



“God help me keep my mind on one th—ooooh, look a bird!—ing at a time”

How to Coach Focus

Sharon Livingston, Ph. D.

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Originally trained as a psychotherapist, Dr. Sharon Livingston has helped literally thousands of people. Along with her husband Glenn, she's sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. And more than \$30,000,000 in marketing consulting to a long list of Fortune 500 companies! Sharon's work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, AdWeek, The Wall Street Journal, and many more!

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Introduction

I'm a classic ENFP in the Myers Briggs paradigm of preference styles. The idea that "Creative minds are rarely tidy" is a good description of both the way I think and my desk. The joke about ENFP's is that we are very easily distracted. "God help me keep my mind on one th ... Oooo, look a bird! ... ing at a time." I have lots of windows and apps open on my Mac and frequently bounce from one to another. When I get stuck on one task, I often jump to another window or the internet. My rationalization about it is that the other open windows send breezes of cross pollination that act as potent fertilizers for my budding thoughts in each flower bed. But, is that really so? Hmmmmm. What does the research say?

Recently, there has been much attention and many studies on the topic of Focus, often vs. the impact of Multi-Tasking.

So the topic of Focus is both a difficult one and an important one for me personally to understand. I've prided myself in being a Multi-tasker. I believe I can work on several tasks at once, getting them all done better because when I get stuck on one thing, I just move to the other to refresh. That's why I have so many windows open, making it easy to click a button and change my attention to addressing an email, adding a slide to a presentation on some aspect of coaching, searching for a better graphic to illustrate something, stopping to take a sip of Green Tea that protects your brain from cognitive decline issues, getting up to feed Stewie . . . see what I mean, how I digressed from windows swapping to behavior swapping in the same sentence?!

Why do we need to know about focus as coaches?

Can I be a good coach without an ability to focus? Do I have the capability to focus? How important is focusing anyway?

These were questions I started asking myself because many coaches coming into our ICCA coach certification academy complained about the inability to focus.

No matter what we coach, focus is bound to be a critical issue with our clients. Whether it's coaching Olympic athletes or business executives, helping them understand their resistance so they can achieve and maintain focus on their goals will be a primary part of our work.

What is focus?

We talk a lot about staying focused but we really don't define well what it means. Focus is generally defined as a skill that people use to put all of their attention into completing a task and being persistent at continuing to work until the task is done. Instead of multi-tasking, it's single tasking for a prescribed period of time or until the undertaking is finished to an agreed upon level of quality and substance.

But is there really such a thing as single tasking?

Our brains are wired to work on parallel planes. While we are consciously contemplating a problem or thought other parts of our brains are busy regulating body functions, free associating to similar moments in time with the outcomes associated with them so we can make a good decision on how to react.

As I write this, I'm looking at the words as they appear on the screen and trying my best to make sense of my thoughts so I can clearly articulate my ideas about attention. It's a little harder than usual because of the topic and my resistance to reconsidering my beliefs about the way I process things. I'm aware of the temperature of my arm where it's resting against my side – a little warm, actually a little too warm, I'm almost beginning to perspire. No I have begun to perspire, when I lift my arm I realize my skin is moist. At the same time I hear the whir of the dishwasher and some banging sound from the clothes washing machine. Did Helena put a pair of sneakers in there? I'm aware of my breathing hearing the small sigh I just made. The screen on my monitor is bright. Stewie my dog just snorted. I probably should take a bio break.

There are lots of things that my body knows at any given moment that hover just under my active attention to them that are happening simultaneously - my head itches a little, I feel my leg hitting the ledge of the desk in front of me making a dent in my skin, my stomach just rumbled, it's well after lunch time, I interpret to myself. Zach the bigger dog just came over to beg for food, cutely pawing the hard wood floor.

Right now, as you're reading this, you're probably not thinking about the sole of your left foot . . . well now you are . . . but at any moment you really do have a multitude of signals being processed. So I think we are always multitasking.

The difference is selective attention. How many things, tasks can we focus on at the same time without a negative effect in performance? Can you drive and talk on the phone? Can you drive and listen to music? A talk show? Can you drive and text? Can you walk and chew gum? [Sorry, couldn't resist!] Those are true examples of

multitasking. And, clearly texting while driving is a bad idea, because you can't look at the road and text at the same time, well unless you hold the phone up to the windshield so you can see the highway and your tiny keyboard and screen . . . Oh My God don't do that!!!! I know I can't and don't want to. But you can listen to music and drive, right?

What does difficulty focusing mean?

