

HOW TUTORS CAN HELP TUTEES IMPROVE THEIR CONCENTRATION

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Concentration may be the most important learning skill for the tutees to learn – and tutors can help them improve the concentration of tutees. If tutees cannot concentrate when they are reading textbooks, sitting in class, or studying for a test, they will not be able to retain what they are reading, hearing, or learning. The good news is that concentration can be strengthened with practice.

First, two misconceptions about concentration must be cleared up. The first misconception is that “good” students can concentrate for hours at a time. Because of this misconception, students often schedule study time so that they are studying, for example, all day Friday or all day Saturday. After examining over 350 study sessions, from first year college students to senior faculty members, the average concentration span in reading textbooks was about 16 minutes. This means tutors need to encourage students to use 15-20 minute study sessions in one subject; they can then switch to another topic or another activity for the next 20 minutes. Some subjects and some study activities will hold the student’s interest and concentration for longer than 20 minutes, but the average study span is about that length. Using 20-minute study bites and switching activities regularly during a three-hour study period increases productivity and retention immensely. When concentration wanes, students need to be taught to turn away from that book immediately and switch to another study material, even if the time has been shorter than 20 minutes. Sitting over an open textbook while daydreams flow is counter-productive.

The second misconception that students hold is that some people just naturally concentrate well and others do not. Concentration is not an innate ability. It is a skill that can be learned and, with practice, can get better and better. Even students who feel they never concentrate well in school can learn to concentrate if they practice.

SPECIAL CONCENTRATION STRATEGIES

Concentration strategies include a balance of mental challenges, emotional involvement, and physical exercises. If any one of these components is missing, concentration will not be good.

Mental challenge

Teach students mental exercises that will improve concentration and ask them to incorporate into their daily lives sustained concentration on a simple task. The first step is to teach tutees a simple relaxation exercise (deep breathing to the count of four, and relaxing the body starting with the feet and ending with the eyes and jaw muscles). Then, with their eyes closed, have them picture a flower (or any object they wish to concentrate on). Encourage them to examine this in minute detail, examining the flower from close-up and far away.

Start with 2-3 minute concentration spans. After tutees have concentrated on the flower for a few minutes, ask them to open their eyes and describe their experience with concentration.

The goal is to incorporate 15-20 minutes of sustained concentration into their daily schedules. Tutors might wish to start every tutoring session with a brief concentration exercise. Even 5 minutes will make a difference in the tutee's ability to concentrate at will and sustain focus over a longer period of time.

A second exercise to enhance concentration involves challenging tutees by teaching them to push themselves past their current intellectual level. If students get bored, the

material is probably too easy, and they need to learn to incorporate challenges by learning more than they may need to learn for the class. If students get stressed, the material may be too hard and that may make the students shut down. Stimulating intellectual activities need to be a regular part of students' lives, or the brain is going to get hazy from lack of use.

Tutors might ask tutees to come up with 3-6 questions about the material they are supposed to learn or teach them to build their background knowledge in that topic by checking out easy books on the subject.

Finally, distributed study with specific short-term goals will help students concentrate. Tutors can teach tutees the 20-minute study bite and help them write specific study goals for each study period. A student may set a goal of reading one history chapter, completing 7 math problems, or brainstorming at least a dozen ideas for an English paper. Studying each subject for a little bit every day will help concentration and retention.

Emotional involvement

Tutees will learn they cannot concentrate on studies unless they have personal commitment to that topic. External motivators are the weakest sort of commitment, so encourage the tutees to concentrate on learning the subject rather than getting a certain grade. Help tutees to see how this topic can become personally relevant. Tutors might want to model by showing why this topic is intellectually challenging or personally relevant.

Negative emotions, especially stress, will detract from concentration; stress management strategies will help. These may include relaxation exercises, guided visualizations, humor, or other activities.

Finally, other people greatly affect the tutees' abilities to concentrate. If they are trying to study in a dorm room when everyone else is watching television, they will find their

concentration turning toward what the others are doing. This may mean helping tutees find other study times (after the children have gone to bed?), other study places (the library?), and situations where their minds can fully concentrate on the topic rather than the distractions of everyday life.

Physical exercise

The mind does not operate by itself and mind/body connections have been firmly established by the scientific community. This means students cannot have an Olympic quality mind with a couch potato body. The first rule for enhancing concentration is to get enough physical exercise every day, at least enough to break into a sweat. Tutees should be encouraged to find physical activities that fit into their lifestyles. This may involve walking across campus, a workout with weights, an aerobics class, or taking the dog for a walk every evening. The exercise brings variety into their lives and enhances the mind's ability to sustain focus.

Active learning also helps. Tutees can be encouraged to position their bodies in alert poses, to walk around while testing themselves over new terminology, to talk aloud about a chapter just read, to write something about the topic studied, to make new concepts or theories into a song, or to get physically involved rather than sitting at a desk.

Conclusion

Tutees need to learn to monitor their concentration and to incorporate active concentration practice into every study session. Tutors can help by modeling intense concentration during tutoring sessions and by changing activities when a tutee's concentration flags. Concentration – just as with any skill – can be developed with practice.