

Find Your Focus Zone

An Effective New Plan to Defeat Distraction and Overload

by Lucy Jo Palladino, Ph.D.

Chapter 1

What Is Your Focus Zone?

Any man who can drive safely while kissing a pretty girl is simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves.

- Albert Einstein

In 1977, I was thrown from a horse when it bolted. I suffered a head concussion, had seven stitches across my scalp, and had to wear a cast on my leg for eight weeks. I lost my interest in horseback riding. Twenty-seven years later, my daughter told me she wanted to ride a horse. She was just a few years younger than I was when I had my accident. It seemed the time had come for me to get back on a horse. I found a dude ranch in Santa Barbara where we could ride scenic trails together all day with a small group and a guide.

The morning of the ride we assembled at the stables. To choose the right horse for each of us, the wrangler asked for our experience level. My face must have betrayed my

fear. Both my daughter and I had replied, “beginner,” but he gave Rocket to her, and I got Nellie. Momentarily, I felt relieved.

As I mounted, I looked down and the distance to the ground made me dizzy. My heart pounded and my hands sweat. From his horse, the guide began to instruct us. I was aware he was talking; I knew his words were important. But to my ears, he could have been speaking in Wookiee. My focus was scattered like dew on grass. My muscles tensed. My thoughts swirled. Deep inside, a part of me cried, “Get down now while you have the chance!” An opposite part of me planted my feet in my stirrups. Mentally paralyzed, I sat there staring, like a deer in headlights. The guide turned his horse to face the trail and led the other riders as they clip-clopped away, single file. I followed in a fog, with no clue what to do.

After a few minutes on the trail, I calmed myself down. I felt safe again and regained my focus. I trotted up next to my daughter, who recapped for me what the guide had said. The day turned out beautifully. But thinking back to the corral, when everything had been a blur, I wondered, how could I have lost my attention at the moment I needed it most? And how did I get it back?

A Critical Connection

The link between *attention and stimulation* is well established. This relationship is the core of understanding attention and learning how to control it. Attention is poor when you are either understimulated or overstimulated. Attention is best when your level of stimulation is just right.

Psychologists use the term “arousal level” to describe how bored or excited you feel. It is a physiological term that corresponds to how much or how little adrenaline is pumping through your system. The amount of adrenaline, in turn, depends on how bored or excited you feel. Arousal is also called activation or drive.

Arousal and adrenaline create a chicken-and-egg cycle: the more excited you feel, the more adrenaline you pump; the more adrenaline you pump, the more excited you feel. The boring side of the story works the same way. The less excited you feel, the less adrenaline you pump; and the less adrenaline you pump, the less excited you feel. Either way – over- or underactivated – your attention suffers.

When you’re *overstimulated* and your adrenaline level is too high, you’re in overdrive. Depending on your thoughts and situation, you might feel intense, overexcited, worried, nervous, angry, or afraid. Think of the first few moments when you have to give a speech, take a test, or face a confrontation. Your heart beats harder, your breathing gets shallow, and you feel like your brain has left the building.

When you’re *understimulated* and your adrenaline level is too low, you’re underpowered; you lack sufficient drive. You might feel stuck, slow, or unmotivated. Picture having to write a technical report, clean a cluttered closet, or do your taxes. It’s hard to keep your mind on what you’re doing. You feel sluggish and sleepy, with a strong urge to check your e-mail, watch TV, or grab a snack – anything to avoid the boring task at hand.

When stimulation is just right, you’re in a relaxed-alert state: Your muscles are relaxed and your mind is alert. Attention experts call this relaxed-alert state “optimal arousal” – you have an ideal level of drive. You have adequate stimulation and the right

amount of adrenaline, and you feel motivated, confident, and focused. Envision doing something you genuinely like to do – reading a novel that is a page-turner, going on a nature walk, or traveling to some interesting new place. You have a sense of clarity and involvement. Paying attention in a relaxed-alert state is practically effortless.

Drive Level			
	Underpowered	Overdrive	Optimal
Stimulation	too low	too high	adequate
Adrenaline	too low	too high	balanced
State	bored	overexcited	relaxed-alert
Feelings	apathy fatigue passivity spaciness indecision	anxiety fear pressure stress irritability	confidence interest activity clarity motivation
Attention	poor	poor	best

Let's return to the day I was horseback riding. Imagine that one of the other riders was so experienced that the guide's instructions added no new information. That rider would be bored – underdriven – and he would have a tough time concentrating on what the guide was saying. In contrast, I was at the other end of the spectrum entirely. I was in overdrive. My brain was a firestorm of adrenaline, and my concentration was shot. At either extreme, under- or overdriven, your best attention is out of reach.

