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[Home](#) > Fixing Your Focus - 001 The Way Out of Inner Paralysis

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Introduction: Difficulty With Concentration Is Improved Through Working With The Four Elements of Earth, Water, Wind and Fire

Difficulties with concentration can be worked upon through understanding how to work with the four elements of the soul, which are earth, water, wind, and fire – as written about by Rav Chaim Vital, in sefer *Shaarei Kedushah*.

Each of the four elements contain aspects of all the elements, so there are a total of 16 general roots that lead to each issue. In the element of earth, there exist all four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. In the element of water, there is earth, water, wind and fire. In the element of wind, there is earth, water, wind and fire. In the element of fire, there is earth, water, wind and fire. Each of these can lead to a different root of difficulty with concentration.

Thus, there are many reasons that cause lack of concentration, and it can never be blamed on any one particular reason. There is always a root reason that is causing it – one of 16 possible root causes, which we will explain individually - and in many cases, there are often several other reasons that “accompany” the root reason. So there are 16 general “root” reasons that cause difficulty with concentration, and each of these 16 can subdivide further as well.

We will begin by learning about difficulty with concentration that stems from the element of earth, in particular, with “earth”-of-earth.

Earth-of-Earth: Internal “Heaviness” That Is Total

Earth has several properties – to name a few, it contains dryness, coldness, hardness, and heaviness. The traits of laziness and sadness stem from the “heaviness” contained in the element of earth, as Rav Chaim Vital writes.

“Earth”-of-earth is the total level of this “heaviness” in the soul, and it can also be a cause of difficulty in concentration. In many people, difficulty with concentration is because they have much “earth-of-earth” in their souls.

When earth-of-earth is perfected, a person can stay heavily focused on what he is doing [and he will be productive]. When it is left undeveloped and refined, a person will just stay in his place and he won’t budge from there, where this nature becomes impaired, [leading to unproductive behavior].

Examples of Impaired “Earth-of-Earth”

1- There are people who can sit all day in the *Beis Midrash* learning Torah, and it seems to onlookers that that such a person must be “one of the 36 hidden *tzaddikim*”, but the truth is that it’s simply his personality to stay where he is and not budge from there. If this kind of person would be working in a store, he would sit there all day long too. It happens to be that he has chosen to sit all day in the *Beis HaMidrash*, but it’s his personality to sit all day where he is, so his ability to sit all day in the *Beis Midrash* is not a result of a high level of righteousness. It is simply a personality to stay in place.

2- Another example of this is that there are people who won’t get up to get the *sefer* from the shelf when they need it. When writing *Chiddushei Torah*, such a person may write “The *sefer* is not in my hands to check”, as the Chazon Ish wrote about himself; but in this person’s case, he is just fooling himself, because he really can go get the *sefer* easily [and he’s just being lazy]. It’s really just a few feet away from him. But he has a problem of staying in place and not budging from there, and he convinces himself that it’s too hard for him to get up and go get the *sefer*.

This is all the evil, impaired use of “earth”-of-earth. It is the habit of staying in the same place and not budging from there.

Why Impaired “Earth-of-Earth” Leads To Difficulty In Concentration

In contrast, when this power is used for holiness, it becomes an ability to heavily concentrate on what one is doing, saying,

feeling, or thinking. But the evil, impaired use of earth-of-earth causes difficulty in concentration. Why? Especially if we are explaining that earth-of-earth is in essence an ability to stay heavily focused, why would the impaired use of earth-of-earth lead to difficulty with concentration? If anything, shouldn’t it keep a person very focused on what he is doing, since it is a power to stay in place?

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The answer to this is as follows. Man cannot really stay in one place for too long, because this Creation is always moving. The constellations are always moving, the earth is constantly in movement, and the same goes for the body – it is always moving. Even the guards in Buckingham Palace move - they will move very slowly, or they will wiggle their toes or some other part of their body, but they have some movement. No one can stay unmoving for too long. This is true about the body, soul, and the power of thought in the mind – the body always needs to move, the soul always need to move, and the mind always needs to move.

“Earth-of-earth”, when left unrefined and undeveloped, will cause a problem that even when a person needs to move and he’s aware that he needs to move in order to do a certain action, he will not move quickly to do it, and he may not move at all to do it. He will feel the need to do the action and he knows that he needs to move from his place in order to get that thing done, but he won’t actually do it.

Why doesn't he act? Because the heavy amount of earth-of-earth in his soul is keeping him in place and shackling him down. He really needs to get up and go get the sefer, but he doesn't get up. He will feel a need to go relieve himself, but he doesn't. His soul needs to move, but he won't satisfy this need for inner movement.

