even with ease. Other tasks require a deeper state of focussed attention, and we need to learn how to manage our attention to honour our commitment to "deep work" where cognitively demanding tasks get prioritised.

Fortunately our voluntary attention, like a muscle, can be strengthened by conscious development. We need to remove distractions, calm our minds and pay deliberate attention to our chosen activity. This practice is what develops our skills and creates our results.

In this workshop we will explore how to:

- Recognise and manage your attention saboteurs
- Build daily rituals that strengthen focus
- Use your energy wisely and sustain concentration
- Find flow and make progress on the work that matters

Finding Focus at the Start

When chosen, this version of the workshop supports a specific emphasis on choosing priorities, planning and organising the year ahead.



Why Focus Matters

When people say "I didn't have time," it often isn't the whole story. All of us have the same twenty-four hours in a day. The real difference lies in how we use our attention.

You may have scheduled the time, blocked it neatly into your diary, even protected the slot from interruptions — and still found yourself scrolling, tinkering or attending to everything except the important task.

That's because focus isn't just about time, it's about where your mind is when you show up.

Attention is the true currency of progress.

Ten distracted hours don't achieve what one clear, concentrated hour can deliver. When we're unfocused, we can be "busy" all day yet move nothing forward. When we're fully engaged, even for a short burst, we create impact, momentum and satisfaction.

Sometimes we don't give a task our focus because, deep down, it isn't a real priority. At other times, it matters deeply but we struggle to summon the right kind of attention. Either way, the outcome is the same: the work doesn't get done or not to the standard we hoped.

That's why learning to manage focus matters. It's not just a matter of managing time, but of deliberately choosing where to place our energy, our attention and our best thinking. Because what we consistently focus on becomes the sum of what we achieve — and who we become.

The best days are characterised by progress:
76% of 12,000 diary entries from top scoring days featuring small wins, breakthroughs, forward movement on projects and goal completion."

Teresa Amabile in The Progress Principle

*Don't get addicted to
finishing stuff that
doesn't matter!*

What are the priorities you want to focus your attention on?

Saboteurs vs Sage

When you sit down to work, it's not always your calm, capable self who shows up. Sometimes it's a restless part of you that wants to check email, a perfectionist that insists nothing is good enough, or a pleaser who says yes to someone else's request before you've even looked at your own priorities.

We might give them different names but these are your Saboteurs. They're the voices or habits that pull you off track. They may sound familiar:

- **The Judge or Inner Critic** that tells you you're not doing enough.
- **The Avoider** that nudges you toward easier, less important tasks.
- **The Hyper-Achiever** that keeps adding more to the list, never satisfied.
- **The Pleaser** that prioritises everyone else's needs first.
- **The Stickler** that insists on getting it "perfect" and slows you down.

Saboteurs aren't enemies — they're old strategies your brain developed to keep you safe or successful in the past. But when you let them run the show, they scatter your focus. You end up busy but not productive, stretched thin but not moving forward.

The alternative is your Sage. This is the wiser, steadier part of you — the one who can pause, choose deliberately and focus on what really matters. The Sage doesn't shout, but it's always there if you give it space:

- The Sage helps you step back, breathe and notice what's most important right now.
- It brings curiosity instead of judgement, empathy instead of guilt, clarity instead of chaos.
- From the Sage, focus feels easier because you're choosing it, not fighting yourself for it.

Learning to spot when a Saboteur has taken over is the first step.

The second is deciding to shift gears and invite your Sage into the moment.

This isn't about being perfect; it's about recognising the pattern sooner and recovering faster.

Focus isn't just about shutting out the world.

It's about choosing which version of yourself you let lead the way.

Reflection Prompts

- Which Saboteur shows up most often for you when you try to focus?
- How do you usually notice that a Saboteur has taken charge?
- What simple action could you take to shift into your Sage in those moments?
- How might your work feel different if your Sage was in charge more often?

Finding Flow and Creativity

Flow is that state when you're fully absorbed in what you're doing. Time seems to pass quickly, the work feels meaningful, and your best ideas surface naturally.

Flow is not something you can force. It emerges when the challenge in front of you stretches your skills without overwhelming them. Too easy, and you're bored. Too hard, and you're anxious. In the balance, you find flow.

