

The lost art of concentration: being distracted in a digital world

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It is difficult to imagine life before our personal and professional worlds were so dominated and “switched on” via smartphones and the other devices that make us accessible and, crucially, so easily distractible and interruptible every second of the day. This constant fragmentation of our time and concentration has become the new normal, to which we have adapted with ease, but there is a downside: more and more experts are telling us that these interruptions and distractions have eroded our ability to concentrate.

We have known for a long time that repeated interruptions affect concentration. In 2005, research carried out by Dr Glenn Wilson at London’s Institute of Psychiatry found that persistent interruptions and distractions at work had a profound effect. Those distracted by emails and phone calls saw a 10-point fall in their IQ, twice that found in studies on the impact of smoking marijuana. More than half of the 1,100 participants said they always responded to an email immediately or as soon as possible, while 21% admitted they would interrupt a meeting to do so. Constant interruptions can have the same effect as the loss of a night’s sleep.

Nicholas Carr picked up on this again in an article in the Atlantic in 2008, before going on to publish his book *The Shallows* two years later. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy,” he wrote. “My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case any more. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.”

The impact of interruptions on individual productivity can also be catastrophic. In 2002, it was reported that, on average, we experience an interruption every eight minutes or about seven or eight per hour. In an eight-hour day, that is about 60 interruptions. The average interruption takes about five minutes, so that is about five hours out of eight. And if it takes around 15 minutes to resume the interrupted activity at a good level of concentration, this means that we are never concentrating very well.

In August 2018, research from the UK’s telecoms regulator, Ofcom, reported that people check their smartphones on average every 12 minutes during their waking hours, with 71% saying they never turn their phone off and 40% saying they check them within five minutes of waking. Both Facebook and Instagram announced they were developing new tools designed to limit usage in response to claims that excessive social media use can have a negative impact on mental health.

Continuous partial attention – or CPA – was a phrase coined by the ex-Apple and Microsoft consultant Linda Stone. By adopting an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behaviour, we exist in a constant state of alertness that scans the world but never really gives our full attention to anything. In the short

term, we adapt well to these demands, but in the long term the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol create a physiological hyper-alert state that is always scanning for stimuli, provoking a sense of addiction temporarily assuaged by checking in.

Myth of multitasking

With our heavy use of digital media, it could be said that we have taken multitasking to new heights, but we're not actually multitasking; rather, we are switching rapidly between different activities. Adrenaline and cortisol are designed to support us through bursts of intense activity, but in the long term cortisol can knock out the feel-good hormones serotonin and dopamine in the brain, which help us feel calm and happy, affecting our sleep and heart rate and making us feel jittery.

It would seem then that this physiological adaptation, fostered by our behaviour, is a predominant reason for the poor concentration so many people report. The fact that we are the cause of this is, paradoxically, good news since it hands back to us the potential to change our behaviour and reclaim the brain function and cognitive health that's been disrupted by our digitally enhanced lives. And this may even be more important than just improving our levels of concentration. Constant, high levels of circulating stress hormones have an inflammatory and detrimental affect on brain cells, suggests the psychiatrist Edward Bullmore, who has written about the link between inflammation and depression in his latest book, *The Inflamed Mind*. Depression, along with anxiety, is a known factor in knocking out concentration.

Put simply, better concentration makes life easier and less stressful and we will be more productive. To make this change means reflecting on what we are doing to sabotage personal concentration, and then implementing steps towards behavioural change that will improve our chances of concentrating better. This means deliberately reducing distractions and being more self-disciplined about our use of social media, which are increasingly urgent for the sake of our cognitive and mental health.

It takes about three weeks for a repeating behaviour to form a habit, says Jeremy Dean, a psychologist and the author of *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*. Getting into a new habit will not happen overnight and adaptation can be incremental. Start by switching off smartphone alerts, or taking social media apps off your phone, then switching off the device for increasingly long periods.

