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# Deep Work: Dealing With Distractions in a Distracting World

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If you're anything like me, there are distractions all around you. From the time I wake up in the morning until my head hits the pillow at night, if I'm not careful, my concentration is pulled in one direction after another. Recently, I concluded that this was a problem for me not because of the distractions, but because I was choosing to give them my attention.

Author Cal Newport defines the term *deep work* as “professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit.” This is the state we want to achieve, in order to be at our best during the workday. Whether we are at home or at leisure, we want to enjoy our rest and relaxation and to be as present as possible

with our families and friends. Allowing our attention to be diverted by constant distractions makes it harder to accomplish this. Newport's book, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*,<sup>1</sup> presents several tips that have helped me focus more deeply at work and to be more present at home. If you're interested in avoiding distractions in a distracting world, and increasing your ability to focus deeply and intently, here are some ideas to try.

- **Stop multitasking.** Studies show that people who perform a task and then move to another task immediately without finishing the initial task have a harder time concentrating on the new task. Researcher Sophie Leroy refers to this lingering distraction as “attention residue.” The more tasks that you leave incomplete before moving to the next, the greater the attention residue you experience, and the worse your performance on future tasks will be. Multitasking is an activity that causes a large amount of attention residue, and it can also be habit forming. Professor Clifford Nass, who has studied the effect of multitasking on the brain,<sup>2</sup> describes people who multitask as chronically distracted. One way to stop this habit is to apply the rule that one distraction equals many. Something I try to do is to ignore emails, texts, phone calls and instant messages when I am trying to concentrate deeply on something. Otherwise, once I let that first distraction grab my attention, I may never get back to the original task at hand.



- **Find ways to say “no.”** Whether you are saying “no” to a person or to an activity, the less you allow yourself to get drawn in by unintended distractions, the better you can concentrate and accomplish your tasks. Author Travis Bradberry writes that saying “no” to a new commitment honors your existing commitments and gives you the opportunity to successfully fulfill them.<sup>3</sup> One thing I did recently was to turn off almost all notifications on my phone. I used to get notifications from social networking sites, work emails, personal emails and other applications throughout the day. When I got a new Smartwatch, it started buzzing at me every time my phone buzzed, giving me an unwelcome double shot of distraction. When I turned off almost all these notifications, it drastically decreased the number of times per day that these devices can grab my attention.
- **Spend time in nature.** Researchers Rachel and Steven Kaplan studied the effect that spending time in nature has on one’s ability to concentrate, and they named that effect attention restoration theory. Studies have shown that when research participants spend time walking in nature as opposed to walking in a busy city, they concentrate better.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is that spending time navigating the highly distracting city environment creates “attention fatigue.” The more your environment pulls at your attention, the less you can concentrate deeply when you need to. I try to accomplish attention restoration by running—an activity where I don’t have to expend a high amount of mental energy—which allows my mind to take a nice break and restore my ability to concentrate.
- **Tune out.** In a series of trials by social psychologist Jan “AP” Dijksterhuis, participants who had been given a complex problem and then worked on something else outperformed those who actively tried to solve the problem. This led Dijksterhuis to develop unconscious thought theory (UTT).<sup>5</sup> The unconscious mind is more effective at problem solving than the conscious mind. Newport argues that one of the best ways to activate your unconscious mind is to tune out of your work as soon as you leave the office. Engage in a work shutdown: don’t check emails and don’t even think about work after normal work hours. This will give your conscious mind a much-needed break and engage your unconscious mind, diversifying your mental efforts. “Trying to squeeze a little more work out of your evenings,” writes Newport, “might reduce your effectiveness the next day enough that you end up getting less done than if you had instead respected a shutdown.”
- **Set aside time for deep work.** Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi popularized the term *flow* in his 1990 book of the same title.<sup>6</sup> The concept is that it takes some

time—usually about 15 minutes—to achieve a state of deep concentration. This is time when you must remain focused on the task at hand. When pushing hard to get better at something, scientists believe that myelin grows around the fatty tissue in your brain that helps brain cells to fire faster and cleaner. This is called “deliberate practice,” a term coined by psychologist Anders Ericsson. Specifically setting aside time each day for deliberate practice will improve one’s ability to concentrate and to return to the same state of deep flow in each future attempt. The key is to make sure to schedule the time consistently.

Newport says that the ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at the same time as it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. Some of these tips have helped me refine my ability to concentrate and to avoid distractions during the day. In addition—and more important—studies show that the more deeply we can focus on activities that we enjoy, the happier we are. Author Winifred Gallagher summarized this phenomenon as “who you are, what you think, feel and do, what you love, is the sum of what you focus on.” Try putting some of these tips into practice, and most important, be aware of where, when and how you focus most deeply on tasks. This will help you make changes and improve the quality of your own concentration. For in the end, the way that we choose to focus our attention can determine the quality of the lives that we lead. As Gallagher summarized about the effect of deep work on the quality of her own life, “I’ll live the focused life, because it’s the best kind there is.” ■



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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Newport, Cal. 2016. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- 2 Bates, Sophie. 2018. A Decade of Data Reveals That Heavy Multitaskers Have Reduced Memory, Stanford Psychologist Says. *Stanford News*. October 25, <https://news.stanford.edu/2018/10/25/decade-data-reveals-heavy-multitaskers-reduced-memory-psychologist-says/>.
- 3 Bradberry, Travis. 2017. Six Things You Must Quit Doing Now if You Want to Be More Successful. *Inc.com*, April 6, <https://www.inc.com/travis-bradberry/6-things-you-must-quit-doing-now-if-you-want-to-be-more-successful.html>.
- 4 Heath, Oliver. 2016. A Focus on Nature: The Attention Restoration Theory. *Interface*. January 21, <https://blog.interface.com/the-attention-restoration-theory/>.
- 5 Dijksterhuis, Ap, and Nordgren, Loran F. 2006. A Theory of Unconscious Thought. *Sage Journals*. June 1, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00007.x>.
- 6 Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.