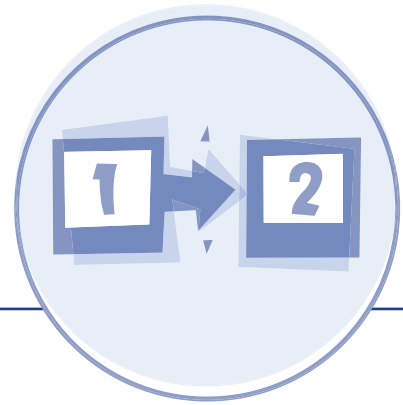


Modules for Executive Functioning



Brief Overview

Almost all students struggle at one time or another with focus, paying attention, organizing, prioritizing, and completing projects or papers. These modules will focus on increasing self-awareness and improving your ability to pay attention and focus, which are related to the skills of executive functioning. Specific cognitive behavioral and mindfulness strategies will be offered that you can immediately use to:

- organize your school work
- pay attention more fully while studying or in class
- initiate school tasks more readily
- minimize distractions and procrastination



There are 4 modules, and while it may be most helpful to complete each module sequentially, it is also possible to pick and choose the topic that is most important to you:

Module 1: Introduction/Definition/Self-Assessment

Module 2: Organization

Module 3: Initiating and Maintaining Focus

Module 4: Maximizing Attention and Minimizing Distractibility

Each module is divided into three brief sections that you can navigate individually or with support.

The 3 sections include:

- ***brief overview***
- ***self-assessment***
- ***strategies***

Module 1



Brief Overview: Definitions

Executive functions are a set of processes that have to do with self-management and exerting mental control and self-regulation. The skills of executive function are often needed to study well and succeed in school and include, for example: focusing, paying attention, organizing, starting and finishing schoolwork, flexible problem solving, and prioritizing.

Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to the present moment non-judgmentally and with curiosity. It is the practice of being alert, present, and relaxed. Many of us are not very present. Rather, we are often thinking about the past (e.g., “I forgot to call my friend or I didn’t hand that paper in on time”) or the future (e.g., “when is that assignment due, I can’t wait to get away this weekend, I need to do my laundry tonight”) and miss the present moment. By constantly living in the past or the future our minds are trained to be there and often miss the present and the opportunity to fully focus and attend to the here and now. Practicing mindfulness as a way to increase our ability to focus and attend is akin to retraining our minds to be more focused and attentive. If your mind was more focused and attentive on the here and now just think what you might accomplish. Another byproduct of being more mindful and present is increased energy and calm. Mindfulness requires practice and exercise, though pretty much everything you need is available to you right here and now.

Module 1



ASSESSMENT (abbreviated form of the BRIEF-A):

The following informal check-list may help you identify areas of more solid functioning and areas of challenge related to executive function skills. The checklist is inspired by the *Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function-Adult Form (BRIEF-A)*.

Directions: Read each item under the nine categories of executive function and mark the appropriate letter that most closely identifies you:

N= Never

S= Sometimes

O= Often

After completing the assessment ask yourself:

- 1)** Which areas are satisfactory or good enough (identify at least a couple)?
- 2)** Which areas seem more challenging (identify no more than a couple)?
- 3)** Are the results of #1 and #2 consistent with how I think I am doing?
- 4)** What might I somewhat easily change to improve (per #2) and what do I want to intentionally continue doing (per #1)?

Module 1 Assessment

Inhibit (Recognizing the need to stop your own behavior and resist impulses)

I rush through things.	N	S	O
I have problems waiting my turn.	N	S	O
People say I am easily distracted.	N	S	O

Shift (Easily transition and change focus)

I have trouble changing from one activity to another.	N	S	O
I am bothered by having to deal with changes.	N	S	O
After having a problem I don't get over it easily.	N	S	O

Emotional Control (Modulating your emotional response)

I have emotional outbursts for little reason.	N	S	O
My mood changes frequently.	N	S	O
I get emotionally upset easily.	N	S	O

Self-Monitor (Awareness of the impact of your behavior on others)

I talk at the wrong time.	N	S	O
I don't think about consequences before doing something.	N	S	O
When people seem upset with me, I don't understand why.	N	S	O

Initiate (Independently beginning and continuing a task)

I have trouble getting ready for the day.	N	S	O
I have problems getting started on my own.	N	S	O
I lie around the house a lot.	N	S	O

Working Memory (Holding on to multiple pieces of information in order to solve a problem or carry out a task)

I forget instructions easily.	N	S	O
I have a short attention span.	N	S	O
I forget what I am doing in the middle of things.	N	S	O

Plan/Organize (Managing current and future task demands)

I have trouble prioritizing activities.	N	S	O
I don't plan ahead for future activities.	N	S	O
I have trouble.			

