

The Concentration Crisis and What to Do about It

The Problem:

Our ability to concentrate is being shredded by competing demands from electronic devices for our attention. Remember the Pixar animated movie, “UP” with the talking dog? At one point, the dog is listening intently to the old man when suddenly the dog shouts, “Squirrel!” swinging his head around, instantly re-focused on the prospect of chasing a squirrel.

We are the dog and the “squirrel” is our email, our phone, our Facebook page, our Twitter feed.

Do you believe that you’re not distracted when your email or phone “dings” because you don’t stop to look at them? The fact is, however, that the “ding” pulls your brain’s attention away from what you were working on, and it takes some time to refocus: “Now, where was I?” When you succeed in bringing your focus back, the brilliant idea you had just before the “ding” may be lost. Just... gone.

Driven to Distraction

The explosive growth of technology in the last 10-15 years has trained our brains in how to be distracted. Our brains are now much better at responding to distractions than they are at bringing our attention back to the task at hand. Giving a project or a problem the attention it needs is increasingly hard to do while we are bombarded with a never-ending stream of “dings” and “beeps.”

The Cost:

According to BASEX research, as reported in Fast Company magazine, interruptions cost U.S. businesses \$588 billion a year. That can translate to as much as half of your daily productive time.

Interruptions can result in:

- **Missed Deadlines**

Time spent responding to emails is time *not* spent on developing a presentation or project. Trying to make up for that lost time can result in:

- **Poor Quality Work**

Trying to hurry your way through a project that requires you to think deeply means missing better ideas and solutions. (As I was writing this, my phone “beeped” and, proving my own point, I stopped to read the text message. It turned out that it did not require immediate action on my part. And, yes, it took me an extra moment or two to regroup. Note to self: mute the phone when I am trying to concentrate.)

- **Procrastination**

Procrastination often begins with an interruption that tempts you away mentally, if not physically. Emails, tweets and texts are tempting because of the possibility they suggest of something good. They are like wrapped birthday gifts when you were a kid. And, just like when you were a kid, most often their content is more like a pair of socks than a pony.

On the way back to the task at hand, you notice some little chore that would take no time at all to finish off. “I’ll feel better getting something done.” So, you tackle the little chore that often takes longer than you thought it would. Then you notice that it’s getting close to lunch time. “Might as well take an early lunch and then come back and really hit that project.”

You see where this is going. A single “ding” from your email and the next thing you know you’re having lunch. The consequences of the failure to pull yourself back on task sneak up on you.

The Solution: Train Your Brain

A hundred years ago the average person didn’t even think about spending time and energy training his body. The very idea would have seemed ridiculous. Today, working regularly is not just normal; we’re urged to do it for our health.

Like physical training a hundred years ago, brain training today is an idea that may sound weird at first, but the idea is gaining traction. And for the same reason that physical training became accepted: body or brain, stronger is better.

Strengthening your ability to concentrate and re-focus your attention is like strengthening your muscles; it's a matter of practice. Here is a three-step process for *strengthening* your ability to get back on task quickly and with minimal loss of productivity.

1. Remove Potential Distractions

Remove as many distractions as possible. Turn off electronic alerts. Make a sign to hang on the entrance to your cubicle or work space that says something like, "Please do not disturb. I'll be available at [enter a time.]" Then tell yourself, "It's time to concentrate now."

2. Learn to Recognize Distracting Thoughts as Soon as They Break Your Concentration

Your brain is a thought-generating machine, and it can interfere with your efforts to concentrate by continuing to generate random thoughts. This is good news as long as the thoughts are relevant to the task you're working on. It's bad news if they are about lunch or plans for the weekend.

When an unrelated thought or idea threatens to break your concentration, simply label it (to yourself): "Interesting, but not right now. I'll get back to that later." Then, re-focus on the subject of your concentration.

3. Focus on Learning to Re-Focus Your Attention

This is the money shot. Re-focusing your attention is the ability you want to strengthen. And, thanks to your frenetic, thought-generating brain that bombards you with random thoughts, you will have a lot of opportunity to practice re-focusing.

The One Minute Practice

Here's a special practice technique that only takes a minute (at a time)! Practicing this technique trains your brain in the way that increasing the reps at the gym, or adding five minutes to your daily walk, trains your muscles. Here's how it works:

1. Shut your eyes or, if you prefer, pick a point in the lower part of your visual field and go into soft focus.
2. Focus on your breath by labeling (silently) your breathing with "In" on the inhale and "Out" on the exhale. Don't try to control your breath. Just observe it and label it. After a few seconds, a thought will hijack your attention. This is totally normal and will happen with frustrating frequency. Simply label it, "A thought," and re-focus your

attention on your breath: “In” on the inhale and “Out” on the exhale. As soon as the next thought interrupts, as it will, pull your attention back to your breath. Every time your concentration on your breathing is interrupted, recognize it and immediately re-focus on your breathing.

3. Do this for one minute.

The more you practice this technique, the better you will become at concentrating for longer periods of time. Remember, if you have trouble lifting a 15 pound weight more than twice, that’s your untrained arm. If you have trouble re-focusing after a distraction, that’s your untrained brain.

This simple one-minute technique trains your brain to regain concentration.

Some Final Tips:

- Make it a goal to do a One-Minute Practice at least once a day.
- Before you start your practice, set a timer for one minute. (Don’t use your phone’s timer; you want your phone in silent mode.) This keeps you from being distracted by wondering how much time is left.
- Start with one minute but, as you continue your practice, you may want to move to two minutes or more. The more you practice, the better at refocusing you become.
- Don’t put your One-Minute practice on your “to-do” list. Your One-Minute practice should be a time-out from your “to-do” list, not just one-more-thing-to-do.

We live in a world full of distractions and interruptions that rob us of the joy of productivity. While we can reduce their number and frequency, we can never do away with them completely. With daily practice, however, we can train ourselves to concentrate better and get back on task more quickly.

“Learn to concentrate, to give all your attention to the thing at hand, and then be able to put it aside and go on to the next thing without confusion.” – Eleanor Roosevelt