

# Improving Concentration and Procrastination



with Sarah Myhill

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# Concentration is key to academic success

“Concentration is the ability to focus your attention on a single thought, idea, or action, as critical as this skill is, it is one of the most difficult to develop.”

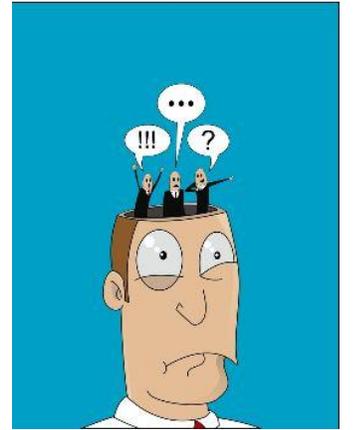
Kam Knight (2019)

Concentration is a critical skill for a student, without it, you are not able to start, stick with, or finish a task or an assignment



# Why can't we concentrate?

- there are **so many thoughts** invading our minds
- and there are **so many distractions**
- we have become so used to attending immediately to these distractions, such as text messages and social media posts, that **we have worn down our attention spans**
- we need to become aware of this and **build up our concentration 'will' again**





## **The unrelenting noise of the way we live now is eroding our attention:**

- **technology and social media – manipulating us**
- **economic growth – living faster**
- **constant switching between tasks – every 3 minutes**
- **less sleep – under-slept and over-tasked**
- **sedentary indoor lifestyles**
- **lack of reading – reduced empathy**
- **no space for mind to roam**
- **lack of unsupervised play for children**
- **bad diets - processed foods**
- **pollution**

# Mind-wandering / reflection / day-dreaming

**Johann Hari** in his book, **Stolen Focus, Why You Can't Pay Attention (2022)** describes attention as being like light that is in many layers and the way we live now is eroding it

1<sup>st</sup> layer: **Spotlight attention:** makes you do things like make a coffee

2<sup>nd</sup> layer: **Starlight attention:** shows the direction you are travelling in

3<sup>rd</sup> layer: **Daylight attention:** reflection, mind wandering and deep thought

4<sup>th</sup> layer: **Stadium light attention:** helps us see each other and work together as a society - we don't see the big picture anymore

**Johann** thinks we have become obsessed by petty goals and lost in distractions and we are losing our light



# Thoughts and Emotions

**Thoughts can overwhelm us and trigger emotions and more thoughts**

**We do not acknowledge the positive aspects of life as much the negative**

**We can train our minds and direct our thoughts with positive self-talk**

# Manage distractions

Being **alert to distractions** is an automatic survival mechanism

So you **need to manage them** - remove them or learn to ignore them

**Stay away from your phone** (and social media and emails)

**Train your brain to refrain from attending to distractions** for longer and longer periods.

Keep your **workspace tidy** and **clear distractions from your senses**

# Manage distractions

Consider your **most productive time of day**, when you feel most energetic and focused

Work in **blocks of time**

If all else fails, try a **distraction free zone! Take yourself away from your usual environment**

# Manage distractions – Ask a Question

**Automatic mechanism in brain** – designed to seek answers when a question is asked

**Questions** engage mind – so **direct and train focus**

How can I pay more attention to this task or assignment?

Your brain will do its best to make you more attentive

**Daily routine – start the day with a question!**

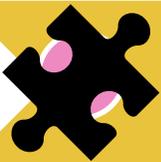
How can I concentrate on my revision today?

How can I read this book with full attention?

**Directed questions:** ask questions that direct your mind to pay attention

# Study Strategies - Reading

Read a book like a jigsaw



The 80/20 technique



5 minute jotter



Set goals (journey - menu)



