
Additional Ways to Practice External Focusing

In this supplemental handout, we will review what's discussed in the audio and in the main handout related to external focusing. Then, we will present some additional ways you can practice external focusing.

From the audio:

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This session we're going to expand upon the power of external focusing to help us cut down on our feelings of panic and anxiety. We want to be externally focused – meaning that we pay attention to things outside of ourselves – outside of what's happening inside our body.

In the past, we have been too internally-focused, and this has had the tendency to freak us out and cause us to become more agitated and anxious. The more internally-focused you are, the more prone you are to give in to anxiety and panic.

That is why we need to develop the habit of noticing things outside ourselves – of becoming externally focused, and become aware of all the things going on around us.

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So, I've learned that the habit of focusing internally increases anxiety and keeps the cycle of panic and anxiety alive. I want to start focusing externally instead.

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We don't want to be focused on our internal bodily symptoms; we want to be externally focused on what is positive and interesting in the outside world. So, by paying attention to external situations and events, we keep our mind away from all that internal searching we used to do.

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Okay, maybe instead of focusing on my internal feelings and sensations, I can start paying attention to real, everyday things happening around me.

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External focusing is a strategy that needs to be practiced and reinforced, and you can start doing this today.

To get into the habit of focusing externally, we may have to stop ourselves from thinking too much. It's easy to get trapped inside your mind by the brain, but you're not living life if you're stuck inside your head. Pull yourself out of the past and focus on what is going on around you right now.

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Hmm, so I can start practicing external focusing today. I'll remind myself that new habits need practice and take time.

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Just like with other cognitive strategies, remembering to pay "external attention" may be difficult at first, but if you find this to be true, use any aid or assistance to help remind you to pay attention to things outside of your own head. Just like you'd study for a test in school, use any study aid to keep reminding you to shift your attention toward outside, external events.

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I understand what Dr. Richards is saying. Changing habits is difficult but possible. I may get frustrated practicing this new strategy, but that's okay. I may feel frustrated because paying external attention doesn't come naturally to me, but that makes sense, right? – Something that comes naturally is a habit. This is a NEW practice for me that is not yet a habit. So, I'll remind myself, as best I can, not to get angry at myself as I practice external focusing.

Now, what EXACTLY am I supposed to be DOING to practice this?

Let's look to the main handout:

1. Directed Self-Talk & Getting Up and Active

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Say to yourself: "I need to call my anxiety (which is irrational) exactly what it is – UNTRUE – and then I will focus away from it. I will focus externally on something outside of myself. I do NOT need to sit, dwell, ruminate, and scare myself to death by letting my anxiety grow. I need to get ACTIVE and get my mind moving in a positive direction related to some external situation."

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From the handout is a statement that we say to ourselves, out loud in Slow Talk, during our therapy time, to remind ourselves to focus externally – to direct our brain what we want it to do. Let's remember that saying such statements out loud to ourselves is not silly nor a waste of time. This is a necessary part of changing our thoughts and feelings.

When you notice yourself focusing internally, at any time throughout your day (not just during your therapy time), you may also say such a statement, with these same words, or the phrasing of your choosing.

Next, don't just sit idle. When and where appropriate, get up and get active. Doing something active is a direct way to shift our focus outwards.

2. Don't "check in" with your feelings.

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We must not get into the habit of "checking in" with our anxiety, and then do things on the basis of how we feel. Feelings are more irrational than thoughts. And negative feelings, like anxiety, love it when they can trap us into paying attention to them. Our emotions and feelings lie to us. And if we dwell and focus on them, they will grow stronger and more negative – and they will make us more anxious. Do not pay attention to your anxiety. Do not "check in" with how you feel. Instead, pay attention to things outside yourself. Focus on other people, other situations, other jobs, other activities.

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"Checking in" with our feelings and internal sensations is a strong tendency (habit) for all of us who deal with anxiety and panic. When we find ourselves "checking in" with internal feelings, we gently catch that tendency, direct ourselves with a self-talk statement when possible, and find a distraction. Another way to say "distraction" is to get active, to get engaged with another activity (which could be physically doing something), or to move your (mental) focus to take in

what's happening in your present moment around you, NOW, away from an unhelpful, over-thinking inner-focus.

Distractions – does this sound familiar? Yes, this is how we treat ANTs and ANTs habits or tendencies. Focusing internally is an ANTs habit. We don't look to irrational ANTs thoughts for healthy, rational answers, and we should NOT rely on an ANTs habit, such as "checking in" with internal sensations, to give us any rational answers, clarity, or helpful meaning at all.

