

Increasing the Mind's Power to Focus Using the Heart Rate Monitor

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As an educator, I have come to view the inability of some students to stay on task as symptomatic of a weak "focusing muscle." Brain research in the last decade by Dr. Jeffery Schwartz, among others, has demonstrated that the ability to maintain focus and stay on task can be increased with proper focusing exercises without the use of medication. Focusing exercises alone can change the structure of the brain and brain activity as revealed in PET scans, and increase one's ability to stay focused on healthy thoughts and productive tasks. (See for example, Dr. Schwartz' book, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force.*)

Most all focusing exercises involve picking something to focus on, typically one's breath or a candle, and then making an effort to stay still and focused on it while thoughts that have nothing to do with the focusing activity come in and out of awareness. It is normal for the mind to frequently get off task by engaging one of these intruding thoughts: "I wonder what . . .?", "Did I . . .?", "Are we done yet?" An effort must be made to bring attention back to the chosen object of focus. Both the effort to focus and bring the mind back when it wanders off strengthens the mind's "focusing muscle" to do both on any task. Great! Now how do you get an adult or child who seems to have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to sit still and focus on one thing, like a candle, for 20 minutes? Answer: Throw out the sitting still part and get them to focus on a heart rate monitor while engaged in vigorous exercise.

Here's how to start:

- 1) Pick an exercise that will allow you and your child to exercise together, such as indoor cycling, running on treadmills, jumping on small trampolines, or any relatively stationary exercise that keeps you both together, challenged, and able to focus your eyes on your heart rate monitor without fear of running into anything.
- 2) Select a time you can both regularly commit to (before breakfast is usually the best time).
- 3) Talk with your child before each workout about which one of the five heart zones that you are going to work for during the workout, and about how to focus the mind during the workout (Steps 4 thru 6).
- 4) Focus on the heart rate monitor with your eyes and mind.
- 5) Observe the thoughts that enter your mind as you workout, but do not engage them unless they are related to your workout. "My heart rate is falling, I need to speed up"—This thought is on task and should be engaged by speeding up and then returning your full focus to the heart rate monitor's display. "I wonder what we're having for breakfast"—this thought is off task and should not be engaged. Just let it be and use your "focusing muscle" to keep the bulk of awareness on your heart rate readout. The thought will eventually fade away.

6) Do not talk to your workout partner. This is very important. You are not ignoring each other; rather you are making an effort to help each other keep your minds on your heart rate monitor. "Focus on your monitor" is appropriate reminders when one of you loses focus and engages a thought that tempts you into conversation. Before you begin, you might agree to use this reminder phrase compassionately when either of you gets off task. (As the parent, you might talk "accidentally" during a workout just to allow your child to remind you of the task. It's nice if they get a chance to enforce the social contract for the workout now and again.)

7) After the workout, spend a little time discussing what you both observed during the workout. How many times did your mind wander off? Did you notice thoughts come in and then leave when you did not engage them? Was it easier or harder this time to focus? What are you noticing about how your mind works? Is your ability to focus on other tasks improving?

Focusing exercises are easy to describe, but difficult to do. If you currently work out your "focusing muscle," then you know that it takes months of effort to see significant progress. In the beginning the primary benefits come from observing and sharing your focusing observations.

By combining Heart Zones Training with focusing training, you and your child will benefit body, mind, and relationship simultaneously.

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