Usually, we think of focusing as the ability to concentrate on one thing for a designated period of time. When it comes to working on two things at once, we are "switch tasking" rather than multitasking. I can't write two books at the exact same time. But I can have aspects of another book in the "back of my mind," get a brain storm from seemingly out of the blue that interrupts my thinking because of something I was writing or considering, then switch over to the other book to jot down my ideas. [That's why I like having that other file available so I can record those Aha reveries].

So rather than getting into the discussion that seems so big in the media these days about Single Tasking vs. Multitasking why don't we talk about Tasking in general.

Generally, difficulty focusing is experienced as being stuck, not being able to do the task you want to do even if you are right there in the moment, with time set aside yet the action you plan to take is not happening.

Examples that come to mind for me personally:

I know I have to exercise. I value exercise, believe it's good for me. So I put on my light clothes, socks and sneakers, drive all the way to the gym, and just sit there. Instead of getting out of the car, I stare through the windshield at the door to the gym. I watch others enter, but after a couple of guilt laden minutes, turn on the engine and drive home.

I'm writing my book. I've set aside time to work on it. I sit at the computer and nothing comes. My fingers strum the keys without typing.

I have to call the local Chambers of Commerce to set up workshops. I think of 10 things to do instead and interrupt myself, rationalizing that it's probably better to call – later, tomorrow morning, during a lunch break, next week . . .

When I asked people what they meant about difficulty focusing, a long stream of frustrations were listed:

Restlessness – can't sit still, need to move from one place to another, feel agitated, anxious, foot tapping, uncomfortable in the task, feel trapped

Fatigue – feel tired, can't concentrate because feel sleepy, eyes begin to close, loss of energy, need to get up and move around to just stay awake

Overwhelm – too much to do, too much on my plate, can't figure out where to start first, want to throw my hands up in the air and flee the field

Boredom – mind wanders, not interested, think of doing something else

Pressure – stress about meeting a deadline and/or pleasing a boss or client with a particular quality of response, or within a certain time period which seems too difficult or unreasonable.

Distractions – More than ever, we are faced with a multitude of distractions, noises, people, cell phones, computer sounds, popups, email, texts. TV, radio, games, pets, kids, stoves, microwaves. The more technology offers us the more opportunities for interruptions that take us away from any given task.

Performance Anxiety – I don't think I can do this, this is too hard, why did I think I could, I must be crazy to take on this task

Self Limiting Beliefs - how can I start when I can't see myself finishing, I'm not an expert, what do I know, I've never done this before, there are many experts out there who know much more than I do

Wandering Mind – while attempting to work on a project other thoughts come to mind which take you away from the project at hand

Lack of Discipline – feeling out of control, disorganized, lacking clear boundaries

Yep, yep, yep. I could relate to all of those at one time or another.

But even with my multi-tasking, I'm a high functioning, highly productive person. The research suggests that people who multi-task take longer to complete particular projects than those who stayed with one project at a time uninterrupted. So does that mean I could get more done if I spent more concentrated time on one thing at a time?

Hmmmm.

How to bring focus into your life

I decided to do my own research on myself and see what I discovered. There are a number of tips for those with adult ADHD [and ENFP's] which is virtually defined as a propensity to multitask rather than focus. They are useful if you take the goal of "paying attention" at face value. There are some practical things we can all do:

- Clear your desk – it's been shown that seeing clutter can be distracting and interfere with attending to other more important pursuits.
 - SL – Ugh my desk is a mess. That's why I look at my computer on the "other" desk so I don't have to see it. I have to admit that I do feel much better, happier, self satisfied when I can actually see the glass top of my beautiful very faux Louis XV desk.
- Chunk your projects into bite size pieces – Break down projects into their components and assign yourself the smaller pieces. It's easier to complete parts of a project, rather than being overwhelmed by the whole thing.
 - SL – I've always given myself permission to begin wherever I have something to say. So while any writing assignment has a beginning, middle and end, I start with what I clearly know and let the rest fall and emerge around it.
- Set time limits for decision making – rather than agonizing endlessly over small details.
 - SL – I can get caught in that trap. Glenn groans and wants to go on a long hiking vacation when I tell him it's time for me to buy a new car – sooooo many considerations – make, model, V6 – V4, performance, rear wheel, front wheel, all wheel drive, type of radio, software options, phone compatibility, interior design, upholstery, shape, visibility, and then what if I can't get the color I want!?! Have to start all over again.
- Control the number of commitments you make – many of us tend to take on too much and then struggle deciding between all the promises we've made.
 - SL – Yep. I understand that too. Being a caregiver, all of us coaches are caregivers, it's sometimes hard to say No, when someone needs help.
- Similarly, pare down your to do list to under 10 items, preferably 5 – complete these and then make a new list.

