

4. FOCUS

*Rarely will you see an athlete who hasn't put on ten or fifteen pounds over a full career,
but even rarer are the ones who don't put on the same amount of mental fat.
That's the biggest killer of aging champions,
because concentration and mental toughness are the margin of victory.
-Bill Russell-*

If you ask experts to identify which mental skill is the most necessary to become the best in a domain, many of them will tell you that it is the ability to focus. It is without a doubt a fundamental aspect of performance and life and if you want to improve, you must examine your focus. How would you rate this ability of yours? Tell help you answer this, ask yourself, "How many times do I lose focus during my day? Do I lose focus when I practice my sport? Do I lose focus at work or at school? Do I have difficulty concentrating during competitions or exams? What about when I am with loved ones, am I totally connected to them or do I think about what I should be doing or what I need to do tomorrow? Your responses will give you a general idea if improving your focus should be a priority right now.

FOCUSING...
Simple or complex?
Conscious or unconscious?
State or process?

The ability to focus or concentrate may appear to be simplistic enough but in reality, it can be quite a complex process for many people. If your coach tells you to "focus" today during practice or your athletic trainer tells you to "pay attention" during your workout at the gym, will you know what to do? Will you really know where to center your attention? If your answer is "no," you're not the only one to have this answer. This is why mental preparation is so important. The process in which you engage to figure out, either alone or with someone else (i.e., coach, teacher, parent) how and where you should focus your attention is in fact "mental preparation." This process is part of learning and mastering any new skill. Remember from the previous section that it takes approximately 40 hours of deliberate practice to become proficient at performing a particular skill? Part of these hours are likely spent figuring out how and where to focus your attention (i.e., look at the ball, tune into your breathing, feel your hips rotate, hear the sound of the snow underneath your feet).

Now, what helps you to focus? Within you, your 6 senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, and let's not forget, feel) are indispensable vehicles in the process of focusing. Your senses lead you to unconsciously process a tremendous amount of information during any given day. However, you can also consciously control your senses to help you focus on particular cues within you or outside of you in your environment. In other words, you can choose to activate one or any combination of senses when performing a task. For example, you can choose to *look* at your opponent, *feel* your swing, or *hear* the whistle. So in reality, **focusing is a choice**, it is something that you can regulate most of the time, which means that you can take ownership of your personal process of focusing. Isn't this empowering? At first, especially when you are learning something new, you might need to invest more time and conscious effort to focus (i.e., tell yourself which information to process at which time through your senses). However, once you have mastered a task, this likely will be done automatically. You will not have to think about

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looking somewhere or touching something, you will just do it. I would think that this is what most people aim for in most situations.

In my opinion, focusing is a process and not just a state in and of itself. I say this because we come in and out of focus several times as we perform a task or a series of tasks. Let's face it, although we might try really hard, it is impossible to stay focused 100% 24/7 so we need to recognize not only when we are and are not focused but also to what depth or intensity we are focused. Some days, it is very easy to concentrate. We are completely absorbed in what we do and we are extremely efficient and effective. On other days, it is near impossible to stay connected to what we are doing for any length of time. Perhaps it is because we are more tired, we are feeling sick or stressed out, or we are preoccupied with too many things at once. Whatever the reason, figuring out and engaging in our personal process of focusing will allow us to recognize when our attention is not at the right place at the right time (this is assuming we have figured out where it should be) and do something to re-center it. Does this process sound familiar to you? Don't you find it is similar to the resonance process I described in the first section? In fact, let me make the connection for you.

The process of resonance allows you to really fine tune your 6th sense of "feel." When you engage in your process of resonance, you might have all of your senses activated but your main focus is on "feeling" your way through a task. If you have designed your own resonance process and have developed strategies to help you remain engaged as often as possible, I would argue that you have also figured out to a large extent your process of focusing. If feeling the way you want to feel typically allows you to have the best performances (whatever the task or domain may be), why shouldn't this be your focus?

So let me ask you... What is your best focus? Is it when you are *consciously* and fully engaged, paying attention to every single detail of what you are doing to make sure you execute to near perfection? Or is it when you are so absorbed in what you are doing that you *don't have to consciously* think about anything? You can just let it happen almost effortlessly and feel your way through it? Maybe it depends on the situation. Maybe in some instances you are consciously aware but in others, you are not. What's important is that you figure out your best focus for different tasks. Even more important, you must develop a process that will enable you to connect to your focus and sustain it over time. In this process, you must also put in place strategies that will allow you to re-access your best focus when you lose it.

