

Is Your Smartphone Making You Less Smart? Distraction Addiction Is Real

By Shailini Jandial George

June 4, 2021, 3:00 AM

Attorneys and law students are multi-taskers, but constantly checking a smartphone can lead to distraction addiction, says Suffolk University Law School professor Shailini Jandial George. She offers tips on how to be more productive and focused, which can lead to greater happiness.

In a 2014 study published in the journal *Science*, researchers put their subjects in an empty room for 15 minutes, with no access to reading material or technology, offering the subjects the option of administering themselves a small electric shock. Two-thirds of the men and one-quarter of the women actually shocked themselves, preferring that jolt of electricity to being alone with their thoughts.

While you may not see yourself reflected in the results of that study, you may sometimes wonder if your dependency on your phone has gone too far. If you use your phone everywhere from the grocery store to the elevator, and even in the bathroom, you may have reached a level of distraction addiction where you are unable to be alone in your thoughts for any free moments during the day.

This may not sound like a problem, but in terms of your overall productivity, it almost certainly is.

Cut Down on Multi-Tasking

Many lawyers and law students see themselves as master multi-taskers—jumping from their assignments to social media, checking the weather then a sports score, ordering a coffee, and then jumping back to the work at hand. That might feel right in the moment, but it's not.

Here's the problem: Those quick hits of distraction ignite an area in the back of your brain called the parietal lobe, which constantly scans the environment for stimuli. But to deeply focus, you use the prefrontal cortex, in the front of the brain. You can't really use both well at the same time.

When you know you need to focus, you can't simply tell yourself to do so. It takes too much of your brain's finite willpower to constantly resist the distraction temptation. Asking your brain to ignore the phone next to you is like putting doughnuts next to a dieter or cigarettes next to a smoker. It's pretty difficult to ignore.

“But I have my phone on silent” you might argue. The news still isn’t good. Studies show that just having your smartphone near you, even face down on silent, drains your capacity to focus. Every time your mind wanders, whether you actually pick up the phone or not, you are not focused on the task at hand.

Research suggests that it can take up to 23 minutes to refocus after checking your phone. Think about how many times you check your phone in an hour, much less a day, and try doing the math.

Most of us instinctively go through our days with our phones as another appendage from which we can’t separate. But with some conscious planning we can increase our productivity, and, I would argue, our happiness.

How to Combat Distraction

Here are some tips to help you combat that distraction addiction and improve your productivity:

1. Consciously Decide What You Intend to Accomplish

Instead of sitting at your desk “to work,” first decide what you are working on: a part of a brief, an outline for a class, etc. Goals help you sharpen your focus, provide motivation, and improve performance.

1. Put Your Phone in Another Room, Disarm Automatic Alerts

Have the materials you need so that you don’t have to break your concentration to retrieve them. Equally important, clear away other things that would compete for your attention, like unrelated assignments or bills, so those tasks don’t sap your attention.

1. Create the Mental Space to Be Productive

Many of us spend about 47% of our day thinking about something other than what we are actually doing. Mindful breathing can help you identify those wandering thoughts and focus your mind before you start to work.

Try three to five minutes of intentional breathing before diving into work. There are many apps and tools available if you are unsure how to do this. Jot down ideas or nagging thoughts that popped up so that you can attend to them after your work session.

1. Work for 50 Minutes, Then Take a Break

Research shows that we perform best when we deeply focus for about that amount of time and then take a break for eight to 10 minutes. It may sound counterintuitive, but breaks are essential to your productivity, mental focus, physical health, creativity, and to avoid burnout.

1. Commit to a Time to End Your Workday

Avoid the warrior mentality of constantly working deep into the night. Working or even checking emails until you go to bed doesn’t allow your unconscious brain time to make connections or solve problems.

We have all had that experience of inspiration striking in the shower or on a walk. That happens when you give concentration a rest and allow the unconscious brain to work. But it will never happen if you fall asleep right after finishing your work—with your phone or laptop briefly cast aside. If you have a big deadline, then consciously extend your workday.

My final thought on distraction addiction as we begin to emerge from the pandemic: let people close to you again, but socially distance from your phone.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. or its owners.

Write for Us: Author Guidelines

Author Information

Shailini Jandial George is a professor at Suffolk University Law School where she teaches legal practice skills. Previously, she was an attorney at Ryan, Coughlin & Betke LLP in Boston and a law clerk for the Superior Court of Massachusetts. She is the author of a new book, "The Law Student's Guide to Doing Well and Being Well."

Topics

mental health care
lawyer well-being
sleeping and loafing
mobile applications
social media