

In this lesson, you'll learn about focus and, more importantly, why it's best to only have one... at a time.

If you're someone who loves to learn and experiment with lots of different ideas and projects, that's probably a terrifying idea. But I have good news. I am *also* one of those people.

I love to learn, and I love to practice what I learn. At any given time, I might have lots of different interests that I'm researching and pursuing. But I also hold myself to a few standards so that I don't spiral off into procrastination land and get nothing done for days, weeks, or even months.

The trick is to have multiple focuses, but only one at a time. If that's a little confusing, let's explore it.

What is focus, anyway? The dictionary says it's the "center of interest or activity." That sounds about right to me.

And if you agree, then it makes sense that you really can only have one at a time. If you're focused on one thing, then you can't be focused on another.

And that's where most of our problems come from. We know we can only have one focus, but that's uncomfortable, so we try to have more anyway. We try to break a rule we know we can't actually break.

And what that tends to look like is a constant state of distraction. While you attempt to work on one thing, your mind slips away to other things. The result of course, is that you do subpar work on the thing you *think* you're focusing on, and you *also* don't engage your mind fully on the distracting thoughts.

Basically, you get the worst of both worlds.

There's a lot of research to back up the fact that humans are not good at multitasking. Yes, you can do it, but you don't accomplish much. Quality and productivity suffer when you try.

The best performance comes when you pick one thing, work on it until it's done, and then move on.

That allows you to get into a state of flow—that place where distractions cease to exist and time passes by without even noticing.

But getting into that state—and staying there—when you have lots to do and you always feel under pressure is pretty difficult. It creates a lot of stress.

Another reason focus is so difficult is because, well, it always has been and the speed of our culture today is designed to grab our attention, but only for a moment. It feels good to be constantly on the move, hunting for information and doing something new.

That can *contribute* to great work but, by itself, it can't *produce* great work. And, more often than not, we use that perpetual hunt as a way to avoid doing what's *hard*. All those small things don't always add up to what you could accomplish if you stayed focused on the big thing.

But, this is the way many of us are wired.

That's why I like to take focus one step further and think in terms of multiple focuses. I can have more than one interest. And I can indulge more than one. But not at the same time.

When I'm in one task, I need to be in it fully. Once it's done, I can move onto another, but not before.

It's a simple concept, but when you've been operating differently for so long, it can be surprisingly hard to actually implement.

There are a few things that have helped me get better at this. They've made me a lot more productive and helped me finish bigger projects and goals without feeling like I'm trapped or can't have other interests.

First, I limit the number of focuses I allow myself to have, and one of them must take priority. So, I can work on different projects, but I only get to have two. That's the magic number for me because I make great progress on the most important one, but still have an outlet for other ideas when I get worn out and need to shift gears for a bit.

And what I've found about myself that seems to apply to a lot of people like me who are naturally pulled towards many ideas and projects is that they're voracious learners. If you're like me, you love to learn new things and test how well you know them... often by starting a new project.

So, when I limit myself to two focuses, the primary focus is always something I already know. Something I'm already skilled at. My job for that project is to produce. To create something from the knowledge I already have.

And the second project involves a lot of learning. It's purpose is to test new ideas and meet that drive to fill my brain with new information.

Now, let's zoom in a little bit. How do you make this work on a day-to-day basis? It's so easy to set lofty goals and tell yourself you're going to focus on one thing at a time, but it's also easy to abandon that plan and find yourself stuck spinning your wheels again.

What helps me is to start every day with only two goals. Just like I only allow myself to have two focuses, when I first start my work day, I define two things I want to get done that day.

There may be lots of competition for those two slots, and deciding first thing in the morning what they're going to be makes it so much easier to stick with them and have something you're actually proud of at the end of the day.

If you're used to a miles long to do list every day, this might seem pretty unambitious.

But I challenge you to try it and see! You may be used to getting lots of things done every day, but how often have you achieved more than one or two *really* great things? These are things you would talk to your friends about when they ask "Hey, what have you been up to?"

It's actually pretty challenging to complete more than one or two of those kinds of things every day.

Another focus-improving thing you can do is to practice time-blocking. You'll learn about this in more detail in a later lesson, but the gist of it is pretty simple: If you want to get something done in the most time-efficient way possible, give it a block of time and make it your singular focus during that block.

By forcing all other work or distractions out during a block of focused time, you give yourself the best opportunity to get into that flow state.

And a helpful strategy with time blocking is to use what's called the pomodoro technique. The pomodoro technique is just another way to block your time, but on a smaller scale—usually about 30 minutes.

That 30 minutes gets broken up into two chunks—a 25 minute sprint of work followed by 5 minutes of rest and recovery. That's not a hard and fast rule, so you can experiment with the numbers to see what works best for you.

A pomodoro, by itself, does not typically produce much work. But when you string them together, it's an effective way to maintain focus on one thing for a long period of time. They really add up.

Okay, another trick I like to use to maintain focus when I have two competing priorities is to use one as a reward for the other.

Like I mentioned earlier, I'm the type of person who always needs a second project. It's just how I tick. And, like I mentioned, one is always focused on producing what I know and one is focused on learning and exploring new ideas and concepts.

Most of the time, the learning and exploring is more fun, but producing what I know is more valuable to others—at least in the moment. So, I can use that contrast to set up a sort of carrot and stick scenario. I can create incentives for myself.

If I hit my goals and priorities for the day (that's the stick), then I get to spend time on the other project at the end of the day without feeling guilty about wasting time (that's the carrot).

Setting up rewards for yourself and challenges to meet in order to receive them can be a really motivating strategy to keep you focused on one thing at a time. But, I'll admit that it doesn't work for everyone—sometimes it becomes just another distraction—so you should experiment with it to see if it's useful for you. And it's okay if it doesn't.

You'll probably know after a few days if it'll work for you.

So here's what we went over in this lesson:

First, we learned that we can have multiple interests and projects, but that it's critical we only focus on one at a time. Useful productivity depends on being able to sweep away distractions when we're trying to get things done.

Then, we learned a few ways to think about and organize our multiple focuses so that we can actually achieve that. Setting just two goals per day is one strategy to maintain focus throughout the day. Time-blocking and the pomodoro technique are a good way to get little sprints of work done that add up without burning out. And setting up rewards for meeting our goals is another trick that can work for some of us.

If you haven't already, decide what your two most important tasks are to get done today. Or, if you're watching this video in the evening, decide right now what they're going to be for tomorrow so that your focus is set from the moment you wake up.

When you're done, I'll see you in the next lesson.