In the process of resonance, obstacles can not only prevent you from feeling the way you want to feel, they can also take away your focus. Take for example when a referee makes a bad call. How does this make you feel? Angry? Guilty if you've been the cause of the bad call? How does this affect your focus? Do you keep dwelling on your mistake or the referee's bad call? How do you feel as you keep dwelling on it, probably worse and worse. What happens to your performance? I think this simple example demonstrates how your focus and the way you feel can be directly related.

Remember we talked about your response to your initial response when you face an obstacle? Just like you want to know how to respond when you don't feel the way you want to feel, you also want to know how to respond when you are not focused. If I may make another link, when you do something to reconnect with how you want to feel (e.g., taking a deep breath, recalling an image of your best performance, calling your friend for support, writing in your journal), you

are shifting your focus to try to feel better, at least in most situations. You are **choosing** to focus on “feel” and rely on this sense to not only feel better but perform better.

Defining and exploring the intricate skill of focusing

We have examined the process of focusing and how you can personalize this for yourself. Let's now take a narrower look at the intricacies of the skill of focusing.

Focusing can be defined as the ability to **direct** and **maintain** attention on task-relevant cues while ignoring those that are irrelevant and distracting. It is the ability to be in the moment, in the here and now. As I said previously, you are limited in the amount of information you can process through your senses in a given moment, therefore you must be proficient at quickly shifting your attention from one source of information to another (i.e., swimming the ball down the pool, then shooting it in the net). This requires that you know which information to process at which time. Try the following exercise.

EXERCISE 10.1 - SHIFTING MY FOCUS

Think about the following: your last meeting, what you have to do today, and what you are going to eat for supper tonight. It's impossible to think about these three things at the same time. However, you can shift quickly from one idea to the other. Try shifting between these three ideas as quickly as you can for 30 seconds. If you are a visual person, it might help to switch between images or words in your mind. If you are more auditory, then you might prefer to repeat these ideas or words to yourself.

Comment on your ability to shift focus...

Do you remember learning how to ride your bike? No doubt it took a lot of concentration. Since you didn't know exactly what to pay attention to, you probably made a few mistakes and fell down a couple of times. The task was most likely tedious and required a lot of effort. However, after a while, you learned to attend to the right cues in your environment and riding your bike became a natural thing. Today, you probably don't have to think twice about riding your bike, you simply get on it and go.

As an athlete, you constantly have to learn new skills and tactics that require effort and concentration (see section on deliberate practice). You must learn what information to process and deliberately practice these skills so that you don't have to consciously think when you're executing them during games, the same way you don't have to think about riding your bike anymore.

Here's where things can get challenging: When you get stressed or too intense/activated, your ability to focus or attend to the right information can be reduced. This is because your "attention field" is narrowed and it becomes difficult to attend to peripheral cues in your environment. In other words, you get "tunnel vision." Have you ever experienced this? You may notice the opposite when you are under-intense/activated. Your focus becomes too large and you process too many cues, including irrelevant ones that distract you from adequately performing your task. So once again, what's the answer? You want to be able to maintain your optimal level of intensity in either the presence or the absence of stressors in order to be able to maintain the appropriate focus.

Focusing Style

Some people contend that everyone has his or her own **focusing style**. This means that depending on your style, you will have a general tendency to focus your attention a certain way. Have you noticed this about yourself? Your style, which is arguably relatively stable over time, can hinder your performance if it's not compatible with the attention style required for a given task or situation. If you have a certain focusing style, then the challenge for you is to adapt it to match the attention demands of your sport or daily life tasks.

Researchers have found that the attention demands of any situation, including sport situations, vary along two dimensions: **width** (broad-narrow) and **direction** (internal-external).

Your dominant focusing style can become a weakness if you rely too heavily on it and fail to make necessary shifts, particularly in demanding situations.

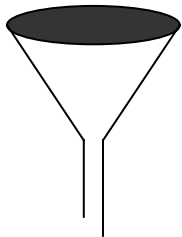
TABLE 10.1 - DIMENSIONS OF ATTENTION

Width	Direction
<p><u>Broad</u> Focus is on something more distant and on a wider range of cues.</p>	<p><u>Internal</u> Focus is on something inside of you such as your internal feelings and thoughts</p>
<p><u>Narrow</u> Focus is on something close and on a limited set of cues.</p>	<p><u>External</u> Focus is on something outside of you such as things in your environment.</p>

Combined together, these two dimensions form a variety of focusing styles that are suitable for different situational demands. Four predominant styles are described in the following table. As you get acquainted with them, try to remember if and when you have used these styles.