When a person gets used to always repressing his need for movement, what does all this cause? It becomes an internal war within his own soul forces, between his need for movement and his nature of staying in place, and there will be much clashing inside him. He will then feel like he needs to move even more, which will lead him to becoming hyper, so that he can relieve all of the buildup of internal stress that has piled up. As time goes on, his need for movement will become repressed, and at a certain point, he will feel restless. Then he won't be able to concentrate that well, as a result.

There are some people who have much earth-of-earth and they are unmoving, and then they become the opposite of this nature, becoming very hyper and all over the place, crashing into people around them and knocking over things and breaking them. This happens because they were so used to repressing their movements that eventually they become restless, and then they lose control over their movements altogether, so their movement becomes hyper. They will feel an impulsive need to move around. This kind of person might seem to onlookers as a person who has a lot of "wind-of-wind" in his soul - the nature of fast movement - but in reality, he has much "earth-of-earth" in himself, the very opposite of how it seems.

This nature can manifest in action, and also in speech, and in emotion, and in thought. These people have a very hard time concentrating on any one thought, because they have become stormy inside, due to all of the inner contradictions that have piled up inside themselves.

Repairing Internal Paralysis, Step 1: Times of Quiet Every Day

Now that we understand the problem, let's see what the remedy to this is. One should only use the following remedy if his dominant nature is earth-of-earth. Since there are many different causes of difficulty in concentration, each particular issue requires a particular solution, which will be detrimental to use in the other cases.

If one recognizes that his dominant nature is earth-of-earth (as for how to figure out your dominant element, that is a separate discussion for itself), generally speaking, he will need time of quiet every day, to just be with himself. He should disconnect from the world during this time, and turn his phone off. He can listen to himself and hear the movements in his soul which want to express themselves. If he has no quiet time for this, he won't be able to listen to his soul. He must have this quiet time, and then he can listen to himself. This will be the beginning of how he can start to calm down.

(This particular advice is not only needed for one who has problems with concentration. It is also recommended for couples who want to achieve marital peace; each of the spouses needs quiet time every day, with just being alone with themselves, and to listen to what's going on inside themselves. One also needs it for his own self, to become in touch with himself, in solitude.)

He should take a few minutes a day of quiet of reflecting into this. This is not a time to make self-accounting. The point is to become calm, a far more basic step, which calms even the animal level of the soul. It is not either a time for prayer, learning Torah, or *hisbodedus*. The point of this is totally different: just to simply relax, so that he can calm his soul. One can eat or drink something light, in order to create a relaxed atmosphere.

Getting used to this gives a person quiet time every day to recognize what calmness is. Then he will notice the storminess in his own soul, the need for movement which has become repressed.

Repairing Internal Paralysis, Part 2: Light Movements To Get Things Done

After some time of practicing this – it will not be right away – the next step will be, to try to act upon the need for movement when he feels it, even though he is initially reserved about doing it. He should try to lightly perform what needs to be done. It is recommended that he try this only with something that is easy to take care of, and not with something that's too hard for him to do; he should not try to change so drastically and always act upon every desire for movement.

If he is not sure if he can go do what has to be done, he can try simply leaving his own "*daled amos*" (direct space), or he can just go do anything, so that he moves a little bit from his place. This gets him used to doing things and actualizing the desire in his soul for movement, helping him become more productive.

Again, he should not try to make drastic changes. He should just lightly act upon the desire for movement when he feels it, and do just do small things that he initially feels opposition towards doing.

Step 3: The Goal - Improved Concentration

If he gets used to this a little bit, he will be able to see that he has become calmer inside himself. He will suddenly feel that his concentration has become better and that he can better listen to himself, and he will no longer feel so chaotic inside, to the point that he can concentrate and focus in his thoughts on something.

In Summary

In summary, the first step is to have a few minutes a day of quiet time, of disconnecting from all the noise in the world. This is necessary for any person, not just a person who has problems with concentration. This is advice that can help most people. [For men,] there is always a danger that practicing this will lead to wasting time from Torah study, and this is something to be concerned about. But in spite of this issue, most people still need this quiet time every day, in order to learn how to become calm and relaxed inside themselves.

The second step is that when a person feels the desire to do something, he should try to do it. If he is doubtful about if he can do it or not, he should move in a different way, such as by walking out of his *daled amos* (four cubits), or by doing something else, etc. The point is that he should not stifle the need for movement.

Slowly as he gets used to this, he will become freed from the heaviness of earth-of-earth that has shackled him in place, and his "earth-of-earth" will become refined and rectified. This will also lead to an improvement with concentration, because when earth-of-earth becomes refined and corrected, it aids in focus and concentration, as explained earlier.

We have explained this only briefly, and it takes months of work of practice, in order to feel changes. But when one does feel the changes, it will give a total overhaul to one's life. It will feel to a person like a redemption taking place inside himself, for he has previously been tied down in place, and now he is setting himself free from all of those inner confines.

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