There is a time and place for everything, even in therapy, and right now, this is not the time I need to be checking in with my internal feelings. This is the time I need to be focusing externally.

3. Acceptance

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Accept yourself and the present moment – as gently and as peacefully as possible – walk through anxiety by paying attention to the present moment and all it offers for the future.

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Accept yourself, as best as you can, while practicing external focusing.

Don't get mad when you catch yourself focusing internally. Why should we get angry at what our brain can do, especially when our brain has been in the habit of doing something for so long?

Our brain is a powerful tool which has the ability to focus and to learn any number of things. Of course, frustration is to be expected. When we catch ourselves focusing internally, **gently** return your focus to something external. "Gently" is the keyword here, and we use this word intentionally. Acceptance of what our brain naturally can do allows us to gently get back to also trying a new thing our brain can do – external focus.

I'm not here to use negative emotions about what my brain can do, and has done, due to old habits. I'm here to gently remind my brain what I can focus on now, instead.

4. External Activities

The handout tells us to focus on anything in front of us, on other people around us, tasks to accomplish, any enjoyable activity, anything interesting. Let's discuss some examples.

Other People Around Us & Active Listening

Focus your attention on other people – perhaps how they look, in detail, or on what they are saying. Listen with full attention to what someone is saying. **Active listening** (which is external focusing) is particularly useful in the real world when we may start to feel anxiety during conversation.

Active listening is the directed way we practice external focusing in therapy groups at the Social Anxiety Institute. During our regular mingling exercise, where we all stand up and make small talk with other group members, we practice paying particular attention to what the other person is saying. If you find yourself becoming anxious or falling back into an internal focus, gently focus back out, on what the other person is saying. Don't worry about what you are going to say next or how you look or feel. Listen to that other person with as much focus as you can draw upon. What are they saying? What is the story? Before you know it, you're so focused on what the other person is saying, that you'll be asking follow-up questions. Before you know it, you're paying external attention.

It's interesting to think that being around other people may have caused us anxiety before, but now we have the opportunity to use those same people in those same situations to help us with our anxiety. Instead of the potential for panic and anxiety, another person presents us with an opportunity for active listening and external focusing. A conversation becomes a chance for us to practice a strategy that builds new neural pathways which help us gradually overcome panic and anxiety.

You don't need a therapy group to practice active listening. You can do this anytime other people are present. Listen intently to what someone is saying. Be proactive - start the conversation. If you're at home alone, perhaps after experiencing some panic sensations, pick up the phone and call a friend. Get out of your head, then and there, by actively listening to a friend or family member. - *How are they doing? What are they doing? How has their day been?*

When you apply active listening, you are setting your brain up to BE interested, to BE externally focused.

You'll find that the more you practice active listening, the more you'll be able to effectively draw upon it. It might not be so easy at first. The brain may drift back to an internal focus. With practice, you'll be surprised how much more capable you are at shifting your focus externally, to the present, to a conversation that is happening right now in front of you.

Tasks to accomplish

Bring your focus to a task at hand. Clean your desk. Fold your laundry. Organize your papers. Write your grocery list. Water the flowers. Do any task, and do it mindfully.

What does that mean, “mindfully”? It means nothing more than being present with the task. Our brain has the ability to wander off and think of other things while we fold the laundry. That’s the beauty of such a powerful tool like the brain, being able to handle so many different things at once. But, also, we can be focused on the experience of folding our clothes properly and enjoying that experience – nothing else.

With any task, we can be present with that task, or we can be daydreaming. You have a choice. Practice that choice. Why not try focusing on the task, without pressuring yourself, and seeing how that goes?

Enjoyable activities / anything interesting:

Pick any activity you like, preferably one that involves some hands-on engagement or the need for focus.

Find the lyrics to a favorite song and sing along to it, instead of just listening to it. Draw. Do a jigsaw puzzle. Do these activities seem too simple? These are activities which can get me out of my head and into the present.

I enjoy stretching. I feel better when I do it. There’s nothing stopping me from taking a 5- or 10-minute break anytime I feel like it to enjoy stretching out. I have my stretching routine memorized, but I could find a new one online and follow that. Either way, I have the choice to passively go through the motions or to really take my time, respecting my body during each movement.