Key Words and Key Themes



Read Actively



Dual Reading



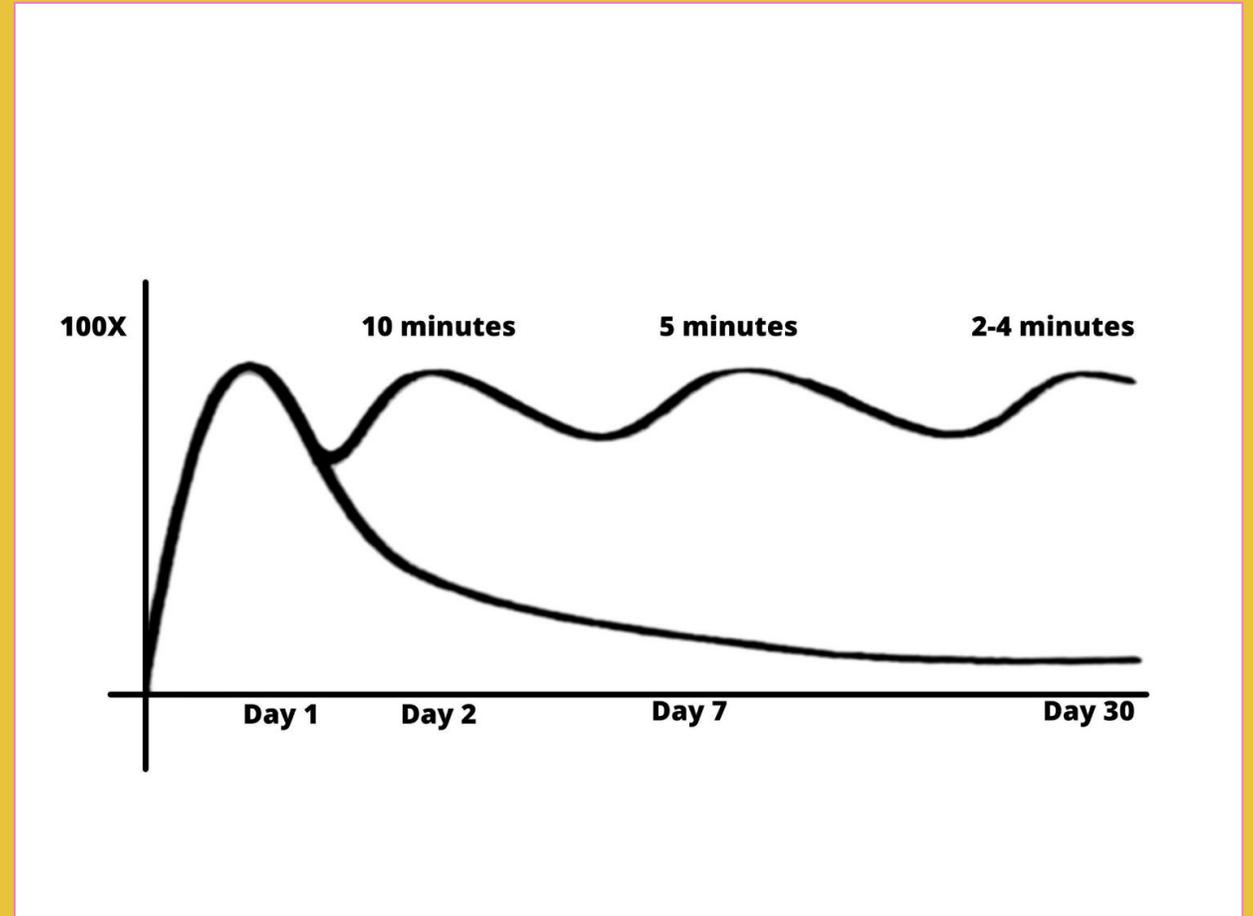
Use a guide to read



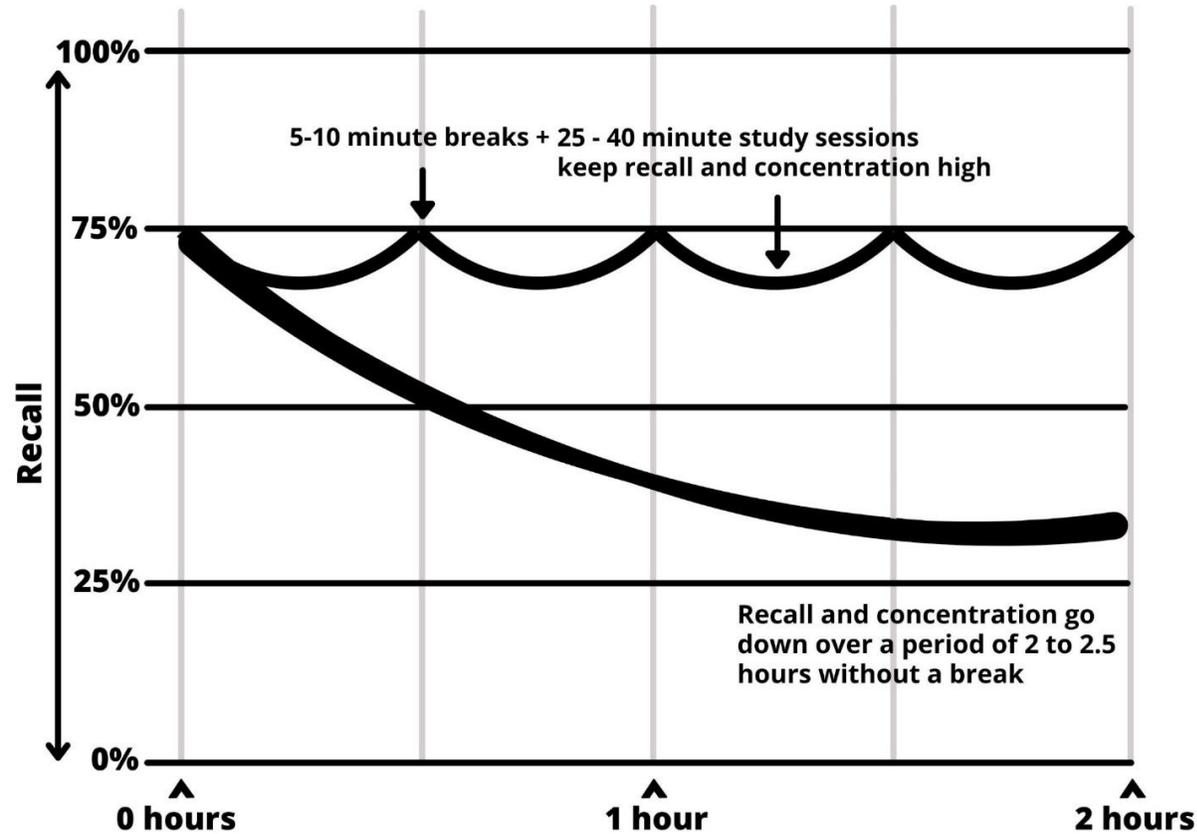
# Review

## Rationale

- Enhancing memory
- 5 minutes
- can potentially save you hours of time when you come to the exams



# Chunking time



The Pomodoro Technique  
(by Francesco Cirillo 1980s).

- timer to break down work into intervals
- traditionally 25 minutes in length, separated by short breaks

Why?

