

How to Focus Transcript

Chapman Learning Commons



Introduction

As a student, I know that it takes focus to get through day-to-day student life. Whether it is paying attention during lectures, doing readings, or completing assignments, all those tasks require focus. It's easy to overlook the fact that focus is a skill that can be cultivated.

To work on my focus, I'm targeting:

1. Distractions
2. Brain fog
3. Stress

1. Distractions

When I'm working on assignments and notifications pop up on my phone, I find it super distracting and it disrupts my focus. I find it hard to get back on task, especially when checking my phone is so much more fun! To try and prevent these distractions, here's what I like to do:

First, I turn my notifications off and set my phone to focus mode. If I don't hear the noise, I'm not distracted from my work. If I still find myself staring at my phone, I just put the whole thing away, either in my pocket or in a different room. Out of sight, out of mind really works.

You might also consider limiting the screen time for certain apps in your settings. For me, I find it important to make sure my computer notifications are turned off too, since I can't exactly put my computer in my pocket! Instead, I find website blockers really helpful. That way, if I'm on a website that's particularly distracting the blocker stops me, and I'm reminded to get back to work.

Another thing that helps me focus is music. I like to listen to a relaxing jazz tune or some lo-fi beats when I'm working. Maybe for someone else it's Swedish punk rock; whatever gets your head in the right mindset is what we're looking for. Music without lyrics is most helpful for me so that I don't get distracted by what they're saying.

However, an important thing to remember is that music can hinder recall on an exam if you're not listening to the same music you studied to, so keep that in mind. (Balch et al.)

2. Brain Fog

Sometimes, when I've been working nonstop for a long time, my brain starts to feel like it's going to completely shut down. Brain fog is that feeling when your brain is tired and you just can't think straight. This shows up in all sorts of ways, whether I'm falling asleep at my desk, zoning out, or going on autopilot and submitting an assignment to the wrong course. There's not really one right way to combat this, because there's probably multiple reasons why this is happening.

The first thing I think about is how much sleep I'm getting. Sleep plays a huge role in our ability to focus and I can always tell when I'm overtired because I'm unable to focus. The Chapman Learning Commons website has some great resources on the link between academic success and sleep and I highly recommend checking them out to see why sleep is so important.

Some other things that help with brain fog are exercise and fresh air. Research shows that there are many mental health benefits to being outdoors. Taking advantage of the nature in your city on a nice day could improve your cognition and wellbeing (Lackey et al.). Personally, I find that any movement in my body that stimulates blood flow has a positive effect on my ability to focus, in addition to re-energizing me.

3. Stress

Stress takes away our focus by drawing attention away from the task at hand. In my experience, when I feel like I have too much work to do I get stressed thinking about everything I have to accomplish, making it hard to focus. This is pretty ironic because if I could just focus and get my work done, I wouldn't be as stressed. While some amount of stress is totally normal, there are lots of ways that we can stay on top of things!

Being able to manage my time effectively helps me stay on top of tasks and it gives me a good idea of what my day, week, and even term will look like. This helps to reduce my stress because I feel like my life is more in control and my tasks are more manageable. The Chapman Learning Commons has lots of great resources on time management that I encourage you to check out.

That said, too much stress isn't good. Stress can come from all aspects of our lives, whether it is academic, personal, or from external factors. Regardless of the root of it, it's important to ask for help when you need it.

Resources such as AMS Peer Support and UBC Counseling Services or even talking to a friend can lift some of the weight life's pressures can put on us.

Conclusion

This video touched on some of the main challenges I experience when trying to focus, but it does not cover all the challenges you might face. Similarly, just because something worked for me doesn't necessarily mean it will work for you – we're all different!

If you have a solution that works for you that I didn't talk about, I'd love to hear it! Please share them below in the comment section.

This video is one of many student toolkits created by the Chapman Learning Commons at the University of British Columbia. To learn more about ways to excel at university, take a look through the learning Commons website at learningcommons.ubc.ca or come visit our Chapman Learning Commons Help Desk on the 3rd floor of the Irving K. Barber Learning Center.