

Choosing our focus

What to do when we want to do everything



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

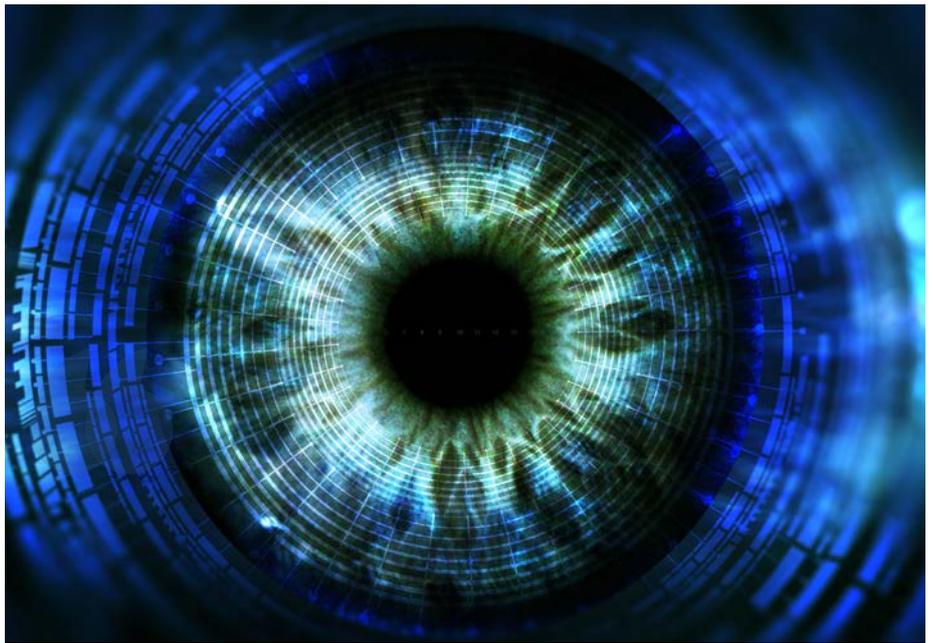
Even though I teach yoga and mindfulness alongside my coaching and therapies, I have to be careful about overextending myself. Since I was ten, teachers have told me I need to focus more. I used to hate the word but increasingly recognise its power and benefits.

Still, I've been laughing at myself while writing this feature on focus and juggling other work, emails, phone calls from my solicitor regarding my move and generally getting distracted by the news and more. I've learned that those early teachers' efforts to get me to focus on just one thing were far too limiting for the way my brain works. By focusing on a few things – for example, reading six books at a time rather than have a pile that would often creep up to 35 – I have enough variety while also seeing faster, more tangible results.

Even knowing I'm not the only one helps. Barbara Sher's delightful book *What Do I Do When I Want to Do Everything?* was helpful in letting me know I'm not the only what she calls 'scanner'. For 'divers', focus is their default.

'Focus is vital to our experience of life and is the channel through which we receive and process information about the world around us,' says **Colette Reilly**, life coach and Director of Potential in Me. 'It's a really juicy topic that's very relevant to our current world. The 'seven, plus or minus two conscious thoughts' figure originally came from the 1956 study by Miller. His aim was to explore chunking or intelligent grouping as a way to increase our effective storage capacity. The magic number of 7 ± 2 emerged as a by-product of this. More recent research suggests we have a lesser capacity; more like 4 ± 2 (Cowan 2001).

'Like everyone I'm focused on what's interesting and important to me in the moment. By nature I'm a butterfly catcher, full of ideas and living in a



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technicoloured and exciting world full of distraction. I have had to learn to focus more effectively.

'Mindfulness, writing journals and accepting myself as the creative, playful person I am, slowing down my world and becoming consciously aware of what's going on around me has been invaluable. I used to compare myself, very unfavourably, to other seemingly more focused people.

'Embracing my creativity and playfulness has been a game changer. I now create mini projects that work with my attention span to help me build momentum. I write a journal about my goals to keep what's important at the front of my mind. The physical activity of putting pen to paper helps me connect to them more strongly than when saying them out loud.

'Be curious. What do you find easier

to sustain your focus on? How do your energy levels affect this? What environments are easier to sustain your focus in? There are so many variables and as with everything, the gold lies in appreciating your own *modus operandi*... and knowing that if it doesn't work for you, you can change it.'

'Focus can be easier for some than others. It can be achieved if you understand your behavioural patterns and what makes you tick,' says **Veronica Amarelle** of Healed Soles, a personal performance coach, NLP master practitioner, MAR reflexologist, reiki master teacher and wellbeing specialist.

'Sometimes, I'm naturally focused. At other times, I have to really apply myself or put processes into place to help me to be focused. It's all dependent on how I'm feeling, the environment that I am in and what I am trying to focus on. Sometimes you just have to start and once you're engaged, the rest falls into place.'

Veronica talks encouragingly to herself and gives herself rewards and breaks on completion of tasks or focusing for a set time. She also changes her state



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by jumping, dancing, stretching or walking. 'It helps to increase circulation, produce hormones, increase energy levels and shake up the body which in turn improves focus.

'I find it most challenging to focus when I'm tired, uninterested, nervous about the outcome or my mind is elsewhere. When do you find it hard to focus? What tends to hinder your focus? Understand how you operate and put simple systems into place to help you to focus.

'Do you need a deadline to focus or maybe you need reward systems to help you to encourage focus? Having a clear idea of what your objective is for the day is really helpful. I personally find that meditating first thing in the morning helps me to reset my mind and my energy and also assess with ease what requires my attention for the day.'

'Focus is critical to everything I do and want to achieve in my life and work,' says **Bettina Pickering**, a Business and Culture Transformation Consultant and Executive Leadership Coach at Aronagh UK and Aronagh Ireland.

'I am familiar with the idea of us only being able to hold seven (plus or minus

two) conscious thoughts from my NLP training. It was eye opening and helped me to be safer when driving and also to reduce my 'multi-tasking' where possible. I also value meditation, qigong (slow and deliberate movements), yoga and similar activities a lot more. These activities allow noticing conscious thoughts and being able to direct attention and intention where it is needed.

'I was fairly focused before a brain injury I sustained in primary school. After that focus was really hard. I had to force myself to focus, keep practising all sorts of subjects over and over again until I got them. It was a start, stop, start, stop experience with a lot of failure for a long time. That constant practice all throughout school helped me later in my work life and also to help others who had focus (and thus performance or learning) challenges. I had a period where I was great at focus and it was easy for me. Nowadays, I find my focus slipping regularly due to social media, emails, various client communication media, phone, Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp and the list goes on.

'My qigong practice has been a life saver to balance the multimedia and minutiae onslaught. Meditation (like

standing tree meditation) works well as does taking lovely walks in nature. My three cats, Seamus, Paddy and Finnegan, immediately sense when I am slipping in focus and getting distracted. They get me back on track.

'I have also used TFT/Psy-Tap (tapping), hand acupuncture and NLP to get me focused when I had to complete a task I did not enjoy.

'It's most challenging when I am unwell, when I experience strong emotions and when I am tired (not enough sleep); also after a long day being bombarded by multimedia and lots of bitty interactions. Never beat yourself up if you cannot focus right now. That just creates internal resistance. Give yourself a time window to focus if you find it not easy to do so. Start with five minutes or even one minute. Be OK to stop at the end of the time window. You may find that you don't want to stop.

'If you have been stressed or engaging in multimedia for more than 20 minutes, you will need a little time to come down from that energy and focus. The more you exercise focus, the better you get at it, and the longer you can focus.' ●

