

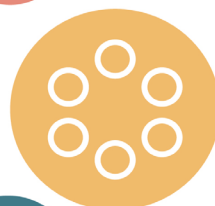
BRADLEY HOOK



RESILIENCE

MASTERY

**11 Keys to Upgrade
Human Performance**



RESILIENCE MASTERY

11 KEYS TO UPGRADE HUMAN PERFORMANCE

BY BRADLEY HOOK

Resilience Mastery
11 Keys to Upgrade Human Performance
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INTRODUCTION

Imagine the movie of your life. Is it fuzzy and out of focus or masterfully crafted? Does the storyline flit haphazardly or is the narrator driven by a sense of purpose? It doesn't matter whether the movie of your life is a comedy, tragedy, drama or epic adventure – what matters is that you get to act, produce and direct. The mission from a resilience perspective is to never allow our movie to become pointless, or mundane.

Life as theatre is not a new idea. For thousands of years Hindus have viewed existence as a great drama, unfolding in endless cycles, each actor playing a part in the performance, unaware that they are all, in fact, dreams in the mind of the creator. The ancient Greeks also regarded life as a play. The word person – derived from *persona* – means the mask we wear.

Human consciousness is a flash of curiosity in a vast, unfathomable universe. None of us asked to be here and yet here we are: trying to make sense of biology, time and each other. Perhaps we are apertures through which the universe experiences itself. Or maybe there is no real meaning and the earth produces people, as an apple tree does apples. Life diversifies and becomes ever more complex because the underlying drive to survive is powerful in a vast, cold universe. We encode stories into DNA lest we forget the journey life has travelled on to bring us to here, now. Congratulations. We made it.

Seeing life as a drama, or from a more contemporary lens, a movie, or even a video game, encourages us to cultivate a sense of purpose. In a world where threats are increasingly abstract and abundance, for many, is taken for granted, it's easy to slip into apathy and despair. Imagine how our ancestors would look at us now. They fought for our freedom and safety and we lock ourselves to screens in echo chambers of the attention economy.

Resilience is being proactive: absorbing shocks, growing through trauma, building supportive networks and being effective.

Using the metaphor of a movie is helpful because stories reveal the human struggle. Through stories we recognise the capacity we all possess to encounter obstacles and emerge stronger than we were. This is the archetypal tale. We revere those that triumph over adversity. Resilience is the journey of the hero. This book tells many heroic stories. It encourages us to push the limits, be creative and move steadfastly toward our goals. To do this requires preparation, practice and courage.

Unfortunately, few of us are trained in the art of crafting a great story, never mind constructing a fulfilling life. Ancient Greeks devoted entire schools to the philosophy of living. From the Stoics to Sceptics and Epicureans, scholars and everyday folk embraced methods for reducing suffering and reaching their potential. Resilience continues along this path by mapping out a framework for human flourishing, bringing a scientific lens to factors that underpin success, happiness and wellbeing.

Resilience is not just grit, or the ability to bounce back from adversity. It is a learned and skilfully executed web of competencies that form both a safety net and springboard to success. It is an upgrade to the human operating system that offers us choices in a demanding world. Some people use resilience like vitamins, establishing disciplined daily routines to support high performance. Others use resilience like aspirin, executing learned skills and behaviours on-demand, or when times get tough.

Understanding high performance

The Resilience Institute surveyed over 20,000 people to understand what drives resilience in individuals and groups across the world.

11 key factors were identified. These range from the obvious – focus, purpose, optimism, assertiveness and bounce – to the less expected – sleep quality, vitality, presence, decisiveness, values alignment and fulfilment.

Our definition of resilience is the learned ability to demon-

strate bounce, to continually grow, to build strong connections and to cultivate the conditions for flow. We draw no distinction between work and personal life. A resilient person breaks down life's challenges into achievable tasks, prepares biology and environment, then works with focus and determination. Things go wrong for them as for any of us, but they rely on their ability to bounce, recalibrate and recover. They engage with their whole being: physical, emotional and cognitive, dynamically playing to their strengths and working to mitigate risk areas.

