HOW WE LIVE

Why we can't focus

Are we driven to distraction by our digital devices, or are our minds just built to wander? Five researchers concentrate on the root causes, and how we can make our time more meaningful

ZOSIA BIELSKI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JARETT SITTER
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Straining for focus at the office, you find yourself opening Instagram. Minutes tick by as you scroll, peering in on strangers' reels. You rein in your attention but soon feel pulled to check your inbox; the flow of email is endless, mostly irrelevant. On the train ride home, you open the book you've been struggling to concentrate on for weeks. Abruptly you reach for your phone: more aimless scrolling, maybe some online shopping. The end of another day brings little cohesion and even less meaning.

Digital distraction is what we call this meandering state of mind. We bemoan our tech-warped brains, fearful the Internet is rewiring them, siphoning off our focus and hijacking our hours. Learning disruptions in school, burnout at work, less time for connecting in person: we point to tech taking time away from the things that matter. But is that the whole story?

A quarter of people find the hours they spend online interfering with work or school, according to the 2022 Canadian Internet Use Survey from Statistics Canada. Nearly half of young people 15 to 24, and a third ages 25 to 34 confessed to checking their smartphones every 15 minutes. In Ontario, close to a third of Grade 7 to 12 students said they spend five or many more hours a day scrolling social media, according to a 2021 report from Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Pushback is building. This fall, schools across Canada banned phones in classrooms, with some of the country's largest boards suing social media giants, accusing them of designing addictive tools that interfere with learning.

On the work front, Ontario passed "right to disconnect" legislation, joining Australia and France, which passed their own laws giving workers the right to ignore bosses pinging their phones after-hours. Then there's the plethora of screen-free social events and apps that set timers on social media usage, helping people limit their incessant scrolling.

Still, for all the disconnection efforts, digital detoxes and school cellphone bans, we've not been terribly successful at reclaiming our focus. We bemoan our lack of time but surrender so much of it to the devices in our hands. What if our efforts at self-control are failing because we fundamentally misunderstand the brain and distraction?

Today, research remains inconclusive on whether technology conditioned us to constantly seek out interruption, irrevocably shortening our attention spans. Some neuroscientists aren't actually convinced tech rewired any of our brains. Instead, they say, the brain evolved to be distractible a long time ago. Then tech arrived, carefully designed to exploit the mind's natural tendency to roam.

More scientists, psychologists and authors studying attention now propose that a closer understanding of this connection – what technology is and isn't responsible for – might better steer our fragmented minutes, hours and days.

Being more realistic about the inevitability of distraction, understanding there is a limited window of time to harness our concentration – these might be wiser ways forward than reproaching ourselves for our fragile focus.

The Globe and Mail asked five of these thinkers about the roots of distraction, the real role of technology, and how to infuse our time with more meaning.

Interrupting ourselves

Forty-seven seconds: that's the average sliver of time workers are able to focus on one task on their screens before switching to another, according to Gloria Mark, a University of California, Irvine professor who studies the links between technology, attention and stress. Using software logging to track information workers over 12 business days in 2016, Dr. Mark and her research team found subjects' attention constantly shifting online.

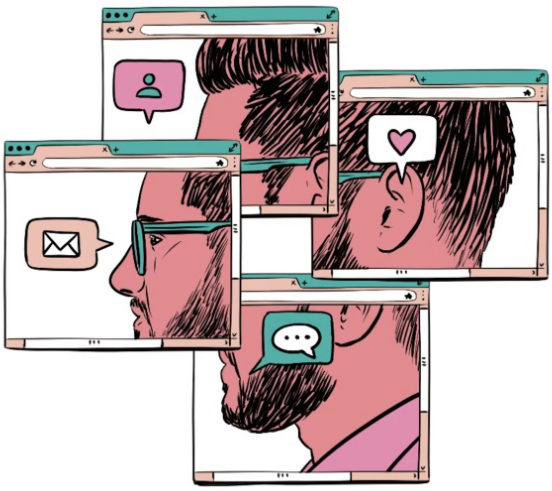
Dr. Mark is particularly interested in "self-interruption": you're working or concentrating on something, and with no external trigger, you abruptly divert your attention to something else. Self-interruption can be triggered by a memory, boredom, procrastination, or a whim to look something up. She and her colleagues found that employees interrupt themselves just as often as other people interfere with their focus. The researchers noticed that even when outside distractions were minimized for a period of time, self-interruptions spiked soon afterward anyway.

"We are determined to have short attention spans. If our attention is not being diverted by some external source, it's being diverted by ourselves," said Dr. Mark, who wrote the 2023 book Attention Span and now publishes a weekly Substack newsletter, The Future of Attention. "We are in a context where it provokes us to self-interrupt," she said, citing the "lure of the Internet," the ability to seek out anything that jumps to mind, and the easy access we have to each other through social media, Slack, texting and email.

