

PSYCHOLOGIES  
MAGAZINE

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valuable advice  
to sharpen  
your focus  
and transform  
your life.”

Michael Acton Smith - Co-Founder of  
Calm.com and Creator of Moshi Monsters

# REAL FOCUS

Take control and start  
living the life *you* want



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Take control and start living  
the life you want

**PSYCHOLOGIES**  
MAGAZINE

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# FOREWORD

by Suzy Greaves, Editor, *Psychologies*

**T**ime is the currency of our lives. We are all given the same amount of time to spend – 8760 hours a year, 730 hours a month, 168 hours a week – so how are we choosing to spend that time? Your ability to focus, be it giving the full beam of your attention to the people you love or delivering an important project at work, can mean the difference between a happy, productive life and a lost, miserable one.

That's why I love this book. It helps you discover the key to spending your time consciously and wisely instead of frittering days away on reacting to the assault of never-ending demands – which means you'll be free to proactively create the life you *really* want.

At *Psychologies*, our slogan on the front of the magazine is 'your life, your way'. Our readers are passionate about creating a life that works for them on their own terms. But, as we all know, that's difficult to do when we find ourselves distracted, overwhelmed and frazzled. How can you even begin to ask the bigger questions (*What do I want? Where am I going? What do I want to create?*) when you're squashed flat under a giant to-do list? This book encourages you to create the space and time to identify what really is stealing your time and attention so you can create a strategy to focus on what really matters to you – with the help of the most renowned and respected productivity experts in the world.

I believe this book will not only save you time but quite literally save your life – one minute at a time. Are you ready? OK, let's focus.

**Suzy Greaves, Editor, *Psychologies***

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# INTRODUCTION

**H**ow are you today? We would hazard a guess that your answer will be along the lines of 'I'm so busy', 'I feel so frazzled', or 'what am I doing even reading this book, I've got so much to do!'

However, we also suspect that you know in your heart of hearts that life's not supposed to feel like this. You're not supposed to feel like you're in a hamster wheel that you can't get off; that life is a 'whirlwind' or 'one never-ending to-do list'. You know there has to be another way – but what is it?

Well here it is: Real Focus. We suspect that the reason you're reading this book is because you feel your lack of focus is causing you problems in your life. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by how much you have to do every day in the time available; or you're unclear about your goals and what you really want. Maybe you're sick of getting to the end of another 'manic' day and thinking: what have I actually achieved?

You probably look at other people and think they've got it all worked out (we can pretty much guarantee, they haven't). At the end of the day though, this isn't about anyone else, it's about you; it's about creating a life that allows you the time and space to do everything that matters, and spend time with those that matter too. We feel that's what Real Focus is, in a nutshell: doing what matters. It's kind of simple and yet tricky all at the same time.

The good news is that anybody can achieve it when they know how; and this book is the first step.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First of all, it's important that you use this book in the way that benefits you the most. All we want is for you to take away as much as possible to help you in your personal journey towards better focus. To that end, we've split this book into three, clear sections so that you can dip in and out, read from front to back, or in whichever way you wish.

Part One is called *How Focused Are You?* This section will help you to look at how you feel now (how your lack of focus might be affecting your life), and what life could look and feel like if your focus improved. We have also put together a list of what we, at *Psychologies*, feel constitutes Real Focus. It's meant as a helpful list of goals if you like, but you can add to and omit as you see fit, curating your own personal set of goals. Perhaps you'll want to stick our list up on your fridge, or use it as inspiration for your own.

Part Two is called *Why Do You Lack Focus?* Covering key issues like time management and work/life balance, this section will help you to identify the issues that might be standing in the way of you reaching your potential and hindering your efforts to become more focused.

Part Three is called *How Can You Become More Focused?* Taking everything we have learned and explored throughout the book, this section is packed full of tips and strategies for you to 'practise' Real Focus and keep practising long after you have finished this book. Like any life skill, 'Real Focus' is something you need to keep at; you don't master it overnight. However, there are plenty of bite-sized tips throughout the book, so that you can start working on your focus straightaway.