The good thing about stretching for me is that during this particular activity, my mind is much less prone to wander off. I’m focused on counting out my stretch, enjoying the feeling of loosening my muscles, and breathing calmly. There’s not much else I’m focused on when I’m doing my stretches. Stretching just seems to require my concentration. If I needed more encouragement to pay external attention while stretching, I could speak out my stretching positions as I do them, count out loud the seconds of holding my positions as I go through my routine.

Additional Suggestions for Practicing External Focusing

1. Daily Commute

Most of us have some sort of commute to work or school that involves a car or public transportation or walking. What are most of us doing during this time? Maybe we're in a rush because we're late. Maybe we're worrying about the day ahead. Maybe our thoughts are running on auto-pilot, unintentionally letting those pesky ANTs guide our thoughts and feelings.

What can you do instead? Your commute could be a perfect amount of time to get in some external focus practice.

While driving, try turning off the radio for a change. Look around you. Observe the other cars. Be a safe driver, of course. Use your mirrors. Look up ahead. Look at license plates. Be a defensive driver, NOT an anxious driver. This simply means, once again, that you're being present in the activity. How many red cars have you counted? How many green?

While taking the bus, notice your surroundings. How many other passengers are on the bus? What is each person doing or wearing? Look out the window. What's new on this street? Is there a new shop opening? What are the shops along this street? Have you ever taken the time to notice? See if you can remember the shops and their locations. This is a memory game you could play every time you take the bus. Read the street signs. Can you remember what's the name of the next street? Could you name each street along the route?

To be externally focused during your commute does not have to be a memory game. It could be, but it also could simply be you actively focusing on what's there, right before your eyes.

2. Daily Routine

We all have some sort of morning routine. Yours might be turning on the radio and listening to the morning news. Can you repeat out loud the full weather report that was just reported? Think, "I want to learn three things from this news broadcast, and I want to remember it later. I'll test myself this evening to see what I remember from this morning's radio program."

Perhaps you don't listen to the radio in the morning. Instead you could pay deliberate attention to each step of your morning routine. You might even speak each step aloud. "I am waking up. I am standing up. I am going to stretch for a few minutes. I am going to make toast." Focus on the sensation of smelling, touching, tasting that toast.

We've had one group member say that he takes time to pay external attention while taking his morning shower. He tries not to think about the day ahead or yesterday. He tries instead to gently keep his attention on his immediate surroundings. He focuses on the temperature of the water, the smell of the soap, the act of scrubbing shampoo on his scalp, the sounds of the room, the color of the tiles, the shape of the faucet. Over time, with repeated practice, he's

reported that this simple, daily practice of external focusing while in his shower has increased his ability to focus externally in other situations throughout his day. He's been surprised at how powerful this simple practice has become and how it's had a positive bleed-over effect in other areas of calming down and mental focus.

3. Be Present on a Walk / During a Jog

Whether it's a lunch-break walk around your office building or an evening walk, pay attention to your surroundings with a new set of eyes. Look up. Notice other people. Admire gardens. What do the homes look like on this street as compared to the next street? Can you find something you've never noticed before? What can you find that's new or different every day? Do you know the exact number of homes in your neighborhood? How does the sky look today? How are the clouds moving, and is that different than yesterday?

4. The "Senses Check" & "Name 10 Things"

You might try this anytime, but this could also come in handy if you're starting to feel anxiety or if you've just experienced some panic sensations and would like to get your focus outwards. In a public situation, you can think through this **Senses Check**. In a private place, you may find it more effective to speak aloud the questions and your answers.

- What do I see right now?
- What do I smell right now?
- What do I feel (sense of touch) right now?
- What do I hear right now?
- What do I taste right now?

You could expand this Senses Check, or, instead, try "Name 10 Things":

- **Name 10 Things:** Say to yourself, "Name 10 things I see right now."

Your answer includes the object that you see and as many details you can think of that describe that object. *"I see one soft, purple chair. I see a black, flat-screen TV that is turned off. I see a matte-finish black 1-liter water bottle with a screw top, ..."*

You may name more than 10 things. You may notice that by the time you finish listing these 10 things, you are more removed from that sensation of anxiety than you were just a few moments before. This is how external focusing can help us.

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It's NOT necessary to practice ALL of these exercises for external focusing. Pick one that works for you. Therapy group members have reported positive feedback with these options and others. It's good to have different options to use at different times and in different situations. It's also good to be consistent with one option over a longer period of time so that you can more clearly see and feel the progress you've made.