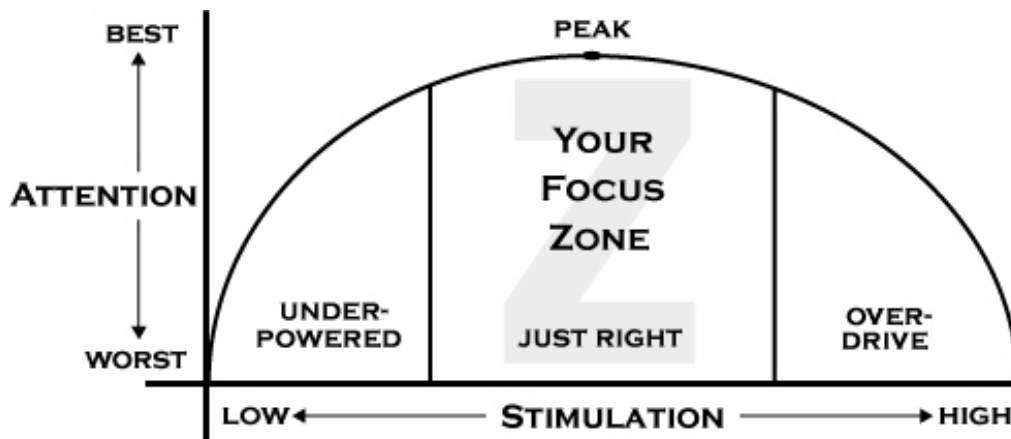
When the level of your drive is just right, you feel sharp and able to concentrate. The other riders, like my daughter, focused easily on the guide. They were excited by the ride, but not frightened or immobilized. They were stirred to listen, but not in a swirl, as I was. In their relaxed-alert state, they could pay full attention to the guide, their horses, and the breathtaking beauty of a coastline trail overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Good attention has its rewards!

The Upside-Down U Curve

To understand the relationship between attention and stimulation, picture a simple graph that looks like a hill or an upside-down U. Attention is the vertical axis, increasing upward from worst to best. Stimulation is the horizontal axis, increasing left to right from low to high.

The left end (going uphill) represents understimulation and the right end (going downhill) stands for overstimulation. On both ends, under- and overstimulation, your attention is at its worst. In the center (the middle of the hill), your stimulation is just right and attention is at its best. *This is your focus zone.*

It feels good to be in your zone, where stimulation is sufficient and steady. In this relaxed-alert state of body and mind, you feel effective and get things done with a power that lasts. You listen well, sustain attention, organize efficiently, make sound decisions, and finish what you start.



Your Focus Zone on the Upside-down U Curve

The inverted U has been in the psychological literature for about a century. It illustrates the Yerkes-Dodson law developed by Robert M. Yerkes, Ph.D. and John D. Dodson, Ph.D. in 1908 to explain the results of a series of experiments. The law states that performance (or attention) increases with arousal (or stimulation) but only up to a certain point. When arousal level gets too high, performance decreases.

Through the years, the upside-down U has continued to serve as a unifying principle to explain findings in biopsychology and neuroscience. Research studies have confirmed and expanded this classic curvilinear relationship to include more complex

variations. It's a core teaching in sports psychology, and it is used by world-class athletes as a model to practice attention control.

Sometimes the horizontal axis – stimulation – is labeled drive, intensity, motivation, level of adrenaline, or physiological arousal. And sometimes the vertical axis – attention – is labeled selective attention, concentration, focus, mental performance, or performance efficiency. The center range – your focus zone – has also been called the optimal range of performance, the individual zone of optimal functioning (IZOF), and in sports, the zone.

At the very top of the hill, the exact center resembles a peak. The closer you get to this peak, the closer you get to an ideal state of stimulation and attention. Athletes have long referred to this state as “peak performance.” Experts in creativity call it “flow,” and describe it as an altered state of consciousness. The term was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D. who collected data on thousands of highly focused individuals, from mountain climbers to chess players. The word “flow” best described their experience when they engaged in self-controlled, goal-related, meaningful actions. Csikszentmihalyi explained it further as a suspension of time and the freedom to get totally absorbed in what you're doing. Artists, musicians, and inventors strive to achieve flow, the pinnacle of the relaxed-alert state.