A changing world

Humans are falling behind the evolutionary curve. Over millions of years we evolved in direct response to our environment. From the first flickers of life some 3.1 billion years ago to our more recognisable human ancestors around 250,000 years ago, we engaged in a precarious wrestle for survival. Through fitness, cooperation and ingenuity we survived and thrived.

We used our prefrontal cortex (the front of the human brain) in bursts, innovating, strategizing, seeking homeostasis in a dangerous world. Then came agriculture and, much later, industrialisation. From free ranging animals we became farm fed, dependent on food and information generated by entities with whom we have little direct connection. We increasingly seek out more abstract forms of work in order to secure our livelihood. We have changed our environment and we are adapting to it, but slowly. The information revolution brought us global connectivity. Just over a decade ago the iPhone gifted us access to all information ever published, via a screen in our pockets. We became obsessed. And stressed. Even our noisy minds are often not our own. We seek comfort in – and feel outraged by – the ideas of others, which fill infinitely scrolling feeds upon screens wherever we go. Screening is the new sitting, and both have eclipsed smoking as health hazards of our time. Our biochemistry is manipulated by behavioural scientists and user experience designers, employed to conjure the dopamine rush

of likes, follows and retweets, and the cortisol spike when the network goes quiet.

Descartes said, ‘I think therefore I am’. We propose, ‘I am, therefore I think’.

Let’s nourish the I. Bring it back to now. To where life happens. To where we are, whether we like it or not.

Let’s take control of the movie. Get back in the director’s seat, turn up the background music and change the lighting. Time is ticking. The hero – that’s you – is ready for adventure. Let’s dive in.



FOCUS

***In all areas of spiritual development,
you need both analysis and focus.***

The Dalai Lama

Focus is the ultimate success accelerant. It is the number one factor distinguishing the most from the least resilient people. In Resilience Institute research¹, 94% of the top decile report a strong ability to focus. Only 4% of the bottom decile manage to stay focused. To achieve our goals, improve as individuals, expand our consciousness and create a better society, we must be able to focus on what's important. The ability to focus, like all factors in this book, can be improved with dedicated practice. Whether the goal is to run a marathon, launch a business or write a novel, learning to maintain focus and ignore distractions is pivotal to success.

Focus as a life goal

For Buddhist monks and Zen practitioners, cultivating focus is central to growth as a human being. They dedicate their time and effort accordingly. Take for example the Dalai Lama. Each morning he trains his mind for the day ahead with a meditation practice. He begins around 3am and, after his breakfast at 5.30am, returns to meditating for another three hours.²

Buddhist monks have developed rigorous routines to pacify the so-called “monkey mind”. The purpose of this is to attain states of awareness unencumbered by distracting thoughts. They might be considered the elite athletes of focus, able to exert attention on something as simple as the breath for hours at a time. We don't need to go to such extreme lengths to build

attention control but understanding the mechanics of focus and mastering the ability to focus on demand are key to gaining momentum in life.

Many people feel that finding happiness is their primary objective, and they are disappointed when it doesn't last for long. Happiness is a vague concept – like stress – and is, for the most part, transient. Satisfaction and contentment come from having accomplished something meaningful. Whether it is a solid day's work, a significant milestone or finishing a major project, a feeling of accomplishment provides real happiness. We enjoy the sense of relief when a worthwhile struggle has passed. If we have grown in some way as a result of the struggle, we value the journey even more, and respect ourselves for having persevered.

To build momentum there is a simple hack: ruthless focus. Focus is the stepping stone to a state of flow. It is the difference between lacklustre efforts and achieving major goals. It's the difference between unfinished to-do lists and a relaxing evening with loved ones. A scattered approach to the day's work can leave us scrambling to tie up loose ends after dinner, while focus allows us to work more productively, achieving key tasks in fewer hours and enjoying leisure time by design: relaxing, socialising or working on our side hustle. The focused individual achieves their New Year's resolutions, while others throw in the towel in February. To become the person we want to be and to live the life we've imagined is almost impossible if we are unable to maintain focus on our key priorities.

