IMPROVING CONCENTRATION

Objective: Learn about the causes of concentration difficulties and how to overcome them.
“I CAN’T CONCENTRATE!”

Not being able to concentrate may be one of the most common reasons students cite for why they are struggling to succeed in school.

An inability to concentrate can cause students to have trouble focusing in class, studying for exams, or completing assignments.

In this workshop, we will examine various causes for concentration difficulties and how to overcome them.
CAUSE #1: ENVIRONMENTAL DISTRACTIONS

Noise, television, phone calls, e-mail, other people, etc. can all be distractions and impede one’s ability to concentrate.

SOLUTION:

Ideal study conditions cannot always be obtained, but they can be approximated.
- Choose a work area that is free from as many distractions as possible. Designate that area as your work space and try not to use it for other activities.
- Study in an area that is well-lit and well-ventilated.
- Have all of the necessary materials nearby to limit the need to get up.
- Be sure that others know when you are working so that they do not distract you.
- Set aside a specific time to check e-mails, text messages, etc. after you have completed work or when you are on a break.
CAUSE #2: PHYSICAL DISTRACTIONS, SUCH AS HUNGER OR DROWSINESS

If a person is hungry, tired, or generally not feeling well, his or her ability to concentrate will be limited.

SOLUTION:

• Plan to study when you are most alert. This may be different times for different people. Typically, people are most alert and refreshed during the morning hours.
• Prior to studying or attending class, eat a high-protein snack, such as fruit or nuts. Avoid sugary foods that may cause a “crash” during study time.
• If you are feeling tired, do five minutes of light exercise to wake up. Jumping jacks and jogging in place are good examples of activities that increase blood flow and can provide an energy boost.
• In general, if you are not in good physical health, it may be more difficult to concentrate. Try to stay on a regular exercise and good eating routine to improve overall concentration.
BREAK TIME!

Do you need to take a break right now? Go ahead. Go get a healthy snack if needed. Or, stand up and jog in place for five minutes.

After you return to the workshop, pay attention to whether you feel more able to concentrate.
CAUSE #3: BOREDOM, DISLIKE, OR DISINTEREST

Required college courses are not always in one’s area of interest and therefore, may be boring to study. When the material is not particularly interesting, concentrating on it can be especially difficult.

SOLUTION:

Try to find a good reason for taking the class, something that will motivate you to do well. For example, consider the class as a means to get to the classes that you really want to take. Or, set a personal goal to do the best you can in the class, despite your disinterest in the subject.

Remember that, while certain classes may not be interesting to you, they are an important component of your education and will be beneficial to you as you pursue your career goals.
To maintain concentration on what you are studying, make it an active process by doing something with what you are reading. Underline, take notes, work sample problems, etc. This will help to keep you focused as you study.

When you are in class, make an effort to think critically about the material and ask and respond to instructors’ questions. Not only will it help you to concentrate on the material, it will also make a good impression on the instructor.
CAUSE #4: INTIMIDATING STUDY MATERIAL

When the materials being studied are extremely difficult, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and then become distracted during studying.

SOLUTION:

When the material is difficult, break tasks into small chunks. You may find it helpful to read one section at a time or plan to take a break after completing a specific number of problems.

Set up ways to reward yourself frequently for completing small chunks of the work. Rewards may include taking a break, calling a friend, or social networking.

When you are in class, do not hesitate to ask questions when you are confused, even though you may feel uncomfortable doing so.

As you are studying, write down questions you have so that you remember to ask the instructor or a tutor later.

Seek out a “study buddy,” who you can call when you have questions about the material or need additional support.
CAUSE #5: DAYDREAMING

You are sitting in class and suddenly realize that you have been daydreaming about your plans for the weekend and have completely missed the instructor’s review of the material for an upcoming test. Sound familiar?

As it turns out, it might not be your fault.

In the past few years, researchers have been exploring the effect that technology has on people’s ability to concentrate. They suggest that daily juggling of phone calls, e-mail, web sites, and other sources of information has affected our ability to focus.