Although reaching this peak state is ideal for single-purpose undivided attention, it can be tough to achieve and impractical in the workplace, which is both clock- and interruption-driven. Fortunately, you don't have to reach this peak to be in your focus zone. When you're anywhere in the center range on the graph, your attention is engaged and you are productive.

Being in your focus zone is a matter of degree. Sometimes you'll be closer to peak performance (in the center) and sometimes you'll be closer to feeling under- or overstimulated (at each end).

Being under- or overstimulated is also a matter of degree. You could be a little bored or intolerably bored, or a little hyper or very hyper. But if you're anywhere outside your zone, you're likely to run into trouble. Have you ever been at a meeting or lecture when your thoughts start to wander? You may not have spaced out completely, but you missed some of the details. Now you're stuck with the problem of worrying if they were important to you or not.

Mild forms of overstimulation cause problems too. Have you ever felt anxious while taking an exam? You probably got a lower grade because your concentration was weakened. You didn't flunk, but you felt frustrated, since you knew you'd studied hard and had the answers somewhere in your mind. They would have come to you more easily if you'd been in your focus zone.

Being in Your Zone

When it comes to paying attention, the zone is definitely the place to be. We've all been there at some time, and when we are, it feels great. Think of the last time you were doing something you genuinely like to do – a pet project, hobby, or sport. You might have been researching a favorite topic, organizing your music, or conversing with a friend. Remember what it felt like to be engaged in what you were doing – relaxed, yet energized? You may recall feeling a pleasant sense of purpose, meaning, and motivation. You may even have thought to yourself, “I wish it could be like this all the time.”

The good news is that most of the time, it can be. With practice, you can teach yourself how to stay in your zone. Like Olympic athletes who practice psychological skills, *you can stay in your focus zone by choice*. This is true whether you're working on some truly boring task or at the other extreme, facing a once-in-a-lifetime moment of high-stakes tension. Top performers have trained themselves to do this reliably and you can, too.

Understanding Overstimulation. First, let's take a closer look at what happens when you're overexcited. When most people think of an adrenaline rush, they imagine euphoria, like the thrill of a roller-coaster ride. We pay money to ride on a roller coaster. It's fun. We regard this experience as desirable.

But "overstimulation" refers to the total state of your brain and body when you're pumping too much adrenaline, and usually that's undesirable. Your heart beats faster and your focus either bounces around or gets stuck in one place. A roller-coaster ride is an exception. You can scream and still smile because the rational part of your brain knows you're safe and not actually on a train going over a cliff.

Usually, in an over-stimulated state, fear is *not* your friend. Your perception of fear triggers a fight-or-flight response in the survival part of your brain, whether this response is helpful to you or not. Even knowing the fun that lies ahead, have you ever felt the sudden urge to duck out the exit gate when it's your turn to step onto the roller coaster? That's your adrenaline fueling your impulse to flee.

In other fear-evoking situations, the survival part of your brain pumps adrenaline because it assumes you'll need to fight. You may be preparing to have a difficult meeting

with your boss, and you sense that you may lose status or money. The survival part of your brain reacts to this danger as though you have to fight off an attack from a wild animal. It pumps adrenaline to increase your physical strength and give hair-trigger speed to your reflexes.

Signs of fight or flight in your thoughts, words, or actions are flags that you're going into overdrive. Common signs of fight include feeling cranky, argumentative, or overly critical of yourself or others. Common signs of flight include worry, anxiety, and rumination, although the connection between these feelings and the impulse to flee may not be as readily apparent. These feelings result when the survival part of your brain wants you to get away, but you're at work or caught in traffic and you can't get up and leave. Without realizing it, you do the only thing a trapped person can do – you escape in your mind. You flee mentally from the reality of the here and now, with adrenaline-fueled thoughts of past, future, or even imagined fears and mistakes.

Different Activities, Different Zones. Every activity has its own zone or optimal state of adrenaline-fueled drive. At gametime, an NFL linebacker needs to pump a lot more adrenaline than you do when you sit down to write your quarterly sales report. Generally speaking, physical activities require more adrenaline, which sends strength to the body to physically fight or flee. Mental activities require less adrenaline because adrenaline gives the body extra physical strength by diverting blood-flow away from the brain. For mental activities, the brain wants all the blood-flow it can get.