So what does it mean to be truly focused? What does it look like in action? And, most importantly, how can we cut through the noise of modern society and cultivate focus in our lives?

What is focus?

The successful warrior is the average man, with laser-like focus.

Bruce Lee

Focus is a competence that can't be taken for granted. In a noisy world, the skill requires both strategy and effort. To focus means to concentrate our conscious awareness on a single task. It happens when we hold attention on one thing at will and with intensity. Imagine the expression on an Olympic gymnast's face before she launches over the vault, the wildlife photographer silently waiting for an animal to emerge from the jungle, the pianist hunched over the keys for hours. We know it when we see it – yet it can seem difficult to achieve that kind of sharp intensity ourselves.

Bruce Lee, the actor and martial-arts master who founded the Jeet Kune Do kung-fu style, was renowned for his masterful ability to focus without reacting to distractions. Although he only lived to 32, he is regarded as one of the most influential martial artists of all time, renowned as a champion fighter and acclaimed as a movie star.

By the time Lee turned 18, he had already appeared in 20 films. He is best known for his starring role in *Enter the Dragon*, which ignited a major trend of martial-arts films in the United States, and established Lee as a legend in the martial-arts world. He was a student of philosophy, a poet, a director and a father of two. His long list of successes did not come easily but demonstrate what one human being can achieve when they perfect their ability to focus.

Lee understood that focus would not come without practice. He planned his days around routines that kept him disciplined and motivated. He prioritised quality nutrition, experimented with many methods of physical training and, most importantly, he practised honing in on a single goal and working towards it without distraction. He stated that he allowed his attention to flow like water: when an obstacle or distraction arose, he simply redirected his focus back to his goal, like a river flowing through rocks and continuing to the sea.³

As Lee demonstrated throughout his life, the ability to focus requires physical health, motivation and deliberate practice. Unfortunately, the modern world makes following his exam-

ple challenging. But if we understand what distracts us, how it affects us and how we can change our environment, we can improve our focus and discover the profound benefits.

A distracted society

If we let ourselves, we shall always be waiting for some distraction or other to end before we can really get down to our work.

C.S. Lewis

If you feel like you're surrounded by distractions, you're not alone. Our society has become an increasingly difficult place to sustain focus. External influences are constantly vying for our attention. From emails and smartphone notifications, to social media and binge-watchable clips on YouTube, it can feel impossible to focus without interruption. It's not your imagination, and it's not because you lack self-discipline, it's because human beings have never been exposed to such extreme information density, and it's changing the way we think. Tristan Harris, an ex-design ethicist at Google, who has since founded an organisation called Time Well Spent, warns of the impact the attention economy is having on us, to the point of claiming we no longer know our own minds.⁴

Harris, who worked at Google for almost three years as a "Product Philosopher", would know. He believes what he calls "our lower-level vulnerabilities" are being exploited by Silicon Valley firms who are actively competing for what they view as the scarcest and most valuable resource in the world today: human attention. He compares online engagement design to "bliss-point" combinations of fat, salt and sugar that food companies have developed to hook consumers.⁵

Employers are also competing for this attention resource, while inadvertently contributing to the noise – think workplace Instant Messengers and open-plan offices. Then there are our family and friends, often the ones most in need of our attention,

who are unfortunately at the end of the queue, especially after a busy day.

The rise of ADHD

Today in the US, ADHD is one of the most diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders of childhood.⁶ In 2003, 7.8% of US school-age children were diagnosed with ADHD. By 2011 that figure had risen to 11%. That's one in 10 school-age children in the US diagnosed with ADHD.⁷

A child can end up with an ADHD diagnosis if they present a persistent collection of three specific symptoms: inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.⁸ Basically, if a child has trouble focusing on a single task, becomes extremely restless when they're expected to pay attention and consistently makes hasty choices without thinking of the consequences, they could earn a diagnosis. It's especially difficult for children with ADHD to focus in school, and they typically earn lower grades than their classmates. The disorder can affect individuals well into adulthood, and medication is often prescribed to manage the symptoms.

