

[Lifestyle](#) > [Wellness](#)


5 Ways to Get Your Focus Back

Attention hijackers are everywhere. Here's how to retrain your brain to concentrate.

By Louisa Kamps Published: Mar 4, 2024

[SAVE ARTICLE](#)


PRIMPIL / GETTY IMAGES

Ah, focus. It used to feel so delicious: sitting at my desk, warming my head under a gooseneck lamp as I drilled into work, ideas clicking, in a cone of pure concentration. Lately, though, my capacity to pay deep, prolonged attention has taken a licking. The everything-everywhere-all-at-once wallop of the pandemic dimmed my mental wattage. Then, wired and fried from that crisis, my once passable ability to resist constantly checking my phone for texts, emails, and social-feed updates crumbled completely.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here. Many of us spend unholy amounts of time beguiled and stupefied by the internet. Over the past 20 years, Gloria Mark, PhD, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, has found that the length of time people can focus on a single screen has dropped, on average, from two and a half minutes to 47 seconds. Even worse, we're no longer just putty in the hands of the tech lords who've hijacked our attention. We're so accustomed to being disrupted by our devices that when the number of pings goes down, we check screens more often, just to keep the same "rhythm of interruptions going," as Mark, author of *Attention Span*, recently told *The New York Times*.

But there's a flip side to learning what our tech addiction is doing to our brains: a growing understanding that attention is a precious resource we can recultivate. "Think about anything you've achieved in your life that you're proud of, whether it's starting a business, being a good parent, or learning to play the guitar. That thing required a huge amount of sustained focus," says [Johann Hari](#), author of *Stolen Focus*. "When your ability to achieve your goals deteriorates, you feel worse about yourself. But when you get your attention back, it's like regaining your superpower." Here are a few proven ways to do it.

MORE FROM OPRAH DAILY

Respect your internal clock

One of the simplest ways to improve attention is to get enough [sleep](#) every night—most adults need at least seven hours. The ability to focus on what we need to do to accomplish our goals is largely guided by the prefrontal

cortex, a.k.a. the executive center of our brains, says Charan Ranganath, PhD, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of California, Davis. Our brains can pay close attention only to one thing at a time, so when we multitask—toggling between ordering new sneakers, drafting an email, and half-listening to a conference call, say—we incur switching costs that quickly deplete our limited supply of cognitive energy. Multitasking also impairs our ability to remember new information and makes us more error-prone—effects that are amplified when we're sleep-deprived, says Ranganath, author of *Why We Remember*. "Not getting

enough sleep is very bad for the prefrontal cortex,” he adds. “If we don’t have the mental resources to say, ‘This is my goal, and here’s what I’m going to focus on,’ we’ll only remember whatever grabs our attention.”

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

“

WHEN YOU GET YOUR ATTENTION BACK, IT’S LIKE REGAINING YOUR SUPERPOWER.

”

The key is to aim for consistency, says time-management expert Laura Vanderkam, author of *Tranquility by Tuesday*. Her advice is to give yourself a grown-up bedtime and stick to it. This makes evenings more purposeful and peaceful (especially if you douse your screens at least an hour before bed) and greatly increases your odds of waking up feeling refreshed and optimistic.

Set explicit goals

A study published last year in the journal *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics* found that people who were given progressively quicker time-limited goals for completing tasks (versus those who were just asked to respond as quickly as possible) not only decreased their reaction times but also showed fewer lapses in attention than the control group.

Vanderkam recommends regular weekly planning sessions to identify your most important goals for the coming week and scheduling blocks of uninterrupted time to tackle them, ideally when you’re most productive; late morning and midafternoon are peak focus times for most people. It’s also helpful, she says, to batch up piddling tasks (ones you can knock off when your brain is at half-mast) and schedule windows for those, too. “When you think through the upcoming week and what’s most important to you, then figure out roughly when you intend to do those tasks and solve any logistical challenges,” it’s easier to do what you said you would (versus losing hours to TikTok) on a Tuesday afternoon, she says.

Name your saboteurs

Metacognition, the ability to think about our thinking, is one of our great human strengths. And while he was writing his new book, Ranganath took advantage of it—“actually practicing what I preach”—by pausing for 30 seconds to consider why he was growing distracted when he noticed his attention was waning. Often, pausing helped him realize that he was thirsty, hungry, or sleepy and just needed a five-minute break to get a drink or a snack or listen to an energizing song, or to scratch an itch to check out (quickly!) a colleague’s Threads feed. But other times, pausing helped Ranganath realize that he needed a longer break because he was truly exhausted or needed a few hours to digest new research. Overall, he says, learning to pause and consider what was distracting him was ultimately a huge time- and focus-saver. “Being on a treadmill of constantly trying to do one thing after another is harmful” and ultimately makes us less productive, says Ranganath. But “giving yourself time to think really helps a lot. It protects you from misinformation, and it helps you remember things more accurately,” he adds. “Thirty seconds is all it takes.”

