

Chapter 1

I Can't Think Straight!

Finding Focus

CHAPTER 1: I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT!

Your mind is racing at a breakneck speed...changing direction every few seconds. Perhaps you are plagued by phones ringing, kids demanding attention, customer complaints, employee tiffs, or simply too much on your plate. Whatever your situation, it's as though you need a traffic controller for your brain. One thought takes off. Another crosses into the same path. Several others circle in a holding pattern, waiting for permission to land. If only you could close your thought-port...just for a few moments. It would give you time to sort things out and see more clearly what is most important. You'd feel more in synch from the inside out.

You can calm mental fireworks by practicing techniques that help you to turn down the noise, hear your inner voice, release past concerns, and focus on your priorities. Whether you

“shut down” for one minute or ten, you’ll notice the difference. Try two short breaks throughout the day, or take one longer break. It’s up to you. Whatever time you can spare will add to your clarity.

Just don’t fall into the trap of postponing your refocusing break until you have more time. No matter how rich or poor, how wise or uninformed, we all have the same 24 hours each day. It’s how we choose to use that time that makes the difference. You can race from activity to activity without taking a breath, or you can choose to stop all incoming mind traffic long enough to assess what is best for you next. Imagine what a few minutes of centering might do for you. Lift your mood? Improve productivity? Enhance your creativity? Boost your confidence?

When you can’t think straight, it’s time to reset your inner compass. Here are ten quick-lifts to help fine-tune your focus. Some take as little as two minutes; none take more than ten. A small investment for clearer direction, don’t you think?

**Working with a mind in overdrive is like playing darts blindfolded:
a bull’s-eye is unlikely and mistakes can be painful.**

- S.W.Z.

10 Ways to Find Focus *Fast!*

These quick-lifts will help slow your brain traffic to a normal pace, making you more effective in directing your energy. Read over all ten and then pick one that appeals to you. In just a few minutes you'll feel less scattered, more focused, and full of energy.

1. Practice "Morning Intent"
2. Do, Defer, or Delegate
3. Learn to *Really* Breathe
4. Complete One Thing
5. Throw One Back
6. Get Physical
7. Accept a Helping Hand
8. Get Rid of the Ghosts
9. Stop Shoulding on Yourself
10. Plan Tomorrow Today

1. Practice “Morning Intent”

How often do you start each day by hitting the bricks running? Before your feet even touch the floor, you’re probably reviewing your have-to list: what you have to pick up, whom you have to call, which projects you have to complete. If that’s your normal routine, your day is likely to be busy, but not necessarily on target with your priorities. Thinking of all you have to do is not the same as making room for what is really important to you. To sharpen your focus, begin each day by planning from the inside out...using a practice I call “morning intent.”

- Each morning, before you get out of bed, while you shower, travel to work, or land at your desk, set your compass for the day, by answering these questions:
 1. What kind of person do I want to be today?
 2. What two to three things do I want to **accomplish** today?
Note: The operative word here is “want,” not “should.”
 3. Where can I make a difference in someone’s life?

If you start each day briefly focusing on what is meaningful to you, your personal values will shape your choices all day, helping you to stay grounded when your mind threatens to carry you away. You will feel more in control and less likely to get caught up in just putting out fires.

2. Do, Defer, Or Delegate

When your brain screams, “Hurry up. You’re not doing enough,” it’s time to stop and prioritize.

This three-minute planning break will put you back in the driver’s seat. Instead of reacting to every “fire,” you’ll finish what’s important first. With less on your plate, you’ll be able to concentrate.

- Write down the top ten things you’d like to complete today.
- Rate each item 1, 2, or 3. (1 = must-do today; 2 = must-do, not necessarily today; and 3 = doesn’t necessarily need to be done by you at all).
- Now, “actionize” by priorities (1 = do, 2 = defer, 3 = delegate or dump).

For a quick-lift, try this prioritizing break right now, and then again later in the day. See if your priorities change throughout the day. To maintain focus every day, consider making the 3Ds a habit!

3. Learn To *Really* Breathe

When you are hassled, your breathing becomes shallow and your brain is deprived of much-needed oxygen. No wonder you can't think! Try this cleansing breath technique.

- Close your door or go to a quiet place. Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat and your spine straight. Close your eyes and place your hand just above your waist. Now inhale slowly – to the count of six – and feel the air inflate your rib cage, as if it were a balloon pushing against your hand. Relax your chest or lower your shoulders.
- Hold for two seconds in the inflated state. Now, slowly exhale to the count of six, letting your “balloon” empty slowly and your hand sink closer to your spine. Let any tension in your neck and shoulders melt away. Say, “ahhhhh” silently, or “God,” “peace,” or “yes.”
- Repeat for a total of eight deep breaths (in two to four minutes).

When your mind is in overdrive, taker a breather...literally!

4. Complete One Thing

When we can't think straight, it's often because we've got too much stuff on our plates.

Decisions deferred or actions delayed don't go away; they just add to your pile. One way out of this clutter is to complete things systematically, before starting something new. Decide, act, complete.

- Make or review your to-do list for the week...or the day...or the hour.
- Now pick one item that you can complete or one decision you can make in five minutes or less. Make a phone call? Send an email? Decide what to have for lunch? Order a birthday bouquet? Jog in place?
- Great! Now cross it off your list and say out loud: "Done!" No matter how small a task, give yourself credit for completing it. As your list shrinks, your sense of control and competence expands. One success sets you up for another.

As you become a master of completion, you will be spurred on by your obvious progress. Feel your head clear as you cross one more thing off your list. Every time you complete something, you reduce the number of things you have to remember to do. When your mind has fewer incompletes to keep track of, it won't need to keep switching tracks.