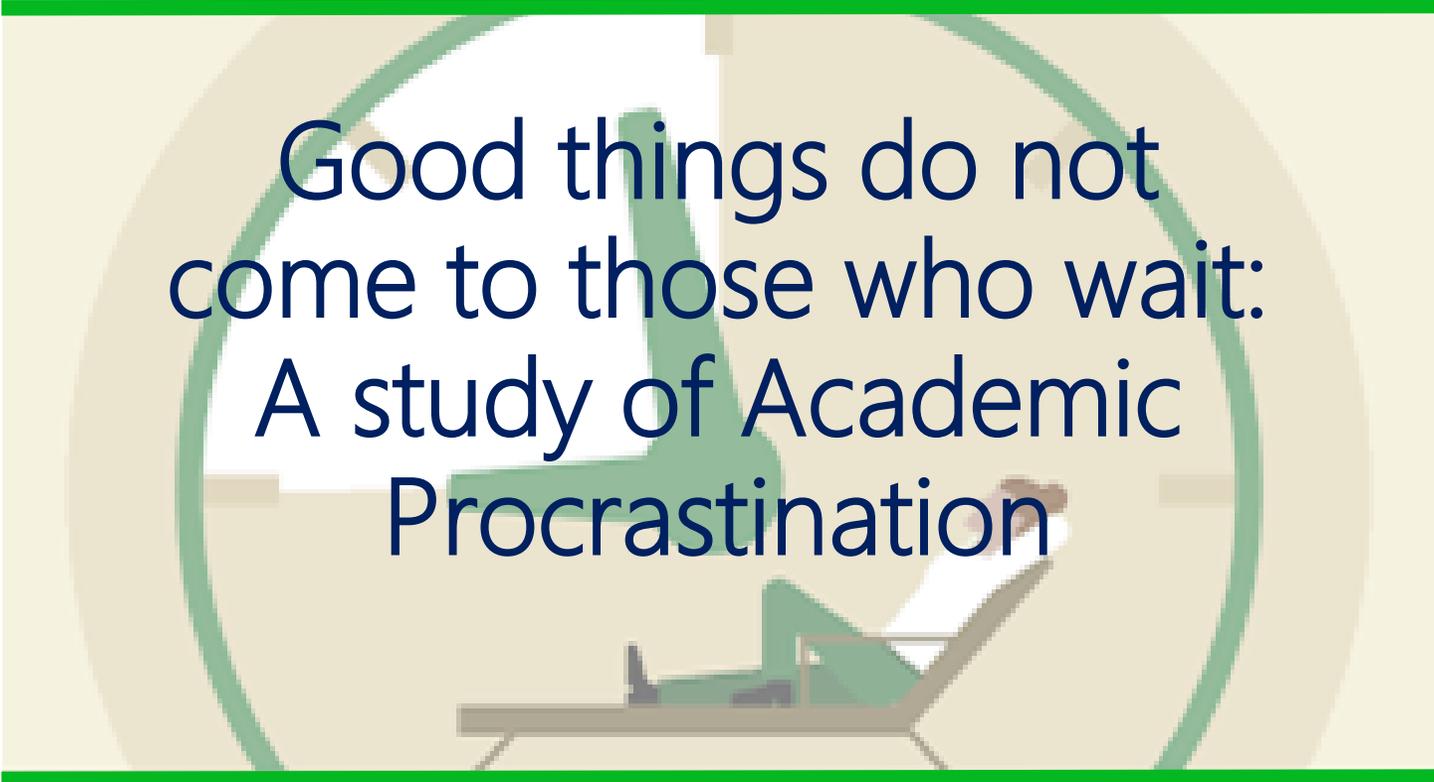
- Retention
- Recall
- Concentration



# Improve your focus to improve your grades

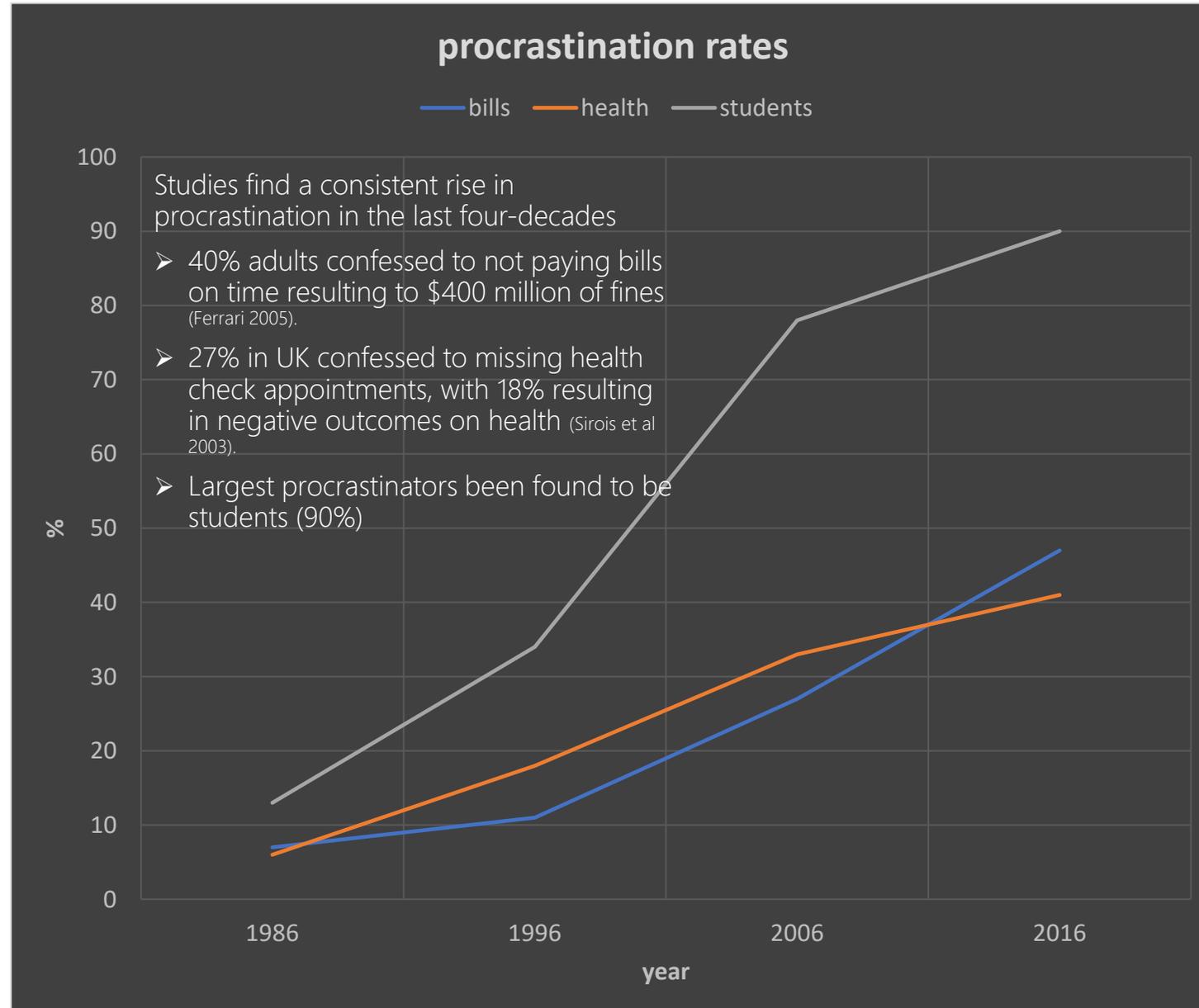
## You don't need to learn to concentrate

- Learning to pay attention takes conscious control, **live in the moment!**
- **Memory is linked to concentration** – improve your focus and you will improve your memory
- Multi-tasking is not good for attention or focus – it spreads concentration too thinly

An illustration of a person in a green suit reclining on a lounge chair. In the background, a large, stylized clock face is visible, with the hands pointing to approximately 10:10. The scene is set against a light beige background with a green circular frame around the clock and chair. The text is overlaid on the clock face.

Good things do not  
come to those who wait:  
A study of Academic  
Procrastination

Saman Awan

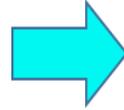


# what influences academic procrastination?

## Self-efficacy

"The Belief in ones own capabilities to successfully execute an action required to manage a prospective situation" (Bandura, 1995, p2)

The lower the belief, the less likely one is to manage a situation

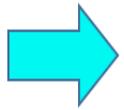


- Self-efficacy was a strong predictor of procrastination in students. (Steel, 2007)
- Van Earde (2003) found that the lower ones self-efficacy was, the higher their levels of procrastination.

## Motivation

Motivation is the force that drives a person to do something (de Charms 1968).

It can be intrinsic (IM) such as feelings of gratification) or extrinsic (EM) such as rewards (Deci and Ryan, 2000).



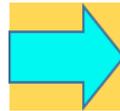
- Senecal et al (1995): intrinsically motivated students procrastinated less than extrinsically motivated students when performing the same task.
- Brownlow et al (2000): low procrastinators were motivated by internal and external rewards and found academic tasks as opportunities to progress further.

# what influences procrastination?

## Perfectionism

Perfectionists adhere to strict and high standards for themselves and can be severely self-critical. They are often high achievers but a fear of failure may cause them to procrastinate.

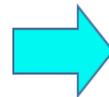
Perfectionism can be adaptive (motivating) and maladaptive (limiting) effects



- Onwuegbuzie (2000): found that maladaptive perfectionism such as fear of failing, self-critical beliefs were linked to procrastination
- However, Steel (2007) found that perfectionism did not predict procrastination.

