The quality of our attention determines the quality of our lives. Faced with so many demands on our time, we need a strategy to learn how to direct our attention to what is truly important. Meditation offers that strategy, the ability to focus on one thing and ignore distractions.

Matt Killingsworth, a Harvard researcher, found that people report being happier when they are focused on a task than when their mind wanders, even if the task is unpleasant. 

Matt Killingsworth TED Talk: Want to be happier? Stay in the moment.

Michael Posner, a psychologist at the University of Oregon, has studied the attention system of the human brain, and found that it consists of more than one ability, including: orienting (where we place attention), selective focus, (the capacity to focus on one element and ignore others), vigilance (the ability to maintain focus), and goal focus (keeping a goal in mind despite distractions).

Recent scientific studies have shown that meditation can help us increase attention. Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson report on these studies in a new book called Altered Traits. After examining 6,000 studies of meditation, they identified 60 that they considered the gold standard of science, using volunteers who were randomly divided into those who practiced meditation and a control group.

In a study conducted by Amishi Jah at the University of Pennsylvania, novice meditators who were trained in MBSR significantly improved in orienting. A similar strengthening of attention was found in meditators who were tested after attending a three-month retreat; their selective attention improved by more than 20%.

Finally, researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara found that mindfulness practice of only ten hours improved working memory: those who practiced mindfulness upped their scores on the GRE by more than 30%.

Start to improve attention by practicing meditation for at least 8 minutes per day (the amount that shows a state effect); establish a regular practice to achieve a trait effect (rewiring of the brain that leads to consistent changes in behavior). Begin by noticing patterns such as the way you answer email. Use David Levy’s email observation exercise, for example, to log a pattern of answering email and then to implement methods to be more focused and efficient.

References: