

## The Mental Game – Concentration

Loss of concentration can be devastating for our results as bridge players. It is easy to dump 20imps in the space of 3 or 4 boards through poor concentration. Top athletes generally have superb concentration – it is a skill which is developed over time – and if they lose concentration they have mechanisms to regain it.

Imagine what would happen if an athlete at the Olympics who was about to take an attempt at the high jump, allowed their focus to waver by a distraction at the event. Would they be likely to make a successful jump? Tennis players, golfers and others often complain about the noise of spectators, and the impact this has on their ability to concentrate. Bridge players are no different – often finding themselves unable to concentrate properly due to a variety of distractions – whether it is a director at the next table, the players discussing a hand or chatting nearby – or the stage they have reached in the match which may be commencing, nearing its conclusion, nearing lunch and so on. Loss of concentration need not come from a distraction. It may also manifest itself through the mind wandering - thinking about the last hand, the card you failed to play, the mistake you made, the game you didn't bid, the victory which is in sight, and so on.

In an earlier article I discussed maintaining focus, (ABF News Edition 167, May 2014), and how to regain focus after a distraction. However, it is better if one doesn't become distracted at all. If the mind does not wander and we can concentrate despite what is happening around us and the circumstances that we find ourselves in. Concentration is a skill, just like counting cards, that can be practiced and improved. I have provided two exercises – one very simple, and one slightly more difficult - that were provided to me many years ago when I was participating in a training camp for shooting. The original source is now unknown, and I have modified these to be applicable to the bridge world. I hope these will help you improve your concentration skills to assist in maintaining focus.

There are also many articles about improving concentration available on the internet. The Australian Institute of Sport has a course available on their free online e-learning facility which you can register for via <https://learning.ausport.gov.au/> if you want to complete something more structured.

Exercise 1: To begin this exercise, get seated in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and breath slowly.

On a signal, begin to count respirations by adding one on each inhalation and continue to do so for a period of one minute. Because this is a simple activity and there is a pause during the exhalation other thoughts will rise to the conscious level. Do not get distracted by these; just passively let them pass through your mind. Otherwise breaths will be missed, the count will be lost, and/or you may find that you are counting on exhalations and not inhalations.

Exercise 2: To begin this exercise. you need to have an object which is a part of bridge. The object, for example, can be a piece of clothing you always wear at bridge, your favourite pen, your system card, a playing card, etc. The type of object is not important as long as it is something that is directly connected with performance in bridge. In addition, a watch or clock is needed to time the concentration periods.

To begin the exercise, sit in a comfortable position with the bridge object in your hands. The purpose of the exercise is to concentrate on the object for an increasing period of time. During the exercise be aware of nothing except the object itself - its colour; its texture; its smell; its weight; and its taste. Examine the object in detail, becoming aware of scuff marks, creases, stitching, shadows as the object

is moved. etc. Guard against being distracted (i.e., losing concentration) by what the object is used for, past or future performances, sounds and/or actions going on in the environment, or non-bridge related thought.

Initially, practice this exercise in a place that is quiet and which has few or no distracting sights and sounds. At the beginning, use a 30 second concentration period followed by a 30 second rest period. As the ability to concentrate increases, extend the concentration period and then shorten the rest period until the concentration period can be held for five minutes.

When you can maintain focused concentration for up to five minutes, the exercise can be made more difficult by changing breadth of focus. This is accomplished by focusing first on the object as a whole, then broadening the focus to the object in relation to you and other objects within your sight line, then narrowing down to a single crease, mark, point on the object, etc.

Both these exercises can be made more difficult by doing them in distracting settings, such as an area with noise, or by having someone deliberately attempt to distract you.