

## Lesson 1 - Focus Your Attention

Learning to focus your attention in sport is a key skill that not only helps you to **perform** at your best, but also helps you to focus on the task in hand, so that you can **acquire new skills** and **practice** those skills so that they become learned. In this lesson I will look at some strategies to help you remain 'present' and focused while also looking at 'mind wandering' and how and why to avoid it.



So what exactly is 'attention'?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2002) in his classic book *Flow*, refers to attention as being **psychic energy**. Each person has a limited amount of attention available and a useful way of thinking about it is to "focus it intentionally like a beam of energy" (p. 33). Focused attention can be said to bring order to consciousness. The opposite of psychic energy is **psychic entropy** where there is disorder in consciousness. In the ski lesson environment, distractions such as fear and anxiety can divert attention to things that are undesirable, moving your thoughts away from the original task or goal, leading to disorder.

Furthermore, focused attention creates interest and in turn interest helps with maintaining attention. When learning a skill, if one is interested in the task, set by the instructor, then it will be easier to keep attention on task. However, it could also be argued that if one is good at maintaining focused attention then it can lead to greater interest in the task! So, developing your ability to focus your attention fits very well with the philosophy of Learn it, Love it, Live it (Tate, 2015).

How do you avoid 'mind wandering'?

First, it would be useful to establish what mind wandering is or is not. **Mind Wandering** is not being able to focus on the task in hand. This is not the same as **Daydreaming** (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016). Kaufman talks about positive constructive daydreaming (Singer, 1975) as being a useful version of 'mind wandering' as it helps you to have creative, planful and playful thoughts. However, in terms of developing your skiing performance the concern of this lesson is with the version of mind wandering that leads to poor attentional control.

Matt Killingsworth (2011) in his Ted Talk says that mind wandering is likely to be a cause of unhappiness. He has carried out studies that found that, people who are present focused are substantially happier than people who's minds are wandering, no matter what the activity! One of the big reasons for this is that when people's minds wander they often think of unpleasant things e.g., worries, regrets, anxieties etc. So the benefit of remaining focused on task is two fold; 1) you will develop the skills more quickly and 2) you will be happier as a result.

**Tip:** Try to reduce distractions from outside sources such as mobile phones and watches. When engaged in a lesson or practice session put your phone on silent and avoid looking at the time!

**Focused attention allows for full engagement of the task in hand. This is an active process that can be improved over time.**

(Csikszentmihalyi, Latta & Duranso, 2017)



How do you practice and improve your ability to focus your attention?

There are many ways to develop your ability to focus your attention so for the purposes of this lesson I will cover; Mindfulness, Refocusing and Task Goals.

**Mindfulness** is one of those terms that seems to be used by everyone these days but there many benefits to the practice not least to help improve your ability to stay focused on the present moment. It is also used as a way of reducing stress through Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and as a way of developing your strengths through Mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP). Essentially, mindfulness is "a state of mind that keeps you locked into the present moment" (Csikszentmihalyi, Latta & Duranso, 2017 p.86). It can be practised in many ways through



### TRY THIS

**Nature walks** are a great way to practice focusing your attention. **Look, listen** and **feel**. Look at the beautiful surroundings, listen to the sounds around you and feel the air against your skin. Try to remain present by choosing one thing to focus on.



## Key Points

- Psychic energy brings order to consciousness.
- Mind Wandering is not being able to focus on the task in hand, leading to poor attentional control.
- Remaining focused helps you develop skills more quickly and, as a result, makes you happier.
- Focused attention allows for full engagement on the task in hand.
- Focusing your attention is a skill that can be improved over time through practice.
- Mindfulness helps you to remain locked into the present moment and can be practised in a variety of ways.
- Task goals are preferable to outcome goals when focusing on challenging and improving performance.
- Refocusing is a skill that can be developed to allow you to regain lost focus.
- Effortful attention is required when learning a new skill.
- Skilled performers use effortless attention meaning the task or skill is more automated.

## References

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *FLOW, The classic work on how to achieve happiness*. London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: RIDER.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., Latter, P., & Duranso, W. C. (2017). Running Flow, Mental immersion techniques for better running. Human Kinetics.

Dietrich, A., & Stoll, O. (2010). Effortless Attention, Hypofrontality, and Perfectionism. In B. Bruya (Ed.), *Effortless Attention: A new perspective in the cognitive science of attention and action* (pp. 159-178). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jackson, S. A., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow in Sports; The keys to optimal experiences and performances*. Human Kinetics.

Kaufman, S. B., & Gregoire, C. (2016, March 9). *Unravelling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind*. Retrieved May 29, 2017, from YouTube: <https://youtu.be/sy3yhPD-F2k>

Loudis, L., Lobitz, C., & Singer, K. (1988). *Skiing Out of Your Mind*. Springfield Books Limited.

Killingsworth, M. (2011, November). *Want to be happier? Stay in the moment*. Retrieved May 29, 2017, from TED Ideas worth spreading: [https://www.ted.com/talks/matt\\_killingsworth\\_want\\_to\\_be\\_happier\\_stay\\_in\\_the\\_moment?utm\\_source=tedcomshare&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=tedsread](https://www.ted.com/talks/matt_killingsworth_want_to_be_happier_stay_in_the_moment?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=tedsread)

Singer, J. L. (1975). Navigating the stream of consciousness: research in daydreaming and related inner experience. *American Psychologist*, 30, 727-738.

Tate, D. (2015). *Learn it, Love it, Live it; The Philosophy of the Irish Association of Snowsports Instructors*. Edinburgh: Parallel Dreams Publishing.

*All photographs are copyright to Parallel Dreams.*