

STRESS and CONCENTRATION



Stress Affects Concentration

The stress response is naturally activated in the presence of worries, fears, seemingly overwhelming expectations, self-criticisms, and negative perceptions. The stress response *impairs our ability to think and function*. Stress can *result in poor concentration and memory* because our minds are too worked up to focus. Trying to study when stressed is often unproductive, distracting, and can even provoke more stress.

It is important to learn how to manage stress in such a way that we can approach tasks with a clear and confident mind. While the *stress response is automatic, the relaxation response is not automatic*. Applying the “brake”, or activating the relaxation response, takes awareness and practice. Learn how you can be more aware of the impact of stress and what to practice in order to increase concentration.

Give it a try!

Practice Biofeedback Strategies to Improve Concentration

Breathe. Take a slow breath in through your nose for 5 seconds and then gently and slowly exhale through your mouth, as if gently blowing out a candle. Follow a breathing pacer or slowly breathe on your own for 2-3 minutes to clear your mind.

- **Breathing pacers** are a great way to train your body to slow down your breathing for moments of relaxation to clear the mind. A breathing pacer directs you on when to inhale and when to exhale. See our website for free paced breathing apps. We also have musical pacers under “Paced Breathing.”
- **Make an appointment** with Biofeedback to determine your optimal breaths-per-minute for this kind of relaxed breathing. Using biofeedback computer programs, you can find the best breathing rate for you to maximize relaxation and clarity of mind.

Learn and Practice Mindfulness. Mindfulness includes being aware of the present moment in a non-judgmental way. Practice being aware of your stress levels, noticing both emotional and physical symptoms, then learn to observe them rather than react to them.

Practice Relaxation Exercises. Practicing relaxation exercises during the day is a way to respond to stress signals before they become too intense and impact your ability to complete tasks and handle emotions. Practicing a short relaxation exercise for a few moments before studying can improve your ability to let go of other preoccupations and be present and focused.

Visit our website for a variety of relaxation skills, including:

- Relaxation Recordings
- Paced Breathing
- Relaxation and Meditation Apps
- BYU Biofeedback YouTube Channel
- Nature sounds background music

Counseling & Psychological Services



**Stress Management &
Biofeedback Services**

Brigham Young University

Additional Ways to Improve Your Concentration

Review and Try Out Several Ideas to Improve Your Focus

Daily Study Routine and Schedule

Tackle priorities when you feel fresh and energized. Plan to tackle your most important or difficult tasks during this time. Willpower is like a muscle where it gets stronger with practice.

Exercise

Performing some *light exercise* shortly before you need to focus can help *increase your energy, alertness and ability to focus.* Exercise is also a good study break.

Nutrition and Sleep

Eat regular healthy meals; most students find they need to replenish calories and hydrate about every 2-3 hours; bring *healthy snacks* with you. Prepare for bed by quieting your mind and relaxing your body with slow breathing, relaxation recordings, or quiet meditation. *Sufficient sleep is required for effective concentration.*

Optimize Study Time

Create a *study space free from interruptions and distractions and put away all electronic devices.* Focus on one thing at a time; multitasking is distracting. If distracted, calmly write down these thoughts to work on them later, and then refocus on your current studies.

Rewards

Identify some *meaningful rewards* you can use to motivate yourself (calling a friend, engaging in a fun activity, a snack break, etc.). Attach these rewards to your study goals and make them contingent upon finishing your specific study task or goal.

Short Segments and Study Breaks

Divide larger or difficult assignments into smaller manageable chunks and allow for needed study breaks to refresh yourself. *Set a timer for 25 minutes to focus your study time* and then allow a 5 minute break. Intersperse study topics each 25 minutes if needed.

Specific Goals

Set specific goals for what you are going to accomplish during your study session (*read pages 35-50 in the next 30 minutes; complete algebra problems 1-5 in the next 25 minutes; finish an outline of my paper by 2 pm*). Setting specific goals will help you be more focused and productive.

Study Buddy

Study with a friend who helps you stay motivated and focused, where you study the same topics or just study together. Set expectations with your study buddy to study for a specific amount of time without distracting each other and then take a break together.

Try New Study Strategies

- Use the 5 more rule – *study 5 more minutes or read 5 more pages*
- Implement a *power hour* where no matter how tired, unmotivated, or bored you feel, you will focus everything you have for just one hour of uninterrupted study time
- When in class, *take notes and review daily;* re-read notes from up to 3-5 previous classes