- SL - I feel myself clutching my LONNNGGGG list in my sweaty little palm. I know this makes total sense, but It's hard to do. Deadlines! That's the ticket. Let's start by looking at due dates.
- Get an accountability partner – this could be a buddy or a coach. You can let them know what your daily/weekly tasks are, and then tell them when you've completed each one
 - SL- I can tell you from personal experience that this REALLY works. Having an external person to “report” to makes me feel more responsible. I want to please them and get their accolades even more than my own and I want to look good in their eyes.
- Eliminate distractions – turn off your email and phone for periods of time so they don't interfere.
 - SL Uhm, really? I don't know if I can do that . . . I get around it by getting up super early and doing my writing tasks at 6am when no one is texting, phoning or emailing me unless they are a bot.
- Create “focus” times – start with working on one task for 20 minutes before taking a break, avoiding looking at email and texts during that time or switching to another project. Build to 90 minutes over time. It's like working out. Build up slowly.
 - SL -That works for me at 6 in the morning but a lot harder during the day. HmMMM. Maybe I should try it.
- Reward yourself – After completing a task or a portion of a project, do something nice for yourself. Go for a short walk, play with a pet, look at something you find appealing, get something healthy from the kitchen
 - SL- I like that. Particularly in the early am, rewarding myself with a big cup of Decaf Dunkin Donuts. I actually prefer Starbucks, but they're not around at that time, so DDD works great!

So these make sense, right? But what does it really mean not to focus. To me it sounded more like Procrastination.

This is a more difficult problem BUT workable and solvable.

Procrastination is more about fear of the outcome. Because in reality, the thing we push off because it will take “all day” to do, will probably only take an hour or so to complete the whole task or a reasonable piece of the project. So why not do it?

Hmmmm. Why not be my own guinea pig. This manuscript has been difficult for me to get out, so let me “focus” on it as my goal, using a model of problem assessment I sometimes use.

Goal:

(What do I want to achieve?) Write an e-book on How to Coach Focus

(By when should I achieve my goal?) Well ... 2 weeks ago, but I’ll be happy if I’m done by tomorrow.

Benefits:

(What benefits will I derive by achieving my goal?) I’ll feel proud of myself for writing on a difficult topic for myself. I’ll be able to help others. I’ll inspire coaches to guide their clients in a difficult area.

Obstacles: (Because I ... the result will be....) **Because I** keep finding other deadlines more important and other things to do – answer the phone, look at texts, look at the email that just popped up, **the result will** be this book will not be completed, I’ll disappoint both myself and Glenn. I’ll prove to myself I’m not capable of focusing. I’ll be a bad role model for the academy. ☹

Thinking:

(What must I be thinking to achieve my goal?) I must reframe my concept of myself to be one of focused attention rather than seeing myself as so creative and spontaneous as evidenced by my ease of distraction. (Really? What a crazy idea that was! How did I link distraction to creativity?)

Feeling:

(What must I be feeling to achieve my goal?) I must feel that being an author on a book about Focus demonstrates my practical side as a good balance to my creative and innovative side. They work together to make me a more effective trainer. ☺

Action:

(What specific steps must I take? – By what deadline must I achieve my goal?) I must complete this book by tomorrow instead of putting it off because tomorrow is my

deadline. I've already written the lion's share and just need to wrap it up. I have the next three hours to write and I am going to finish.

.....

OK... I've already taken two calls and gotten up to find something in the kitchen and it's only been an hour ... ugh

I want to try another approach. It's a paradoxical intervention. I'll just do it and explain.

Sharon to Sharon.

Hi Sharon.

Hi

I'd like you to imagine going into the future where you have successfully finished writing this ebook, OK?

OK

Now, really be there, see what you see, hear what you hear and feel what you feel. Pause . . . OK, now tell me three (3) bad things about being there and achieving this goal.

Hmmmm. OK . . . 1. I'll be expected to write more books on topics I didn't choose.

2. I may have to give up my self image as being light and airy and extemporaneous / not weighed down by organized approaches to scheduling [which is ridiculous because I have lots of planned meetings. Yes, but not planned writing periods. Hmmmm.

3. I'll have to worry about something else instead of this, e.g., finishing my other book!

Great!

Now imagine the other case, where you never get the book done. Again, really be there, see what you see, hear what you hear and feel what you feel. This time find three (3) good things about this result.

OK. 1. Glenn won't ask me to write another book, so I'll have less pressure on me.

2. I can continue doing my work without pressuring myself into deadlines and boxes of writing time.

3. I can feel sorry for myself and go watch some silly tv show instead that won't tax my brain.

Great! So what did you notice?