Flow becomes easier to reach as you build experience and expertise. The more confident you are with your skills, the more likely you are to get absorbed in a challenge that stretches you just enough. This is why early stages of learning can feel frustrating: you're still laying down the pathways that make flow possible later.

You can make it easier to find flow by:

- **Choosing meaningful work:**
Flow comes from tackling something that matters to you – or finding ways to make it matter.
- **Creating space and time:**
Protect blocks of uninterrupted time and minimise distractions.
- **Starting with rituals:**
A short routine signals to your brain, "Now it's time to focus."
- **Adjusting challenge and skill:**
If you feel anxious, break the task down. If you're bored, raise the challenge.
- **Warming up:**
It can be helpful to begin with simpler tasks to build momentum before diving into deeper, more challenging work – just make sure that you're not simply avoiding the tough stuff.

Creativity often emerges in flow, but it also benefits from rest and variety.

Learn to recognise how your body feels different when you need a break or when you're procrastinating and looking for distraction.

Taking a walk, moving your body, or shifting your perspective can help your brain make new connections. Flow may not appear on demand, but you can invite it by preparing the ground.

Reflection Prompts

- Which Saboteur shows up most often for you when you try to focus?
- How do you usually notice that a Saboteur has taken charge?
- What simple action could you take to shift into your Sage in those moments?
- How might your work feel different if your Sage was in charge more often?
- When was the last time you felt in flow? What conditions made that possible?
- What could you do to adjust challenge or skill to make flow more likely in your current work?

Managing Energy

Focus doesn't just depend on discipline — it depends on energy. Our bodies and brains run on rhythms, fuel and movement. If we want to sustain attention, we need to work with these natural systems rather than against them.

Chronobiology: are you a lark, owl or dove?

Each of us has natural peaks and dips in alertness across the day. Some people are at their sharpest early in the morning, others later in the day. Paying attention to when you feel most focused can help you schedule your deep work for those windows and save more routine tasks for times when your focus is more challenged.

Sleep Hygiene

Sleep is the foundation of focus. Adults need 7–9 hours most nights. Less than 6 hours impairs memory, reaction times and mood, leaving you foggy and less effective. Good habits include keeping a consistent bedtime, reducing screens before sleep, and creating a dark, cool sleeping environment.

Nutrition

What we eat fuels our brain. Diets high in refined carbohydrates can cause energy spikes and crashes that disrupt focus. A mixed diet rich in vegetables, protein, fibre and healthy fats helps stabilise energy levels. Something as simple as preparing a simple yet satisfying packed lunch can significantly improve your productivity in an afternoon.

Staying hydrated also matters: even mild dehydration can reduce concentration.

Movement

Regular activity improves not just general alertness but also memory and recall. Exercise stimulates chemicals like BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor) that help form and strengthen neural connections. Even short breaks to stand, stretch or walk can improve focus and reset attention. Any time that takes you outdoors will also bring additional benefits.

Reflection Prompts

- When in the day do you notice your energy peaks and dips?
- What one change could you make to improve your sleep routine?
- How does your current diet affect your concentration and energy?
- What type of movement helps you feel most alert and focused?

Managing Environment

Your environment can either support your focus or sabotage it. Choosing the right space and setting clear boundaries can make concentration and creativity much easier.

Choose Your Spot

Think about the type of work you want to do and match it to the environment:

- Need to concentrate? Find a quiet space, minimise clutter, reduce visual distractions.
- Want to create or brainstorm? A more open space, with colour, whiteboards or visual prompts, can stimulate ideas.

Cues and Resources

Colour, light and space all influence mood and energy. Experiment with what helps you feel alert or calm, depending on what the task needs.

- Keep the resources you need at hand: notes, tools, references. Having to search for them breaks your flow.
- Decide whether a keyboard, notebook or whiteboard best matches the work — each encourages a different way of thinking.
- Consider sound: silence for concentration, background music or ambient noise for creativity.