“

GIVING YOURSELF TIME TO THINK PROTECTS YOU FROM MISINFORMATION.

”

Practice mind wandering

Fed up with feeling constantly wired by (and to) tech, Hari left his phone at home in Boston and spent three months in Provincetown with the hope of regaining his once robust ability to focus. At first, he set out on long daily walks feeling “slightly guilty”—as a busy journalist, he was used to ticking boxes on his to-do list even while walking. However, to his surprise, he soon realized that his phone-free walks were often the most creatively productive part of his day. Delving into the science of mind wandering, he learned that it’s a crucial and underappreciated form of attention. Unlike “convergent” attention (the kind we use to consciously focus on a complex data set, say), mind wandering promotes looser

associational or “divergent” thinking, which is essential for seeing connections between ideas and creative thinking.

“When your mind is wandering, and you think without anything to focus on, you’re doing important things,” says Hari. “You’re processing the past and making sense of it. You’re anticipating the future and preparing yourself for it. And you’re making connections between things that otherwise would not be connected, which is the heart of creativity.” When we cram every minute with something to grab our attention, checking phones in line at the grocery store and the like, he adds, “we’re really in the worst of all worlds”—we’re “just skimming, frantically skimming.”

Read a damn book

Burrowing into a great book handsomely rewards our effort and attention. As Hari notes, [reading](#) also gives our minds valuable time to wander; yes, we are focusing on words on the page, but our mind takes flight. These days, sadly, many struggle to read anything longer than a Yelp review. And that’s partly because we’re accustomed to reading online, where, research shows, our eyes dart in a zigzagging or F-shaped pattern, skimming and racing to get the end, says Maryanne Wolf, a professor and director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners and Social Justice at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Reader, Come Home*. Wolf worries about skimming—which carries over to reading on paper once it’s ingrained—because it erodes the cognitive patience people need to press through dense prose to understand a complex political argument (vital for a healthy democracy), or to imagine that the inner life of another person is not so different from our own, as reading great fiction allows us to do.

For rusty deep readers or newbies who want to try, Wolf recommends devoting 20 minutes a day to practice reading, on paper, paying attention to detail. “I can’t promise that this will happen to everyone,” she says, “but I *can* say that allocating your mind’s best attention” to “looking at a word, a sentence, a paragraph, and making an analogy between what you already know and what is fresh in the text” is a healthy antidote to the bombardment of stimuli we live with. “It situates you and gives you a glimpse of who you are that moment in time,” Wolf says. Now, that’s something to savor.

RELATED STORIES



Johann Hari: Here's How to Reclaim Your Focus



Distracted? Frazzled? Try the Concentration Cure



Friday Inspiration: 3 Simple Ways to Stay Focused

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below



WELLNESS

Word
of
the
Week

Thera-posing



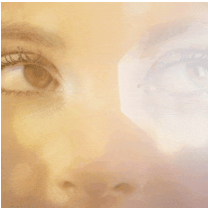
The Facts About Female Heart Health

Word of the Week

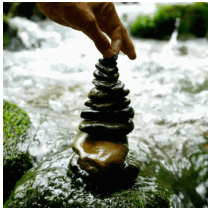


Glimmers

Why Do I Keep Crying About the Same Thing?



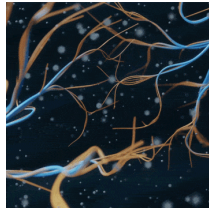
EMDR Therapy Helped Me Recover from Sexual Assault



A Beginner's Guide to Trauma Responses



How to Cultivate Resilience in Your Kids



The Vagus Nerve: Everything Everywhere All at Once



From Oprah Daily for Entresto

Jen's Story: My Heart Failure Diagnosis



From Oprah Daily for QUVVIG

Taye Diggs on Sleep



What Not to Say to a Friend After a Miscarriage



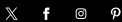
Is *This* Why You're So Tired?

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below



About Us

Newsletter



Contact Us

Press Room

Subscribe

Give a Gift

Customer Service

Being Green

HEARST

LIFESTYLE AND DESIGN GROUP

We may earn commission from links on this page, but we only recommend products we back.

© 2024 Oprah Daily LLC. All rights reserved.

[Privacy Notice](#) [Your CA Privacy Rights/Shine the Light](#) [DAA Industry Opt Out](#) [CA Notice at Collection](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Site Map](#)