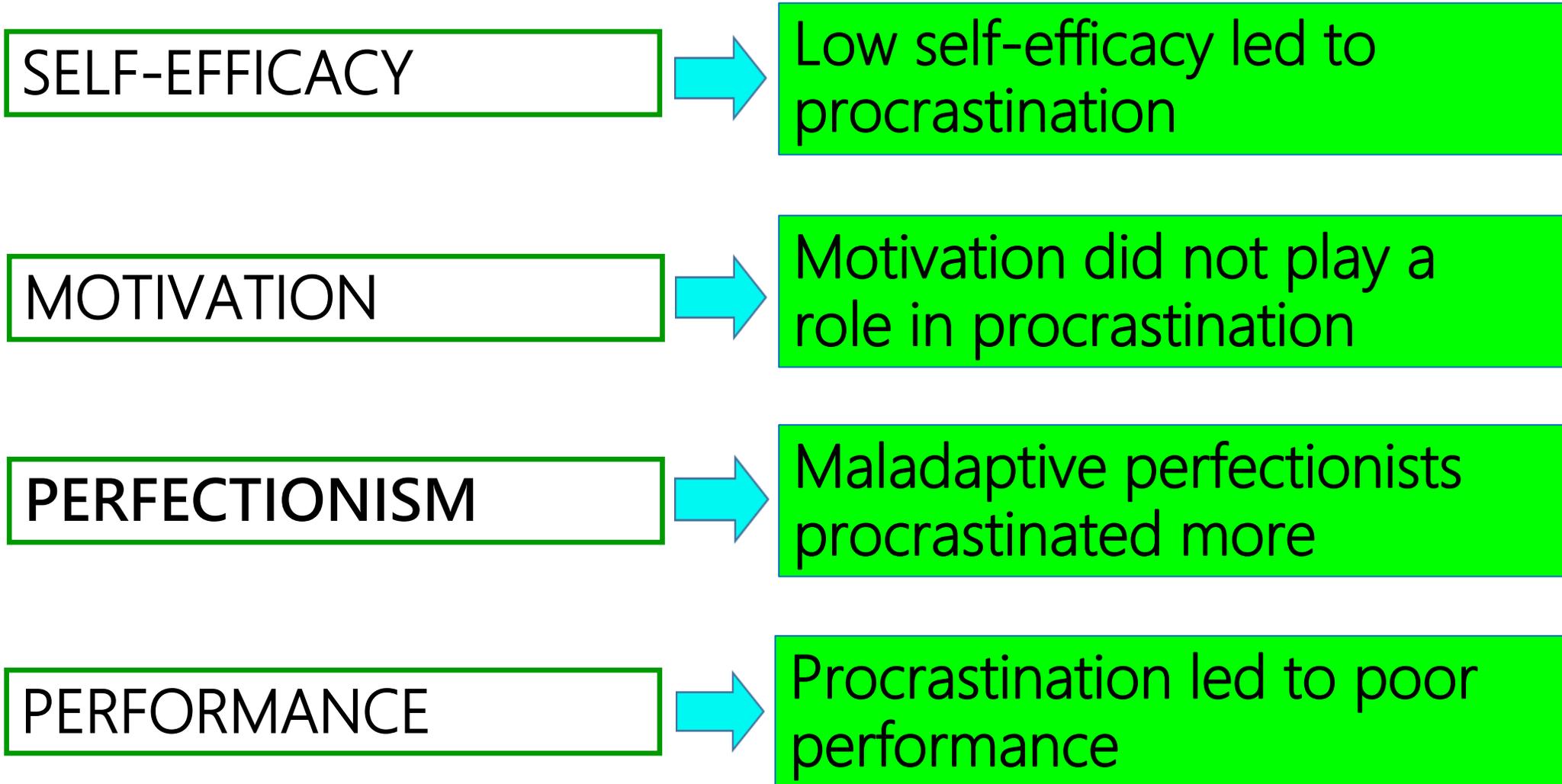
## Performance

Procrastination has practical implications for academic performance



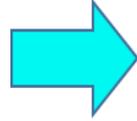
- Procrastinators received lower marks on all their assignments (Tice and Baumeister 1997)
- Low performance was associated with high levels of procrastination in a semester long study (Steel 2017)

# Results



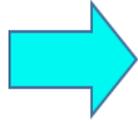
# Strategies

SELF-EFFICACY



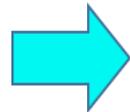
- Positive self-talk: prevents ego depletion and promotes self-belief
- Success spirals and actual accomplishments

PERFECTIONISM



- Practice self-control: targets irrational cognitions about failure
- Addressing values and rewards

PERFORMANCE



- Breaking down tasks
- Formative feedback
- Setting up step-by-step instructions
- Inhibit multi-tasking

Students have difficulties from procrastination, such as; lack of personal control, ineffective learning skills, irrational thinking, ineffective time management (Rozenal and Carlbring 2013)

Poor cognitive outcomes

Procrastinators experience increased psychological distress and anxiety as deadlines approach due to fear of failing and low perceived self-ability (Balkis and Duru 2007)

Poor psychological outcome

Procrastinators complete their assignment later than non-procrastinators, experienced more stress and reported poor health symptoms such as colds and flu (Holden 2007)

Poor physical health outcome

Procrastinators reported lower positive actions, low expressions of feelings and needs than non-procrastinators (Ferrari and Díaz-Morales 2014)

Poor emotional outcome

Procrastinators show less commitment and poor willingness for job search behaviours after graduating (Gupta et al. 2012)

Poor economical outcome



# Getting started

Activity often breeds more activity; action comes first, motivation comes second

Successfully tackling a project builds more confidence and motivation to do it again

