

# LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module


Boost your focus & productivity





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# How to Use this Workbook

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LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

## Enquiries and Feedback

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# Main Module

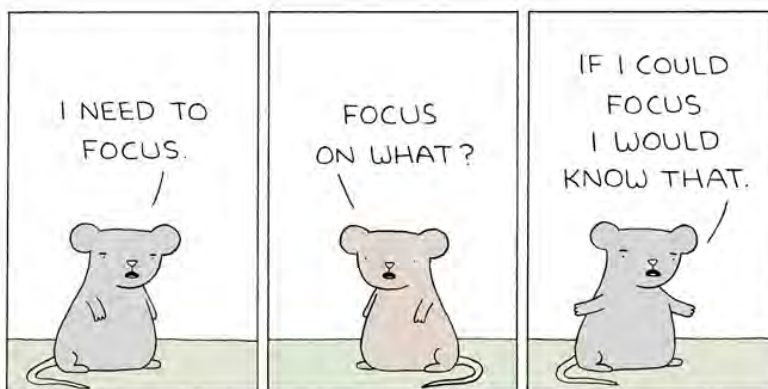
## Boost your focus & productivity

### Introduction

We all wish we had the ability to concentrate whenever we want, as long as we want. While there is no magic potion to obtain this skill, we can boost our productivity by taking a few simple steps.

### So today, you will...

- Learn a 5-step 'focus-boosting' ritual
- This life hack includes optimizing your surroundings
- Calming down your mind so you can focus
- And a suggestion for a specific way of working to maximize productivity



Comic by [Poorly Drawn Lines](#)

Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to concentration and productivity. What would you like to achieve after doing this module? (answer A)

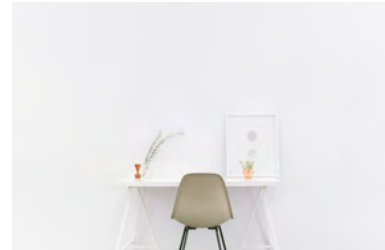
Let's go!

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## 1. Neatify your work-area

Let's kick off our focus-boosting ritual with a perhaps unexpected first step, which is **to do some tidying up!**

Before you do anything at all, you've got to make sure your desk and immediate surroundings are as empty as possible.



Only keep the bare minimum: whatever you won't be using has to be cleared away.

Now, if you're one of those people who claim that 'creative people always work in cluttered environments, it actually boosts creativity' - think again. It's been shown over and over that physical clutter in your surroundings creates mental clutter. Being in a mess-free environment is shown to promote productivity, and you wanted to get things done, right?

**So giddy-up and tidy up that desk right now!**



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## 2. Get everything ready

The next step is to gather everything you need before you start working. You don't want to get into a state of focus only to realise you're missing something, stop your process, go find it and get back to work.

Research shows it can take up to 23 minutes to get back into the zone after a disruption. So whenever you're about to start on a task, take a minute beforehand to prepare. Think about what you will need: books, articles, documents...?

**This is the moment to gather everything.**



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### 3. Eliminate distractions

Remember that little stat from the previous step? Each distraction can cost you up to 23 minutes. So before you start working, you also need to eliminate anything else that might claim your attention. Every time you do this ritual, make sure you can check all the boxes below.

#### You might want to:

- Keep your phone in another room (on silent) - this is very important!
- Turn off the wifi on your device (no quickly checking Insta)
- If you really do need internet: install a programme that (temporarily) blocks access to certain websites (such as social media)
- Close all unnecessary programmes or tabs on your computer
- Use noise-canceling headphones and listen to focus-boosting music
- If there are others around: put up a 'do not disturb' sign
- And try to prevent whatever else might interrupt and break your focus!

#### Dealing with distractions

Now let's do a brainstorm: what are some common distractions for you and how can you prevent or deal with them in the future?