Dr. Mark points to 2004, before smartphones were ever-present, when she and her colleagues used stopwatches to track people, finding they could concentrate three times as long, for two and half minutes.

Our constant attention switching leaves a residue that clouds focus, wreaking havoc on executive function, the part of the brain that filters out peripheral information to keep us on track, Dr. Mark said. The more we shift our focus, the greater the stress, her team found.

In her life, when the professor feels an urge to distract herself online, she tries to probe the moment: does her scrolling signal curiosity, boredom or procrastination? Being more conscious of these automatic impulses helps her form a plan – for example, dive into news online, but only after her finishing her newsletter.



TikTok foragers

While digital distraction is a relatively new phenomenon in humans, some researchers see a striking resemblance to a more ancient instinct: foraging. “How do you know to keep eating berries at one bush, and when do you decide to go over to another bush and see if that one’s got berries?” said Harrison Ritz, an associate research scholar at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute who studies attention.

Dr. Ritz draws an analogy between grazing animals and humans flitting between email, work spreadsheets, shopping online and scrolling Instagram.

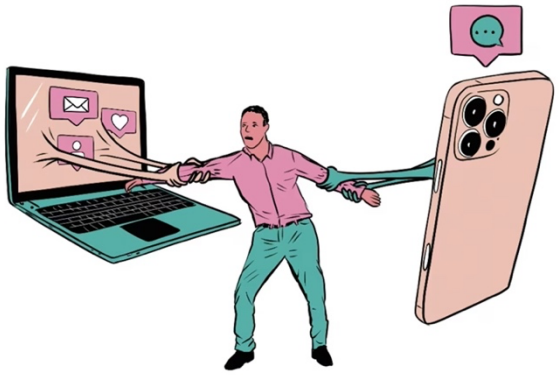
The automatic thought process is this: how valuable is what I’m doing right now, how valuable is another thing I could be doing instead, and how much work would it take to get from what I’m doing right now, to something else?

“There are all these appealing, bite-sized, easy distractions littered around my environment. They’re really accessible. It doesn’t take much work to switch from boring administrative paperwork to this fun TikTok scrolling spree,” said Dr. Ritz, whose latest research looks at task switching.

The key difference with addictive technologies, he said, is that they’ve been intentionally designed to captivate human attention for as long as possible, tapping into the learning and reward circuitries of the brain through immediate and engaging search results.

“Once you’re locked into something really tempting, it’s hard to escape out of that distraction. And the asymmetry is clear: If I’m doing boring paperwork, anything is distracting. But if I’m doomscrolling, then it’s really hard to pull out of,” said Dr. Ritz, who often sets timers to keep himself on track with work.

Still, for all the fears about tech rewiring our brains, he isn’t convinced this is the case. “I’m really suspicious about the proliferation of technology in our everyday life – through our phones and increasingly computer-based jobs – really changing how our self-control works,” Dr. Ritz said. “It might not fundamentally change how our attention works. It might be the same old attention brain we’ve had for tens of thousands of years. It’s just that these distracting options are so much more tantalizing.”



Focus and FOMO

There are strong cultural forces playing into our self-interruption, says Zelana Montminy, a Los Angeles behavioural scientist and author of the forthcoming book Finding Focus: Own Your Attention in an Age of Distraction.

When we abruptly break our own concentration to check Facebook or Instagram messages, there’s some apprehension in the act – a fear of missing something or neglecting our social bonds if we don’t keep checking.

“Technology reinforces the idea that we should always be on and responsive,” Dr. Montminy said. “We are reacting to everybody else’s urgency. We’re in a reactive state, exhausted and depleted by it.”

Then there is social capital: people feel compelled to stay on top of their various personal and professional connections across many streams online.

“We’ve cultivated a significant fear of missing out. Our self-interruption stems a bit from this anxiety that we need to constantly stay updated – even when there’s a complete lack of urgency.”

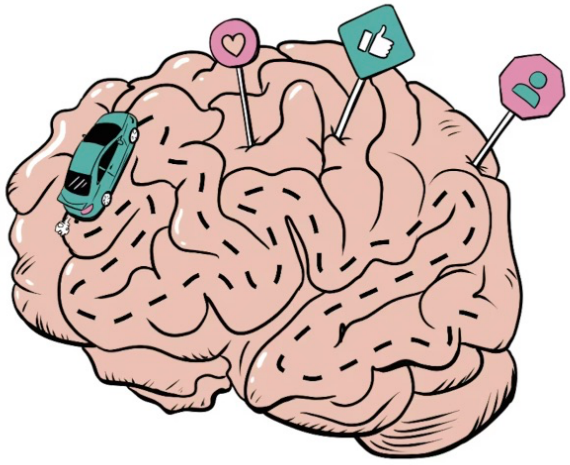
The cultural pressure to constantly switch gears at work is acute. Dr. Montminy often speaks to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, who love touting how much they can multitask.

