

Optimizing Focus when the task brings up difficult emotions

Transcript

JoVE: 00:00 Hello, this is Jo VanEvery from Jo VanEvery.ca and the Academic Writing Studio. In this series, on Optimizing Focus, I look at aspects of the task, how you are feeling. And the context to help you make the most of your writing time. I use the term "optimize" purposefully. Your goal is not to achieve some ideal state of focus that you can replicate every time you sit down. Your goal is to optimize your focus for this session, given what you are working with today. What follows is an excerpt from a conversation at the end of a meeting with your writing one day about how to manage your focus when the task brings up difficult emotions.

H: 00:45 I've been dealing with one thing that was very hard ... with like some rough comments that I'm still sort of sorting through after getting some feedback from my coauthors and then like I had another writing project so I split my time a little and like treating the other one like a reward made me feel kind of more excited to do it.

JoVE: 01:02 Nice!

H: 01:07 And also sort of helped me kept the anxiety part in check which is but like I've learned that like for the other thing that's a little bit harder although more emotionally difficult. It's helpful to sort of like only try and do bite sized chunks because if you stare at like the comments for too long, if you stop having perspective. It's not efficient, maybe, but it is emotionally more supportive.

JoVE: 01:27 Well, and I think it's more efficient because you can't, when you're feeling anxious, you can't, you can't do the work. Right?

H: 01:36 Yeah.

JoVE: 01:36 So by doing it in small chunks, you're able to do the work. Like you actually spend all the time that you're focused on it, you're spending focused on it. ummm. I think that's the sort of lie your te... That's the lie your gremlins tell you, they're like, "You should be able to like stick with this. And you should be able to spend more than 20 minutes" or whatever it is. Right. But the fact is that you could sit there and be 'officially' working on this project for longer, but you know you're not actually working on it. You're just, you know

H: 02:11 I hadn't thought of putting it that way. But yeah, that is very true.

JoVE: 02:16 Yeah

H: 02:18 I get this feeling like, oh, it's a 90 minute block. I should be able to engage with this thing for 90 minutes. But there's a point where you can't make a decision if you're spinning too much about it anyway, so ...

JoVE: 02:30 yeah, no, absolutely. And 90 minutes is actually a really long time to focus on anything. (laughter) I think there's like all kinds of things, like you don't have to feel like, oh I'm working up to like the best Me is the one that can focus on something for 90 minutes. Some people just can't. And I think with the emotionally difficult stuff. One of the other members... She's ... one of the projects she's working on is a memoir project, right? So like she writes one of these memory stories that she's kind of just writing rough drafts of now before she figures out what the whole project looks like. And that's kind of enough work on that. Right? So she's got two projects and so when she comes to meeting with your writing, she does, you know, one of these, she does some work on one of these stories and then she swaps project and works on something else because it's just too emotionally intense, that particular project.

JoVE: 03:21 So I think that's one of the ways that when I say to you in the beginning, how might how you're feeling, and I ask you like how are you feeling about this project, but how might how you're feeling affect your focus? That's one thing, right? It's like "I'm feeling really vulnerable about this project and I know that after ..." you know, 15 minutes or whatever it is, 20 minutes, half an hour, I don't know how long you can stay there, but you know, after this amount of time, and only you know what that is, "I ... it's much harder to stay focused and work on it because I start going into an anxiety spiral." And that's useful information.

JoVE: 03:58 And then when I say, what strategies do you want to try, you can be like, "Okay, because I'm working on this thing that does this, then I need to switch to something else. That's my strategy. I'm going to, I'm going to do 20 minutes on this project, take a little break, work on this other thing." And thinking of it as a reward is fine or just thinking of it as "I'm allowed to do this in short chunks if that's what works for me." It gets a really whatever works for you. Yeah. Well works for you and the project, right? You don't, you don't have to feel any shame about the fact that the projects bringing up loads of emotional gunk. (laughter)

JoVE: 04:36 That's kind of normal. It could be the project itself. Many of us work on stuff that's like personally meaningful to us, right? So sometimes it's like not even to do with the way people have given us feedback, it's just this stuff is personally meaningful. Or, it might be that working on this stuff triggers some other emotions, right? Like maybe somebody you valued a lot, thinks this project you're working on is not worthwhile and you disagree with them. But sometimes when you're working on it, something triggers that interaction and then, and then you're like, okay, I don't have to do it for them. Right? Like, but, but it happens and you know it happens. And, and so it's like you need to give yourself a trigger warning, right. I can do this for this long, but after awhile I started to get into this. So I'm just going to stop before I get there.

JoVE: 05:35 As I'm saying that I remember one time a couple of years ago where I was living before, I had this great yoga teacher and we were doing something and she said, so here's the thing that happens with your muscles. She's like, when you get to the point where it hurts, your brain kicks in to try and protect you from the pain. And so it'll like tense up those muscles or do something, right, that's counter productive to what you're trying to achieve. So she used to say, you know, so do this and go to the point just before it's going to hurt right now in order to know where that is, you kind of have to like sometimes hit the boundary, right? Like you sometimes go and then, but she's like at the first sign, like don't wait til it hurts really bad at the first sign that this is too much. Stop there. And then on the next repetition, stop a little bit before that. And one of the things was that what you noticed was that after you did like a few repetitions of this thing, you could actually go a lot further because you didn't set your brain into protection mode.

JoVE: 06:48 Right? And I think that you could experiment with how that works in terms of your emotional reactions, right? Stop long before you get into the anxiety spiral. And obviously initially it will be like you need to notice, well what are the things that happen before I'm really in it, right? And then stop there. Do something else, do little bits. And what you might notice is it will be that you'll be able to do longer and longer without going into the anxiety spiral. Now the purpose is not necessarily like "I'm trying to get to 90 minutes by..." You know, whatever. Right?

H: 07:28 [unclear] not letting myself get to that point where I'm ...

JoVE: 07:30 Yes, exactly. And then, and then you just .. but also that builds your resilience because then you spend much less time feeling anxious. You spend more time feeling competent about your work. And when I say, how are you feeling about your project? You can be, "I'm feeling pretty confident about it today" because you

haven't made yourself, you haven't pushed yourself to the point that makes you doubt yourself every single time you work on it. Like that's not, that's not helping yourself. Like "Oh, I'm feeling really confident today. So let's see how hard I could work, how far I can go until I feel like shit about this, because clearly I'm not doing well enough if I'm feeling confident" Like, what's with that? Nobody needs to do that to themselves.

H: 08:22 Exactly.

JoVE: 08:22 Exactly So yay you for like starting on that, and yes, you can do that and do more of that. That's an okay way to work.

This conversation happened during [A Meeting With Your Writing](#), part of the Academic Writing Studio. It has been edited. Shared with the permission of the Studio member involved.

Optimizing Focus is a series of posts on JoVanEvery.ca. The first one, [Optimizing Focus: 3 elements to consider](#), has links to the others in the series. New additions to the series are sent to the [Academic Writing Studio newsletter](#) first before being published on the website. I may eventually collate and edit them into a [Short Guide](#).