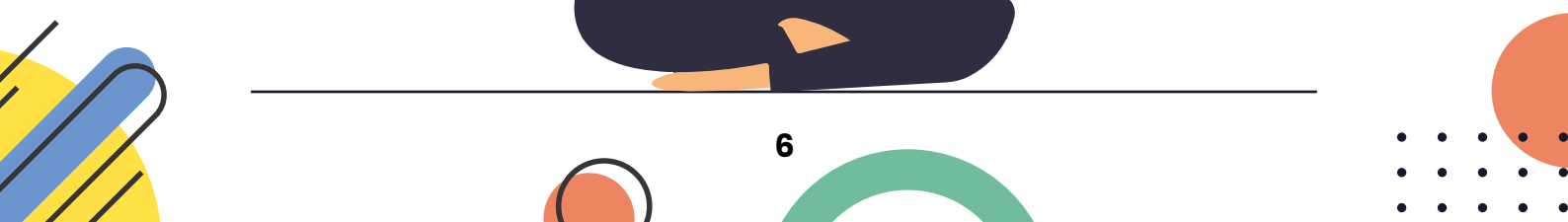
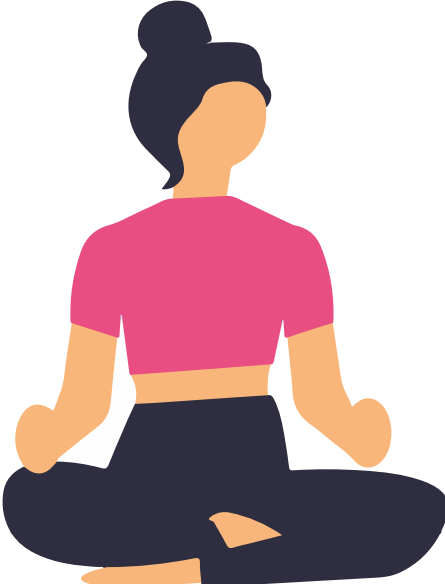




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First, write down all possible distractions you might face (people, sounds, things etc):

Now come up with how you can either prevent each of these from happening, or if that's not possible, how you will deal with the distraction so it doesn't break your focus:





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## 4. Zen your mind

A student once said: "I just can't concentrate: I get distracted every time I try to study!"

So the teacher asked: "So when YOU are distracted, what are your thoughts concentrating on?"



It's not that you can't concentrate - you're simply concentrating on the wrong thing! Getting in a neutral state of mind is very important if you want to get work done.

A lovely and quick way to do this is with a short focus meditation. After eliminating the external distractions in the previous step, do this 4-minute meditation to calm your mind down.

[Listen to the meditation now.](#)

[\(The meditation instructions are available on p.14\)](#)

### Speaking of a Zen mind...

You'll probably have unwanted thoughts and feelings pop up as you're working. How to deal with these depends on what category they fall under:



#### Strong emotions

This is the only type that gets priority over working/studying, as it's generally not a good idea to suppress your feelings. If you find you can't focus due to strong feelings, you should take some time to process them in the way that works best for you. After that, you can get back to your task.

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Need a bit more help managing your feelings? The module 'Boost your mood' gives some useful tips to influence how you feel. Feel free to redo that module any time that you're overcome with strong emotions.



### Intrusive thoughts

Your brain might turn to worrying about things going wrong: missing a deadline, failing a test, writing a bad paper... These types of thoughts are often unhelpful and biased, and can cause all sorts of negative emotions! Below are 2 options for dealing with these kinds of thoughts.

#### Option 1: Do a quick 'fact-check' on these thoughts

Ask yourself if they're really 100% true, or whether they're based on assumptions. Our negative thoughts often aren't very realistic, and analysing the inaccuracies and assumptions can make these thoughts lose their power over us. A helpful question to ask yourself can be: if my close friend told me they had this thought, what would I say to them?

#### Option 2: Set 'worry time'

This means you set aside fifteen minutes a day to worry about your problems (for example: from 20:00 to 20:15). Outside those 15 minutes, you say to yourself: "Stop. I'm not going to worry now, only during my worry time " and redirect your attention to the task at hand. It can help to say "STOP!" out loud when your worry thoughts don't go away. During your worry time, you sit down and think about the problems or issues at hand. And you don't do anything else. This way you don't avoid your worrying thoughts, but you do decide when and how much time you spend on them.



### To-do reminders

Oh, I still need to text Lisa. I should take out the trash. The laundry needs to be done.

Recognise these? To-do thoughts are notorious for appearing when we ought to be working. The way to handle them is by simply writing them down. That way you don't have to worry about remembering these things, and can get on it after you're done working.



### Fantasies / idle thoughts

When your brain comes up with unexpected creative or wishful thoughts, either let them pass naturally (for short ones) or write them down. This allows you to follow up on those thoughts later.