In sports psychology, the zone for each sport is determined by its ratio of physical strength to mental skill. Boxing, for example, requires force and might, so the optimal

adrenaline level for boxing is high. Tennis or golf demands great concentration, so the optimal adrenaline level is much lower. In the language of sports psychology, the inverted U curve for boxing is higher on the arousal continuum than it is for tennis or golf. Being in the zone is important for all athletes, but the levels that define the zone itself depend on the demands of the particular sport.

In your own life, the levels that define your zone depend on what you're doing and how much – or how little – adrenaline it demands. Nearly all information-age jobs require mostly mental activity. Gathering data, managing spreadsheets, writing reports, teleconferencing, and creating computer code are mental, not physical, tasks. When you sit at your desk or your computer to concentrate, you perform better with less adrenaline. A construction worker who is lifting, digging, and hammering all day needs more.

During the course of a day as you go from activity to activity, the amount of adrenaline you need to stay in your focus zone changes. If you're conducting a sales conference, you need animation and passion more than attention to detail. If you're reviewing the wording of a contract, it's just the opposite. Sometimes, you need to shift quickly. If you're giving a presentation, you want fire in your voice, but then during the question-and-answer period, it's time for sharp listening, accurate recall, and concise responses.

Have you ever been in a conversation when someone said something a bit intrusive or asked you a pointed question, and you felt mildly threatened or provoked? You couldn't come up with an incisive answer and may even have felt brain-locked. That's because an immediate shot of adrenaline had kicked you into a hyperalert state. Later on – usually in the shower – you thought of exactly what you wished you had said

at that moment. This is because you returned to a relaxed-alert state. You came back to your focus zone.

A Two-Step Process

When you're not in the zone and you lose control of your attention, what's actually happening is that your adrenaline level is wrong for your current situation. Your brain is pumping either too much or too little adrenaline to get the job done.

Fortunately, you have choices. Like an elite athlete, *you can reclaim your attention by getting back into your focus zone*. You can use your thoughts, feelings, and actions to change your adrenaline level.

Remember the chicken-and-egg cycle of too much stimulation causing too much adrenaline, and so on? Well, the good news is that you *can* break this cycle. Using the same psychological skills that elite athletes use, you can increase or decrease your stimulation as needed, and adjust the adrenaline levels inside your brain. You can return to a relaxed-alert state and get back in charge of your own attention.

Think of any sport that requires balance – skating, skiing, bicycling. At speeds that are either too slow or fast, you do not feel in control no matter how hard you try. Regaining control becomes a two-step process. First you need to realize that you're losing control. Then you need to speed up or slow down to regain your balance.

When you feel distracted, bored, or provoked, regaining your attention is also a two-step process. First you need to realize that you're out of your zone. Then you need to apply a skill or a strategy to get back in. There are many ways to do this. In Part II, you'll learn key methods for the situations you face every day.

To Regain Lost Attention

Step 1 - Stop and notice you're no longer in your focus zone.

Step 2 - Choose a strategy to either rev up or calm down.

The eight keychains give you effective ways to do both.

Is Multitasking Good or Bad?

In today's world, we all multitask. As you read this, are you also munching on a snack, listening to music, or maybe flying to Chicago? The burning question of our time is: Does all this multitasking help or hurt?

The upside-down U addresses this question. If you're underpowered, multitasking is good because an additional activity adds stimulation and gets you into your focus zone. Let's say you're crunching some code and your mind starts to wander. You notice you're getting bored, so you open a window on the bottom of your screen and download some rock music videos to glance at and keep you pumped as you work. The added stim(ulation) gets you back into your zone.

At the other end of the curve, if you're in overdrive, multitasking will only make matters worse. Let's say you're working on a project under deadline. Other members of the team constantly call, text, e-mail, instant-message, and even walk up to your desk to interrupt you. Your mind is racing, and you may feel the impulse to download some rock videos, but the added stim will cost you in performance and productivity.

It can also happen that you're crunching code, get bored, and download a rock video that's so awesome you can't stop watching it. You've increased your stimulation but you've added too much. By overshooting your focus zone, you trade one problem for another. Now you're caught in a time-wasting cycle of attention swings from one end of the upside-down U to the other.