You don't have to be in the mood to do something

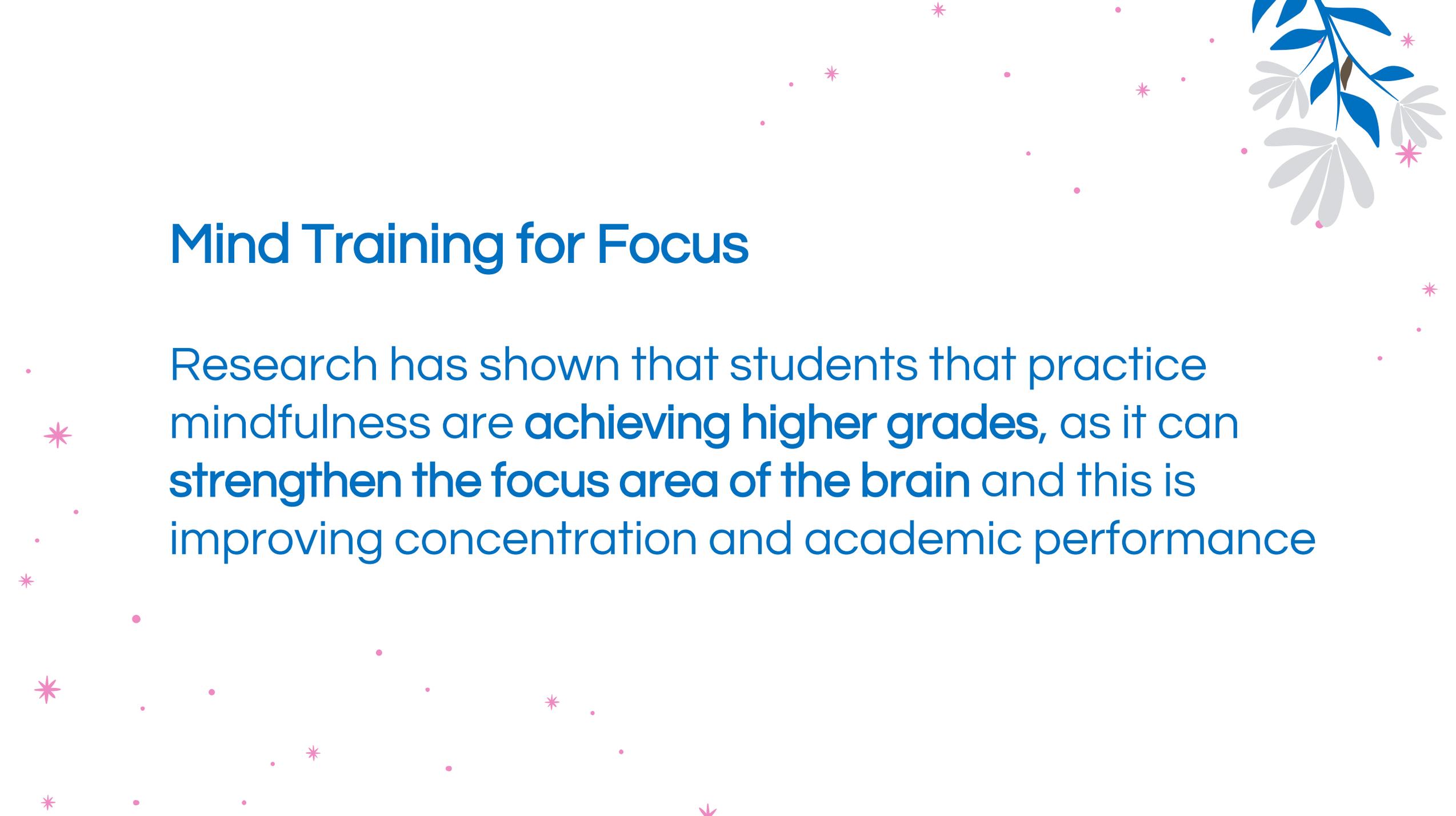
Managing emotions – How am I going to complete this task? Not Why!





# Mind Training for Focus

Research has shown that students that practice mindfulness are **achieving higher grades**, as it can **strengthen the focus area of the brain** and this is improving concentration and academic performance



# Documented Benefits of Mind Training in Research

Stress reduction  
Clarity and focus  
Greater resilience  
Enhanced creativity  
Improved relationships  
Improved concentration  
Rapport and communication  
Improved health and wellbeing

Greater confidence and self-esteem  
Reduced anxiety and depression  
Improved work-life balance  
Greater work satisfaction  
Memory enhancement  
Intuitive ability  
Pain reduction  
Happiness





# Mind Training Benefits for Students with Concentration Difficulties

*one of the most effective non-pharmaceutical treatments for ADHD*

## **Cognitive Benefits**

- *enhanced attention control*
- *better working memory*
- *strengthened executive function*
- *increased focus*

## **Emotional Well-being**

- *greater emotional regulation*
- *reduced emotional reactivity*
- *enhanced self-compassion*
- *boost in overall happiness*

## **Social Aspects**

- *elevated self-awareness*
- *effective conflict resolution*
- *better communication*
- *improved relationships*

## **Behavioural Improvements**

- *greater self-regulation*
- *diminished impulsivity*
- *increased motivation*
- *enhanced productivity*
- *easier initiation of tasks*

## **Mental Health and Sleep**

- *better sleep quality*
- *lowered stress levels*
- *effective treatment for depression and anxiety disorders (common comorbidities with ADHD)*



**Better Concentration**  
**increases** your chances of  
**Better Grades** and  
**Greater Academic Success**  
by strengthening the  
**Focus Area** of your brain