TABLE 10.2 - FOCUSING STYLES REQUIRED FOR DIFFERENT SITUATIONAL DEMANDS

Internal	
<p>1. Broad-Internal (ANALYZE) Focus used to plan a strategy and to creatively solve problems (i.e., make adjustments in your game, develop goals and objectives for the season, mentally rehearse a skill).</p>	<p>3. Narrow-Internal (PREPARE) Focus used to reduce your attention to a single thought, image, or feeling (i.e., repeat to yourself, "Breathe," "I'm confident," or "I feel strong").</p>
Broad	Narrow
<p>2. Broad-External (ASSESS) Focus used to assess a situation to become more aware of your surroundings (i.e., scan players on the field).</p>	<p>4. Narrow-External (ACT) Focus used to execute a skill (i.e., shoot the ball in the net, do your presentation in front of the class).</p>
External	



Another way to look at focusing is to think of a **funnel**. Notice how it has a wide mouth at the top and a narrow tip at the bottom. All the information in your environment that can be captured by your senses enters the top of the funnel and is **filtered** as it comes down. What is processed at the bottom is the necessary information that will help you successfully perform your task.

If you have ever used a funnel before, you probably noticed that if you pour the sugar too quickly for example, it sometimes gets stuck in the bottom part. Similarly, when you have difficulty focusing, it is possible that the information you take in gets jammed somewhere in the process because you are trying to attend to too much of it too quickly. Also, just like sometimes you make the mistake of pouring flour instead of sugar, it is possible that you process the wrong information to perform your task. What happens then? Your performance decreases... your pancakes don't end up the way you would have liked them to and they may not taste as good.

In addition to the external cues in your environment, you have internal cues that are also competing for your attention. Your internal thoughts and feelings are important but you must know when to attend to them. For example, if you are sad over the fact that you had a fight with your partner earlier during the day, it's probably not the best time to deal with this when you're in the middle of a game. Or, if negative thoughts such as "I stink today," creep into your mind during practice, focusing on them will probably not do you any good.

The next exercise may help you determine if you have a tendency to focus on 1) internal or external cues, and 2) a few or many cues in a given time. This may in turn help you recognize if you have a dominant focusing style.

EXERCISE 10.2 - MY PREFERRED FOCUSING STYLE

Think of a recent situation (e.g., game) and recall what you focused on before, during, and after it. Be specific in terms of the external and internal cues to which you were attending and how long you were attending to them (e.g., **people** - coaches, teammates, opponents, fans, referees; **objects** - shot clock, scoreboard, net, markers, ball; **yourself** - your thoughts, emotions, physical pain, etc.).

- Before -

Cues

Time spent

- During -

Cues

Time spent

- After -

Cues

Time spent

Now, examine the types of cues to which you attended. Were they relevant or irrelevant? Were they more internal or external? Also, notice how much time you spent focusing on these different cues. Did you spend more time on some than on others? For example, did you spend more time thinking about the goals your opponents scored or focusing on the crowd rather than actually focusing on the puck you were passing, receiving, or shooting in the net? How did this affect your overall performance and satisfaction? If you have difficulty concentrating on the right cues in a particular situation, you should carefully assess the attention demands of the tasks you need to perform (i.e., on defense, offense, man-down, man-up, etc.). This way, you'll know exactly where your focus should be. A coach, teacher, teammate, or a mental training consultant could be of some assistance to you.

EXERCISE 10.2 - MY PREFERRED FOCUSING STYLE (*cont*)

Based on the previous information (*also see Table 10.2*), do you have a preferred focusing style? If so, what do you think it is? Here are some ideas that might help you figure this out.

1. Are you more of an internal type of person? Do you tend to be more introverted or meditative? Do you like to spend a lot of time alone? IF SO,
 - a) Do you spend most of your time analyzing, conceptualizing, or planning things? Do you like to generate a lot of ideas and design several projects at a time? If so, your dominant focusing style might be BROAD-INTERNAL.