Why have the rates of ADHD increased during the past 15 years? There are several theories. Diagnostic methods have most likely improved and talking about mental health issues has become less taboo – perhaps making both parents and children more open to asking for help. Some believe that doctors are over diagnosing. One study showed how fixing sleep routines significantly reduced symptoms of ADHD.⁹

Normal behaviour, like a child not wanting to sit quietly at a desk is being considered abnormal, instead of acknowledging that a classroom environment is far from natural for a young animal – of any species!

Some evidence suggests that children with ADHD have an easier time focusing when they are playing outdoors. However, our kids are spending less time outside than previous generations. Instead, they're spending increasing amounts of time

using smartphones and tablets, which are potentially addictive, with lasting effects on neurochemistry. Kids who use technology before bed also struggle with disrupted sleep cycles, which makes it harder for them to pay attention in class the next day.¹⁰ It's not hard to see how these findings might also signal a risk to children without an ADHD diagnosis, and for adults.

Focus and ageing

As we age, we lose some of our ability to focus. Research shows that older adults are more easily distracted than young adults.¹¹

There are two separate processes occurring when our brains are focused. The attentive process gives us the ability to concentrate, while the suppression process is what enables us to block out distractions. We need both in order to focus. But as we grow older, the suppression process becomes less effective.

Studies show that our ability to focus actually begins to decrease in our early 20s. We're able to concentrate just as well, but because of the changes in the suppression process, we're not able to block out distractions like we used to. This only becomes more noticeable as we age, so if we want to learn effective attention control, the sooner we start the better.

Digital distractions

Ignoring distractions in today's highly connected world is no easy task. We've become habituated to hyper-connectivity and feel the pressure to respond immediately to incoming emails and messages. Many messaging apps display when a message has been both been delivered and read, meaning that the recipient feels obliged to submit a timely response. This extends to the workplace, where ubiquitous access to communications tools means that employees email each other throughout the work day and outside of work hours, expecting fast responses and normalising these behaviours.

On top of social expectations to keep our phones on hand at

all times, we also receive regular push notifications from applications that lure us back to the device. Every time our phone pings or vibrates, we stop what we're doing and shift focus. Even if we don't swipe through, our attention has already been interrupted and this has as much impact as checking the notification itself.¹²

These endless digital distractions are eroding our ability to focus, and the problem may be even worse than we think. Researchers studied employees in office settings to see how often they switch from one screen to another. In 2004 we looked at a single screen for three minutes before switching. Now we spend less than a minute looking at a screen.¹³ The number of screens in our lives has multiplied and it is not uncommon for us to own a laptop, tablet, phone and even a smartwatch, often all within easy reach.

Why is this modern technology so distracting? One reason is that every time we see a notification, our brains release dopamine, a chemical that provides a fleeting feeling of happiness.¹⁴ That explains why we get so excited when we see that someone has liked one of our posts or commented on one of our photos.

We're not really addicted to our phones – we're addicted to the neurochemical stimulation they deliver. But the feeling fades quickly, and we become locked in a vicious cycle of craving. Receiving notifications doesn't bring us a feeling of long-term fulfilment, but we crave the short-term pleasure over and over again.

Researchers have found that some young people report experiencing a so-called phantom phone phenomenon. They feel their phone vibrate in their pocket or hear it ring, but when they check, they haven't actually received a message.¹⁵

Who hasn't checked their phone out of habit recently? Research suggests we're checking them, on average, 2,617 times a day.¹⁶

Multitasking

Checking our phones and switching screens every few minutes is a form of multitasking.¹⁷ When we're multitasking, it can feel like we're completing two tasks at once, and therefore saving time and energy. But we are wired to be mono-taskers, and for 97.5% of us it's impossible to effectively split our focus between two or more tasks.¹⁸

Consider talking on the phone while answering emails. We end up pausing several times in the conversation to ask the caller to repeat themselves, or we stop typing when we decide that the person is saying something important. We're not really doing two things at the same time, we're rapidly switching between two different actions, making ourselves less efficient overall.