You will also find tests that will help you assess yourself and navigate your personal journey towards Real Focus. We hope that these, along with the 'Ask Yourself' questions at the end of

each chapter, will help you to gain a deeper understanding of your obstacles and goals where focus is concerned and also to relate what you read in this book to your own experience. In addition, we have included case studies from real people (names and identifying circumstances changed). Their journeys will help you see how it's possible to achieve Real Focus and give you a wider range of tools to do so yourself.

We interviewed a sociologist, a clinical psychologist/mindfulness expert, a time management and productivity expert, an investigative journalist, an entrepreneur/business author and a speaker/author. All of them are leaders in their field and were handpicked by us to offer as varied and rounded a picture as possible of what Real Focus is and how you can achieve it. For all their colourful differences, however, it could be said that they all have one, clear goal: to help people to live a 'good life' – that is, a balanced, happy, full life that is rich with the things that matter to them. They are united in the fact that in order to make this possible, one must cultivate Real Focus. We hope that, contained within these pages, is how.

## THE EXPERTS INTERVIEWED FOR *REAL FOCUS*

**Dalton Conley, sociologist, Henry Putnam University Professor of Sociology at Princeton University**

Dalton has many academic roles including University Dean, University Professor and Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research. He writes and speaks on subjects such as race, socioeconomic status, poverty and the role of technology in society. He coined the term 'weisure' to describe the blurring of work and leisure and is also the author of many books, including *Social Class: How Does it Work?*, *Elsewhere USA* and his latest, *Parentology*.

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### **Mark Forster, author and specialist in time management and organization**

Mark is the author of numerous books including *Get Everything Done, Do It Tomorrow and Other Secrets of Time Management* and *Still Have Time To Play*. His latest book is *Secrets of Productive People*. Mark has also developed a time-management system called Final Version.

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### **Dr Tamara Russell, clinical psychologist, mindfulness trainer and martial artist**

Tamara combines all three disciplines to work with individuals and organizations advising on mindfulness techniques to enhance performance and improve mental and physical wellbeing. She is director of the Mindfulness Centre of Excellence (virtual) and author of *Mindfulness in Motion* (Watkins Publishing), a book teaching the Body In Mind training which she developed.

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### **Brigid Schulte, author, former award-winning *Washington Post* reporter and current director of The Better Life Lab at the nonprofit think tank, New America, and mother of two**

A few years ago, Brigid found herself besieged by constant, exhausting busyness. Wondering why she felt so overwhelmed, she decided to go on a quest to find out. The result is her *New York Times* bestseller: *Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love, and Play When No one Has The Time* (Picador). Schulte was a long-time, award-winning journalist for The Washington Post, and now directs the Better Life Lab at New America, which seeks to drive the evolution of work, reframe

gender equality to include both the advance of women and the changing roles of men, and rewire policy to support the needs of diverse 21st century families.

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### **Laura Vanderkam, author and speaker on topics such as time, money and productivity**

Laura questions the status quo and helps people to rediscover their true passions and beliefs in pursuit of more meaningful lives. Her books include *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast* (Portfolio), *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think* (Portfolio), and *All the Money in the World: What the Happiest People Know About Wealth* (Portfolio). Her latest book is *I Know How She Does It: How Successful Women Make the Most of Their Time* (Portfolio). She is also a frequent contributor to Fast Company's website and a member of USA Today's Board of Contributors.

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### **Sháá Wasmund, MBE, speaker, entrepreneur and author**

Sháá is one of the UK's most prominent female entrepreneurs and a champion of small businesses. After being a boxing manager (the only woman ever to do so), she set up Smarta.com, which gives advice and tools to small businesses and start ups. In 2015, she was awarded an MBE for services to business and entrepreneurship. She is also the author of the bestselling books *Stop Talking, Start Doing* and *Do Less, Get More*.

