

Stop Letting Modern Distractions Steal Your Attention

Making yourself inaccessible from time to time is essential to boosting your focus.

By **Anna Goldfarb**

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When David Rock needs to immerse himself in his work, he goes offline. Being reachable, he knows, will tank his productivity.

In fact, Dr. Rock, the C.E.O. of The Neuroleadership Institute and author of “Your Brain at Work,” was able to write four books during several flights to and from Australia. He credits the long stretches of uninterrupted time with granting him the ability to fully concentrate on assembling those book drafts.

Sure, not everyone can hop a 13-hour flight to Australia when they need to finish a project. But the lesson Dr. Rock learned is applicable regardless: Making ourselves inaccessible from time to time is essential to boosting our focus. A 2017 survey from the American Psychological Association found that being constantly and permanently reachable on an electronic device — checking work emails on your day off; continuously cycling through social media feeds; responding to text messages at all hours — is associated with higher stress levels.

This phenomenon of always being reachable is what Linda Stone, a former Apple and Microsoft executive, calls continuous partial attention. Unlike multitasking — juggling activities of similar importance that don’t require too much cognitive processing — C.P.A. is a state of alertness during which you’re motivated by the desire not to miss out on anything.

Ms. Stone, who gives lectures and consults on issues relating to technology and attention, describes C.P.A. as an “always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis.” Being distractible — allowing incessant beeps, flashes and trills to shatter any semblance of concentration — contributes to a strained lifestyle, she said. Half-paying attention to everything means you’re not able to fully pay attention to anything.

This kind of task switching comes with a cost. It's called attention residue, a term established by Sophie Leroy, a professor at the Bothell School of Business at the University of Washington. In a 2009 study, Dr. Leroy found that if people transition their attention away from an unfinished task, their subsequent task performance will suffer. For example, if you interrupt writing an email to reply to a text message, it will take time to refocus when you turn your attention back to finishing your email. That little bit of time of adjusting your focus — the residue — compounds throughout the day. As we fragment our attention, fatigue and stress increases, which negatively affects performance.

“You can't positively adapt to stress if you're consistently run down,” said Paula Davis-Laack, a stress and resilience expert. “We know that chronic stress is linked to higher rates of errors, safety issues, lack of concentration, working memory problems, and inhibits effective problem-solving and kills attention. For many people, these are critical tools to effectively do their jobs, and rates of errors and safety issues impact a wide range of industries where precision is critical.”

Besides compromising your ability to be an effective worker, “being available to everyone at all times is exhausting,” said Catherine Price, author of “How to Break Up With Your Phone” and the founder of Screen/Life Balance, a movement dedicated to helping people create a healthier balance between their online and offline lives. “We need to intentionally make ourselves unavailable to preserve our own sanity.”

Here's what you can expect when you make yourself less accessible, put reasonable boundaries in place and reclaim your time.

You'll be calmer

Ms. Price suggests trying to be unreachable for short periods of time, but she cautions you might feel twitchy and anxious at first.

“Those are withdrawal symptoms,” she said. “Stick with it, and within a surprisingly short amount of time, the anxiety is likely to shift to a pleasant sense of calm.”

She doesn't think or expect people to ditch their phones entirely — “that would be very impractical and unrealistic” — but she does recommend experimenting with taking a 24-hour break once in a while. Yes, she emphasizes, it is possible to do. It just requires some advance planning.

At the very least, she said, start leaving your phone behind during certain periods of the day, and perhaps establishing no-phone zones in your house or workplace. Treat it as an experiment: Try things and see what makes you feel good, she said.

You'll be more creative

A still mind is fertile ground for creative thoughts. Being unstimulated gives the brain a chance to explore ideas and create new connections that can break through into our conscious awareness, Dr. Rock explained. That's why we tend to get so many good ideas as we wake up or take a shower — the brain is usually a blank slate while sudsing up.

“Our ‘Aha moments’ are literally quiet brain signals,” said Dr. Rock. To facilitate more flashes of inspiration, make space for these serene moments. Being “always on” and jam-packing your schedule with demanding cognitive tasks impedes the number of big ideas you'll be able to create. Those bright, bold ideas are the ones that motivate us and can feel the most rewarding.

If you want to think deeply or have any sort of creative insight, you must give your brain breathing room, Ms. Price added. It's not wise to always be in “intake mode,” which is what can happen when mindlessly scrolling through emails and social media feeds. To form long-term memories, you need to create new pathways in the brain, a process easily disrupted by distraction, Ms. Price said. Sadly, our smartphones are built to distract us.

You'll be more productive

Ms. Davis-Laack said she wishes workplaces were more accepting of this need to unplug occasionally.

“Working to the extreme is often seen as a badge of honor at work and is highly rewarded,” she said. “Organizations bear a lot of the burden to examine values, process and cultural issues generally that support the inability to disconnect, recharge and recover.”

“We have literally become addicted to doing stuff all the time, and think that downtime is laziness or somehow a missed opportunity to get ahead,” Ms. Davis-Laack said. “Organizations reward this, so it's reinforced.” Unfortunately, it's up to us individually to put those boundaries in place.

For optimal productivity, Dr. Rock suggests focusing intensely for around 45 minutes and then indulging in a 15-minute break. The brain is not a muscle, he said, but it does need to rest and replenish like a muscle does.

He also recommends taking a brief nap in the afternoon, which has tremendous cognitive benefits.

“You wouldn't expect someone to do a physical task like chop wood for hours on end with no break,” he said. “It's similar with the brain.”