“That always makes me chuckle,” the clinical psychologist says. “When I give them the actual research on why multitasking is really truly bad for us, it’s unbelievable, the shift in the room. …People who are constantly doing multiple things are seen as hard working and high achieving, even if the science says it’s not productive.”

When we talk about our lagging focus, we often frame it as a workplace productivity issue. But the trouble goes much further than work, Dr. Montminy argues. All this mental fragmentation online is diminishing our creative abilities, and worse, the quality of our thinking.

“Creativity is rejuvenating in a way that other things are not. Our brain craves creativity but we don’t give ourselves the pockets of time necessary to be creative. Constant online interruptions derail us.”

In her calendar, Dr. Montminy purposely schedules brief dips into social media or sifting through email. She finds these planned pauses help her stay the course longer on critical work, fending off the urge to scroll.



Roaming free

Where some see pained self-interruption, others see mind-wandering – an active, healthy thought process that finds the mind moving in an unconstrained way.

Kalina Christoff Hadjiilieva is a University of British Columbia psychology professor who researches human thought, including spontaneity and mind-wandering.

While we rebuke our brains for flitting about, the professor sees value in a roaming mind. It makes links, processing our life experiences into stories and meaning, helping us understand ourselves.

From the perspective of many employers, this kind of daydreaming is unwelcome; they'd prefer employees be laser focused. Mind wandering is more expansive, connecting our lives to something bigger than the to-do list in front of us, Dr. Christoff Hadjiilieva argues.

"A lot of scientists and people in everyday culture define mind wandering in a very narrow sense, of the mind moving away from the current task at hand. For me, that's a very industrialist, capitalist narrowing definition of a freely moving mind."

Going further, Dr. Christoff Hadjiilieva questions the very idea of self-interruption, arguing it's really the brain's default setting. Running people through fMRI scanners to track how frequently thoughts arise, Dr. Christoff Hadjiilieva and their team got to watch, in real time, the ebb and flow of thinking.

"On average, every 10 to 20 seconds, there's going to be a new thought coming up. … Our natural state is not to remain fixated on thinking about the same thing for longer than 15, 20 seconds. That's something our minds evolved to do."

Dr. Christoff Hadjiilieva posits that frantic scrolling online is really just the mind exploring, shifting impulses to keep itself stimulated. More often than not though, it's an unsatisfying pursuit. When the mind wanders in nature, or among other people, the senses alight and we feel engaged. When we go down the Internet rabbit hole, there is a "narrowing of experience."

“The tragedy of technology is that it’s engaging in a very shallow way. It’s not meaning that speaks to our lives,” Dr. Christoff Hadjiilieva said. “At the end of the day, it doesn’t feel like it’s me. It feels like it’s a small sliver of me that’s being stimulated.”

Here, the professor sees clear threads from tech use to burnout: “There’s a commonality where people feel that some part of them is withering away, perishing. There’s something that’s not being nourished in the course of these everyday activities, even though it feels engaging.”

Procrastination 2.0

When we fret about our tech-addled brains, how much of the problem is really procrastination?

It’s a question posed by British author Oliver Burkeman, who explores the ways we manage (and don’t manage) our time.

He thinks we’ve been a bit sidetracked by the specter of digital distraction. What if, at the heart of people’s self-interruption, sits anxiety about getting important things done, and done well? What if technology serves as an escape hatch from this discomfort?

“If we think about what happens in a normal instance of being lured away from a difficult piece of work to scroll through social media instead, it isn’t that our attention is happily and relaxedly focused on the work, and then you’re pulled

away against your will. It's that we gladly give in to the distraction to take us away from the work," Mr. Burkeman said.
"The things that matter to us inevitably stimulate a sense of fear, intimidation or lack of confidence that we'll be able to do it well. …It's more pleasant to leave that all aside and scroll."

Mr. Burkeman's new book is Meditations for Mortals: Four Weeks to Embrace Your Limitations and Make Time for What Counts. As a former columnist at The Guardian who probed our misconceptions about personal productivity, he questions the cultural push to become "indistractible."

Sifting through historical accounts of the daily routines of artists, authors and scientists, Mr. Burkeman saw a pattern: three to four hours of deep thought and intense focus a day. Beyond that, it's hard to exert much control over your time.

The author hopes people will become gentler with themselves – with roving attention not always at their command.

"Anything that verges on berating yourself to focus, which a lot of people do, is ultimately counterproductive. It turns the whole territory of focus into a kind of combat zone."

He urges reframing our attitudes toward challenging, focused work and thought. Which parts are actually meaningful and fulfilling? Why do we treat concentration like kale, the Internet like candy? Instead of cursing our distracted minds, why don't we ask ourselves how we'd actually like to spend our days?

"There are anxiety-inducing issues with every choice we make about how to use our time," Mr. Burkeman said.

"Leaning into that and learning a little bit to tolerate that anxiety, to see that being human means always having other things you probably should be doing, once you see that's just our condition, it can be empowering for people."

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