

Ways to Stay Focused, Minimize
Distraction, and Reduce Interruptions



27 MULTITASKING BUSTERS





Multitasking Busters

GAIN FOCUS

Old Fashioned Shuteye

A good night's sleep is like pushing the reset button in your brain. You should try to get the amount of sleep required for you to wake up without an alarm. Consistency is key.

Food & Drink

If you're running on fumes and about to head into a marathon meeting, drink a glass of water and eat a snack with a balance of carbohydrates, fat, and protein, like an apple and a piece of cheese. This hydrates you and keeps your blood sugar levels even, both of which aid focus.

Focus Stone

Use a small stone as a memory aid to develop a habit of focus. Associate the stone with the phrase "RIGHT NOW" followed by whatever it is you are doing. Practice this for at least a month to experience a decrease in the number of moments you spend multitasking. When you feel you're wandering from your current focus, look to their focus stone & think...*"Right now I am talking to a client."* or *"Right now I am working on a proposal."* or *"Right now I am listening to a friend."* This inner dialogue will begin to anchor you in your current activity and help prevent you from being tempted to move to the next activity before completing the current one.

Water Cooler

To promote positive feelings, especially during highly stressful times, interact directly with someone you like at least every four to six hours.

Schedule Optimization

Identify the time of day when you feel most focused or alert. Use that time to tackle your most challenging projects.

Visualization

When you're interrupted, get back on track with this focusing trick used by athlete in competition: close your eyes for a few moments and imagine successfully completing the task.

Get Movin'

A quick burst of aerobic exercise relieves stress and improves concentration by flooding the brain with oxygen and activating brain chemicals such as dopamine. If you've been stuck at your desk all day and a quick walk around the block isn't an option, just stand up. This simple act tells your brain it's time to be awake and act alert.

High Low

When you're doing something that requires a lot of mental effort, rekindle your brainpower with something rote and mindless. You'll return to the first task with a greater level of concentration.

Compiled from Chris Crouch's *Getting Organized*, Edward Hallowell's *Harvard Business Review* article "Overloaded Circuits," Todd Goldfarb's guest *Zen Habits* blog post, and Kristyn Krusek Lewis' *Real Simple* article, "May We Have Your Attention."



M u l t i t a s k i n g B u s t e r s

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Decision-Making System

Develop a personal decision-making system to triage incoming items including email, phone messages, paper, verbal requests, and your own thoughts.

Batch Process Email

Turn off all email notifications, increase the number of minutes between send/receive prompts (factory setting is 2...try 15 to start), and process email in scheduled batches.

Action-File System

Develop a personal action-file system to store all the papers/emails triggering you to do something today, in the next few weeks, or regularly.

Frogs for Breakfast

There's an adage, if you have to eat a frog, don't spend a lot of time looking at it first. And if you have to eat two of them, start with the ugliest. Identify the most important task you need to complete. Maybe it's strategic work that requires focused think time, or perhaps it's something you have a burning desire to procrastinate for untold emotional reasons. No matter, eating your largest, ugliest frog first will give you the boost to help the rest of the day seem lighter.

Boundaries

Determine what boundaries you need to establish in order to maintain a healthy blend of family, work and rest. When you notice your energy running low or you feel resentful, you likely need to erect a new boundary—or to respect an existing one.

Police Officer

Until you develop a more appropriate life pace, you might consider asking someone to police you and to keep you honest. Make certain it's someone you respect, someone who has your best interest in mind and someone who will hold you accountable.

Use a Timer

Set a timer for the amount of time you want to exclusively focus on an activity. Do not allow anything to take you away, including your own procrastination techniques, before the timer goes off.

Clear Space...Clear Mind

Keep at least one section of your work space clear.

Go Dark

Turn off your email client. Turn your phone to do not disturb. Close your door. If necessary, explain to your others that you're going dark for a short time in order to serve them better.

Notebook or 3x5s

Carry a notebook or 3x5 cards to collect extraneous to-dos so you can safely tell your brain to focus on what you're supposed to be doing.



M u l t i t a s k i n g B u s t e r s

MANAGE INTERRUPTIONS

Block Time

Schedule your day in blocks of like activities, remembering to include transition time and not to hard schedule more than half your day. Block time for high-priority work. Publish “office hours” so others know when you are available.

Go Topless

Mandate “topless” meetings...as in no laptops, CrackBerrys, iPhones and the like. See what methods you can employ to create meetings so immersed in human connectivity, outside interruptions vanish.

Slow Down

Slow down & remember 80% of your results come from 20% of your efforts. Stop & ask questions to clarify the outcome you truly desire. The antidote to confusion is clarity. Break up overwhelming projects into digestible tasks. Think about reasons you should not do something, or legitimate ways you can avoid doing it. If things are totally out of control, take the most counterintuitive action of all—shut down & make getting organized your highest priority.

Interruption Choices

When someone interrupts you, you have three choices: 1. Multitask—trying to continue your current activity & adding the activity your interrupter requests. (Research shows this adds on average 40% more time to total completion rates. 2. Engage—deeming the new activity more important. 3. Defer—acknowledging the current activity is more critical than the new one.

Recess

Ignore business calls and e-mails as much as possible on your days off and when you are on vacation. For example, free yourself from the habit of checking work e-mail from home every night, and avoid business calls at family functions. Leave your handheld device at home on your bike ride. If you go online to find movie listings, resist the temptation to research something for work.

Think Time

Not every moment at work needs to be consumed with frantic motion. Purposely add contemplation time to your daily schedule. Some of your best work and best ideas will grow out of you periods of stillness and reflection.

Change How You Think

Change is initiated by changing the contents of your brain, not by attempting to change conditions outside yourself without also altering how you think. Believe interruptions can be minimized.

Alternate Office

Move to an alternate location, such as an open conference room, where you have no phone and people will not find you.

Walk the Walk

Make a deliberate effort to interrupt others less frequently. Create a holding place for questions/ideas, and schedule a meeting to review them all together.