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# **1 HOW FOCUSED ARE YOU?**



# CHAPTER 1

## DEFINING 'REAL FOCUS'

## HOW DO YOU FEEL RIGHT NOW?

So what is 'Real Focus' anyway? Why do you need it and what would it bring to your life? In order to start answering these questions, we need to look at how your life probably feels right now – in other words, what Real Focus definitely *isn't*.

Chances are if you feel Real Focus is a problem for you, the following phrases feature heavily in your vocabulary:

'Life's just crazy ...'

'There aren't enough hours in the day ...'

'I'm feeling totally overwhelmed ...'

'Stop, I want to get off!'

One of the key characteristics of lacking focus and feeling overwhelmed is that we can't see the wood for the trees. This feels slightly different for everybody, but we'd put money on the fact that the following are very familiar ...

### 1. Your time feels fragmented and 'bitty'

Brigid Schulte, harassed mother of two and reporter for the *Washington Post*, remembers very clearly the point at which she decided she had to write her book *Overwhelmed: How To Work, Love, and Play When No One Has The Time*. She was clearing up after her son's birthday party and her husband was outside on the patio smoking a cigar. She'd cleared the food and plates away and all that was left to do now was to sweep the 'Happy Birthday' confetti off the table and floor. As an exhausted Schulte surveyed the small bits and pieces all over the place, it occurred to her that her life felt exactly like the confetti: scattered, fragmented and exhausting.

Sound familiar? When we're trying to stretch ourselves too far, we lose sight of our goals and feel overwhelmed. This is how our time feels: like hundreds of little pieces of confetti – that when you

put them back together don't seem to amount to much. You feel like you've been on your feet all day, completing endless tasks: sending emails, running errands, and working your way through an ever-expanding to-do list – but do you feel like you've actually achieved anything?

Of course, you're not alone in feeling like this. Our harried lives and constant busyness seem to have overtaken the weather as the UK's number one topic of conversation. We have more choice than ever in terms of what we do with our time, but this is stressing us out even more because we don't know what to focus on. As a result, we fall into the trap of trying to focus on everything, splintering ourselves and our time into a million pieces of 'time confetti'.

This goes not just for work but for family and leisure time too. It's probable that you feel like you don't have enough down time and that it's difficult to get any unbroken periods of relaxation when your day is so fragmented. But the thing is, this down time is actually always in reach – you just need to learn how to find it.

This book will not change 'time'. There will always be 24 hours in a day and 168 hours in a week. What it will help you with, however, is how you manage and therefore experience time, so that things feel more focused and you feel calmer and, ultimately, happier. Schulte calls it moving from 'time confetti' to 'time serenity'. Imagine ...

## BRIGID SCHULTE ON THE PROBLEM WITH 'TIME CONFETTI'

*'When I saw that confetti whilst clearing up after my son's birthday party, I knew that's exactly how life can feel: all these little bits and scraps of time that don't amount to much of anything.'*



Psychologists who have studied time and how we spend it, have found that we are happiest when we are in flow – that is, focusing on something for an uninterrupted period of time and being engrossed in it. However, our time is so fragmented these days, and we're so busy, it's often hard to find that stretch of time in the first place. And even if we could, we struggle to give ourselves permission to really sink into flow. We get distracted by our To Do list, we're worried about being “productive.” And without taking time to think about what's most important, we often don't really know what to focus on, or where to start. It takes practice, especially practice in giving ourselves permission to experience flow.

But research is showing very clearly that we can't multi-task like this and expect to do everything well. Instead of multi-tasking, we're really task-switching, which wears out the brain and degrades focus and attention, so you end up not doing anything particularly well. And in the end, that just makes us feel worse.'



## FOCUS ON ONE THING

If you're having trouble focusing, decide on the **ONE** thing you have to do by a certain time: It could be by the end of the day, or the end of the hour. The important thing is, don't do anything else until you've done it.