Multitasking gives the illusion of productivity, but it is not a productivity hack, it's a bad habit. It increases our levels of the stress hormone cortisol and can actually lower our IQ over time.¹⁹ Poor sleep, increased worry, procrastination and reduced impulse control are further undesirable consequences of trying to perform multiple tasks simultaneously.²⁰

The benefits of focus

Human beings, it seems, are at their best when immersed deeply in something challenging.

Cal Newport

Will Davison ranks as one of Australia's most successful supercar drivers.²¹

In order to win a race, Davison has to maintain near-perfect control. One small error could mean losing, or crashing. Some of his races can last up to 12 hours, so he needs to be able to stay focused for hours on end.

Davison prepares for the demands of supercar racing by following an intense physical and mental training regimen. He exercises every day, including lifting weights, biking and running.

He also makes time for endurance training and has competed in triathlons and Iron Man competitions together with his wife. Davison's workout sessions don't just train his body, the intensity of his regimen leads to "super compensation", enabling him to perform competently under extreme duress.²² Hardcore physical conditioning allows elite athletes, soldiers and racing drivers to remain calm and focused under the most demanding conditions.

Davison has become a champion because he understands the power of what has recently been termed "deep work".

Cal Newport, author of the best-selling book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, defines deep work as 'the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task'. If we can regularly perform deep work, we learn new skills in a shorter amount of time, while producing higher quality output as we progress towards our goals. Deep work, according to Newport, is the 21st-century superpower. Not only does it improve productivity but makes us happier.

Overlapping deep work, focus is also essential for getting into a flow state. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the classic book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, says that flow is a state of 'deep enjoyment, creativity, and total involvement with life'.²³ When we get into flow, we're in the zone, on form and totally engaged.

This is when you hit your stride in a race and barely notice the other runners around you; when you sit down to write a chapter of your novel and can't take your fingers off the keyboard; when you're tackling an important task with co-workers and become so absorbed that an hour or more simply disappears... that's flow.

In flow state our skills match the challenge and we're motivated, creative and intrinsically rewarded by the experience. The benefits are immense, and focus is the gateway. A scattered approach to life will rarely find us flow.

We've established that focus can help us avoid distractions, be more productive, achieve goals and enjoy the process, all

while setting us apart from the competition. But given the challenges in our highly connected world, how do we cultivate greater focus?

How to improve focus

My success, part of it certainly, is that I have focused in on a few things.

Bill Gates

By committing to a few basic lifestyle adjustments, it's possible to stay focused on our most important tasks throughout the day, get into a flow state, and prioritise deep work over shallow multitasking. But we can't just will ourselves into being focused, we need to set up reliable systems and create an environment that is conducive to focused attention.

Get sufficient high-quality sleep each night

Staying focused during the day starts the night before. As we'll see in subsequent chapters, sufficient high-quality rest is integral to resilience, and with regard to focus it's not difficult to see why. Exhaustion can wreck our cognitive performance²⁴ and relying on caffeine to buoy us through the week is no lasting substitute.

Sleep experts tell us that we need seven to eight hours of well-structured sleep per night. Any less and the impact is quickly measurable. In fact, sleep is three times more important than the rest of your wellbeing program.²⁵

Check out Chapter 10 to understand how to set the optimal schedule for high-quality sleep.

