

Intentional Avoidance and Focus



Introduction

An amazing ability that may be unique to humans is the ability to think about our own thinking. This ability gives us some powerful tools for managing the ways we respond to distressing and exhausting experiences, including our work.

One of these tools is the ability to notice which aspects of our world are receiving the greatest part of our attention, and which aspects we are giving less attention to. Remember that our world includes both our external world (the environment, people, noises and other things around us) and our internal world (the feelings in our bodies, our thoughts and feelings). Are we focusing on the things in our worlds (both external and internal) that inspire and refresh us? Or are we focusing on the things that add to our unhappiness and tiredness?



Note

Intentional avoidance and focus are not the same as denial or avoidance. Denial is when we pretend to ourselves that serious problems are unimportant and so do nothing about them. Avoidance is when we fail to solve serious problems because we are afraid of conflict, feel embarrassed, or for other reasons. Intentional avoidance and focus are not about avoiding or denying our problems.




Intentional avoidance means that we intentionally reduce the amount of attention that we are giving to unimportant things that add stress and unhappiness in our working lives. Focus is about making sure that we do give attention to those aspects of our lives that make us feel good about our work and about our lives. Below are two different tools that you can practice to help you become more aware of how you are directing your attention, and how to intentionally shift that focus to increase your compassion satisfaction, and decrease the risks of burnout, secondary trauma, and moral distress.

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“Switching Off” and “Switching On”

Many people who work in stressful jobs that bring them into contact with suffering find it useful to prepare themselves emotionally before entering their workplace. Sometimes this is called “switching off” as it involves reducing our emotional vulnerability to the world. To intentionally “Switch Off” before entering work, a particularly difficult space or duty, you can make use of your **thoughts, images, and actions**.

	<p>Thought</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You might have a particular phrase that you repeat to yourself in your head (thoughts)
	<p>Image</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may have a picture that you hold in mind (image)
	<p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be certain actions that you intentionally use to prepare yourself for the difficult work that lies ahead.

Every person uses different thoughts, images and actions depending upon their personalities, beliefs and culture. Experiment with different ideas until you find something that works for you. At the end of the day it is important to use the same process to “Switch On” again.

Consider the example of Lela, an orthopedic nurse who works with children. It is very difficult to see small children struggling with pain and immobility, and she knows that witnessing their suffering every day can have a negative impact on her life. She intentionally uses the switch to help her during the day (switching off). Before she enters the rehabilitation unit where she works she pauses for a minute and does three things.

1. She repeats to herself “I have a deep pool of strength within me that flows from God” (thought).
2. She closes her eyes and visualizes a pool of golden, energy-filled, liquid like honey (image).
3. She pins a large badge with a smiley face to her clothes (action). It makes the children smile, but it also reminds her that she is about to start work.

As Lela does these things, she focuses on the feelings of calm competence and relaxation that flow from this quiet moment before starting work. When she has opportunities during the day for a short break she will intentionally use the thoughts and image to refresh her focus on her inner strength and resilience.

When Lela finishes work, she uses the switch again to switch back on before she goes home to her husband and children (switching on). Again, she uses, thoughts, images and actions to intentionally switch her focus.

1. She repeats to herself “I am a human being who thrives in loving relationships” (thought).
2. She closes her eyes and visualizes a beautiful flower growing in a warm, soft rain (image).
3. She takes off the large badge with the smiley face, a signal to herself that she is done with work for the day. (action)

As Lela does this she allows herself to feel the tiredness that has built up over the day and looks forward to returning to her family and home.



Note

It is essential that there are always two switches. Nobody can be “Switched On” or “Switched Off” all the time. We need time when we focus on our inner needs and allow ourselves to be nurtured by those around us, and there are times when we are at work and we need to focus on the needs of others. The skill is to intentionally manage the switch between these two ways of interacting with the world. Like all skills, this takes practice.

“Tuning Out” and “Tuning In”

The human brain is designed to pay special attention to unpleasant parts of our environment. This is because these unpleasant sensations are often warnings of danger and we need to pay attention to stay safe. Of course, there are many unpleasant sensations in our workplaces that are not actual danger signals, they are merely constant unpleasant irritations – irritating noises, bad smells, overly bright lights, a nagging pain in our back. These unpleasant aspects of our work environments add a great deal of stress to our day and unfortunately our brains are still drawn to give them extra attention. As a result, these small irritations can end up taking up much more space in our experience of the world than they deserve.

However, because of our special ability to think about our own thinking, it is possible to make ourselves more aware of these patterns and to change them. To do this, try the following steps:



Make a list of the unpleasant sensations in your work environment that add to your daily stress



There might be some things on that list that you can fix, in which case do so and cross them off the list



But there will be some things that you just cannot change, so start to pay attention when one of those irritating things is constantly drawing your attention and adding to your stress



When you notice this happening, intentionally work on focusing your attention away from the unpleasant sensation (tuning out) and towards something that is associated with good feelings (tuning in)



As you practice this you will find that you can take more and more control over some of the stressful aspects in your work environment



Note

Make sure that you never tune out actual warning signals like those from medical monitors.



References & Further Reading

1. Distraction and Humor in Stress Reduction
https://www.gulfbend.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=15671
2. How to Reframe Situations So They Create Less Stress
<https://www.verywellmind.com/cognitive-reframing-for-stress-management-3144872>
3. Improve Your Life by Paying Attention
<https://fs.blog/2013/10/improve-your-life-by-paying-attention/>
4. Quick Stress Relief
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm>
5. Why Attention Matters for Stress Management & How to Train it
<https://www.stressresilientmind.co.uk/articles/why-attention-focus-key-for-stress-management>