Task Monitor (Keeping track and identifying and correcting mistakes)

I don't check my work for mistakes.	N	S	O
I misjudge how difficult or easy tasks will be.	N	S	O
I have problems completing my work.	N	S	O

Organization of Materials (Easily locate and maintain orderliness of belongs)

I am disorganized.	N	S	O
I have trouble finding things in my room, bag, desk.	N	S	O
I leave my room/home a mess.	N	S	O

[N = Never | S = Sometimes | O = Often]

Module 1



Strategies for Increasing self-awareness of executive function

- A.** Think about a time or situation (preferably related to school) when you were well-focused and organized. Describe in writing, drawing, or discussion as fully as possible what was happening (e.g., Where were you? What were you doing? Who else was with you? How were you feeling—physically, emotionally, etc.?)
- B.** Now identify the conditions under which you are typically most effective and efficient when it comes to school work (consider location, time of day, quality of sleep, ample nourishment, exercise).
- C.** Given the information gleaned from A and B above as well as the self-assessment respond to the following:

Related to executive function,

Something I will start doing is _____

Something I will stop doing is _____

Something that is helpful and I will continue doing is _____

Module 1



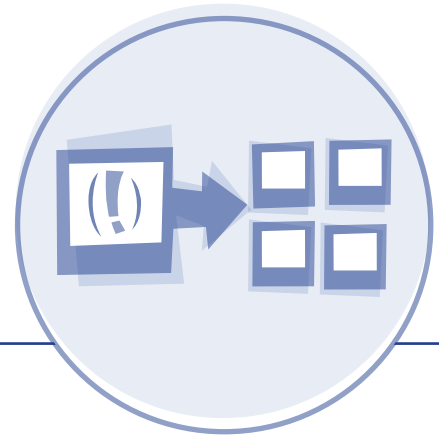
Mindful Breathing: Strategy for focusing the wandering mind

(Adapted from Lidia Zylowska's "The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD")

Through mindfulness, we can increase our awareness and ability to focus as well as awareness of distraction and ability to return to the present moment. A good place to start is with breathing. Our breath is typically accessible as we can take it wherever we go.

- A.** Set an intention, such as, "I will focus on my breath right now."
- B.** Take a deep breath and allow yourself to rest in the present moment. Allow your thoughts and feelings to fall into the background as you focus your breath in one spot—at your nostril, chest or belly.
- C.** Bring your full attention to your breath. If you notice your mind has wandered, that's OK. Simply gently remind yourself of your intention to focus on the breath.
- D.** If your mind wanders off 50 times, gently bring it back 50 times. Each time you intentionally refocus your attention to your breath you are training your mind to stay focused in the present moment.

Module 2



A Different Way of Paying Attention: Skills of Organization

Brief Overview

Challenges with organization and planning are often related to difficulties with understanding the steps in problem solving and/or the strategies for breaking down a large task into smaller discrete steps. Additionally, when experiencing these difficulties there is often an absence of a system of organization (calendar/planner, to-do list, binders for each class), as well as a process for managing and consistently using the organizational system(s). Problems with organization and planning often lead to avoidance, procrastination, and increased feelings of stress and anxiety which can be self-reinforcing.

This module will focus on organization and planning as skills needed to experience success in college. First, there will be an opportunity to engage in self-assessment and identify what you are already doing well when it comes to organization and planning so that you can continue. There will also be opportunities to identify areas of challenge and take this awareness to developing some additional tools and strategies. Specific strategies will be offered for building your organizational skills. And, finally, mindfulness strategies for maintaining focus and presence will be offered.

Assessment

Organization and planning are foundational components to good study skills. Additionally, using good organizational systems will likely pay off with improved academic performance, satisfaction with overall studies and more manageable stress levels.

Module 2

Directions: The following informal check-list may help you identify areas, assets, and challenges related to planning and organization. Please check the appropriate response.

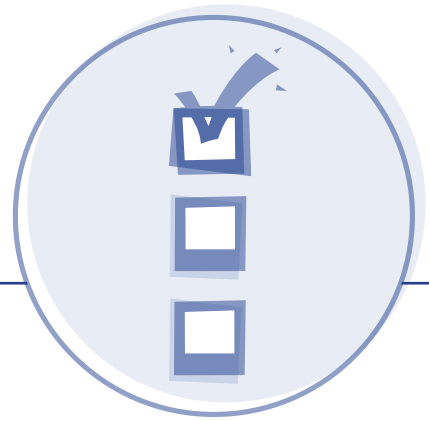
- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1) I use a planner/calendar (either electronic or paper) | N | S | O |
| 2) I transfer all assignments and exam/test due dates into my planner | N | S | O |
| 3) I maintain a daily "to do" list for my academic studies (e.g., projects, assignments, tests, quizzes, papers) | N | S | O |
| 4) I have strategies for prioritizing which tasks are most important | N | S | O |
| 5) I have a clear study routine (good location, time of day) | N | S | O |
| 6) I maintain healthy sleep habits | N | S | O |
| 7) I eat a healthy breakfast | N | S | O |
| 8) I maintain a binder/folder for each class | N | S | O |
| 9) I have a handle on procrastination | N | S | O |