## Amygdala

- memory
- decision making
- emotional responses

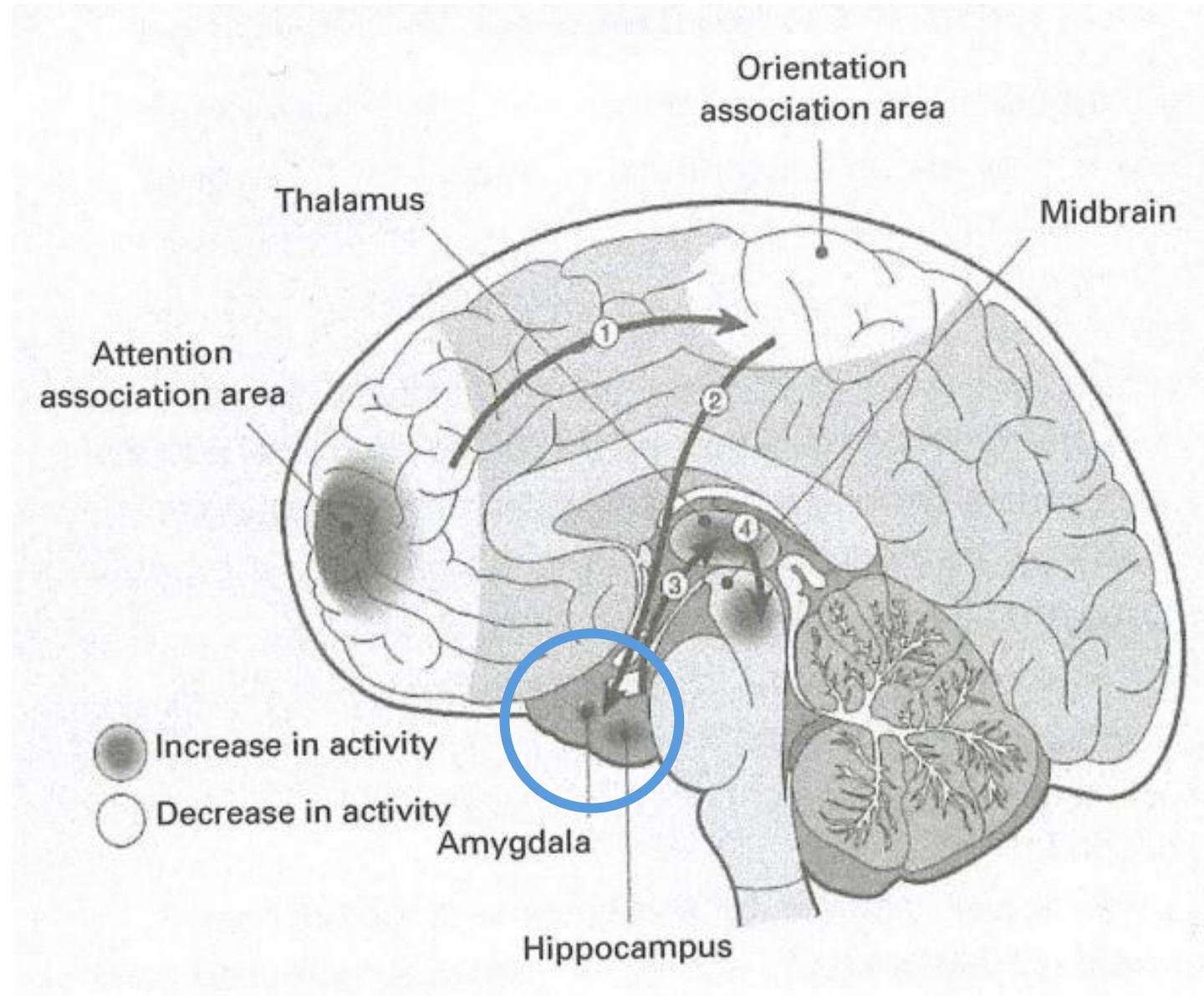
## Hippocampus

- spatial memory

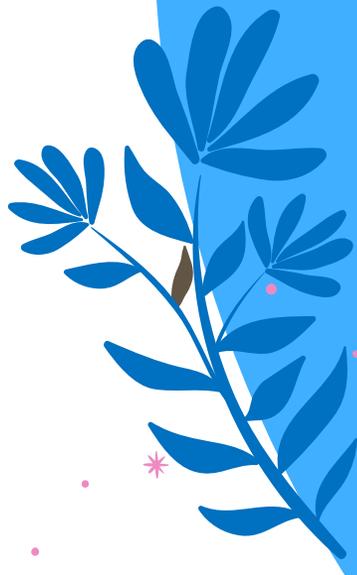
short term memory



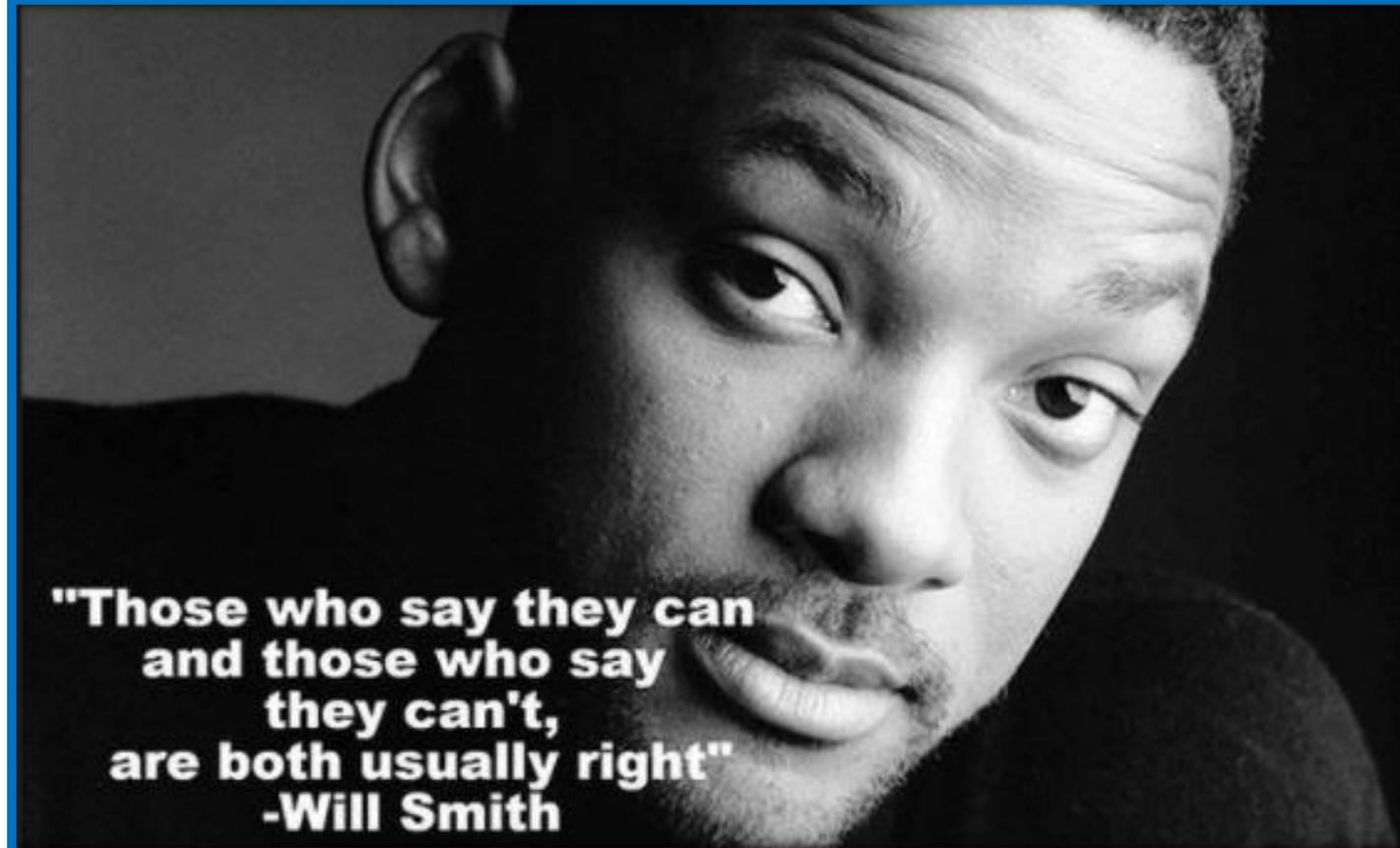
long term memory



Mind Training is becoming aware  
of the present moment, through  
paying attention, on purpose and  
non-judgmentally



# Self-talk & Mind-set



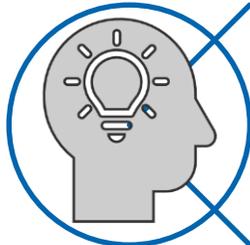
# Self-talk & Mind-set



Self-talk is a form of concentration training -- have to focus on the words



Self-talk changes your mind-set and identity -- if you repeat certain words they go inside and rewire your brain to act out what the words describe



TO DO: Make your statement in the **present tense**, as though it is happening now e.g. **'I am excellent at concentrating'** **'I have a very good memory'**

- Your brain starts to believe it then and work towards that outcome (Knight 2018)

