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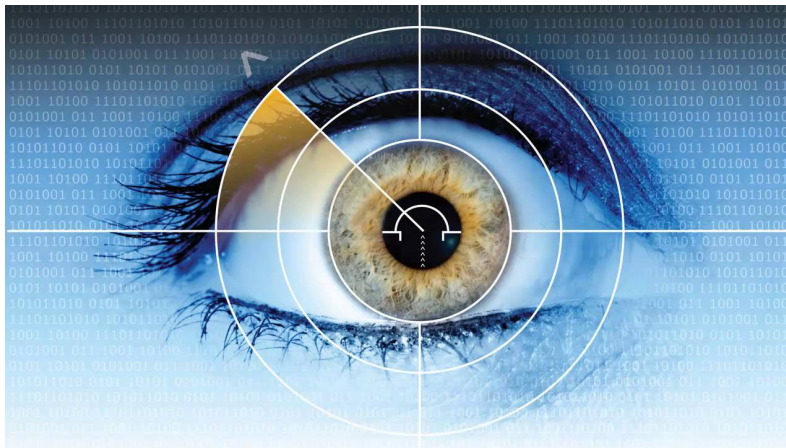
The Art & Science of Focus

By Joe Hunt

Birds do it. Bees do it. All humans do it, but not always well or for long. Focus is a primary ability of all living creatures, built into DNA as a necessary skill for thriving in nature. When humans pay attention and focus fully on a task, they learn, understand, and act decisively.

Human beings, although blessed with smart brains, aren't always good at focusing attention and overriding distractions, often with dire consequences. With practice, however, focus can be improved using the FANS method.

1. **Focus without judgment:** Simply observe what is present.
2. **Awareness:** Observe all the details and issues at play.
3. **Narrow attention:** Hone in on the critical variables that will determine success.
4. **Story:** Create a story or a mental model of the situation, including the variables, next steps, and expectations.



In all of nature, focus is an instinctual reaction necessary for survival. See food, eat food. See threat, fight or flee to avoid it. However, the modern thinking brain, the neocortex, allows us to see, feel, process and decide where to focus attention and how to take the best course of action.

Focus on the wrong thing, an accident ensues. Let attention wander, take a wrong turn. Forget to call a client or listen well, miss a sale and lose that bonus.

To become genuinely productive in today's world requires seizing control of focus. With full attention to focus, mental resources get used most effectively.

At the opposite pole, most of the mistakes adults make are caused by loss of focus and attention. Dramatic cases result in passenger jet disasters, train derailments, and massive recalls of food or vehicles. Individual mistakes can cause personal tragedy, loss of opportunity and disappointment.

Beyond the mistakes, losing focus simply means less productivity, understanding, and enjoyment of everyday human activities. In sum, paying attention is critical to all learning to adjust actions and to achieve desired outcomes.



Focus Is a Skill

What is less obvious is that focus and attention is a skill that can be practiced and improved, the same skills as are involved in driving a car, cooking dinner, or playing a sport. To improve the ability to focus and successfully complete projects, you'll need to keep in mind two important facts.

1. **The practice of focus cannot be forced.** In other words, trying hard to concentrate interferes with paying attention. The result is frustration and a narrowing of vision. Instead, focus works best alongside interest and desire. It cannot be coerced. Focus needs to become a friend, one trusted to emerge as long as the interest and desire are maintained.
2. **The practice of focus requires a non-judgmental mindset, especially judging oneself.** Getting angry for losing focus compounds the distractions that are in the way of success. On the other hand, keeping focus will cause a keen awareness of those distractions. So, being easy on oneself, not judgmental, and nurturing focus as a friend reveals the distractions that are unproductive, the ones to deal with.

PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS

Practice Makes Progress

One way to practice and improve the ability to maintain focus is to approach tasks with the mindset of a learner.

Being a learner means that each time something pulls attention away, observe what that distraction is, and do so without judgment, stay detached. Shifts in attention are normal; only when they do not contribute to task completion are they distracting.

One example of practiced learning is driving a car. The attention of the driver shifts continually from one thing to another to reach a destination. The more a driver pays attention to each shift, the more consciously and safely that person will arrive. The same applies to focus at work.

Any task - be it for work or sport - can be divided into a series of steps. The more awareness assigned to each phase, the more attention gets paid to details. Thus, the more we recognize and learn about the variables that matter.

Remember the acronym **FANS** in order to practice and improve powers of focus:

1. **Focus without judgment:** Simply observe what is present.
2. **Awareness:** Observe all the details and issues at play.
3. **Narrow attention:** Hone your attention to the critical variables that will determine success.
4. **Story:** Create a story or a mental model of the situation, including the variables, next steps, and expectations.

Studies reveal that people who create mental pictures of a situation maintain focus better. They are always anticipating what's next. Building mental models takes control of attention. When something deviates from the model, the model builder becomes alert and takes action to adjust.

Today's 24/7 world means a constant stream of incoming stimuli and distractions. Mental models help triage information and offer choices as to where to direct attention. Better decisions can replace indiscriminate reactions.

Conversations with Focus

One of the most imperative reasons for improving the ability to focus is to maximize the effectiveness of communication. Completing projects at work, playing team sports, and countless other tasks involve communication and collaboration with others.

The biggest obstacle to good communication is the inability to focus on the dialogue that is received during conversation. It is difficult to listen without assuming knowledge regarding what's being said, and shifting focus toward formulating a response at the same time. It's a natural reaction to agree or disagree almost immediately. That judgment interferes with listening and observing. It distracts the listener from absorbing important information.

I titled this article The Art & Science of Focus because "Being Focused" is a component of cognition, but the ability to develop and apply Focus in an art. Focus can be improved through conscious practice on any task, anytime, anywhere. To improve focus and achieve better outcomes, whether at work or play, join the **FANS** of Focus: **Focus** without judgment, become **Aware** of details, **Narrow** attention to key factors, and create a **Story** to anticipate what matters most. Take charge of your attention and ward off distractions.

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