OR

- b) Do you mostly attend to individual thoughts or feelings? Do you avoid thinking about too many things at once, elaborating plans, or analyzing situations or performances to come up with solutions? If so, your dominant focusing style could be NARROW-INTERNAL.
2. Are you more of an external person? Do you tend to be more extroverted? Do you predominantly center your attention on things outside of you? IF SO,
 - c) Are you single-minded, that is, do you usually carry a narrow focus and concentrate only on a few things at a time? Have people ever told you that you have a "tunnel vision?" Do you usually have to finish one thing before starting another one? If so, your dominant focusing style might be NARROW-EXTERNAL.

OR

- d) Do you like to have a broad focus and be aware of everything that is going on around you? Are you good at assessing the big picture? Are you "all over the place?" Do you like to have many projects going on at once? If so, your dominant focusing style could be BROAD-EXTERNAL.

What other type of information might lead to figure out if you have a preferred focusing style?

My preferred focusing style is :

- Broad-Internal
 Broad-External

- Narrow-Internal
 Narrow-External

If you have a dominant focusing style, it might be a good idea to determine when it is and isn't appropriate to use it. You'll probably prefer to use your dominant style in most situations,

however, **you must be able to use all four of them effectively**. When the attention demands of a situation change, you must also change your focus to use the ideal one to meet these demands. Your most successful performances will likely occur when you are able to attend to and shift between meaningful internal and/or external cues, and ignore those that are irrelevant and distracting.

How is your ability to accurately change the direction and width of your attention?

Example. Let's take the example of catching the ball during a game of water polo. In most cases, you must have a broad-external focus to read the position of your defense, your own position, the position of the person passing the ball as well as the position of other potential blockers. Then you must shift to a narrow-external focus to be able to catch the ball. All of this has to be done from the time the ball leaves your teammate's hand and reaches yours. So within seconds, you have to have processed all these things so that you successfully catch the ball. Overwhelming? This is why you want to practice this skill extensively so that the whole process happens automatically without too much effort on your part.

Force your focus or let it flow naturally? What happens if you have to *force* your attention on a task to the point that you have to almost *focus on focusing*? If you have to focus on focusing, you might be defeating the purpose, in fact, you might be distracting yourself. For example, did you ever have the frustrating experience of not being able to fall asleep at night while trying everything possible to "make yourself sleep," including counting sheep?!! The harder you tried, the more irritated you became, and the longer you stayed awake. In this situation, and in most performing situations, you must try to let your attention flow naturally. You must put yourself on auto-pilot and let the game or situation unfold.

As previously mentioned, there ARE situations though, in which you have to consciously focus your attention. For example, when you get distracted in games, you must consciously redirect your attention to relevant cues. Also, when you are learning or refining skills in training, that is, deliberately practicing them, you usually have to put some effort into directing and maintaining your focus simply because the skill hasn't been completely automated yet.

How can we summarize this? The demands of any situation, regardless of the discipline or domain, vary considerably so you must be able to effectively use all four types of focus and shift between them quickly and automatically. You can become good at this by practicing your focusing skills diligently. When can you do this? **Anytime!** Where? At home, at work, at the park, at the sport venue, before practices, after games, you name it! Try it today. Notice how you constantly shift your focus from internal to external cues depending on the task you are performing. Set a goal to use the right focus, at the right place, at the right time, and to shift it quickly and appropriately to another type of focus as the demands of your tasks change. Obviously when you're doing this, you're in a conscious mode but with practice, you will need to invest less and less conscious effort and be less cognitively engaged, and as a result, you might notice a different feel to your execution as it evolves. Eventually, you might prefer to discard any thoughts and simply use feel to perform your way through a task and to evaluate if you executed it correctly or to satisfaction.

In many situations, it may be difficult to pinpoint the focusing demands of the tasks you need to perform. But with help, you can break down a task into its different components and figure out which focus you need to have for each component. This may also help you to identify what you may be doing wrong and fix it. It may help you to refine your overall process of focusing so that when you run into difficulties, you have a plan to respond not only to the overall situation, but also to the specific component that is troubling you.

EXERCISE 10.3 - IDENTIFYING THE ATTENTIONAL DEMANDS OF A SKILL

Choose a skill that you have not been able to perform consistently. Break it down into the steps you need to go through to execute it correctly. Then identify the attention demands required for each step according to the 4 different quadrants in Table 10.2. Determine where you are committing the error and what you can do to correct it.