5. THROW ONE BACK

When your mind is racing, it is often because you have caught too many little fish while you were casting for the big ones. It's up to you to know when to say "no" and throw the little ones back.

- What's one "little fish" you recently picked up from a boss, subordinate, friend, or family member? Maybe you're already wishing you hadn't said, "yes." It might be going to take more time than you originally thought. The circumstances may have changed since you signed on.
- Okay, here's where the rubber meets the road. Contact that person who lured you into a "little fish" commitment and give it back. Of course it's hard – none of us wants to risk disappointing someone – but bite the bullet. Pick up the phone or walk down the hall and tell the person that it is not possible for you to help out after all.

If you start to feel embarrassed, don't! You are righting a situation that was wrong in the first place. Okay, you made a mistake. Any discomfort you feel will be offset by the relief of clearing one thing off your plate. Next time you'll think before you get hooked. Maybe you'll even learn to say "no," more often or at least not volunteer when you have a full plate.

6. GET PHYSICAL

When our minds race so rapidly that we don't know which way is "up," it often helps to get physical. It may seem ironic, but it works. As you focus your energy on a physical task, the "traffic" in your mind will begin to thin out.

- Go for a walk.
- Run up and down a set of stairs, or hit the treadmill, if you have one handy.
- Dig in the garden, play with the dog, or wash a floor.
- Wherever you are, stop for three minutes of push-ups, sit-ups, or jumping jacks.
- At work, shoot a few baskets (into the wastebasket) or sprint down to the corner café to pick up that latte or lunch.

If the energy drain is all in your head, get the lead out, and move the rest of you. It's astounding how much mental clarity you can bring about by getting your body involved. See if you don't feel more self-directed after shifting your energy from your head to your feet.

7. ACCEPT A HELPING HAND

When we really need a break, it's often because we are trying to do everything alone. We might not know what we want, hesitate to ask for help, or hint rather than ask for the kind of help we'd like. Also, we may be too critical about how someone helps. In the interest of your mental and physical health, try a more effective way to getting the help you deserve.

- The first step to getting what you want is to know what that is. What do you truly need today? Could your spouse take over a task at home? Would a coworker represent you at a meeting? Might a friend meet you for lunch? Could you use a miracle?
- The second step is admitting that you need help – to yourself and then to someone else. The jig is up. You are not a Superhero. You need some help.
- Now ask specifically for what would help you most. No hinting or implying. Be assertive. Whether you're asking for divine guidance or help from a mere mortal be clear about what you'd really like.

Remember, if an offer of help does arrive, don't insist that it be done precisely your way. Try not to second-guess or nitpick. You've caught a break...and you deserve it. Now give the "helper" a break. Be grateful.

8. GET RID OF THE GHOSTS

One common challenge to managing mind traffic is keeping ghosts of the past at bay. No matter how hard we try to stay in the moment, our attention often wanders back to the past. For clearer thinking, you've got to become a Ghost buster.

- Jot down on the top of a card: "I wonder why...[somebody did something]." List as many possible answers as you can in sixty seconds. Finish with a "letting go" statement, such as "Whatever the reason, it's done...time to move on." Rip up the card, and if the thought returns, try repeating your letting go statement.
- On another card write: "I wish I'd said...[the brilliant response you thought of later]." Now, either follow-up on the earlier interaction with your new response, or save the new comment for a future interaction.
- On a third card, write: "In hindsight, I didn't make the best choice when I decided to [whatever behavior you now regret]." Write as many regrets as surface in sixty seconds. Review your list, and shift your attention to decisions you now face. If your mind wanders back, try repeating something like: "That was then; this is now. I've got bigger fish to fry." Then bring your focus back to the present.

Carrying around thoughts of the past is a problem of sheer volume. Clean out your mind clutter so you can see what's best for you next.

9. STOP SHOULDING ON YOURSELF

When you can't think straight, "should" is a good word to eliminate from your vocabulary. It resonates with judgment and guilt, and is often followed by a knee-jerk reaction rather than a deliberate decision. First, post this reminder on your telephone or daily calendar: "There are no shoulds." Then try this quick-lift.

- Check your to-do list for any "shoulds." If you find any, ask a few questions: Am I doing this to avoid conflict? To look good? Out of guilt? Because I want to?
- If you answer, "Because I want to," why are you perceiving it as a "should"? Reframe how you think about it, making it a choice. "I want to" energizes; "I have to" depletes.
- If you can't say, "Because I want to," don't do it! Risk displeasing someone, ignore your ego, or find another way to deal with any guilt.

"Shoulding" indicates you have surrendered your power of choice and are following someone else's rules. The next time you find yourself thinking, "I should," ask yourself, "Who says?" The answer may surprise you.

10. PLAN TOMORROW TODAY

When you can't think straight it's so important to plan before you move into action. That way, you won't make hasty decisions or let others pull you off course. The irony is that when we're feeling frazzled is precisely the time when we avoid planning because we haven't the time.

One way to increase your sense of control and add a little order to your day is to make a habit of planning your tomorrow at the end of today.

- At the end of the today, review all that you have accomplished. Then write out your plan for tomorrow: what has to be done, when, and about how long each project will take. In what order should you tackle each project? When will you schedule in a quick renewal break? Any pre-appointments you need to work in? Don't forget to schedule in some "emergency response" time. If you're like most of us, you'll need it.

After ten minutes of planning, you should be able to release your fixation on tomorrow's tasks and focus on enjoying your evening. When tomorrow does come, you'll come out of the gate with direction and energy. You'll know where to start and have a plan for getting important things done.