Set Boundaries

Your environment is also about people and expectations:

- You might have an "open door" policy but setting "office hours" can protect your creative or deep work time and others know when you're available.
- When someone calls/visits, state your expectations up front: "I've got 10 minutes" helps manage expectations around conversations. If longer is needed, schedule a future appointment.
- Negotiate blocks of uninterrupted time with colleagues or family. Even relatively short blocks of focussed time can be very productive.
- Triage interruptions, deal with urgent & important requests and manage the rest with simple phrases like: "I'd really like to help but I'm busy right now. Could you come back at..."

Other Considerations

Digital clutter matters too. Close unnecessary tabs or windows and silence all but essential notifications.

- A regular "reset" at the end of the day — clearing your desk, preparing tomorrow's materials — creates a cue for fresh focus the next morning.

Reflection Prompts

- What environments help you focus best? Which environments help you create?
- What cues (colour, light, space, sound) are most supportive for your concentration?
- How could you set clearer boundaries to protect your focus time?
- What one small change could you make to improve your environment tomorrow?

Managing Attention

We often think of focus as something we either have or don't, but in reality it's a skill you can train. Attention is a like muscle that strengthens with practice. Managing attention means creating conditions that make it easier to stay on task, noticing when you've drifted and bringing yourself back to focus.

Start Small

Begin with short focus intervals — even five or ten minutes. Over time, gradually increase the length. Like physical training, your ability to sustain focus grows with repetition.

Noticing Distraction

It's normal for your mind to wander. The key is to notice quickly, remind yourself what you were working on and return to your task without guilt. Each time you bring your focus back, you're strengthening the habit.

Remove Obvious Distractions

Social media and email are two of the biggest culprits. Silence notifications, log out, or set clear times for checking them. Keeping your phone out of sight during deep work sessions will help focus.

Anchor with Priorities

Have a clear priority before you start: your anchor or “most important task.” Writing it down somewhere very visible, can help keep it front of mind.

Work with Your Peaks

Research shows cognitive performance tends to peak around midday and again in the mid-to-late afternoon. Notice when you feel most alert and align your demanding tasks to those times.

More Than Willpower

Focus isn't just about sheer determination. Support it with:

- A clear lead-up routine or ritual that signals your brain it's time to work.
- Breaks to reset and recharge; even the most productive people rest deliberately.
- Finishing your day by prioritising for tomorrow, so you start with clarity.

Reflection Prompts

- What is your current “focus stamina”? How long can you work before you drift?
- What distractions catch you most often — and how could you reduce them?
- What anchor task could you set before your next work session?
- What ritual could help you switch into focus mode more easily?

Daily Focus Practice

Here's a simple template you can try:

- **Set your anchor task:** Write down the most important thing to focus on for this day/session/block of time.
- **Choose your time block:** Protect time for deep work: try 30 to 50 minutes if you feel confident, choose 10 to 15 minutes if you feel more distractable. Set a timer.
- **Clear distractions:** Silence notifications, close tabs, put phone away.
- **Begin with a short ritual:** A breath, a stretch, a phrase like "Now I choose to focus."
- **Work and notice:** If your attention drifts before the timer goes off, gently bring it back.
- **Break:** When the timer sounds, celebrate with a short (timed) break. Pause for 5–10 minutes, get up and move.
- **Repeat:** Do another block or shift to lighter tasks.
- **Close the day:** Note progress and set your anchor for tomorrow.

Practical Tools for Regaining Focus

Even with the best plans, focus slips. Distractions, interruptions and wandering thoughts are normal. The skill is not in never losing focus but in returning quickly when you do. Here are some simple strategies to help you reset in the moment.

1. The Two-Minute Rule

When you feel scattered, commit to just five minutes on the task. Set a timer and start. When the timer sounds, decide - continue, take a break or switch? Momentum, "feeling in the groove", will often carry you further.

2. Noticing and Naming

Pause and name the distraction e.g., "I'm scrolling email because I feel stuck". Then choose to return to your task.

3. Reset Ritual

Create a mini ritual: stretch, breathe deeply or use a phrase like "Back to what matters."

4. Self-Compassion

Don't waste energy on guilt. Everyone loses focus. The secret to success is in returning to your task quickly, not staying perfect.

5. Attention Anchors

Set one clear anchor task at the start of a focus block (e.g., "write methods section" is more helpful than "work on paper"). This reduces friction.