[N = Never | S = Sometimes | O = Often]

After completing the assessment ask yourself:

- 1) Which areas seem satisfactory (marked with often or sometimes)?
- 2) Which areas seem more challenging (marked with "never")?
- 3) Are the results of #1 and #2 above consistent with my perception of how I am doing?
- 4) What might I somewhat easily change to improve (per #2) and what do I want to intentionally continue doing (per #1)?

Module 2



Strategies for increasing Organization and Planning

- A. Use a planner/calendar** and write down all assignments (tests, quizzes, projects). Refer to the calendar regularly—at least twice each day.
- B. Maintain an academic “to do” list.** This can be incorporated into your planner. The “to do” list will contain daily school related tasks.
- C. Prioritize the tasks** depending on importance. Consider a system of A, B, C with **A**=highest level of importance and need to complete today; **B**=moderate level of importance and would like to start or complete today though can transfer to tomorrow to do list; and, **C**=least level of importance and will complete if time allows. Check “to do” list at the end of the day crossing out those items that have been completed and creating a new to do list for the next day. Some items may transfer over and have a different level of priority assigned for the next day.

To Do List Example:

- B Read Chapters 3-5 for Econ
 - A Meet with Spanish study group, 4 PM, @ Mem U for upcoming test
 - B Download materials for English paper
 - B Identify which articles are most important to read for above
 - A Complete Chem Lab project
 - C Make flashcards for Spanish test
- D.** Consider working with a more organized peer as a model or who can assist with structure.
 - E.** Build in time at the beginning of the day to review to do tasks (noted in your planner/calendar) as well as time at the end of the day to note what was completed.



Module 2

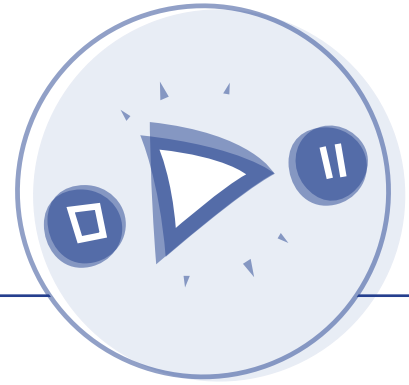
Mindfulness Strategies

A. Direct and Anchor Your Awareness: This is a simple centering exercise that you can use several times a day, especially to focus your attention.

- 1) Plant your feet into the floor and push them down, noticing the floor beneath you supporting you.
- 2) Notice the muscle tension in your legs and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, and legs into your feet.
- 3) Now look around and notice what you can see & hear. Notice where you are and what you are doing.

B. Matching Attention to Intention: As you start a new task briefly and specifically state your intention (e.g., "I intend to read my Biology assignment for 45 minutes."). Periodically stop and check in with yourself to see if your attention matches your intention. If it does, then notice this and give yourself a pat on the back. If it doesn't notice this as well and without being hard on yourself, gently refocus your attention and bring it back to task. Each time you bring yourself back to the task you intend to do you, reinforce focus and attention as well as deepen your present moment awareness.

Module 3



Initiating and Maintaining Focus

Brief Overview

Initiating is the ability to independently begin a project or task such as start a paper or study for a test. This is a skill that many students find difficult. Oftentimes, students may even learn the opposite of initiating—procrastinating—and find themselves delaying or avoiding the start of a project. Many people describe complicated routines of procrastination that way lay their ability to effectively start a task, often contributing to feelings of stress and low self-worth due to lack of goal completion.

This module will help you reflect on those conditions that will increase the likelihood of initiating the work you need to do and maintaining focus long enough to feel a sense of accomplishment.

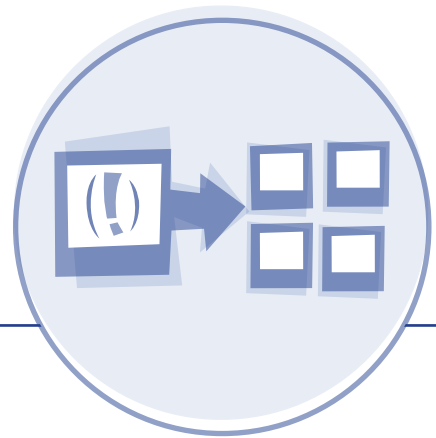
Assessment

Take a few minutes to reflect on a time when you appreciated the way in which you initiated a school project/paper. Think about some of the following:

- What was the specific task/homework assignment/project?
- Think about where you were when this occurred, time of day, who else was with you?
- Think about other conditions that were in place including: type of assignment... did it speak to your strengths or your challenges?, did you just eat, exercise, what was your level of alertness, were you well rested?
- Further consider the conditions that made it more likely for you to start/initiate the task such as location, time of year? Working independently, directly with others, in the same vicinity as others?
- How did you manage distractions or barriers as they cropped up? What strategies did you implement to get started?