Practise concentration by finding things to do that specifically engage you for a period of time to the exclusion of everything else. What is noticeable is that you cannot just go from a state of distraction to one of concentration, in the same way that most of us cannot fall asleep the minute our head hits the pillow. It takes a bit of time and, with practice, becomes easier to accomplish.

The 'five more' rule

This is a simple way of learning to concentrate better. It goes like this: whenever you feel like quitting – just do five more – five more minutes, five more exercises, five more pages – which will extend your focus. The rule pushes you just beyond the point of frustration and helps build mental concentration. It's a form of training as well as being a way of getting something accomplished.

Sitting still would seem an easy thing to achieve. But it is harder than it sounds. It is akin to meditation, which can be a useful way to improve concentration. In this case, however, just get in to a comfortable, supported position and sit still and do nothing for five minutes. Use it as a pause between activities. Of course, if you already practise meditation, combine this with breathing for a quick “time out”.

Meditation and focus

Switching off from both external and internal distractions does not come easily. Learning how to be more mindful, practising mindfulness or meditation, can all help facilitate greater concentration, not least because feeling calmer restores equilibrium and focus.

Most of us breathe poorly: we tend to over-breathe, taking three or four breaths using only the upper part of our lung capacity, when one good breath using the lungs more completely would serve us better. This shallow breathing is very tiring, not only because we expend unnecessary muscular energy, but because we reduce our oxygen intake per breath.

In its extreme form, over-breathing becomes hyperventilation, which can trigger panic attacks. In all mindfulness or meditation practice, breathing is key. So it's wise to learn good techniques first. A daily practice, starting with 10 minutes and building on it, means that the ability to take some restorative “time out” will also be available to you:

- Lie comfortably on the floor, knees bent, chin tucked in – what Alexander Technique teachers call the “constructive rest position” – or sit upright in a chair, legs uncrossed, feet flat on the floor.
- Consciously relax your neck and drop your shoulders, rest your arms by your sides with your palms turned upwards.
- Breathe long and gently through your nose, into your belly until you see it gently rise, for a slow count of five.
- Pause, and hold that breath for a count of five, then gently exhale through your mouth for another count of five.
- While doing this, try to clear your mind of all other thoughts, or if this is difficult close your eyes and visualise a pebble dropping into a pool of water and gently sinking down.
- Repeat this breathing cycle 10 times; then see how your regular breathing adjusts.
- You can also use this breathing technique at any time you feel tense or stressed, or as the basis of any meditation.

We all need to take time out, so set a timer to signal a break, or use an app such as Calm.com. Or you can just play a favourite music track, knowing that it will give you a set amount of time in which to press pause and do nothing.

Another effective technique for boosting concentration is counting backwards. Counting backwards in sevens from 1,000 might sound like an exercise in exasperation, but it does require you to concentrate very hard: try it. It requires persistence and the use of different skills, which for some may include visualising the numbers as you count. Whatever it takes, keep at it for long enough to completely focus and you'll also have the added bonus of finding that you have, temporarily, cleared your head of everything else for a few minutes.

Similarly, spelling words backwards is a good way to focus: start with words that are easy: dog, box, cup, and then build up to longer words – including nouns and more abstract words – such as cushion, blonde, effort, number – increasing the length and complexity of the word. Again, this is an exercise that can be built on.

Another way to focus is to sit in a comfortable position and find a spot on the wall to stare at. This works best when you have no conscious association with it to distract you – so, a black spot about two inches in diameter at eye level works well. Focus all your attention on this for around three minutes to start with (you can set a timer if this helps) and let any thoughts that arise drift away, constantly returning your focus to the spot.

Anyone familiar with meditation will recognise this technique. If it helps to notice your breath, slow and steady this too, but always make your visual focus on the spot the priority. Practiced regularly, this can become so familiar it creates a resource on which to draw, enabling you to consciously refocus at will, even without the visual prompt.

Watching the clock

An old-fashioned clock face with hands and a second hand is needed for this. Starting with the second hand at the 12, focus intently on its progress around the clock face without allowing any distracting thoughts to intervene. Every time your concentration is interrupted by a stray thought, wait until the second hand is at the 12 again, and start again. It's harder than it sounds and can feel very frustrating initially, but once the ability is learnt it's easy to access again and again, whenever you need to create a more concentrated state of mind.

