



CANCERcare®

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IMPROVING YOUR CONCENTRATION: THREE KEY STEPS

Concentration is the ability to stay focused on your work without letting people, feelings, thoughts or activities get in the way. People during or after treatment may notice changes in their ability to concentrate. There are three helpful steps that may improve and develop your concentration abilities:

- Establishing concentration
- Increasing concentration
- Developing the concentration habit

Read below for tips on how to develop each of these abilities.

ESTABLISHING CONCENTRATION

Create the right environment. Recognizing and removing potential barriers or distractions is the first step.

Be aware of external distractions and separate yourself from them.

For example, give yourself permission to let your voice mail pick up calls and not to check your email while you're working on a task. Or, ask your family for an hour of uninterrupted quiet time.

Try to recognize internal distractions and take care of them.

Internal distractions such as thoughts, emotions, physical feelings, hunger and tiredness can interrupt your ability to focus. Do something about the things that are bothering you before you start the task at hand. For instance, if you know that you are hungry, eat before you start a task.



Stop distracting thoughts that pop into your mind as soon as you are aware of them. You can do this by “noticing” the thought, and then consciously bringing your attention back to the task at hand.

Keep a reminder pad or notebook handy. If something that you need to do pops into your head, jot it down to get it off your mind. Schedule a time later in the day to address it.

INCREASING CONCENTRATION

Set aside time to concentrate. How interested are you in what you are doing? If the answer is “not much,” then try to come up with reasons for developing an interest. Will the project give you a chance to learn a new skill? Or might finishing it give you a sense of accomplishment?

Use a pencil or highlighter. Taking notes or highlighting key points are ways to keep yourself actively involved in a task such as reading.

Divide tasks into smaller, more manageable parts. You will feel a sense of accomplishment more often, which can help you stay motivated and on task longer.

Plan breaks according to your concentration span.

You are not a machine. Taking a walk or a lunch break will help clear your head.

If you find yourself losing focus, stand up. The physical act of standing up brings your attention to the fact that you're losing focus. It lets you stop the process and bring your thinking back to the task at hand.

Vary your activities. Change is often as good as taking a break.

DEVELOPING THE CONCENTRATION HABIT

Like any other skill, concentration must be learned, practiced and developed. Here are some suggestions to help you get in a regular pattern of concentrating:

Determine how long your concentration span is. Find out by recording your start time for a task like reading, and as soon as your mind begins to drift, record this time. Try this several times until you can gauge your average concentration span.

Learn when your concentration level is at its best. Find a consistent place or time during the day when you know that you won't be interrupted and that your energy level meets the demands of the particular task. Then, try to use that time slot each day to work on that task.

Find whether there are conditions that best allow you to concentrate. Allow yourself to be removed from distractions for set periods of time to try and accomplish work. Figure out what works for you, whether it's a cleared off desk, good lighting, or quiet music playing in the background. Make the atmosphere as inviting as possible for you to be less distracted and concentrate better.



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Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

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