

The One Productivity Killer You're Overlooking

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The One Productivity Killer You're Overlooking

Written by Nicole Lipkin, Psy.D., M.B.A. – 10/31/16

"You're not watching with me."

"I am! I can do both, I have to check something."

"Then check and then we'll watch the show."

"It's fine, just keep watching, I'm paying attention."

"But it feels weird to watch alone while you're doing something else."

"It's fine, I'm watching. Here, I'm putting it down, you happy?"

"Yes, thank you."

"So catch me up."

This is an exchange that happens from time to time in front of the TV between my husband and I. In this exchange he and I are interchangeable as we've both played each role, each requesting that the other put down their phone in order to be present and watch TV together.

TV is clearly insufficient entertainment at this point in our modern lives. A story on a screen is all fine and good but what about *our* story? When will the TV tell me about *my* life? Well, I know what will: my beautiful adoring phone.

So now the TV is on and we're scrolling through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat and Instagram. When we return to the TV we no longer understand the plot. When we return to our phones we feel a diminishing dopamine reward. We're now caught in a limbo of unsatisfying entertainment. Maybe at this point we go and look for something to eat, or we text a friend hoping for a response. The friend doesn't text back and there's nothing in the fridge.

We decide to get ready for bed. We get into bed and we repeat the same TV/phone routine in bed until we pass out. We wake up, we immediately check our email. Out of the shower, we check our phone for updates. We get dressed, we check our phone for updates. We're almost annoyed by the time it takes to get dressed as we can see something is lighting up on the phone while we are putting our boring pants on. When did getting dressed get so boring and insufferable!?

We do not know how to be bored.

Our intolerance for boredom is one of the primary reasons our productivity suffers. It is not the phone or Facebook, those are secondary causes. Before we check Facebook we are bored. Before we text a friend it is because we are bored.

This is the result of being ego-based creatures with brains that seek pleasure and reward at all costs. Humans have never been comfortable with boredom. Most of us do whatever we can to resist being alone with ourselves. We turn on the TV, we read, we call a friend, we go to the movies, we go out to dinner, we get drinks, whatever, whenever.

We rarely sit with our own minds and practice being present in the moment. As the Internet develops and social media broadens the number of distractions it is increasingly difficult to ignore the lure of self-attention.

It's no mistake that one of the common activities of successful people in many online articles is "meditation." Meditation is the practice of sitting, of being present, allowing thoughts to flow without following each one down its windy, unending, tangential path.

Without this practice it is difficult to withstand the moments of boredom in life when nothing is happening on Facebook, nobody is texting you, you've seen all the episodes of The Walking Dead, and you haven't read a book in years.

Why you need to work on your attentiveness

If you're growing your business or just working on a spreadsheet you need the skill of attentiveness in your arsenal. Otherwise your willpower will deplete as you think about all the other things you could be doing, seeing, eating, reading, and talking about. You'll overhear someone in the office talking about last

night's Game of Thrones episode and you'll leap out of your chair like a dog greeting its owner that just came back from war.

There's a darker undercurrent to not being able to withstand boredom, which is that boredom is becoming synonymous with sadness. The withdrawal from Internet addiction, from TV, or any "substance" can lead to a sadness that nothing is happening *right now*.

Resisting temptation – to abstain from distraction – depletes our willpower. The more depleted our willpower, the less we are able to attend to important projects and important conversations. So at first, it would seem like it's best to give into temptation, i.e. give into the chocolate chip cookies, give into drugs, give in to McDonalds. Give in, give in, give in. But over time, with all the giving in, your body gets sick. Same with our minds. Giving in to every distraction versus training your brain to be still creates a scattered, inattentive mind.

How to get rid of the distractions

What needs to happen is you build the habit of focus by building the habit of distraction management (e.g., turning off your notifications when you are working, scheduling times to check social media and email, etc.). Behaviors that become habitualized do not deplete willpower. Of course the process of building the habit will be exhausting, difficult and depleting, but once it is built, it becomes a routine that does not sap your energy.

Thus it will no longer look like this:

work>email>work>facebook>work>twitter

but rather something like this:

Work>work>work>email>facebook>work>work>work

Or something to that effect, depending on what your distraction of choice is.

Make a concerted effort to turn off all modes of distraction. This involves silencing your phone, turning off any banner notifications for social media and email, not opening instant messaging, maybe turning off wifi altogether, and sitting yourself down in a locale that isn't distraction-prone. Just like we learned to distract over time, we can learn to *attend* over time too. It takes sustained practice to build your attention muscle and diminish your distraction fat.

But the fact remains that sometimes life is boring. Boredom is a mild form of pain. Humans resist pain and seek pleasure in every moment of life. The pleasure we get from work distractions, however, diminishes over time, yet we keep chasing our fix. The chase serves to damage your long-term ability to focus on a task. If we can increase our boredom stamina we will rehabilitate our minds and increase our productivity. A fit and focused mind is less 'distractible'. Yes, it is that simple.

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