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## 5. Work in time blocks

The last step in the focus ritual is to actually do the work. If you already have a tried and true method, feel free to stick to that, but it might be interesting to try time-blocking. Time-blocking is a process where you work for a set amount of time, then take a mandatory break, and repeat. You can do this with several intervals, but below are two popular types to try.

Experiment with these (and/or other intervals) and see which works best for you!


### NEXT LEVEL HACK

Use an egg timer to keep track of time so you don't distract yourself by checking the clock over and over. And also: do NOT use the timer on your phone! If your phone is in sight, you'll probably be tempted to start doing other stuff on it too ;)

**WORKING IN TIME BLOCKS**  
goal: 2 hours of productivity

option 1	option 2
work 25 mins	work 50 mins
break 5 mins	break 10 mins
repeat 4 times	repeat 2 times

after this, take a longer 20 to 30 minute break



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Make a plan for yourself to try out these time-blocks. When exactly will you implement this technique? Which option? How will you keep track of time?

### What to do in your short breaks

It's important you don't fill your short breaks with all sorts of activities that take you completely out of the zone. You also should NOT grab your phone. If you do, the 'up to 23-minute penalty' can come into effect again. Here are some things you can do during your break:

- Make and drink a cup of coffee/tea (or a smoothie, if you're feeling adventurous)
- Prepare a small snack
- Do stretches or a bit of yoga
- Go for a super-short walk
- Do breathing exercises
- Listen to your favourite song (and perhaps even dance to it)

Decide what to do on your break the next time you're working in time-blocks:

# NEXT LEVEL HACK

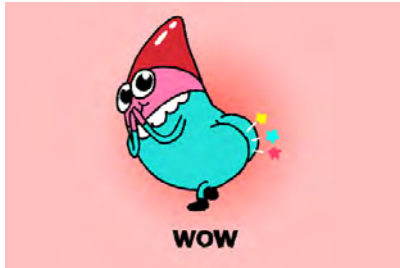
To increase productivity, try alternating between challenging tasks that require a lot of brainwork, and easy tasks. For example: work on something challenging 2x 25 minutes, then work on something easy 2x 25 minutes. That way your brain won't get overloaded, and it also won't get bored.

## And with that you've successfully completed the 5 steps to boost your focus!

Like with all new habits, the more often you do them the better they tend to work. Over time, your brain will link even these steps with the state of 'being focused', which means you'll automatically get in the zone as you do the ritual (no more concentration issues!). Now isn't that the holy grail.



## Hack wrap-up



You made it all the way to the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

This is what you wanted to achieve with regards to concentration and productivity:  
(refer to answer A on p.2)

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

### This module in bullets:

- There are 5 steps to making sure you're in the best state of mind to get productive.
- 1. Neatify your work area: less clutter around means less clutter in your mind.
- 2. Get everything ready: good preparation is half the work, as they say.
- 3. Eliminate distractions: anything that might draw your attention needs to go.
- 4. Zen your mind: a short meditation can help quiet your mind from distracting thoughts.
- 5. Work in time blocks: structuring the time you will work on a task boosts productivity.



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Beat procrastination' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).

# Supplementary Information

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## Meditation instructions

Start to observe your breath.

Start to observe your breath, without trying to change it. You'll notice that your breath slows down, simply because you're observing it.

Your mind will wander, and that's okay. When you notice it, simply bring your attention back to your breathing.

Feel the air going in through your nostrils... then out through your nostrils. Feel your belly rising and falling with each breath.

Now we're going to do something interesting. Start repeating your full name in your mind. I am Kathy Smith. I am Robert McGregor. Keep repeating it mentally.

And now invite all the things that are creating stress right now. All the things you have to do. Your deadlines, your problems, your worries. Invite them into your awareness, while still repeating your full name. Do it for a few seconds longer.

Now, you can drop your last name and just repeat your first name. I am Kathy. I am Kathy. Then think back to your childhood. Fill your awareness with experiences from when you were little. Your parents, your siblings. School, friends. Happy moments, sad moments, while still repeating your first name.

And now drop your first name. Just repeat: I am.

No labels.

I am.

Let your memories and thoughts fade.

Just I am.

Repeat this for a few seconds.

Now, even let that go. Simply be aware of being aware. Feel free to stay here as long as you'd like.

You can now slowly start to come out of the meditation. Feel your body, feel all the sensations. Start to gently move, starting with your fingers, your toes. When you're ready, you can continue your day.