

Improving Focus and Productivity in a Crazy World

Let's face it – our lives can be hectic, even crazy. Our to-do lists are long, and the distractions around us can be overwhelming. Even if we just had to get our work and our personal tasks done, we can still feel like it's too much. Then we add countless interruptions from technology, minor “emergencies” that seem to always pop up, and the like, and it can easily get to be overpowering. Suddenly, even the most organized and ordered among us feel like we're not getting anything done.

At the very least we might feel our productivity slipping away, and that has an impact on our well-being and on our sense of accomplishment through the day. The good news is that no matter how frustrated you might feel, you are certainly not alone. We all have problems focusing, and strategies exist to help manage that and become more effective at everything we do. All it takes is a little commitment to create new habits to overcome this very natural cycle.

How the Mind Works

Contrary to popular belief, the human brain really isn't a very good multitasker. In fact, it can't multitask at all. Instead – and this was very important to our survival and evolution – we switch between tasks very rapidly, allowing us to simulate multitasking as though we are accomplishing many things at once.

The difference is subtle. Functionally how rapidly we can switch between tasks and retain the status of the ones we temporarily leave behind marks the difference as to how effective we can promote practical multitasking. While the brain may be processing things sequentially at astonishing speeds, the fact is to an outside observer we are multitasking because things are getting done perceptibly at the same time. This is important, especially in many jobs, but everyone has their own comfort levels with it.

Multitasking, Focus, and Perception

With that neurologist's explanation behind us, we're going to keep calling it multitasking because we aren't doctors or scientists. What is important about knowing how the mind works however, is that we understand that how we process information and tasks is not equal among individuals. Some people are very comfortable with it, while others find themselves stressed out and unable to cope with the demands. It isn't a function of intelligence as much as it is a function of personality. We're all wired a little differently, with some people thriving with their focus spread out across multiple tasks. Others are more comfortable targeting fewer things at once, ensuring that the details are handled and that everything is completed to their satisfaction. Both are valid.



To be clear: *we all lose focus when we multitask*. The more tasks you place on yourself, the greater the risk you run of losing pieces and parts of the other things you are working on. Learning to manage focus includes *both* improving your personal capacity to retain that information and data and discerning your own comfort in juggling many things at once.

Tips to Improve Focus

Our purpose here is to improve your focus. An outcome of that should be an improved ability to handle multiple tasks at once throughout your day, making you more productive and effective at what you do. Some tips to get you started:

- 1) **Sleep** – Getting on a regular and effective sleep pattern is critical to improving cognitive performance and focus. It is recommended that adults get 7-8 hours of “uninterrupted” sleep per 24-hour period, and the best way to achieve that is to be disciplined about start and end times, watching what you eat and drink before you go to bed, and eliminating distractions when you do. Turn that TV off.
- 2) **Exercise** – Exercise releases endorphins and other brain chemicals that improve focus and retention. Regular exercise can sustain the effects, as well as improving your mood so that you are better positioned to handle the inevitable stress that comes from a hectic schedule.
- 3) **Drink water** – Studies show that even mild dehydration can impair cognitive ability - sometimes, even before you think you are thirsty. Hydration also provides other health benefits that should not be ignored.
- 4) **Meditate** – or find calmness before you start tasks. This isn’t about chanting, it is about preparing your mind for the day ahead. Meditation Improves concentration and practicing this can have a tremendous impact on your long -term ability to focus.
- 5) **Take short breaks** – The focus cycle (focus, distraction, re-focus) affects all of us. It is estimated that a natural cycle lasts about 50 minutes, and that assumes other distractions don’t get in the way. Our productivity depends on our ability to return to the task at hand effectively, and short breaks which can include walking away, doodling, or other simple activity can help achieve that.
- 6) **Set your environment** – If you deploy in an area that is distraction-free you will be more likely to focus on what you are trying to do. Even in hectic workplaces it is unlikely that you don’t have a place that can be set up to enhance your productivity. It might require you to set boundaries – such as letting others know you can’t be disturbed for a period of time, but if you’re going to make it work, you’re going to have to make these choices. It is usually a myth that distractions can’t wait. Set aside a time to deal with those or empower others to do them on their own.
- 7) **Prioritize** – One of the biggest threats to focus comes from our own to-do lists. It is important to identify what is really important versus what we think we have to accomplish and when. Delegation can be important to limiting your own task list, but it really comes down to the ability to rationally choose what has the most impact on your day – and learning to say “no.”
- 8) **Identify high- and low-attention tasks, and switch between them** – a key to any list is to identify what takes the most time and the most brain energy. Hammering out quick or easy to-do items leaves you



free to tackle the big stuff later. But switching between them can also be a good tactic for giving your brain a rest as well. Spend time working on major task items, break it up with a short, easy one, then return to it to improve your ability to re-focus.

The Bottom Line

The brain cannot multitask, but we are by necessity all multitaskers. The key to improving your capacity, comfort, and focus is to be able to create internal and external environments that enhance your ability to cope with inevitable distractions. Remember: we all lose focus. It is programmed into our brains. Set your own limits within your own personality and needs but try to push them to achieve even greater heights of performance. As usual, try to find time to relax in between!