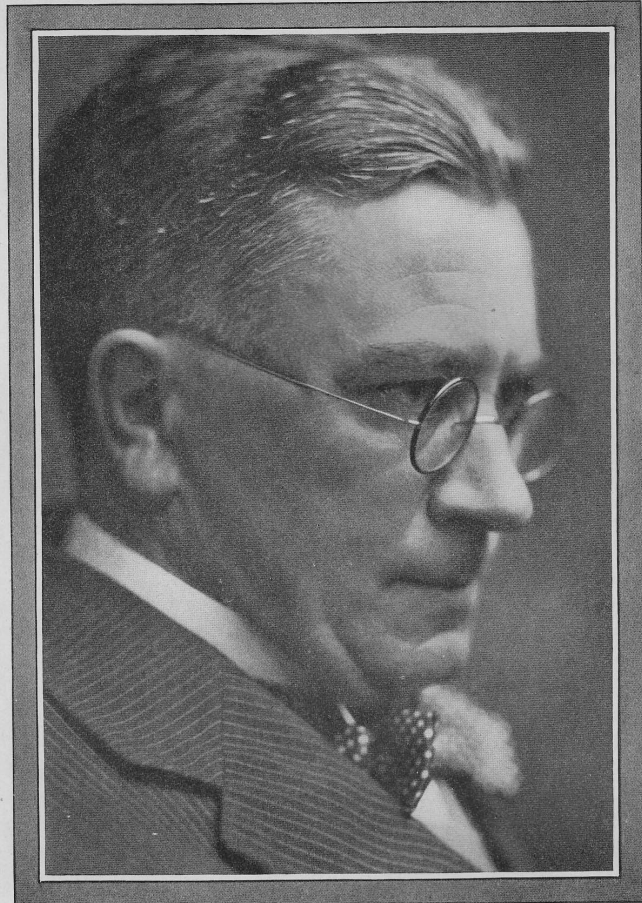


An Essay By Prof. Henry Chellaw Originally Published In
The Encyclopedia Of Psychology Edited By Elmer S. Prather,
Psychology Foundation SA, Brussels, 1928



Professor HENRY CHELLEW

M. A., Ph. D., D. Sc. Lecturer on Psychology to the University of London. Late adviser (1918-1920) to the Federation of British Industries on Industrial Education, etc. Professor of Literature and Education, National College of Music, London. Author of : "The Philosophy of History," "Achievement—the Laws of Human Adaptation." Contributor to principal scientific and technical journals dealing with the subject, and a well-known lecturer on various aspects of Applied Psychology.

MENTAL DISTRACTION

BY PROF. HENRY CHELLEW, M. A., PH. D., D. SC.

Lecturer in Psychology of the University of London.

EDITORIAL NOTE. Probably one of the greatest hindrances to success is a lack of ability to concentrate. Our present mode of living—with its many distractions and its widely diffused interests—conspires to render singleness of thought and purpose a matter of considerable difficulty. That we live in an age of specialization does not materially affect the issue; indeed, the monotony which necessarily accompanies specialization tends to render concentration, in the wider sense, more difficult. In this article the author is careful to explain the various things which militate against concentration, and also to show how the mind may be trained to focus its attention upon any subject at will. Those who experience difficulty in fixing their thoughts and keeping one idea in the forefront of the mind will assuredly find this article of practical help.

THIS is an age of distracting influences when our *The New*
environment tends to invite the mind to scatter *Outlook*.
its forces in many directions. The placid days
have gone—perhaps for ever—and to-day the task of
living is made all the more difficult by reason of the many
claims made upon our attention. The art of reflection
and the power of meditation could well be cultivated in
medieval days, but in our hurrying twentieth century our
days pass with haste, and our nights are but brief interludes
when insomnia readily claims its victims on account of
our devotion to the devious demands of our working
hours. Mental distraction however in the final analysis
is chiefly the product of the untrained mind. Our tempers
and temperaments are not sufficiently harnessed to our
daily duties and hence our minds in order to find relief
are projected toward the fleeting pleasures of life wherein,
except in rare instances, we further dissipate our spent-up
energies and become prodigal of our reserve forces. The
mind no less than the muscles must be trained to like the

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOLOGY

efficient life, and to do that successfully is not an easy task. Poise between intellect and emotion is the result of much effort and severe training—that is unless we turn our eyes to the East and adopt the practices of the devotees of oriental religions or take refuge in false fatalism and so drift with the river of years.