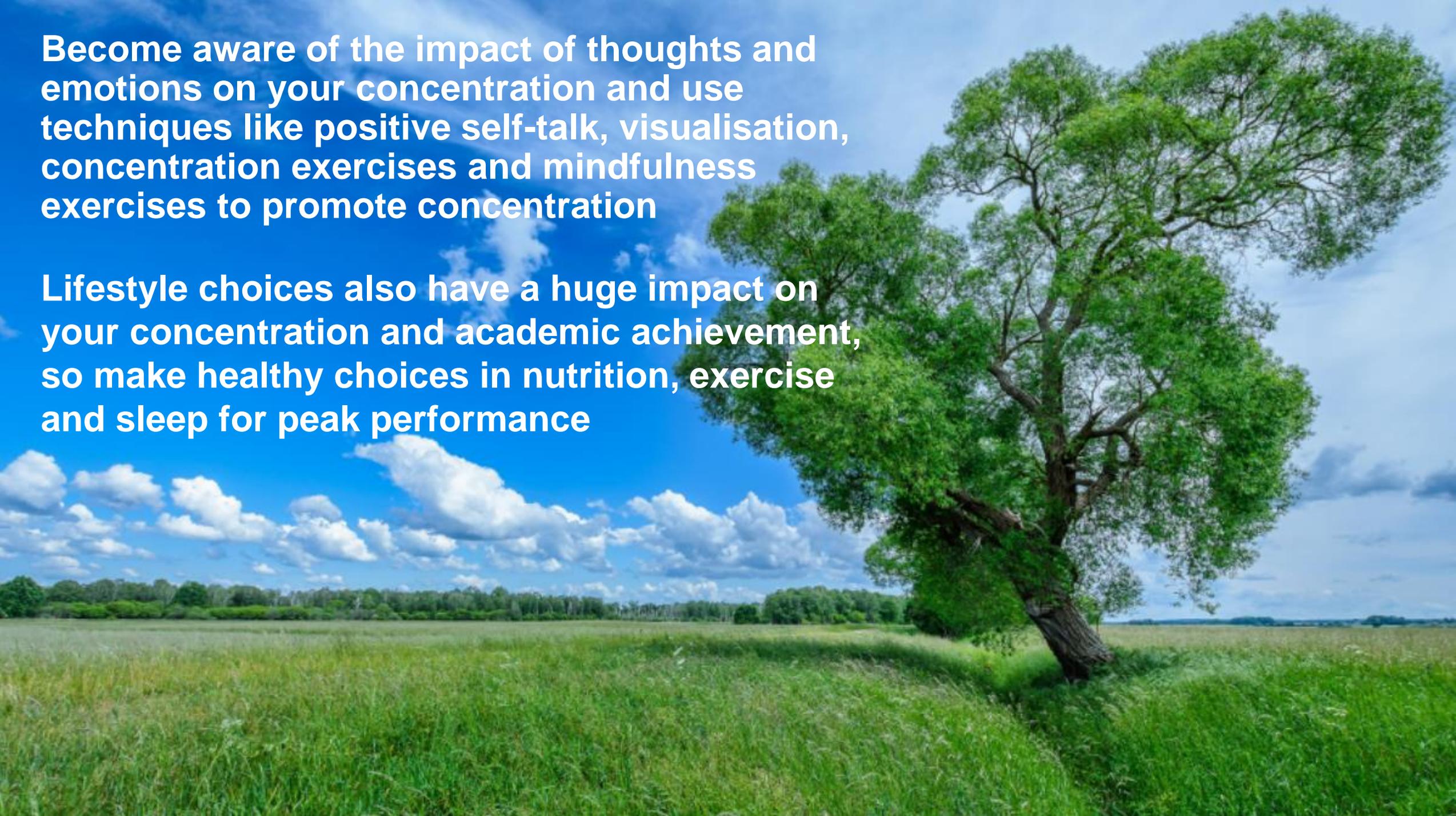
# Happy Students Concentrate Better

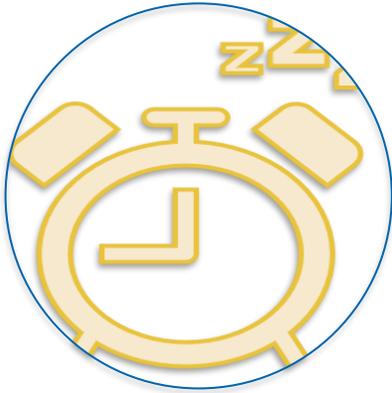
“... the days that make us  
happy make us wise” John  
Masefield, English poet and  
writer



**Become aware of the impact of thoughts and emotions on your concentration and use techniques like positive self-talk, visualisation, concentration exercises and mindfulness exercises to promote concentration**

**Lifestyle choices also have a huge impact on your concentration and academic achievement, so make healthy choices in nutrition, exercise and sleep for peak performance**





### Sleep

- improves energy levels, focus, motivation and mood
- sleep deprivation negatively affects the short-term memory - used while studying



### Exercise / Play

- enhances working memory
- lowers stress and anxiety
- improves your mood as well as your self-esteem



### Nutrition

- you are what you eat
- you need to eat right to work hard



### Do

- manage your time
- create a routine
- prioritise your tasks
- manage interruptions
- stop procrastinating
- schedules & plans

**Work Ethic and Healthy Lifestyle Choices**

# Sleep – Memory and Concentration

Blue light reducing glasses for an hour before bed

Reduce lighting in the environment an hour before bed

Try to keep off technology an hour before bed

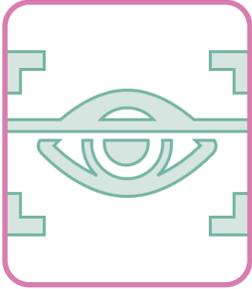
\* Keep the room dark and cool for sleep

• Sleep if possible, between 10am-6am ideally – set reminder for 9pm

\* • Daylight on face – not through glass, either a walk or looking out of a window within an hour of waking up for about 2 min on a sunny day and up to 10 mins on an overcast\*day.



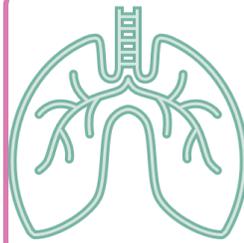
# A quick exercise to quiet your mind



First, close your eyes, clear your mind, and begin to breathe deeply



Inhale slowly concentrating on the air flowing into your lungs, hold your breath for a few seconds, and exhale slowly while concentrating on the air flowing out



Focus only on the movement of air in and out of your body



As you do this, repeat in your thoughts or out loud, 'I AM CALM IN MIND & BODY'



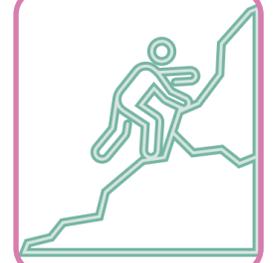
After a few minutes of breathing and reciting this mantra, you will begin to feel a calming and relaxing sensation wash over you



Now open your eyes and come back to the present moment



Notice how the exercise slows down your thoughts and emotions enough to think better and more clearly.



