



# e-quilibrium

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## Attention

There is no one best way to cope with stress. What is advantageous is have a variety of strategies for coping and then having the flexibility to implement the strategy(ies) best suited to a given situation.

How and where one directs attention in the face of stress is an example of a behavior where flexibility is beneficial. The following discussion utilizes the work of Robert Nideffer, Ph.D., in the field of sport psychology. He developed the Theory of Attentional and Personal Style in working with athletes.

Nideffer’s approach suggests that attention can be focused internally or externally, and it can be broad or narrow. One uses a broad-internal focus to plan or strategize, whereas a narrow-internal focus would be used to mentally rehearse a specific plan of action or perhaps to focus on a relaxation exercise that utilizes imagery. If a person needs to scan the environment in a search (e.g., to find a missing child or pet), one would need a broad-external focus. A narrow-external focus works best when there is a specific task to accomplish, such as having an assertive conversation with a supervisor or finishing a tax return on April 14.

While people are capable of directing their attention along any of these dimensions, the theory maintains that most people have a preferred style. Typically that would be one’s “go to” style when experiencing stress. The preferred style may work very well when the stressful situation calls for that type of attention, but may be very ineffective when there is a mismatch. Hence, adaptability is most effective.

Of course, many situations require changing attentional focus as things unfold or progress. Early on in a problem-solving endeavor, broad attention will allow consideration of a range of possibilities. Once a course of action is chosen, a more narrow focus may make implementation of the plan most effective.

It should also be noted that in general, intense stress and/or strong negative emotions lead to a narrowing of attention, whether it be broad or narrow. How problematic this may be depends upon the situation. A common pitfall of narrowed attention is that the focus may not be in the right place. For example, when studying for an exam, a narrow-external focus on the ineptitude of the course instructor will likely be less useful than a narrow-external focus on the course notes. Similarly, a narrow focus on something that is calming/relaxing may be more useful than maintaining a narrow focus on a feared but improbable outcome.

Useful questions to ask regarding one's attention in stressful circumstances include: "On what do I need to focus in this situation?" "Do I need to maintain a broad or narrow perspective?" "Does my attention need to be primarily inward or outward at this point?" "How might I get a different view of this situation if I change my attentional focus?"

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