Concentration and Strategies for Controlling It

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Concentration

- The ability to direct one’s attention to appropriate cues in the present task while screening out irrelevant external and internal stimuli.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Stimuli</th>
<th>Internal Stimuli</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience booing</td>
<td>Distracting body sensations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad officiating</td>
<td>Irrelevant feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsportsmanlike conduct</td>
<td>Dysfunctional thoughts</td>
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What do we mean by good concentration?

Under *maximal* demands, it entails:

1. Selective attention to appropriate cues
2. 100% attention to the task at hand
3. Staying totally in the here and now
4. Keeping appropriate focus over appropriate length of time
5. Quickly shifting attention based upon changing demands.
Problems Concentrating Often Occur

- After mistakes
- When stressed out
- When not sufficiently motivated
- When over motivated
Why Arousal Influences Performance

Attentional narrowing

a. Optimal attentional field — moderate (optimal) arousal

b. Attentional field too broad — low arousal

c. Attentional field too narrow — high arousal
Why Arousal Influences Performance

• Increased muscle tension, fatigue, and coordination difficulties
• Changes in attention, concentration, and visual search:
  • Narrowing of attention
  • Shift to dominant style
  • Attending to inappropriate cues
  • Performance worries and situation-irrelevant thoughts
  • Visual cues are differently identified and processed when performers are anxious
Types of Concentration

- Consider Width of Focus
  - broad
  - narrow
- Consider Direction of Focus
  - internal (strategize, feelings, etc.)
  - external (ball, opponent, etc.)
- Results in Four Dimensions of Attention:
  - Assess
  - Perform
  - Analyze
  - Rehearse
## Types of Concentration

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<th>External</th>
<th>Internal</th>
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<td>Quarterback dropping back to pass  &lt;br&gt; Basketball player starting a fast break  &lt;br&gt; Golfer assessing hole  &lt;br&gt; Lawyer presenting to a jury</td>
<td>Monitor neck and shoulder tension  &lt;br&gt; Deep breath to relax  &lt;br&gt; Mentally rehearse a skill  &lt;br&gt; Memorize a fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitter tracking the ball  &lt;br&gt; Sighting as a marksman  &lt;br&gt; Golfer addressing a ball  &lt;br&gt; Reading a test question  &lt;br&gt; Reading in noisy setting</td>
<td>Analyzing mental strengths  &lt;br&gt; Coach formulating a game plan  &lt;br&gt; Planning essay answer  &lt;br&gt; Clinician forming a diagnosis</td>
</tr>
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Four Types of Attentional Focus

**Broad**
- Used to rapidly assess a situation (e.g., a soccer player rapidly assesses the position of the defensive team)

**Width**
- Narrow
  - Used to focus exclusively on one or two external cues (e.g., the ball or position of opponent)

**Direction**
- External
  - Used to mentally rehearse an upcoming performance or control an emotional state (e.g., mentally rehearse tennis swing or taking a breath to relax)
- Internal
  - Used to analyze and plan (e.g., developing game plan or strategy)
Exercise: Do Your Own Attentional Style Analysis

External

Broad

Internal

Narrow
TAIS Attentional Style Scales

- **BET** *Broad External Attention*: High scores = good environmental awareness and assessment
- **OET** *Overloaded by External Information*: High scores = errors because focus on irrelevant external stimuli
- **BIT** *Broad Internal Attention*: High scores = good analytical planning skills
- **OIT** *Overloaded by Internal Information*: High scores = errors due to distractions from irrelevant internal sources
- **NAR** *Narrow-Focused Attention*: High scores = can remain oriented on task and avoid distractions
- **RED** *Reduced Attention*: High scores = errors due to a failure to shift attention from external to internal or vice versa
Choking
An Attentional Problem

Conditions leading to choking
- Important competition
- Critical plays in a competition
- Evaluation by coaches, peers, and parents

Physical changes
- Increased muscle tension
- Increased breathing rate
- Racing heart rate

Performance impairment
- Timing and coordination breakdown
- Muscle tightness and fatigue
- Rushing
- Inability to attend to task-relevant cues

Attentional changes
- Internal focus
- Narrow focus
- Reduced flexibility
Prevention and Treatment of Choking

• Train performers to recognize and lessen physiological over-arousal
  – Practice in situation specific scenarios
• Train performers to reinterpret physical feelings as facilitative (e.g., “I’m ready”)
• Use simulation and rehearsal to compensate for lack of experience and desensitize to unexpected
• When performing, train to focus on cues related to the process rather than outcome
• Develop detailed and consistent pre-performance routines
• Provide training to recover quickly from the unexpected