Reflection Prompts

- What is your current "focus stamina"? How long can you work before you drift?
- What distractions catch you most often — and how could you reduce them?
- What anchor task could you set before your next work session?
- What ritual could help you switch into focus mode more easily?
- What is your reset ritual?
- What two-minute action helps when unfocused?
- What anchor phrase/task brings you back?

Practical tools for prioritisation

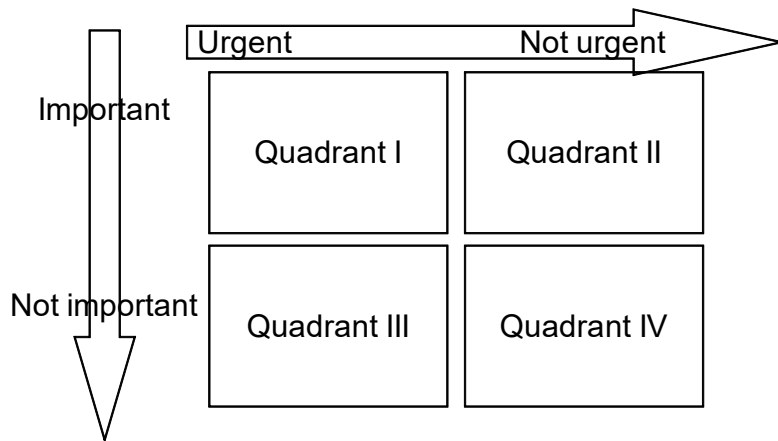
You can establish priorities for different timescales: It is helpful to have a plan for your year and then a more detailed 3 to 6 months plan works well for many projects.

In day-to-day life, a working week is actually a useful frame of reference. For both of these, the Eisenhower matrix is a useful structure to start with.

Eisenhower grid - Task management matrix:

The matrix below uses two vectors to classify your activities by asking two questions:

- Is this important?
- Is this urgent?



Can you estimate approximately what percentage of your time you spend in each quadrant?

Are you happy with that?

Quadrant 3: If quadrant 3 tasks are not important to you, who are they important for?

You need to be mindful of who is requesting the types of work that ends up in this quadrant. It might be that you can negotiate reducing this type of work, delegate it or use the 80:20 principle as you get it done.

What are the consequences of doing/not doing tasks in quadrant 3?

In general, how can you reduce the amount of time spent on "not important" stuff?

Once the important tasks have been identified they need to be scheduled in to your diary. They are the easiest to skip when time is short but the long term consequences can be severe.

Prioritising your to-do list

Once the priorities for the week are clear, you can sort your daily priorities and one useful way of categorising priorities for daily work is:

- A:** Must do **today**
- B:** Should/would like to do
- C:** Could do
- D:** Don't do – delegate or dump

Time Blocking

This simple strategy builds on the fact that most of us have varying levels of energy and focus during the day and setting aside blocks of time for/aligned with different types of work.

- **Deep Work:** Requires focus, little interruption
Writing, data analysis, grant applications
Book these in your calendar for mornings (if that's when your brain is freshest)
- **Shallow Work:** Still necessary but don't require intense focus
Admin, email, responding to student queries
Batch together smaller tasks that require a similar energy or focus.
- **Matters Arising:** Leave buffer time to absorb these without derailing other things
Unexpected meetings, last-minute crises, requests, things that appear in your inbox.

Pro Tip: Colour-code your calendar: eg, blue = deep work, yellow = shallow work, red = meetings. At a glance, you'll see if your week is aligned with your priorities.

Time blocking isn't about being rigid, it's making sure your important work gets the time it deserves.

Resources include:

168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think by Laura Vanderkam
Deep Work by Cal Newport
The Talent Code - Grow Your Own Greatness by Daniel Coyle
The Progress Principle by Teresa Amabile
Atomic Habits by James Clear
Willpower by Roy Baumeister
4000 hours by Oliver Burkeman
Focus: the hidden driver of excellence by Daniel Goleman
Stolen Focus by Johan Hari
Indistractable by Nir Eyal
The Distracted Mind by Adam Gazzaley & Larry Rosen
Building a Second Brain by Tiago Forte



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