3 Ways to Find Your Focus When Your Mind Is Wandering

We can use our breath as a tool to recenter and stay productive.

Thrive Global invites voices from many spheres to share their perspectives on our Community platform. Community stories are not commissioned by our editorial team, and opinions expressed by Community contributors do not reflect the opinions of Thrive Global or its employees. More information on our Community guidelines is available here.

By Amishi Jha, Principal Investigator, Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of Contemplative Neuroscience, Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative, UMiami
To find your focus, the first skill you need to develop is to notice when your attentional flashlight has wandered away from the task-at-hand. In this first “core exercise,” your goal is to repeatedly find your flashlight. This is the workout: orient attention to a target object, notice when it wanders off-target, and then reorient it back to the target.

Think of this like training a puppy. Wandering around is just what puppies do. No need to be harsh or mean. But you should be consistent and clear with your instruction, over and over again. If the puppy does not follow a command, we don’t indulge stories about how bad, flawed, untrainable, or unlovable the puppy is. Instead, we simply begin the training exercise again. Adopt a similar supportive-yet-firm attitude as you engage in this workout—and notice when old mental habits like justifying, chastising, or ruminating show up when you notice your mind-wandering. Now, reframe “mind-wandering” itself: it’s not a failure or error, but rather a cue to begin again and reorient back to the target object. The more
often you gently guide your attention back, the more easily it will follow—just as your puppy will learn to do. Your mind will begin to get more attuned to noticing when you've wandered off, as well: with more practice, you'll grow more able to notice the initial pull on your flashlight away from the target object, instead of becoming completely lost or hijacked before you do. All this will make bringing it back to the target easier, too. When we are able to find our focus more easily, we waste less time, experience fewer dips in mood and fewer spikes in stress, and worry less when we have something important to get done—whether for work, for others, or for yourself.

And interestingly, just as you improve your ability to notice when your mind has wandered, you begin to notice when you may need to truly let it freely roam. When we got our dog, Tashi, I loved taking him to the dog park for this very reason. Once the leash was removed, he was off, exploring, playing, running free. I felt like I was seeing a new part of him, his curious, exuberant-friendly-joyful side. And for those few minutes, I would choose not to take out my phone. I let myself get reacquainted with my mind without an agenda—no problem to ponder, no emails to answer. This small act was like a gift I gave myself. I noticed creative ideas bubbling up, a feeling of good-heartedness reemerging, and a buoyant energy returning back to me. Tashi and I would both return home with an extra little bounce in our steps. But I would not have been able to really let go of my flashlight if I didn't know where it was or how to hold it in the first place.

To find your flashlight, you'll draw on a foundational mindfulness practice often called breath awareness. This practice has been around for millennia. Contemplative traditions tell us that it cultivates concentrative focus. And now we know, after many studies, that it is also part of a suite of practices that can serve as cognitive training for attention. Breath awareness can seem deceptively simple: focus your attention on your breath, and when the mind wanders, return it. The instructions are quite basic, yet what the exercise is actually doing to your brain's attention system is anything but. The breath awareness exercise targets all three systems of attention, because it allows you to practice focusing—as you orient attention to the breath; noticing—staying alert and monitoring ongoing mental activity to detect mind-wandering; and redirecting—executive management of cognitive processes to make sure we return and remain on-task.
Why do we use the breath? We could potentially place our focus on any number of things. Training the flashlight of your attention on anything, and then bringing it back when it wobbles away, can certainly help you, and in fact I encourage you to try this during the day when there's something you want to bring your full attention to: listening to a lecture, briefing, or podcast; reading or writing a report; practicing a musical instrument. But for this daily practice, we use the breath for a couple of important reasons: It anchors us in the body. It allows us to experience the body sensations that are unfolding in real time as we breathe, in the here and now. This helps us more easily catch when our minds have wandered away from these sensations to thoughts about the past or future. And finally, our breath is always with us. It's the most natural built-in target for our attention that we can always return to.

Your breath is a changing, dynamic target, and in this exercise, your attention is to be constrained to a single, prominent, breath-related sensation in a specific body part (like your chest, nose, abdomen). The key is to select a specific target object and stick with it for the duration of the formal exercise. Remember that this is a concentrative practice—the flashlight's beam is narrow and steady on the target. One of the next practices will ask you to take that beam of your attention and sweep it through the body; later, we'll progress to a practice where you have no target to focus on, but will be monitoring the shifting contents of your moment-to-moment conscious experience—your memories, emotions, thoughts, and sensations—without getting caught up and swept away by them. To succeed at any of these later practices, you need to strengthen your flashlight first. And all these together are helping you learn how to pay attention to your attention.

CORE PRACTICE: FIND YOUR FLASHLIGHT

1. Get ready . . . Sit in an upright, stable, and alert posture. You want to be comfortable, but not overly relaxed. Think "upright," not "uptight." Sit up straight, shoulders back, chest open, in a posture that feels natural and embodies a sense of dignified presence. Let your hands rest on the armrest, or on the seat beside you, or on the tops of your legs. Close your eyes, or lower your eyelids to have a soft gaze in front of you, if that's more comfortable. Breathe, and follow your breath. You are following the breath moving at its natural pace—not controlling it.
2. Get set . . . **Tune in to breath-related sensations.** These may be the coolness of the air going in and out of your nostrils, the sensation of your lungs filling up your chest, your belly moving in and out. Choose one area of the body—related to whichever breath-related sensations feel most prominent—to focus on for the rest of this exercise. Direct and maintain your attentional focus here, like a flashlight with a strong, bright beam.

3. Go! **Notice when your flashlight has moved . . . and then move it back.** The real work of this exercise, after you’ve chosen the target for your flashlight and committed to resting your attention there, is to pay attention to what happens next. Notice when thoughts or sensations arise that pull your flashlight off-target. It could be a sudden reminder that there’s something you need to do right after this. It might be a memory, floating up. It might be an itch! When you notice that your flashlight has been pulled away, re-direct it back to your breath. Nothing special to do other than this simple, gentle “nudge” that acts supportively to move the flashlight back.
“Proven practices to take control of our focus and become our best selves. A must read for our distracted times.”

—DANIEL GOLEMAN, author of #1 New York Times bestseller Emotional Intelligence

FIND YOUR FOCUS
OWN YOUR ATTENTION
MIIND
INVEST 12 MINUTES A DAY

AMISHI P. JHA, PhD


— Published on October 19, 2021
Amishi Jha, Principal Investigator, Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of Contemplative Neuroscience, Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative, UMiami

Dr. Amishi Jha has a Ph.D. from the University of California-Davis, post-doctoral training in brain imaging at Duke University, and was a faculty member at the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania prior to her current post. Her research focuses on the brain bases of attention, working memory, and mindfulness-based training. With grants from the US Department of Defense and several private foundations, her current projects investigate how to best promote resilience in high stress cohorts using contemplative/mind training techniques that strengthen the brain’s attention networks. She was selected as a Science and Public Leadership Fellow by PopTech, and serves on editorial review boards of Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, Frontiers in Cognitive Science, and Frontiers in Psychology.

Share your comments below. Please read our commenting guidelines before posting. If you have a concern about a comment, report it here.
You might also like...

**COMMUNITY** // November 19, 2018

**Mindfulness In 2 Minutes—It Really Is This Simple**

by Brian Pennie

**COMMUNITY** // April 28, 2021

**For Mindfulness, Distraction Is the Practice – 5 Simple Ways to Embrace Your Wandering Mind**

by J. A. Plosker
How to Refocus Your Wandering Mind

by Nicolien Dellensen