



Do with  
"genuine  
seriousness,  
tenderly,  
willingly"

## THE SKILL OF CONCENTRATION

# Concentration in a World of At-Home Distraction

### Every minute of every day

*Concentrate every minute... on doing what's in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. Yes, you can—if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable. — Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 2.5 (lightly paraphrased.)*

What is the meaning of “concentrating every minute on doing what’s in front of you” in a time when everything we’re doing – our work, school, meals, sleep, and leisure – is all taking place inside our homes?

### The impact of COVID-19

Here in California, the COVID-19 lockdown continues as the pandemic has reached new heights in the winter months. A few restrictions have loosened recently, but in general, many, many of the activities of daily life are still limited to the home.

The situation is making it harder to stay focused and tune out distractions, especially as it drags on long-term.

Even though we have little enticement to go out to activities outside our homes, and we’re saving time by not commuting or driving around our kids, my friends and I often talk about how hard it is to get things done these days – especially things that require mental effort.

### Separating your non-work from work life

In general, people working from home have a difficult time separating their work life from their non-work life. Everything is ‘in front of’ us, literally. At any hour of the day, we could be working. Or eating. Or watching the news, or streaming binge-worthy content. Or taking a nap. Everything is co-mingling, and it’s taking extra self-control to keep things apart, organized, and on track.

This matters, because one of the key causes of job burnout is the lack of separation between work and non-work, according to productivity experts. They recommend covering your workstation after a certain hour to avoid the temptation to work more. Separating roles into different times of day is critical to avoid overwhelm.

All this is especially tough if you have children who are not attending in-person school or childcare due to the pandemic: You have a built-in, potentially overwhelming distraction in your home. The younger the kids, the more this is true. In my case, my children are a high schooler and middle schooler now, and pretty independent. But even they need help, encouragement, and human interaction as we approach the one-year anniversary of remote-only school.

After my formal workday on my laptop is done, I’m homework helper and cheerleader. I’ve learned more about medieval Persian decorative arts than I ever thought possible (surprisingly, it’s covered in our public middle school curriculum!).

Though this is diverting me from my other informal work demands, I want to be supportive of kids suffering from a lack of social interaction... kids who are trying to concentrate long enough to learn what their teachers require from them in remote school, and to get an education in challenging times.

### Doing things as if they were our last

Marcus’ warning to do things as if they were our last would be too daunting for children. But it certainly puts things in perspective for us as adults. And for me, it helps me define the things I can tune out – the distractions I decide not to pursue – and separate out the competing jobs/responsibilities in my life. This helps narrow down my focus to those things I can do with “genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly”.



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