Here's an example: Taking a penalty shot.

<u>Step</u>	<u>Attention Demand</u>
1. Wait at the 4m line for the whistle and the hand signal.	Q2 - Broad-External
2. Prepare to shoot, feel the ball, position body, repeat cue word.	Q3 - Narrow-Internal
3. Focus on target (i.e., bottom left corner of net), see the line the ball will follow.	Q4 - Narrow-External
4. Shoot the ball, follow through.	Q4 – Narrow-External
5. If shot is missed, move to rebound; if goal is scored, move to defensive position at half pool.	Q2 - Broad-External
6. If substituted because shot was missed, when sitting on the bench, think of what can be done to improve the shot, for example, shoot low instead of high.	Q1 - Broad-Internal

EXERCISE 10.3 - IDENTIFYING THE ATTENTIONAL DEMANDS OF A SKILL *(cont)*

Now, your turn. **SKILL:** _____

Step	Attention Demand (Quadrant)	Successful (Yes or No?)	How can I correct it?

Now that you have determined the demands of this skill, where you have gone wrong, and what you can do to make it right, try to mentally practice it in an environment where there are few distractions. Then, attempt to execute the skill in your normal environment. Once you are comfortable with it, it might be beneficial to practice it under more demanding situations with an increased number of distractions so that you are ready to perform this skill under any circumstance (i.e., championship game). These simulations will allow you to train yourself to focus under different types of pressure situations you will face during competitive events.

There are various exercises you can do to improve your ability to focus, including shifting between different types of focus. If you have noticed particular weaknesses, practice your skill of focusing. Following are examples of exercises that could help you but what's most important is that you design exercises that will be most relevant to your situation or performance domain. Be creative, you'll be surprised at how much you can improve by regularly engaging in meaningful exercises.

EXERCISE 10.4 - IMPROVING MY ABILITY TO FOCUS

Broad-External

1. Listening to sounds (5 minutes)

Find a comfortable place somewhere out in nature. Close your eyes and listen to all the sounds around you (e.g., birds singing, leaves crackling, wind blows in your ears, water cascading). Shift your focus from one to the other, do it quickly, do it slowly. Change the order in which you attend to the different sounds.

2. Scanning colours (3-5 minutes)

Stand in a room and notice all the different colours and shades. Focus on the dark colours, then on the lighter ones. Scan the environment to pick out each colour of the rainbow. Focus on each colour for 5 seconds, then shift to another one. Go through this two or three times. Notice the flow as you shift your focus. Does it feel natural or forced? How do you feel while you're doing this? Engaged? Does it feel too mechanical? How would you rate your ability?

3. Reading, listening, watching (10 minutes)

Read a book or a magazine for 3 minutes in complete silence. Then, turn the radio on to your favorite station, and continue reading for another 3 minutes, just focusing on the content of your book. If you get distracted by the music, shift your attention back to the book. After this, turn on the TV, while leaving the radio on as well. Read for another 3 minutes. What happens now? Are you able to focus on your reading? What happens if you shift your focus between the book, radio, and TV for a minute?

4. Screening people (3 minutes)

Stand in a crowd of people (i.e., at the shopping mall, at a concert, in the stands during a game) and scan the people around you. Quickly shift your focus from one person to another and try to pick out familiar traits / characteristics. For example, target people who have blue eyes, then shift to those who are wearing something red, then to those who are wearing glasses, each time scanning the environment to try to identify as many people as you can sharing the similar trait or characteristic. Can you do this quickly? Do you get distracted by other cues in your environment?

EXERCISE 10.4 - IMPROVING MY ABILITY TO FOCUS *(cont)*

Broad-Internal

5. Flowing thoughts (3 minutes)

Lie down comfortably and let your mind wander without interrupting your flow of thoughts. Allow thoughts to passively enter and leave your mind. How do you experience this? Is it difficult to let your thoughts naturally flow from one to another? Do you find yourself disrupting your flow?

6. Problem solving (10 minutes)

Close your eyes and think of a problem you are currently facing in your sport or life. For the next 4 minutes, brainstorm and think of all the possible solutions to this problem. Then, for the next minute, clear your mind of any thoughts and let it go completely blank. A useful trick is to see a colour, for example, the colour white. Now for the remaining 5 minutes, review the solutions you previously brainstormed, pick the one that seems the most appropriate and realistic, and identify steps to solve your problem. How apt are you at getting through this exercise?