Well, I seem to hate feeling pressured. I think I need to reframe it as exciting rather than taxing. Wow, wouldn't it be fun to shock the world and come across as a guru on organization and structure. Maybe I'll even take a course in accounting, and take back balancing my check book instead of having our bookkeeper do it! That would be fun. Reminds me of when I was on the Board for QRCA the Qualitative Research Consultants Association and we had an urgent opening for a treasurer. I reluctantly but clearly raised my hand and took the job. Glenn burst out laughing when I told him, but, you know . . . I did a great job. I rose to the task and took care of business. Woo Hoo. AND, as a result of my stint as Treasurer, I went up the ranks to Vice President and then President of QRCA.

If I look at an uncomfortable assignment as a challenge rather than a drudge, I have a whole different feeling about it. My warrior mind takes over and I focus on what needs to be done. I actually enjoy the contest! AND, maybe I can reward myself with some mindless entertainment when I complete pieces and parts of it.

It's clear to me that it has to be a win-win. I need to address my fears [being pushed to do more of what I don't like, feeling overwhelmed and boxed in, being seen differently than I care to show myself] and maintain some of the perks in my life that I now enjoy. I love feeling challenged to learn something new. If I can bring that over to a subject that I have not appreciated in the past, I can breathe life into it!

Excellent! I will finish this book!

So, we just saw two approaches to understand what's keeping you from completing a task. The Harte Goal Orientation, create by Dr. Richard Harte and taught at the NGH – National Guild of Hypnotists and a paradoxical intervention where you look at the “bad” in getting a good result and the “good” in getting a bad result.

The Harte approach lays out the problem and starts to help you think through your procrastination resistance.

The Paradoxical exercise, dramatizes the resistance, bringing it to life and thereby allows us to consider solutions to help you overcome the obstacles more comfortably.

GAG - Goal Assessment Grid

Well isn't that the way we feel sometimes when we're overwhelmed and simultaneously stuck?!

So, here's another way to help take control of your GAG list

Jot down all the things you plan to do, no matter what they are. Great to do on an Excel Sheet.

In the next column, put an H for Have to do; and a W for want to do. If the item is both it gets HW.

Add another couple of columns with how well this item matches with your goals. First column is Work goals. Second is Personal goals. [You might also have one for Family Goals or Community Goals.] Give each item a score of 1 – 10, where 10 means it matches up extremely well with the goal and 1 means it doesn't match up well at all. Make sure you rate every item for your Work and Personal Goals.

Next column is for Fun vs. Dread. Give each item an F if it's something you enjoy, or a D if it's something you really don't like doing.

Take a look at your grid so far and notice what you have going on in your life and your list. How much of what you have written down are things you actually enjoy doing? If more than half of the items are Have to do's that you Dread, no wonder you're procrastinating doing them. Is there a way to take those items off your plate? Could they be done differently, by someone else?

If there are Dreaded things you must do, how can you build in a reward for getting them done – partially or completely? What rewards can you give yourself along the way?

Having gone through this analysis, highlight the ones in Green that you want to do and consider fun. Highlight in Red the ones you have to do but dread. Shrink your list to the ones that make the most sense to pursue [obviously you'll include the Have To's whether you want to or not] and create reasonable dates on the ones you will complete, in the Deadlines column. The harder or more dreaded the task, the greater the reward, but be sure to add rewards you earn for all of them in a new Column called Rewards.

It could look something like this:

Task	Have/ Want to Do	Work Goal 1 - 10	Personal Goal 1 - 10	Fun vs. Dread	Deadline	Reward
Write How to Coach Focus	H	10	4	D	16 hrs	Hike w Glenn
Write Lost in Everyday Life	W	7	10	F	Sept 1	Starbucks
Prepare for Cable TV show	HW	8	5	F	Aug 25	Lunch w Friend
Cardio	H	4	10	F	daily	Bath
Weight lifting	H	4	10	D	3/wk	Sit on the deck for 20 min doing nothing
Take Stewie for 3 walks/day	HW	1	8	F		Get hug from pup
Prepare Chamber of Commerce Talk	H	10	4	D	9/1 – going to get Kim to help me	Take Kim to lunch

You might add other columns to do your assessment.

Values: Is this task in line with something I value? Or, more importantly is it in conflict with one of my values.

How did it get on your list to begin with? Your choice or someone else's choice?

Voluntary or Mandatory. AND, in assessing, is there anyway to avoid a task like that in the future or delegate it?