Eliminate decision fatigue

We all know how it feels to be physically fatigued, but even if you've never heard the term decision fatigue before, you've probably experienced it. Researchers have proven that decision fatigue exists and has real and lasting consequences both

in terms of the ability to be productive and on our impulse control.²⁶

Mel Robbins, the popular motivational speaker and author of bestselling *The 5 Second Rule*, reiterates that understanding decision fatigue – and how to avoid it – is one of the keys to achieving both short- and long-term goals.²⁷ Working to improve focus will improve the strength of our willpower, but willpower is a finite resource that decreases with every decision made throughout the day.²⁸

Ever notice how a productive morning can devolve into an aimless afternoon, and how the ability to make clear decisions wavers? Beyond physical fatigue, it could be decision fatigue kicking in. When we've spent an entire morning making a series of decisions, from what to have for breakfast to what to wear, which item on the list to tackle first to what to say to a new client, we can easily find ourselves struggling to maintain momentum in the afternoon. The famous Israeli judge study shows how this can occur with serious consequences. Prisoners who appeared in court early in the morning received parole about 70% of the time, while those who appeared late in the day were awarded parole less than 10% of the time.²⁹

Most people aren't aware of decision fatigue, and this is why we end up feeling disappointed in ourselves when willpower wanes.

How can we eliminate unnecessary decisions from our daily routine? With some careful planning, it's easier than expected. Using weekends and nights to prepare in advance will help us stay more focused during the week.

This can apply to business and domestic tasks. For instance, take some time each Sunday to plan meals for the week, go grocery shopping and spend a few hours batch cooking and refrigerating or freezing dinners and lunches. This eliminates the need for decisions after a busy workday. On weeknights, write a to-do list, plan out clothes for the next day and organise equipment needed for work so there is less to worry about in the morning. Steve Jobs wore the same outfit every day for good

reason. Less decisions means more energy reserved for what really matters.

Digital automation can also help. Imagine the blog writer who, in addition to writing compelling content, needs to source photos, publish the post and share it across multiple social channels. Doing this manually every day will burn through a lot of time, and the more minor decisions the blogger needs to make, the less energy remains for complex or deep work tasks. Instead, the blogger might dedicate a few hours to planning and researching content, and then two days per week to writing. She then uses automation tools, such as those found in WordPress, to schedule blog post publication automatically over the course of the week. Social media automation tools like Sendible can then automatically detect newly published content and share to all social channels instantaneously.

Other digital automation tools like IFTTT (If this then that) and Zapier allow us to take a programmatic approach to common tasks, from email handling to smart home control, and even checking whether it is a good day to go surfing. For example, I program IFTTT with this script: ‘If the waves are 4 foot or larger and the wind is blowing from the west, then send a text message to me’. IFTTT checks the surf forecast every 15 minutes and texts me when the surf conditions meet my required criteria. I no longer need to check the surf report manually because I know that when conditions are good, I’ll receive a text message.

Through automation, we employ technology as a decision maker and avoid diluting our focus. Artificial intelligence promises to take this far beyond our current capability by executing intelligent responses to complex decisions in real-time. For example, the waves are good, so reschedule meetings in my calendar, order more surfboard wax online and call an Uber to take me to the beach. Or maybe the robots will all just go surfing themselves.

Having templates on hand for basic tasks is another useful hack. For example, imagine a small business owner who regularly pitches clients in the same niche. Instead of writing up

unique email responses every time, he sets up automated message sequences in a CRM tool. He simply clicks in the enquiry, customises if necessary and sends, knowing that he's used the best and most comprehensive reply possible. The CRM can then automatically follow-up the lead based on user triggered events, or lack of them.

Use a block scheduling method to avoid multitasking

As we've seen, attempting to multitask inhibits our ability to focus, and means we'll accomplish less. Over time, a habit of constantly multitasking can seriously hinder progress towards our goals. We may find ourselves in a state of general confusion – mindless busyness – where we reach the end of the week without actually having completed anything meaningful. For many, this is the first step towards our resilience being compromised. This is a cognitive risk.

Relearning how to focus on a single task at a time is like training a muscle. It may feel difficult at first, but it will get easier the more often we try.³⁰

The way we structure our to-do list can help us stay on track and avoid switching from task to task. One method is to simply make a list of everything that we need to do throughout the day and start from the top. The more disciplined among us might define whether tasks are urgent or important and then prioritise their list accordingly. However, neither of these approaches sets us up for optimal focus.

