

How to Focus Like It's 1990

Smartphones, pings and Insta-everything have shortened our attention spans. Get some old-school concentration back with these tips.

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6 MIN READ

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In 2004, Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, watched knowledge workers go about a typical day at the office. Using a stopwatch, she noted every time they switched tasks on their computer, moving from a spreadsheet to an email to a web page to a different web page and back to the spreadsheet. She found that people averaged just two and a half minutes on a given task before switching.

When Dr. Mark repeated the experiment in 2012, the average time office workers spent on a task had dropped to 75 seconds. And it has continued to drop from there.

“Our attention spans while on our computers and smartphones have become short — crazily short — as we now spend about 47 seconds on any screen on average,” Dr. Mark wrote in her new book, “Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity.”

Anyone who’s tried to study for an exam, write a report or read a book knows how hard it is to concentrate for significant chunks of time. Typically, digital devices are to blame for the disruption. The internet is omniscient, our phones omnipotent, and together they demand and destroy our concentration. Even when we really try to focus on a task, we often find we can’t, our eyes glazing over and our thoughts drifting.

Fortunately, there are ways to wrest back control of your attention. They don’t require swearing off technology altogether, but you do need some self-restraint and a few well-timed alarms.

First, understand what’s distracting you.

Notifications are one major source of distraction — those pings and dings pull you out of your work and prompt you to check your texts, email or Slack. Because our brains are evolutionarily designed to pay attention to novelty, these alerts are almost impossible to ignore. And if you try to, you’ll likely find your anxiety mounting.

In one diabolical study, psychologists brought heavy and moderate smartphone users into the lab under the auspices of a different experiment. They hooked the participants up to skin conductance monitors, which measure levels of arousal, and took away their phones, telling them that they interfered with the research equipment. Then the researchers texted the participants multiple times; the phones were close enough to hear but too far away to check.

When their phones buzzed, the participants’ arousal levels spiked. “They felt like they needed to answer that text or at least see who it was from, and they couldn’t,” said Larry Rosen, a professor emeritus of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills and a co-author on the study. “And that gave them anxiety.”

Turning off notifications is a good way to reduce distractions — indeed, it’s a classic tip — but it won’t completely solve the problem. In her research on office workers, Dr. Mark found that external distractions accounted for only half of the interruptions in focus. The other half were prompted by an internal motivation to switch tasks. Most interesting, Dr. Mark observed that when the number of external interruptions waned, the number of self-interruptions rose.

“We get into this pattern of having short attention spans,” she said. “And if we’re not being interrupted by something external to us, then we switch gears and begin to interrupt ourselves.”

Dr. Rosen hypothesizes that these urges to self-distract are caused by stress. Research shows that heavier smartphone use is correlated with higher levels of cortisol and other markers of stress. Rising anxiety could become an internal signal to look at your texts or Twitter, even without a chime or vibration. When there are no notifications, Dr. Rosen said, people “get a strong internal sign from their anxiety system that says, ‘Oh, my gosh, I have to check in!’ And so they do.”

According to Dr. Mark, we also grab our phones because we need a break. Simply put, our brains aren't capable of focusing for long periods of time. Sustaining attention and resisting distractions uses up cognitive resources, and we need to replenish them periodically to regain focus. There's no equation to calculate the number of breaks you need per day, but Dr. Mark said that it's normal for focus to ebb and flow. "We can't be expected to hold sustained attention for a long period of time, in the same way a person can't lift weights all day," she said.

While a walk around the block or 10 minutes of meditation would likely be more rejuvenating, there's nothing inherently wrong with scrolling on social media or playing a repetitive game like Candy Crush to recharge. The problem arises when the breaks become longer or more frequent than you intended. This is where a timer and self-control come in.

Take a timed tech break.

To increase your attention span, Dr. Rosen recommended employing what he calls a "tech break." Before you have to focus on a task, take one or two minutes to open all your favorite apps. Then set a timer for 15 minutes, silence your phone, turn it face down and set it to the side. When the timer goes off, you get another one or two minutes to check your phone — a tech break. Repeat this cycle three or four times before taking a longer break from your work. (Fans of the Pomodoro Technique will recognize this structure.)

The goal is to gradually increase the time between your tech breaks, building up to 20-, 30- and even 45-minute stretches. Dr. Rosen said you'll know you're ready to focus for longer periods when the timer goes off and you want to stay on task instead of reaching for your device.

Tech breaks aren't only for work settings; you can use them any time you want to be present in the moment. Dr. Rosen advised implementing them during dinner, particularly if you have frequent conflicts with teens over cellphone use at the table.

Another strategy Dr. Mark recommended is to increase your self-awareness about your technology use. When you have an urge to open Instagram, for example, ask yourself why: Do you feel exhausted and need a break? Will this help restore you? If so, go for it. After a few minutes, check in again and ask if the app is still giving you value. If not, it's time to get back to work.

Neither Dr. Mark nor Dr. Rosen are fans of trying to go cold turkey by declaring a phone-free day or using software to block certain websites. People inevitably return to their old habits when they have access again, and they don't improve their self control.

Try deep reading (on paper).

Tech breaks and self-awareness can help you control the urge to jump from screen to screen, but Maryanne Wolf, a professor-in-residence at the University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, said that even when we're reading just one screen, we aren't engaging with it deeply. That's because screens are designed to make us read very quickly — to scan, skim and scroll. As a result, we don't give the text our full attention and are more apt to miss information.

"The nature of a screen, if you just think about it, is to constantly refresh the information," Dr. Wolf said. "There is a psychological mind-set to go from the start to the finish as quickly as possible."

Traditionally, our brains tended to read print materials more slowly, in part because we were more likely to go back and double-check what we just read. That extra time lent itself to sophisticated mental processes like critical analysis, inference, deduction and empathy.

Unfortunately, simply printing out an article or opting for a paperback book instead of your Kindle won't guarantee that you suddenly become a more engaged reader. Our brains adapt to read in the style of the medium we use most often, and chances are you spend a lot more time reading on a screen than you do on paper. As a result, Dr. Wolf said, you likely now read in print the way you read on a screen.

"Many people have lost the ability to really immerse themselves," she said. "We have developed a cognitive impatience about our reading."

To get back in the practice of what Dr. Wolf calls "deep reading," try to dedicate at least 20 minutes a day to reading a physical book, combined with Dr. Mark and Dr. Rosen's tips to fight distraction. Start with something you want to read for pleasure, set an alarm for 20 minutes, put your phone on silent, and make yourself read slowly and deliberately. Don't get frustrated if you're not absorbed right away — when Dr. Wolf tried this experiment on herself, it took her two weeks before she was able to fully engage with and enjoy what she was reading.

Even if you're not an avid reader, the exercise can help you regain the ability to focus deeply on what you're doing. "There's a lot of power in being able to feel that you can control your attention," Dr. Mark said. "You're in control of your behavior."