7. The brain teaser (5-10 minutes)

Read the following brainteaser, then close your eyes and try to solve it. Take a four-letter word, then add two letters at the end so that the last four letters spell a new word. To that word, add two more letters so that once again the final four letters spell a new word. Repeat this process until you reach a final given word. A few rules: avoid using proper names, (i.e., ANNE), and try to make the chain as short as possible. Here's an example: POLO (add "be") → LOBE (add "ar") → BEAR. Can you easily engage in this mental exercise?

8. Rearranging furniture (5 minutes)

Find a comfortable position, close your eyes and imagine a room in your house that you would like to rearrange. Think of the possible ways it could be done, taking into account every piece of furniture and accessory. Decide what would look best and re-organize the room in your mind. Don't forget the frames or posters on the wall, they might not be aligned anymore after you have moved things around. Are you satisfied with your mental plan of what your room should look like?

Narrow-External

9. Studying an object (3 minutes)

Pick up an object (i.e., rock, leaf, racket, puck, whistle) and study it. For three minutes keep your attention completely focused on it without allowing your mind to drift. Look at its shapes, colours and texture, feel its different parts. Try to notice as many things as you can about it. What can you learn from this exercise? Anything useful?

EXERCISE 10.4 - IMPROVING MY ABILITY TO FOCUS (cont)*10. Facial features (3-5 minutes)*

Sit in front of a partner and observe his or her facial features and characteristics. Try not to attend to anything else except his/her face. Focus on the positives and beauties of this person. You may want to share these with your partner after the exercise, then switch roles. How good are you at attending to one feature at a time? Can you zone in on it or are you tempted to look at her whole face? Can you actually stay serious while doing this exercise?

11. "Killer quads" (3-5 minutes)

Put your back against a wall and slowly come down into a sitting position. Remain in that sitting position for 3 to 5 minutes, or longer if you can. While you do this, focus on a point in front of you. Avoid getting distracted by feelings of fatigue or pain, and/or other external cues in your environment. Can you maintain your focus in the face of obstacles such as pain?

12. Maintaining your balance (5-10 minutes)

Stand on one foot and try to stay in that position for 5 to 10 minutes or longer. While doing this, keep your attention centered on an object in front of you at eye level. Change legs when you're done. Challenge your weakest leg. What happens to your focus as you try to maintain your balance for this length of time?

Narrow-Internal*13. Counting breaths (3 minutes)*

Get yourself into a relaxed, comfortable position. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Count your breaths as you inhale and exhale naturally. Don't let any thoughts or images distract you. Keep track of the number of breaths you take in 3 minutes. Did you lose track? How did you feel as you focused on your breathing?

14. Shooting a ball (3 minutes)

Close your eyes and imagine yourself successfully throwing/shooting/hitting a ball at a partner or in a net. Repeat to yourself an effective cue word as you focus on your target, and throw/shoot/hit the ball. Keep things simple. Do this continuously for three minutes. If you experience difficulties, do it in slow motion. Next time you do the exercise, try releasing the ball from a greater distance. How are effective are you?

15. Listen to your heartbeat (5 minutes)

Find a comfortable, quiet place, close your eyes and listen to your heartbeat. It might help if you take your pulse to feel it first. Count how many times your heart beats in 5 minutes. Can you stay focused this long?

EXERCISE 10.4 - IMPROVING MY ABILITY TO FOCUS (cont)