Sometimes we get so caught up with all of the things we take on that we don't have time to evaluate what we're doing and why. That might be because of our jobs and upper management who pile more and more on fewer and fewer people. It might be because of family pressures. But it might also be a way to avoid figuring out what and who we want to be when we grow up. Analyzing our lists and responsibilities is a way to take a step back and see if we are in agreement with lives we've chosen for ourselves, and the lives our coaching clients have and are creating.

Conclusion

Reading about Focusing is actually a great thing to do because it forces us to Single Task for a period of time. In that sense, it's a good training ground for selective attention. However, in order to get things done and wipe them off your list, you probably would like to put some of these ideas into practice.

So I invite you to try exercises and suggestions in this article and in the attached appendix. In particular, I think you'll be fascinated by the results from the Paradoxical Intervention which helps us understand why we might not want to do a particular task and problem solve it.

There are more ideas to consider in the appendix.

Good luck turning your GAG response to a celebratory YES!

To your success!

Sharon ☺

PS – If you haven't tried the program yet, what are you waiting for?

www.TryTheProgram.com

APPENDIX

How long should we be able to focus?

The amount of time people should be able to focus varies greatly. Older children have a better ability to focus than younger kids. Researchers vary wildly on a number. Some say that teens and adults should be able to focus on something for 40 minutes at time. Others say as little as 10 minutes.

Instead of a time period, maybe you and your clients could decide what would be a time period to shoot for as a goal, like 15 minutes in people who have a lot of difficulty focusing to 40 minutes for those who have more success. You could also measure focus based on the tasks that the client completes.

There's no "magic number" when it comes to how long we should be able to focus. Pushing ourselves and our clients to maintain longer periods of time is a great goal so we can get more done.

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Other Focusing Tips That May Be Useful

There are a multitude of techniques to help develop better focus skills. Here are some to consider suggesting to your clients, but feel free to try whatever has worked for you, too!

- Anticipate your needs - If you want to be as focused and productive as possible, then you should anticipate your needs ahead of time. Consider the temperature, where you're sitting, access to water, healthy snacks, location of rest room, etc. It's hard to concentrate if your body is in need of something other than work.
- Post your top three priorities where you can see them every day. Don't just limit them to work – they need to include your personal life too. The reason why is that you'll be motivated to focus and complete work tasks so that you can focus on your personal life
- Start each day with the hardest task. Most people do mindless things first, which wastes all that fresh energy you have in the morning. Start with the task that challenges you to stay focused. Once it's done, there's nothing else to dread for the rest of the day. Some people, however, find they can only focus late at night. If that's you, plan accordingly to do your most dreaded task at that time.
- Get rid of distractions. Silence the technology. Clear workspace from clutter so that the eye has nothing else to focus on. If work tasks are a problem, shut the door of the office while focusing on a difficult task.
- For people who work in cubicles or in open areas without offices, use headphones. Noise-cancelling headphones do two things: they cut down on the noise around you and people tend to not talk to you unless completely necessary. Wear them whether you are listening to music or not. They have the same effect either way.
- Limit your internet time. Make it more difficult to find your favorite web site by taking it out of your bookmarks or play your favorite video game by uninstalling it on your work device. Instead of taking breaks throughout the day to browse the internet, schedule set time periods during the day. Same thing with games or other internet distractions.
- Maintain A Routine - This could be something as simple as putting your house and car keys in the same place every day so your day starts smoothly. You can

do the same with other essentials, lap top, iPad, cell phone, pens, carrying case. Bringing order to your things, helps you get organized.

- Set a timer - Setting a timer to go off at certain intervals can help bring a wandering mind back to the task at hand. It becomes a cue to check in with yourself on what you're doing. Is this what I planned to do? Am I on task? If not, it's a reminder to get back on.

You can also use a timer to extend periods of focused attention, perhaps starting with 10 minutes at a time and gradually building up to as much as an hour or 90 minutes.

- Build in breaks - Taking breaks is just as important as staying on task. If you plan your day to include bursts of productivity followed by short breaks, then you'll be far more focused than if you just spend the entire day "sort of" working without taking any real breaks.
- Take Notes – When you're in a meeting or talking with someone on the phone, you may find your mind drifting. It's easy to miss key points and tasks that belong on your list or OFF your list. Taking notes forces the mind to focus. AND it helps you remember what was said as well as providing a record to refer to later on.
- Surround Yourself With Organized People – especially if you're a business person, especially if you're in an executive person. Being with people who like to organize their days rubs off and you'll find yourself following suit.

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Originally trained as a psychotherapist, Dr. Sharon Livingston has helped literally thousands of people. Along with her husband Glenn, she's sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. And more than \$30,000,000 in marketing consulting to a long list of Fortune 500 companies! Sharon's work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, AdWeek, The Wall Street Journal, and many more!

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