



Finding Focus in Challenging Times

Six tips to share with employees to help them find focus during difficult or stressful times

As demands at work and home increase, employees may find it challenging to be productive, becoming easily distracted or even irritated with the surrounding 'noise'. Attention issues and distractibility can be increased by stress, and are common in individuals with mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety.

In the short-term, stress can help people focus on priorities and meet deadlines with confidence, but over the long-term, stress can negatively impact our productivity, including our ability to focus on priorities, manage workstreams, and multitask. When you're not performing at your peak, how do you find focus? Here are a few tips to help find focus in difficult times.

- 1. Setting Boundaries.** Social media and digital technology have played an important role in facilitating better communication, collaboration, and innovation over the last several decades. In recent years, our reliance on these technologies for everyday tasks have devolved into frequent disruptions and distractions. Studies show that people who frequently check their social media, emails, etc., experience greater stress than those who do not. An easy way to reduce technology overload is to set boundaries and limits on your access to technology. If possible, try to limit checking email to specific times during the workday. If you find that social media has you constantly scrolling, set a timer to limit your engagement with those apps, turn off notifications of non-essential apps, and set a daily time limit for how long you need to be “plugged in” all together.
- 2. Engaging in a Digital Detox.** Consider taking a break from social media and digital news. This doesn't have to be all at once, start small by taking an hour break each day. At home, try and use that time to engage in something you really enjoy, such as taking a walk, reading a book, trying a new recipe, or conversing with a friend or family member. If you're feeling more adventurous, try “unplugging” for a full day during the weekend and see the full benefits of time without screens.
- 3. Prioritizing Tasks.** Attention is task-dependent and split among all the tasks that you are currently performing. While multitasking is a common skill, engaging in multiple tasks can reduce task accuracy and speed, and may increase stress. The more difficult and complex the task, the worse we perform when multitasking. Instead of multitasking, consider prioritizing your tasks, and focusing on one at a time. This will improve your productivity and help reduce your stress.
- 4. Practicing Meditation and Mindfulness.** Engaging in exercises like meditation and mindfulness can help form a foundation for practicing how to focus more effectively. In preparing to meditate, select a spot with little to no external distractions, a place where you can make yourself comfortable and eliminate potential internal distractions. To start, take deep breaths to slow your breathing and help yourself relax. Then, practice focusing your attention on a specific object or action, such as the feeling of your breath. If you find your mind wandering, gently try to return to, or re-focus on your breathwork.
- 5. Taking Short Breaks.** Just like any muscle, your brain can grow fatigued from continuous use, especially when focusing on complex or difficult tasks. Breaking up your day into workable chunks or setting aside five minutes every couple of hours can really help you increase focus and productivity. Consider using this time to sit in stillness and listen to your breathing.
- 6. Getting More Sleep.** Poor sleep hygiene or fragmented sleep can reduce your ability to concentrate and solve complex tasks. Before climbing into bed, make sure your environment is right for optimal sleep. Consider turning off notifications or putting your phone on vibrate or silent. If you live in an urban environment where outside noise is constant, try using white noise, or turn on a fan to help cancel out the external noise that may disrupt your sleep cycle. Studies show that eating and drinking before bed increases the risk of waking following sleep onset, try to eat or drink at least two hours before bed.