16. Getting absorbed in a thought (2 minutes)

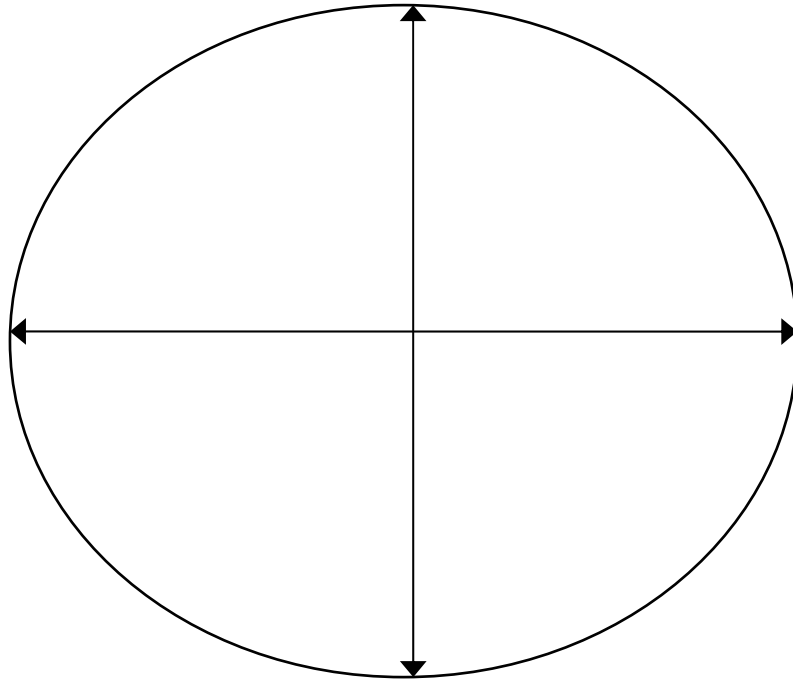
Keep your eyes opened think of a positive thought, image, word, or color (i.e., hugging someone, the sun, the colour red, the word "ENERGY," etc.). Keep this one thought in your mind for 2 minutes without letting any other thoughts interfere. How is your skill of centering your attention inside of you while keeping your eyes opened? Did you get distracted by things in your environment? Were you able to block anything out?

17. Power of the mind (5 minutes)

Take a piece of thread approximately 20 cm long and tie a ring or a paper clip at the end of it. Sit on a chair and place Figure 10.1 (see below) on the floor in front of you so that you can see it clearly. Take the piece of thread between your thumb and index finger and hold it in the air on top of the figure (i.e., aligned with its center). Make sure the thread and object are completely still (it might be helpful to rest your elbow on your knee to do this). Your goal is to get the object to move in a chosen direction (up and down; side to side; *or* in a circle, clockwise or counter-clockwise), **NOT with your hand, but with your MIND shifting between a narrow-internal and broad-internal focus**. Here's how you do it:

1. Look closely at figure 10.1 and chose the direction in which you want the object to move.
2. Close your eyes and narrow your focus internally.
3. Center all your attention and energy on making the object move. Imagine that it is starting to move in the desired direction (i.e., vertical line on the figure). Imagine that this line is magnetic and is pulling the object up and down.
4. Give the object some energy to move. Feel the energy leaving your body from the tip of your fingers, moving down the thread, all the way down to the object. Repeat to yourself cue words like "Up and down," "Power," "Move," etc. See the object move in your mind and believe it is moving.
5. Keep that focus for 3 minutes, then open your eyes to see if the object is actually moving. Notice any slight change. If there is no movement, close your eyes and try again. The goal here is to focus with a lot of intensity. Be persistent. If it still doesn't work, don't get discouraged, it just means you likely need more practice.

FIGURE 10.1



As you plan and practice different exercises or naturally engage in situations that allow you to refine your focusing abilities, reflect on the experience and try to draw lessons for the future. Ask yourself, “Did I center my attention on relevant cues? How long was I able to maintain my focus? Did I get distracted by irrelevant cues? If so, was I able to refocus? Was I able to efficiently and effectively shift between focusing styles? Did I force my focus or let it emerge naturally? How did the exercise feel?” Overall, how was my focusing process?

Concentration is why some athletes are better than others. You develop that concentration in training. You can't be lackadaisical in training and concentrate in a meet.

-Edwin Moses-

TABLE 10.3 - SUMMARY SUGGESTIONS

1. Your ability to focus is fundamental in the achievement of optimal performance and well-being.
2. Develop and refine your best focus and your personal process of focusing in various situations.
3. You may have a preferred focusing style. If so, be aware of it and use it to your advantage.
4. Know the attention demands of different situations and adapt your focusing style accordingly. Remember that your dominant style can become a weakness if you rely too heavily on it, and fail to make needed shifts.
5. When your intensity/activation gets too high or too low, your ability to focus may be affected. Recognize when you are performing at an intensity level that is less than optimal and be ready to refocus your attention if you get distracted.
6. Consciously observe your focusing ability, particularly in stressful situations. Practice using different types of focus by engaging in relevant exercises and real situations in order to be able to select and attend to the most meaningful information, and ignore the information that is irrelevant and therefore distracting to your performance. Aim to be able to naturally do this in the most stressful situations.