This fractured thinking essentially rewires our brains, causing us to have trouble concentrating in other areas of our lives (Richtel 2010).
SOLUTION:

The good news is that you can train your brain to become more focused.

In 2012, researchers from the University of Washington found that regular, focused mindfulness training increases focus, concentration, and productivity (Konnikova 2012).
TRY THE FOLLOWING MINDFULNESS EXERCISE:

- Sit in a comfortable position and set a timer for one minute.
- Close your eyes and focus only on your breathing.
- Slowly inhale, hold your breath for a count of 6, then slowly exhale.
- Your mind will naturally try and wander during this exercise. As other thoughts come into your mind, simply let them go.
- Concentrate your thinking on your breaths, in and out of your body.

This mindfulness activity, when practiced daily, will help to improve your concentration.
OTHER ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE CONCENTRATION:

• Mind games
• Crossword puzzles, word searches, sudoku, etc.
• Concentration games or apps (Lumosity.com)
• Prayer or meditation
CAUSE #6: PERSONAL WORRIES

When there are conflicts or stressors going on in one’s life, concentrating on studying or classwork can be difficult.

SOLUTION:

Focus on one thing at a time. Stop what you are studying and resolve the conflict immediately. Then, return to your studying. If you are unable to solve the conflict immediately, plan a specific time to address it later. This will help you to re-focus on your studying.

If you are unable to resolve the problem on your own, seek out others who can support you. Family, friends, a professional counselor, or other community supports may help you to decrease the stressors or conflicts in your life.
ONE FINAL NOTE:

For some students who struggle with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, concentration may be particularly challenging. While the solutions presented in this workshop can be helpful for all students, those who have ADHD may need to seek out additional supports.

Refer to the resources slide at the end of the workshop for information regarding disability services on campus.
CONCLUSION

Although there may be various causes of concentration difficulty, many of them can be overcome by utilizing the solutions presented in this workshop. Regular use of these solutions will help you to be successful in your college career.
Resources available at WCCC:

College Learning Center, Founders Hall room 565, 724-925-4135
• Offers tutoring sessions to review course material, answer questions on course content, learn test-taking strategies, and provide study skills & writing assistance

Disability Services, Founders Hall room 130, 724-925-4189
• Provides services and/or academic accommodations to support students with disabilities

Counseling Services, Founders Hall room 130, 724-925-4121
• Provides academic advising, career testing, and personal counseling, as well as referrals to outside agencies

Student Services Support Assistants, Founders Hall room 555, 724-925-6893
• Offers assistance and referrals to first-semester students
REFERENCES

CONCENTRATION QUIZ

Please respond to the following statements by answering true or false.

1. Study in an area that is well-lit and well-ventilated.
2. Choose sugary foods, because they are best to improve energy and concentration.
3. Underlining, taking notes, and working sample problems can help improve your concentration in a class that you dislike or find boring.
4. Do not seek out a “study buddy” to learn the material; they will only serve as another distraction.
5. Spending a lot of time juggling phone calls, e-mails, and web sites will help to improve overall concentration.
6. Family, friends, a professional counselor, and other community supports can help reduce personal worries and allow you to concentrate better.
7. Campus resources available include the college learning center, disability services, counseling services, and student services support assistance.

Name one skill you have learned in this workshop that you will use to improve your overall concentration.
Please take a moment to complete our brief survey. Please print this slide (Ctrl-P in the design view) and return it to the College Learning Center, Founders Hall Room 565.

Name of workshop: ___________________  Date taken: _____________

Using the following scale, please rate each item below.
(1) Not very much (2) Somewhat not (3) Somewhat (4) Very much

❖ After completing this workshop, my knowledge has increased on this subject: _____

❖ I found the information in this workshop to be helpful to me: _____

❖ I am likely to use the information in this workshop in my life: _____

❖ Other comments: ________________________________________________
__________________________