

CONCENTRATION

The ability to direct your mental powers or efforts towards a particular activity (of choice)...in our case...practice / performance.

We all have the ability to concentrate some of the time, but all too often our thoughts and levels of concentration are diluted, allowing our minds jump from one thing to another. Therefore, in order to not only cope with, but actively control such times, we need to learn and practice concentration skills and strategies on a regular basis until we can choose to concentrate when where and for as long as necessary.

It is of little use just trying to concentrate in when the pressure is on, be that in an examination, recital or concert, you will then experience a completely different set of emotions to those which you have prepared. Keep things the same...recreate in public exactly what you have practiced in private. Therefore prepare your level of concentration to adequately meet your performance needs.

Let us take a look at a few facts about concentration.

Our ability to concentrate depends on

- Enthusiasm / motivation
- Commitment
- Skill level v task demands
- Emotional, physical & psychological state
- Environment

- **Enthusiasm / Motivation**

If we are interested in the task and enjoy doing it, then we generally find it easy to motivate ourselves to start. Once started, our feelings of involvement in the activity keep us going - we want to do it, and usually have the motivation and enthusiasm to concentrate for extended periods. If you have no choice in the music you are to perform...tough. What you must then do is endeavour to perform to the best of your ability i.e. personal pride and ownership of your performance.

- **Commitment**

This really means personal commitment. A simple rule for most skilled endeavors is :

‘The end result of a given task is usually proportional to the amount of effort put in. (or You get out what you put in!) ‘

We need to make a personal commitment to put in the effort needed to do the task in the way which we realistically plan to do it, and not expect results without serious commitment of time and effort.

- **Skill Level v Task Demands**

Knowing how to do something gives confidence that our efforts will be successful, so we don't have to deal with anxiety about will this work or not. Anxiety tends to impair concentration. Having a task or challenge to face without the appropriate knowledge or skills only leads to frustration and anxiety. Ask for help....always. If you are seen to be trying people are more willing to lend a hand. Be challenging yet realistic in your program choice.

- **Emotional, Physical & Psychological State**

When we are in good physical and psychological (mental) condition, our emotions are even, and we tend to be in a positive state of mind. This in turn raises self-esteem, which makes us more able to concentrate. If we are pre-occupied with the trials of life...debts, family, friends etc we have little mental space to think about anything else. This includes diet, sleep and relationships. When performing you must become a ‘performer’. That means acting the part...letting go of personal trials and tribulations, or even suppressing excitement etc....be you the performer not you the private individual.

- **Environment**

It is much more difficult to concentrate if our surroundings keep intruding on our awareness / concentration. Too noisy, too hot or too cold, uncomfortable or the people around us are stressing out or partying. Try to have a regular place of work (practice) that is calm, comfortable and free from such distractions. If fully concentrating / focused on your task then it is possible to work in less than conducive environments...the ideal environments just make life easier.

Extending your Concentration Span

People sometimes refer to a 'concentration span': this is the time we can concentrate on a specific task before our thoughts wander. In learning concentration skills, we aim to extend our concentration span –that said, we will have a different span for different tasks. Most people find their general applied level to be around one hour, but for some people and some tasks it will just be a matter of minutes.

The main obstacles to maintaining our concentration are boredom, anxiety and day-dreaming. It is obvious then that to improve our concentration skills we need to counteract these barriers. The following basic skills are required for concentration: if you want to improve your concentration, start by practicing them.

1. STOP!!! Or NO!!!

This sounds very simple, but it works. When you notice your thoughts wandering, say to yourself STOP or NO and then bring your attention back to where you want it to be. Each time it wanders bring it back. To begin with, this could be several times a minute. But each time, say STOP and then re-focus. Do not waste your energy trying to keep thoughts out of your mind (do not try the, 'right, I'm not going to think about tonight's party' as forbidden thoughts attract like a magnet), just put your effort into STOP or NO and re-focus. (No this is not just a text book gimmick...it is a real method that actually works).

2. Applied Focus

This is about maintaining concentration and not giving in to distractions. If you are distracted, use the STOP or NO method to regain your concentration. You can practice this applied focus in many situations:

- In a rehearsal. When someone makes a joke, or the Conductor is working with another section, stay focused on your task. Listen and stay alert.
- In a lecture, if people move or cough, ignore them, exclude them from the link or formed between you and the lecturer.

Specific Problems

Mind-Wandering / Day-dreaming...Use the STOP or NO method.

(know your own weaknesses...tv, internet, food friends etc)

Negative thinking ...Have a reality check....are the thoughts real?

Being vague.... make a realistic estimate of how much time and effort will be required to do it. Fully understand your specific task or goal(s).

Feeling overwhelmed.... Look at manageable units of study / practice. A new piece if viewed as a whole can seem daunting.

Lack of Appropriate Skills....seek help. Do not try live in a fantasy world. Just because others 'can', does not make you inferior if you 'cannot'.

Once developed sufficiently, the feeling of being drained, tired, washed out etc will no longer follow major performances...