The well-balanced life is the outcome of volition—not negation, and cannot be attained in a moment.

The Art of Concentration.

Concentration of mind is quite easy in the presence of that which is interesting or causes curiosity—but to concentrate upon the monotonous tasks of life is the result of sustained effort and calls for the action of volition—the will. Life without variation soon palls and becomes a vicious circle, but too much excitement and distraction vitiates the life forces, and lies at the back of much that is classified as neurasthenia and general neurosis. Our minds are daily invaded with a multitude of trivial happenings and the daily press serves to hinder rather than help in the effort to travel toward any definite objective. Civilisation has become so complex that though the span of life has become considerably lengthened, yet many seem to live to no purpose.

Errors in diet contribute to the problem, and there can be no true science of life until we have answered the question, "What shall we eat and what shall we drink?" This fact is too obvious to call for explanation, and the fact stares us in the face everywhere. Linked with the drug habit—alcohol and the pursuit of pleasure for the sake of pleasure, our minds are prone to be lost in the maze of the daily happenings. The motor areas of the brain do not function as they should—chiefly because of over-activity—and hence mental efficiency is at a premium in modern business activity. Most men and women have too many irons in the fire, and mediocrity is a leading characteristic of the age. To concentrate we must, with Victor Hugo, "plan each day," and if we add a definite

MENTAL DISTRACTION

goal or objective towards which we bend our energies we unconsciously or even automatically find how easy it is, by comparison, to concentrate. The tired brain is a poor instrument to work with at any time and unless we get our quota of sound sleep and relaxation we cannot hope to focus the mental forces upon any definite plan or task. Plain diet, fresh air, deep breathing, walking as an exercise, will do far more to promote mental power than we can readily imagine.

Brain-fag, worry, fear, and anxiety for the future, are factors which can only be mitigated when we live on scientific lines and use the human engine with care and the utmost consideration. We must learn to live to-day whilst it is called to-day and not try to live in the three dimensions of Time—past, present and future. As the natural tendency of the mind is to readily do again that which has already been done—the foundation of fixed habits reduces what we may term the friction of life and hence the importance of watching our habits and taking stock of our mental assets at times. *The Importance of Habits.*

Organised mental energy is the result of self-discipline and the correct use of the five senses which are the instruments of all knowledge no matter how lofty the intellect may be. To think right we must sense right, and to keep the senses in proper working order we must be careful in our use of the mechanism of the body from which all the power of the mental dynamo is derived. If the brain is to function as a camera the lens must be clear, the adjustment correct and the time factor be adjusted according to the thing in view. In a word, it may be stated that concentration is founded upon the two words—"observe" and "compare." Here if anywhere is the secret of concentration. It is not necessary to try to teach the mind any new "tricks," nor is it worth much to follow any definite system unless the scheme is established upon these simple psychological

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOLOGY

facts. By using the will—the conscious Ego—as the master hand upon the mental switchboard, we can handle the sensations arriving in the brain area from the use of the five senses; with any voltage we determine. A definite course of reading or the pursuit of any special subject will discipline the mind as few other things can do, and here experience is our witness. The laws of association which operate automatically are always on the mind of the man who sustains his mental efforts in any given direction. To concentrate we must increase the voltages of the mental apparatus and to do this we must develop the will. Mental intensity, the power to decide quickly upon any given situation, the mastery of vacillation, is arrived at by effort alone, not by chance, and certainly not by taking a hasty shot, trusting to luck, playing a hazard, and hoping for the best. That is the way to defeat rather than the way of success.

The age-long aphorism is more than true, "He who would save his life must lose it,"—he must be absorbed in the task of living to prepare for a definite end. Backed by determination and singleness of purpose we can do that which seems impossible, for the line of least resistance is always the line of failure.

J. Cheever