To mitigate the multitasking risk and encourage deep work, give block scheduling a try. Block scheduling involves grouping similar tasks together and reserving specific times to tackle each block. Throughout a typical workday, there are a variety of tasks we need to complete, and they will likely fall into a few distinct categories. By blocking off chunks of time for similar tasks, we're able to perform deep work, perhaps even get into flow, rather than bouncing from one unrelated task to another.

On the average work day many of us start with checking

emails, then gradually build up towards the toughest tasks. This is exactly how we end up experiencing decision fatigue. Try reversing this. Start with tasks that require creativity or concentration first thing in the morning and then move on to easier work, like replying to emails or attending meetings. Avoid checking emails numerous times per day – rather assign time blocks for administrative tasks and turn unnecessary technology off in between. In Silicon Valley the idea of Monk Mode – named because advocates completely disconnect for a set period each day – has gained popularity.³¹ Practitioners become monk-like in their focus (remember the Dalai Lama's schedule) in order to accelerate progress.

But everyone is slightly different. If you experiment with block scheduling, pay attention to where and when you focus best. For many, peak alertness occurs around 9:30am and is a great time to schedule an hour for Monk Mode. Allocate the most important tasks for these moments.

Remove distractions

As we learnt earlier in this chapter, current research shows that digital distractions are eroding our ability to focus. But most of us can't go totally off grid. Thankfully, there are plenty of methods and tools we can use to eliminate distractions. We may not be able to ditch our smartphones, but we can definitely avoid the temptation to check Twitter in the middle of the workday – or at 2am.

Make use of the do-not-disturb option on your smartphone, turn off notifications or put the phone on silent. Ensure vibration mode is deactivated. Be deliberate about interacting with technology. We don't want to get into flow state only to be distracted when a friend texts about weekend plans. Hide phones in drawers and check for any important messages in between tasks or when taking a break. Even then, remember anything that isn't urgent can wait until the relevant time block. If you wear a smartwatch switch off all notifications permanently.

Having email, text messages and social notifications on your wrist is, in my opinion, the highway to hell. If you use your smartwatch for exercising, protect the experience – don't let a meeting request ruin your run.

What if you're online most of the day and you just can't help switching to Facebook once in a while? Deleting social media accounts is certainly a possibility, but since many of us use them for work and to keep in touch with family and friends, it's not always practical to go cold turkey. If good old-fashioned will-power is eluding you, try out a website-blocking app to restrict access to certain websites for a set period of time.

For example, if you know that you're especially tempted to check social media during that late afternoon energy slump, you can block Facebook and Twitter between 12pm and 5pm. Alternatively, you can take it a step further and block everything except a few sites that you need to whitelist. Perhaps toilet breaks are optimal times for catching up on social feeds. Research suggests that 9 out of 10 of us already take the phone to the bathroom. Tip of the day: you might want to think twice about touching someone else's phone as the devices are often infested with E.coli and other microbes.³²

People can also be a huge distraction, especially in open-plan offices. Consider establishing a protocol whereby if you are wearing headphones it signals that you would rather all queries come digitally. You could also book meeting rooms or work remotely for times you plan to get into flow.

Finally, it helps to eliminate physical distractions. A cluttered workspace may not seem like a big deal, but having too many items on a desk can pull focus away from work.³³ When working from home, ensure that the workspace is detached from the living environment and establish rituals to help you shift focus to your work priorities. For many, changing clothes or listening to motivational music provides a cue that work is now beginning.

