**The Two Things Killing Your Ability to Focus**

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I used to wake up, stumble over to my phone, and immediately get lost in a stream of pointless notifications. This digital haze continued throughout the day, keeping me from accomplishing important tasks. I was distracted, anxious, and ineffective as a leader. I knew I had to change but could not seem to break free from the behaviors that kept me locked into the same cycle.

This problem is not unusual. Executives across the world stumble through each day in much the same way. Two major challenges are destroying our ability to focus.

First, we increasingly are overwhelmed with distractions flying at us from various connected devices. [Smartphone and tablet use is spiking](http://www.statista.com/statistics/270781/average-daily-media-use-in-the-us/), and we now use digital media for an average of [over 12 hours per day.](http://www.statista.com/statistics/276683/media-use-in-the-us/) This hyperconnected state [does not allow us to process, recharge, and refocus](https://prezi.com/8_h8mti0sfvv/psychological-neuroscience-of-digital-distraction/).

Second, we rely excessively on meetings as the default form of interaction with other people at work. Studies indicate that [we spend anywhere from 35%–55% of our time,](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-reasons-why-your-meetings-waste-time-peter-stark-csp) and sometimes much more, in meetings. If we want to stay focused on truly meaningful activity, something has to change.

You and your business [will benefit greatly](http://www.inc.com/magazine/201405/brian-dumaine/how-leaders-focus-with-distractions.html) if you can address these issues. You and everyone on your team will enjoy yourselves more and accomplish more. The data echoes what our common sense tells us: We need to carve out more time for ourselves if we want to remain focused and effective at work. These five daily practices will help.

**Practice mindfulness.**The single biggest mistake most of us make is in how we start the day. Do you immediately roll over and start checking email on your phone? Bad idea, according to Stanford psychologist [Emma Seppälä](http://www.emmaseppala.com/), author of [*The Happiness Track*](https://www.amazon.com/Happiness-Track-Science-Accelerate-Success/dp/0062344005). As she said in an email interview, “By constantly engaging our stress response [when we check our phones], we ironically are impairing the very cognitive abilities — like memory and attention — that we so desperately need.”

So what should you do? Start trying a simple mindfulness practice when you wake up, which can be anything from quietly taking a few deep breaths to meditating for 20 or 30 minutes. Dr. Seppälä explains why this is so important: “Meditation is a way to train your nervous system to calm despite the stress of our daily lives. When you are calmer, you are more emotionally intelligent and make better decisions.” Not a bad way to start the day.

**Organize tasks.**Another common mistake is letting other people fill in your calendar, particularly in the morning. You have to make sure you leave enough time to accomplish complex, creative tasks. As entrepreneur, investor, and Y Combinator cofounder Paul Graham described in [“Maker’s Schedule, Manager’s Schedule,”](http://www.paulgraham.com/makersschedule.html) his now famous 2009 post, “a single meeting can blow [an entire day] by breaking it into two pieces, each too small to do anything hard in.” Creative tasks require dedicated time when you are fresh, not a few distracted minutes squeezed in between meetings. We all love to think we can multitask effectively, but [research shows conclusively](http://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask.aspx) that we are terrible at it.

Instead of struggling to accomplish what matters, you can take advantage of your body’s natural rhythms. Focus on complex, creative tasks in the morning; these things will tend to be ones you accomplish individually or with 2–3 other people. Push all other meetings to the afternoon. These simpler, execution-focused meetings with larger groups are easier to handle.

**Clean up.**Is your desk a mess? What about the desktop of your computer? Your smartphone’s home screen? These areas might seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but your environment affects your productivity and quality of work in ways [we are just starting to understand](http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu%3A253102). Tidying up has a big impact, as indicated by the runaway success of Marie Kondo’s book [*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*](https://www.amazon.com/Life-Changing-Magic-Tidying-Decluttering-Organizing/dp/1607747308)*.* And it’s not just for civilians. When (now retired) Navy SEAL Admiral William McRaven gave a [commencement address at the University of Texas at Austin](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgzLzbd-zT4&noredirect=1) in 2014, his most important piece of advice was to make your bed.

Keeping a clean work environment, both physical and digital, is essential to your ability to stay focused. At work, put everything in a drawer. Create folders on your desktop to get rid of all the random files, and keep only the most important 8–12 apps on your home screen. Turn off all unnecessary notifications (here are tips [for Android phones](http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/stop-annoying-notifications-android/) and [for Apple phones](http://www.tomsguide.com/us/turn-off-notifications-iphone,news-21195.html)). Don’t let yourself get distracted by all the clutter — you will stay focused for much longer.

**Shrink meetings.**How many people were in your last meeting? More important, how many of them were actually involved in the creation or fulfillment of deliverables from that meeting? This question might seem like a strange way to stay focused, but countless studies, starting with [this 2015 HBR research,](https://hbr.org/2015/03/how-to-know-if-there-are-too-many-people-in-your-meeting) have shown the benefits of smaller teams. Focus and responsibility are more challenging with too many people — which is how you end up with folks staring down silently at their laptops for an entire meeting.

To stay focused, keep your team focused. Limit the number of people in any meeting to eight or fewer unless it is a meeting that is purely informational. Make sure each meeting results in action items, a timeline for each action item, and one person who is responsible for ensuring that it gets done. That one person is the directly responsible individual, [a powerful technique that Apple uses to effectively manage its vast workforce](http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2979/Directly-Responsible-Individuals).

**Preserve buffers.**One reason so many people have a hard time staying focused is a lack of margin. You cannot be on top of your game if you run from meeting to meeting. Switching tasks and contexts is difficult for the human brain at any time, and that ability degrades throughout the day. For busy executives, this means [up to 70% of their time at work is wasted](https://www.fastcompany.com/3033093/work-smart/70-of-your-time-at-work-is-wasted-how-to-change-that).

If you want to avoid wasting time and burning out, add buffer time between each meeting. For every 45–60 minutes you spend in a meeting, make sure to take 15 minutes or more to process, reflect, and prioritize. This will keep you from wasting time. It will also avoid the burned-out feeling that many of us have at the end of each long day. And it should be an easy sell to your other managers: They will only benefit by also adopting this scheduling tactic.

Staying focused at work is not easy, but it is doable. These five practical techniques will help you stay on task, accomplish what matters, and enjoy yourself more throughout the day.