



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

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Relevance

At a recital, a dancer scans the audience for the presence of friends and loses track of the steps in the routine. A professional golfer thinks about how much money is riding on an 8 foot putt and proceeds to miss the putt. An office worker becomes preoccupied with how a new co-worker is getting preferential treatment from the supervisor and makes a number of uncharacteristic mistakes. A patient with strep throat is aware of feeling much better after two days and stops taking antibiotics.

Maintaining focus is a key factor in effective performance, whether it involves the performing arts, athletics, work, or one's health behavior. In just about any situation, there are many potential distracters that can interfere with performance.

Because sports have become so competitive, and indeed have become big business at the collegiate and professional levels, coaches and teams have increasingly turned to sport psychologists for gaining advantages. One of the areas of expertise that sports psychologists offer is helping athletes maintain focus, especially when arousal isn't optimal (that is, when the athlete is insufficiently "fired up" or overly anxious).

A very simple but effective strategy is to place and maintain attention on relevant factors in a specific situation, avoiding attention to irrelevant factors. This involves sorting out which factors are and are not relevant to effective performance. Whether one's friends are in attendance at the

recital is an irrelevant factor during the dance performance, whereas concentration on the music and steps is relevant. Similarly, relevant factors for the golfer when approaching a big putt include focus on the usual putting routine, not how much money might be won. How a supervisor is treating a new employee is an irrelevant factor with respect to completing one's assigned task.

The "performance" of health behaviors often is affected by irrelevant factors. A decision to not go to the health club because "I'm not as fit or trim as others exercising there" is the result of paying attention to an irrelevant factor. A more relevant factor in such a decision is whether the club offers the necessary equipment and instruction. Focusing on how I'm "depriving myself" if I don't have a hot fudge sundae for dessert is to give attention to an irrelevant factor... relevant factors in such a situation might include how I already feel full or how I don't need the extra calories.

Health behavior is certainly an aspect of life in which we want to function as effectively as possible, since health status has a profound impact on our performance in virtually all other areas of life. It is useful to look at the various factors to which we give attention when making health-related decisions or performing health-related behaviors, and strive to ensure that our attention is on relevant rather than irrelevant factors.

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