Consider how some of these conditions might be brought into your everyday awareness and how you might set your intention toward routinely implementing two or three priority conditions making it much more likely to initiate tasks in a timely and productive manner.

Module 3



Strategies for Improving Initiation

- A. Schedule specific projects
- B. Break down tasks so the task is perceived as more manageable and less overwhelming to start.
- C. Develop and implement a brief routine at the beginning of each task for initiating assignment/project.

D. Engage in **STOP**

S-T-O-P

S = Stop (or pause)

T = Take a breath and relax

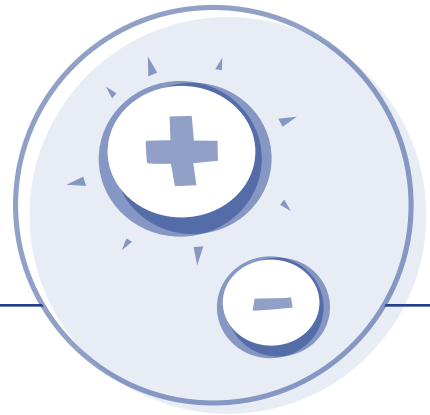
O = Observe in the present moment

- What sounds do I notice?
- What is my breath like right now?
- What thoughts and feelings am I aware of, without judgment?
- How does my body feel right now?

P = Proceed

- Where was my attention before STOP and does it match my intention?
- If you are feeling stressed and/or worried, acknowledge how you feel by labelling it and be aware of your breathing in the present moment to calm your body and mind. It sometimes helps to convey to someone else how you feel.
- If you feel judgmental, try to adopt a non-judgmental and more curious tone.
- Proceed with renewed awareness.

Module 4



Maximizing Attention and Minimizing Distractibility

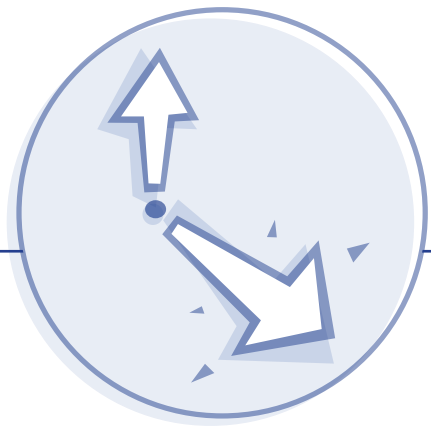
Brief Overview

There are specific skills that can increase the likelihood of completing tasks and creating improved study habits. Attention and focus that results in resisting distractions are important skills that can be better developed and learned with practice.

Assessment

- During the next few days, pick a study task that you have been avoiding or find difficult and time how long you work on the task before taking a break or allowing a strong distraction to pop into your head (e.g., bathroom, checking e-mail).
- Record the stop and end times and complete the exercise a few times.
- Average the amount of time that passed before you became distracted and make this your starting attention time.

Module 4



Strategies

- A.** Use “chunking” or breaking down tasks into chunks that approximately fit into your starting attention time.
- B.** Talk aloud through a task to increase attention and focus and block out distractions.
- C.** Predict how long you can remain on task and then compare the prediction with the actual outcome to increase your self-awareness.
- D.** Use distractibility delay, adapted from *Mastering Your Adult ADHD* (Safren, Sprich, Perlman, Otto, 2005).
 - a.** Put your notebook and timing device next to you.
 - b.** Set timer for a specific length of time, either the length of time you can usually maintain your attention or, if you are trying to build this up, for slightly longer.
 - c.** Start working on a task.
 - d.** When a distraction pops into your head, write it down in your notebook but don’t do anything about it.
 - e.** Once the distraction has been noted, you can use coping statements such as “I will worry about it later” or “I will come back to this” or “Now that I have written that down I can re-focus my attention on _____.”
 - f.** Return to the original tasks until you are finished with the chunk of work that you have selected.
 - g.** When the timer goes off, take a break and you can look at your distraction list.
 - h.** When done working for the day, go back to the distraction list. Decide if these are actually important or if they are things that became attractive only because they were not the tasks you were working on. If they are in fact important, either do them or add them to your task list.