We access so much information through what we see, but often we are not particularly observant about what we are looking at, leaving us with just an impression or feeling about what we've seen. In an effort to improve concentration skills, it's worth considering how looking at and then visualising something, can reinforce concentration. Start by paying more attention, whether this is looking at a picture in an art gallery, or taking a bus ride, or just enjoying the scenery from a window. You don't have to commit an exact graphic image to memory, but engage with it, notice details, reflect on it and, within a short time, you will be able to close your eyes and visualise it. There is no right or wrong way to do this, it's just an opportunity to practise focus and improve concentration.

There's a huge difference between hearing and listening. Learning to listen well starts quite self-consciously but will also become a useful habit. You can use music to practise this, the length of a track giving you between three to five minutes (or longer) on which to focus. Really listen to the nuances of

the music, its notes, cadences, instruments used, lyrics. Music is often just a background noise but real, complicated musical notation can be more than just pleasurable, it can be a real boon to helping relearn concentration skills.

Physical exercise

For any extended period of exercise – whether it be yoga, playing a team sport or dancing – the engagement of the brain with the body is also an exercise in concentration. Regular exercise also activates the body and this is beneficial for the brain.

A Dutch study of schoolchildren published in the *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* in 2016 showed that interspersing lessons with a 20-minute stretch of aerobic exercise measurably improved attention spans in the children that participated. Another 2014 study from the American Academy of Paediatrics, on the benefits of exercise in 7 to 9-year-olds, not only found that the children's physical health improved as they got fitter, but also their brain function, cognitive performance and executive control.

Sleep

Poor sleep and being chronically under-slept affects concentration, while also reinforcing those stress hormones to compensate, making it a bit of a vicious circle. Improving sleep cannot happen overnight, particularly if it is a chronic problem, but taking measures to improve this will yield results over a period of weeks, rather than days.

One place to start is clearing your bedroom of TVs, computers and other technology. Although any type of light can inhibit sleep, research has shown that light towards the blue end of the spectrum is especially effective at keeping you awake because it stimulates the retina in the eye and inhibits the secretion of melatonin from the pineal gland in the brain.

Computer screens, tablets, smartphones, flat-screen TVs and LED lighting all emit large amounts of blue light, and it is important to avoid these before trying to sleep. Around 80% of people routinely use these devices running up to bedtime, and among 18 to 24-year-olds this figure increases to 91%, according to research carried out by Prof Richard Wiseman.

Amber-tinted glasses can cut out glare, and it is also possible to fit screens with commercially produced blue-light blocking filters. Another solution, of course, is to avoid all electronic devices before bed in order to help avoid insomnia and improve sleep.

Reading for pleasure

One thing that many people who feel they have lost the ability to concentrate mention is that reading a book for pleasure no longer works for them. We have got so used to skim reading for fast access to information that the demand of a more sophisticated vocabulary, a complex plot structure or a novel's length can be difficult to engage with. Like anything, single-minded attention may need relearning in order to enjoy reading for pleasure again, but close reading in itself can be a route to better

concentration. To help that, read from an actual book, not a screen: screens are too reminiscent of skim reading and just turning pages will slow your pace. Read for long enough to engage your interest, at least 30 minutes: engagement in content takes time, but will help you read for longer.

Digital apps

Somewhat ironically, digital apps may have their place in monitoring, managing or restricting digital time, but bear in mind that they still keep you connected to digital devices. Better perhaps to wean yourself away from excessive digital use by doing something alternative: read a book, go to a movie (where turning off phones is required), take a walk, eat a meal without checking ... basically restore some sort of self-discipline through the benefit of alternate activities.

But if you must turn to a digital solution to solve a digital problem, try these: track usage with Moment; access Facebook limiter; go Cold Turkey; try Stay On Task; use the App detox blocker; or break phone addiction with Space.