The video ends and you're overexcited but it's time to get back to work. You try, but compared to the rock video, the code is even more boring than before. You make yourself work on it but soon you start to chat or check e-mail in another window. Again, multitasking gives you a spurt of stimulation. But again, you're too pumped to crunch code. You get absorbed in checking out the jokes and links your buddies sent you, until you notice the clock. You try one more time to force yourself to face the code, which, in contrast, is now more boring than ever. You hang in there as long as you can, then give up and check your RSS feed to post comments on your favorite blogs. What you could have done in an hour has taken half a day.

Mindful Multitasking

The key to multitasking is to use it strategically. This can be a challenge, because it's hard to be honest with ourselves when it comes to stimulation. As you'll learn in Chapter 3, our brains are biased toward stimulants whether they're good for us or not.

Take cell phones, for example. About 75 percent of all drivers report using their phone while driving. We like to talk and drive. Yet research using driving simulators reveals that when drivers are on cell phones, they're more likely to be in traffic accidents, miss more traffic signals, and react more slowly. We ignore what researchers call

“inattention blindness” – missing important cues when our attention is incomplete. The stim centers in our brains prefer that we don’t know we’re at risk, because we’re drawn to the stim of driving and talking.

Does this mean you should never use your cell phone when driving? In today’s world, how impractical is that? A commonsense approach is to keep the upside-down U in mind. Use a hands-free set and be aware of the impact of adding more stimulation to each situation that you’re in. Ask yourself what’s it doing to your ability to stay in your focus zone.

Mindful multitasking is one of the keys on the change-of-state keychain that you’ll learn about in Chapter 5. Mindful multitasking means that you consciously check in with yourself and determine the focus zone you need for each new situation – in your car, at your desk, or with your family, friends, or coworkers. Every situation requires its own judgment call. Sometimes you’ll choose to multitask and sometimes you won’t. But with mindful multitasking, you don’t automatically answer a ring, beep, or interrupting voice. You make a deliberate decision based on reason and strategy.

Psych Up or Settle Down?

Finding your focus zone isn’t always easy. Not only does it change from activity to activity, but it’s different from one person to the next. Personality, physiology, style of thinking, age, and experience are all factors. You may not be able to talk, e-mail, and instant-message at the same time, but your child probably can. And in your child’s classroom, while some students get distracted by papers rattling, chairs moving, and classmates whispering, others do not.

Just as we each have a different face and different fingerprints, we each have a different brain chemistry. Your adrenaline thresholds are unique to you. The way in which *you* metabolize adrenaline determines your relationship with stimulation, and your own, personal focus zone.

As you read *Find Your Focus Zone*, you'll get better at recognizing when you're in the zone or not, and what to do to stay there. Sometimes, you may feel as if you're underpowered, but the deeper problem is *too much* adrenaline. Procrastination is a good example.

Let's say you're postponing straightening out your finances, or getting the information you need to make a health-related decision. On the surface it looks like you just don't want to sit down and start a low-stim job like organizing or doing research. But deep down you're scared. You're afraid of how much debt you might be in, or of possibly needing a risky operation. Fear and the adrenaline that goes with it stop you before you even get the chance to face boredom as a problem. Before you can go forward, you need to deal with your fear calmly and get back into your focus zone.

Many capable parents have come to my office bewildered by what happens at homework time. The harder they try to get their child to sit down and focus, the more the child argues, gets upset, or spaces out. Trying to act responsibly, they'll threaten to ground their child or take privileges away. But this does not get the child fired up to work. Instead the child gets immobilized or has a meltdown.

The problem is that the child's arguing, upset, and spaciness are signs of a fight-or-flight response – a result of his unacknowledged fear. On the outside, the child might look bored or defiant. But on the inside, even though he himself may not realize it, he's

scared he can't do it, will make mistakes, or won't do as well as his peers. He's got too much, not too little adrenaline pumping. His parents' threat just makes him pump even more and pushes him farther out of his focus zone. Instead of getting motivated, the child gets overwhelmed.

Back at the ranch, scared stiff in the saddle, I may have looked like my mind was a million miles away and I was spaced out. But if someone had yelled at me to pay attention, I probably would've burst into tears. I needed to lower my adrenaline level so I could regain concentration. I had to keep my panic in check and – ride it out – until I relaxed enough to get back into my focus zone.