This is an easy and effective way to start to improve concentration



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[mynoise.net](https://mynoise.net)

Meditation Bell [L]

R

Random Bells from 5 to 60 min

Cafe Restaurant ☆

Coffee-Shop Background Noise Generator

Meditation Bell [L]

R

Random Bells from 5 to 60 min



## Guided Meditation Apps



[headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)



[calm.com](https://www.calm.com)



[insighttimer.com](https://www.insighttimer.com)



Jon Kabat-Zinn



# Accountability Through Habit-Tracking



[habitshareapp.com](https://habitshareapp.com)





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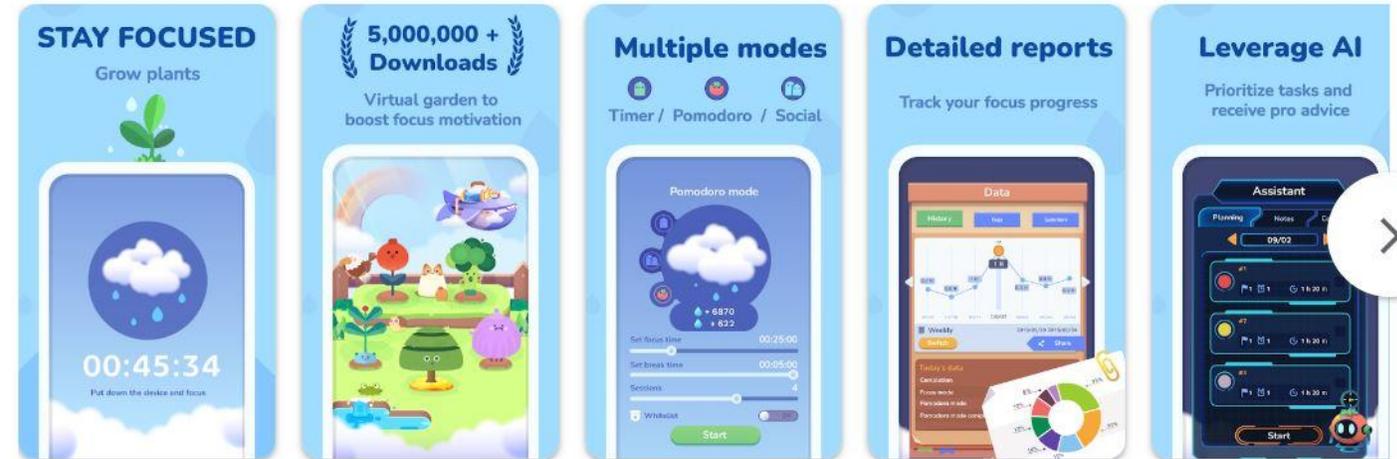
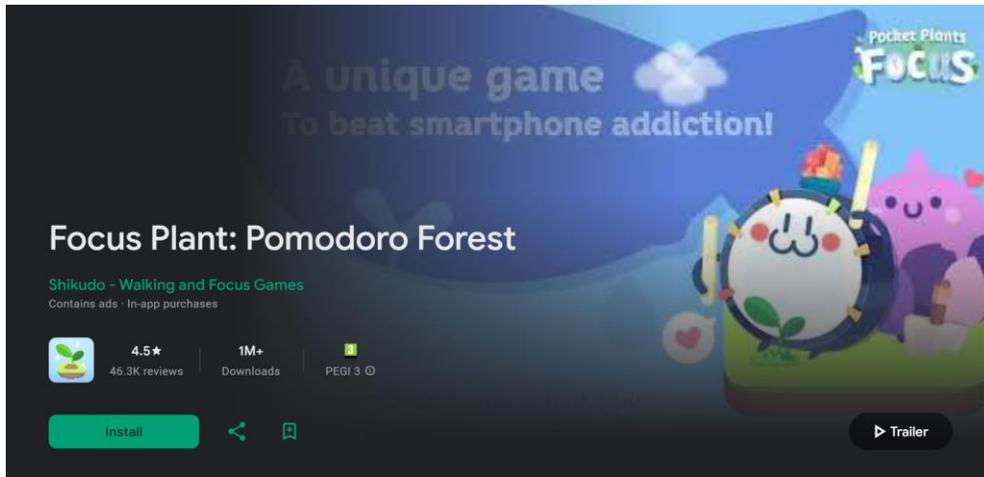
 Get on Google Play

 Chrome Extension

[Flora - Green Focus \(appfinca.com\)](http://appfinca.com)



# Improving Concentration



## About this app →

Focus Plant is not only a focus timer and study timer but also a gamified learning app. It assists in beating phone addiction, improving productivity, self-control, and concentration on learning and work, all while encouraging a 'Better Me' mindset. Stay concentrated with Focus Plant!

Start your focus session and save the barren landscape by turning your focus time into raindrops and grow plants and flora. Get as many plants as you can, and turn the land into...

[Focus Plant: Pomodoro Forest - Apps on Google Play](#)



The **Pomodoro Technique** is a [time management](#) method developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s.<sup>[1]</sup> It uses a [kitchen timer](#) to break work into intervals, typically 25 minutes in length, separated by short breaks. Each interval is known as a *pomodoro*, from the Italian word for tomato, after the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo used as a university student.<sup>[2][1]</sup>

[Apps](#) and websites providing timers and instructions have widely popularized the technique. Closely related to concepts such as [timeboxing](#) and [iterative and incremental development](#) used in software design, the method has been adopted in [pair programming](#) contexts.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Description [\[ edit \]](#)

The original technique has six steps:

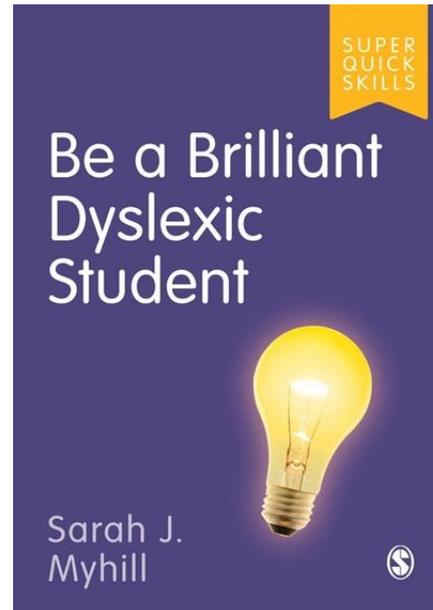
1. Decide on the task to be done.
2. Set the Pomodoro timer (typically for 25 minutes).<sup>[1]</sup>
3. Work on the task.
4. End work when the timer rings and take a short break (typically 5–10 minutes).<sup>[4]</sup>
5. Go back to Step 2 and repeat until you complete four pomodoros.
6. After four pomodoros are done, take a long break (typically 20 to 30 minutes) instead of a short break. Once the long break is finished, return to step 2.



A pomodoro kitchen timer. 

[Pomodoro<sup>®</sup> Technique - Time Management Method \(pomodorotechnique.com\)](http://pomodorotechnique.com)

# There are more tips here...



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## Concentration Solutions

- ✓ Guided meditation apps
- ✓ Variety of mindfulness practices
- ✓ Active meditation
- ✓ Evening practice to improve sleep
- ✓ Accountability through habit tracking
- ✓ Clear goals and relevance
- ✓ Start small and be consistent
- ✓ Habit-stacking
- ✓ Group classes or body doubling
- ✓ Non-judgemental approach
- ✓ Self-care framing
- ✓ Visual reminders and notifications
- ✓ Relax posture for formal practice
- ✓ Optimise the environment
- ✓ Optimise the timing



THANKS



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