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MICHAEL BLANN/GETTY IMAGES

How often do you have a day that leaves you feeling not only exhausted but also like you didn't actually accomplish anything? If your answer is "always" or "very often," you are not alone. In most professional jobs today, multitasking has become a coping strategy. We are constantly shifting our attention from trying to complete assignments and projects, tracking and responding to endless communications, and managing interruptions from colleagues and the office bustle.

Constant distraction leaves a trail of scattered thoughts and partly done tasks in its wake. It leaves us feeling overwhelmed and tired. And when our busy, exhausting days don't come with a sense of accomplishment, our work feels unsatisfying at best — and demotivating at worst. This is a recipe for burnout because progress is what [drives us](#).

In my work as a productivity trainer and speaker for nearly 2,000 organizations, I have found that distraction is the single biggest barrier to meaningful, satisfying work. Studies by Gloria Mark and colleagues show that [we often switch](#) what we're doing every few minutes, and these frequent interruptions "[cause us to work faster, which causes](#) more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort." And this sabotages not just our performance but the way we "show up" in the world.

In contrast, Georgetown professor Cal Newport [defines](#) "deep work" as "the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task." He says that the benefit is that "it allows you to quickly master complicated information and produce better results in less time."

I think about deep work as needing "brainpower momentum." It takes time to get started, get focused, and fully mobilize our resources in the service of our most important, most meaningful work. By "resources," I mean not only our knowledge, wisdom, and experience, but also our empathy, passion, kindness, diligence and all of the other qualities we bring to our day-to-day lives to make them unique, richer and have more impact. The phrase I use to describe building this momentum in the service of a task, experience, or connection is "unleashing our genius."

Consider this analogy: imagine your task is to ride a bicycle for 10 miles. You begin to pedal and just as you build up speed and start making progress, something unexpectedly makes you hit the brakes. Because you had to stop, you've lost your momentum and have to expend more effort to get going again. Imagine you are forced to brake every time you start to go faster. You can never coast. You have to pedal — hard — all the time. How much longer do you think it's going to take you to get to your destination? How much more difficult and frustrating do you think it's going to be? This is your brain power on distraction, and it causes unsatisfying, unfulfilling work days.

You cannot fully unleash your genius in the three-minute increments you have between distractions. Unfortunately, for many of us distraction has become a habit — one that has been so often and routinely reinforced that it is extremely difficult to break. [Persuasive technology](#) — technology that uses sophisticated techniques from behavioral psychology to "persuade" us to keep engaging with it — exacerbates the problem. So, over time, as our habit gains strength, we go looking for distraction. When things get quiet, or a task gets boring or frustrating, we reach for our phones.

Those of us habituated to distraction will find that we have shorter attention spans and less patience for applying our brainpower in a meaningful way. We now see it as an unpleasant and insurmountable task, which means we are less likely to build the brainpower momentum needed to unleash our genius. The problems associated with distraction have thus compounded: our ability to engage in thoughtful work has decreased, as has our desire to actually do it.

This is why I have become convinced that the path to improved productivity lies not in “time management,” but in [attention management](#) and kicking the distraction habit. Three easy things anyone can do to begin this process are to become aware of it, devise plans to overcome it, and take advantage of the principle of activation energy.

The first step is awareness because it’s hard to change a habit you don’t realize you have. Habits are triggered by cues, so try to notice how often and why you are allowing your attention to be stolen. Every time you find yourself switching away from a task without an intentional stopping point, note it on a piece of paper. Then think about what caused you to be distracted and jot that down, too.

Once you become aware of the cues, you can find ways to overcome them. For example, ask yourself and others what exactly you might do to keep people from interrupting you when you’re trying to focus or what exactly you might say if they interrupt you anyway. Or ask what you might do to prevent yourself from reaching for your phone. Record these ideas and identify opportunities to try them out, then note whether or not they were successful. Over time, you will begin to understand what works and what does not in your unique situation.

A third way to kick the habit of distraction is the principle of “activation energy.” Make it easier to engage in more productive attention-management habits. For example, to get started on those thoughtful, important tasks that might otherwise seem difficult, break them down and get specific. Instead of putting “write article” on your to-do list, put “list four bullet points for article.” Instead of “analyze report,” write, “identify the main idea in the first section of the report.” If it sounds fast and easy, you are more likely to do it. So make everything sound fast and easy. The hardest part is getting started.

The corollary of activation energy is what I call “friction.” (Happiness researcher Shawn Achor refers to this pair of principles as [the 20-second rule](#).) This is a tool you can also employ. For example, if you find yourself in the habit of continually checking your email [on your smartphone at home at night](#), it might not be because you really want to read email. It might instead be because you are simply “used to” checking your email at the office all day long — it’s a habit. So when you leave work, set an intention to leave it behind, and create some friction to back you up. Access your account settings on your device, and turn the mail account from “on” to “off.” Then even if you find yourself compulsively tapping your email app, you’ll be faced with a blank screen. It will take you a few additional seconds to go back into your settings and turn the email back on, which might be enough to remind you of your plan and dissuade you from the impulse.

Distraction leaves us feeling exhausted and like we aren’t accomplishing anything despite the fact that we’re always busy. And because it becomes a habit, when we’re not being distracted by someone else, we often distract ourselves. To avoid burnout, we need to recognize and devise a plan to combat the problem so we can get our most thoughtful, important work done and unleash our genius on the world.

Maura Thomas is an award-winning international speaker and trainer on individual and corporate productivity, attention management, and work-life balance. She is a [TEDx Speaker](#), founder of [RegainYourTime](#), and author of *Personal Productivity Secrets*, *Work Without Walls*, and *Attention Management*. She frequently appears in major business outlets, and was recently named one of the Top Leadership Speakers of 2018 in Inc. Magazine. Follow her on Twitter at [@mnthomas](#), or sign up [here](#) to be notified when a new article is published.