Drugs

Smart drugs, so-called *nootropics*, prescription medication and psychedelics all promise to boost focus and productivity. Silicon Valley engineers espouse the benefits of micro-dosing psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and LSD³⁴, while students are using narcolepsy drugs to gain an edge in their studies³⁵. The legal use of narcolepsy pills by astronauts, surgeons and soldiers has encouraged many to go forth and source the medication from shady online pharmacies. While some of these cognitive enhancers have demonstrated benefits there are, of course, side effects, documented mostly on Reddit forums. Anxiety, panic attacks, anger, migraines and depression are reported. Educate yourself before dabbling in the dark side of focus. Self-proclaimed Human Guinea Pig, Tim Ferriss, advises caution when it comes to nootropics. Biohacker Dave Asprey switched from drugs to a ketogenic diet and recommends bulletproof coffee as the ultimate cognitive enhancer.³⁶ Bulletproof coffee is created using coconut oil, butter and coffee. It is oily, delicious and packed full of calories. Use with caution and as part of a carefully structured diet.

Regular coffee, by comparison, seems relatively tame, yet provides significant cognitive enhancement with comparatively mild side effects for most drinkers. Use with care and limit intake after 2pm if you have trouble sleeping.

Energy drinks and caffeine tablets are not recommended. In my opinion, a clear to-do list, good night's sleep and a morning workout are more effective than most stimulants.

Begin a regular meditation practice

You do not have to be a spiritual person to practice meditation, or enjoy the benefits. Various cultures have practiced forms of meditation throughout history and no matter what you do or don't believe in, there is sure to be a method that resonates. You may be most familiar with mindfulness meditation,

which has become popular and accessible with the advent of apps like Headspace. The popularity of meditation is no fad, with numerous studies showing that it can help to relieve stress, reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, boost mood and improve the ability to focus.³⁷

There are dozens of meditation methods and it can be both fun and frustrating finding one that suits you. As a total beginner, you may find meditation challenging without guidance so attending a course or downloading a meditation app are good ways to get started.³⁸ Apps like Calm, Headspace and the Resilience App include selections of pre-recorded guided meditations designed for everything from falling asleep to dealing with anxiety.

The process of meditation really is as simple – and as difficult! – as maintaining attention on one point of focus in the present moment – be that sounds, sensations, the breath, a mantra – and when you catch yourself thinking about something else, return attention to the focus point. It is not avoiding thinking, as commonly believed, because thoughts will always naturally come and go. Rather, it is the act of recognising drift and controlling attention at will. And it does get easier over time.

Historian Yuval Noah Harari recommends two hours of meditation per day for optimal results.³⁹ For many of us this is almost incomprehensible. However, even a much less time-intensive approach can yield noticeable benefits. Research shows that as little as 5 to 10 minutes a day for a few months can result in lowered inflammation⁴⁰ and an increased sense of wellbeing.

What's the easiest way for most people to include meditation sessions in their daily routine? Lock in time before bedtime or shortly after waking up. Think of how often we grab our phones before we go to bed or right after we wake up. What if we reserved those precious minutes for a meditative practice instead?

Meditation teaches attention control. Having learnt how to recognise distracting thoughts, we notice them arise during the work day and can confidently pause, focus on the breath, then

return to the task at hand. This is real-time resilience and the basis for living mindfully.

With time, bringing our full attention into the present moment is something that becomes a way of life. See Chapter 6 – Presence – for more.

Final thoughts

It is how we choose what we do, and how we approach it, that will determine whether the sum of our days adds up to a formless blur, or to something resembling a work of art.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Modifying our routine and environment to cultivate focus can seem uncomfortable at first, and it always remains tempting to submit to distractions. With concerted effort we can build up attention control and apply it to life at will. This is a major component of resilience and a sure-fire way to accelerate success.

Rate my current ability to focus



How important is focus to me?



Which three skills, used daily, would improve my score?

☐

Remove distractions

☐

Improve sleep habits

☐

Avoid multitasking

☐

Eliminate decision fatigue

☐

Meditation

☐

Regular breaks

What would my score be if I became a master of the three skills I have selected?



Imagine myself successfully using these skills every day.

How do I feel in my body?

.....
Which emotions am I experiencing?

.....
What am I thinking?

.....
What am I willing to start tomorrow?

.....
How will I remind myself?

☐

Phone reminder

☐

Written note

Register your commitment and get inspiration at:

<https://bradleyhook.com/mastery>