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Exercise: Eliminate a Distraction

Goal:

Improve your productivity by focusing on one task at a time and eliminating distractions.

Overview:

Eliminate 1 distraction from your life this week.

Instructions:

Step 1: Identify the Enemy

Take 10 minutes and list out all of the distractions you experience in a day. Consider these questions: What are your 'go-to' distractions? When in your day do you usually get knocked off your game? What are you usually doing when you start down a rabbit hole? Where are you? Who or what else is around? What is it that catches your attention?

Step 2: Target One Distraction and Make a Plan to Eliminate It

Once you have your list, choose the one distraction that, if you eliminated it, would give you the greatest return on productivity. Which distraction makes the biggest difference for you? Here are a few ideas for different types of distractions you could potentially eliminate and a few tools and ideas to help you do so.

Digital Distractions:

Digital distractions are particularly difficult to resist, and we all have different preferred social media, websites, etc., that we like to visit. This is probably one of the best places to start. Here are a few options to eliminate 1 digital distraction during your day this week:

- **Put your phone on "Do Not Disturb" mode** at least once during the day for 30 minutes (on iPhones, it's the little moon icon; on Androids, it's the "mute" function.). If you can last longer than 30 minutes, go for another 30!
- **"Single-tab" for 30 minutes during your workday.** Start a timer, and don't allow yourself to open more than one browser tab at a time for 30 minutes. Just like the "Do Not Disturb" mode, if you're finding that 30 minutes of "single-tabbing" feels doable, try it for 60!



Distraction

page 2



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- **Try an app that blocks time-wasting websites and/or a lockbox for your phone.** My personal favorite is the Cold Turkey App -- make sure it's running so you don't get pulled into social media during the time you had set aside to stay focused. Other good apps and plugins that help you not get pulled into time-wasting websites or apps include Opal, Freedom, Focus, StayFocusd, and SelfControl. The best lockbox for your phone is the **kSafe**. I use mine every day. *I've seen people's lives changed with this one thing!* It's a game-changer.
- **Turn off all non-essential notifications, alerts, badges, etc. on your smartphone.** Just go into your "settings" and switch the notifications to "off" for each of the apps that you can probably do without getting constant reminders from.
- **Schedule yourself to only check your email 2 or 3 times a day.** This is a particularly difficult one, but if you can do it and hold fast to it, it can truly work wonders for your productivity. In fact, a recent study showed that checking your email less often can significantly lower your stress.
- **Make a "No devices 1-hour before bedtime" rule,** in which you and your family don't turn on or check devices 1 hour prior to going to bed. This will not only help decrease distraction, it will also help you sleep better and is the amount of time the Mayo Clinic recommends to allow your body to start producing the sleep hormone melatonin without being thrown off by your bright screen.
- **Schedule a "Digital Sabbath."** For 24 hours (usually over the weekend), put your phone out of reach and completely unplug for an entire day.
- **Schedule "Digital Mini-Sabbaths"** by leaving your phone for small amounts of time. Throughout your week, leave your phone home when you go out, or leave it at your desk when you go to lunch, etc. Simply not having it "on you" for small windows of time can work wonders in helping reduce your distractions.
- **Get a router that allows you to "pause" the wifi signal,** such as those specifically designed for kids. WiFi Blocker is a nice option. Bark for content monitoring for parents and Gabb phones for kids can also be helpful options.
- **Make your "smart phone" a "dumb phone"** with this elegant solution.



Distraction

page 3

Environmental Distractions

Environmental distractions are things happening around you that catch your attention. Often, small environmental distractions don't seem like that big of a deal, but when you add them up, they can be a major drain on your productivity by demanding that your brain process them in the background while trying to stay on task. Eliminate as many as you can to give your brain the extra energy it needs to achieve highly-focused productivity sprints.

- **Buy a box of earplugs and use them regularly.** One of the best ways to reduce environmental distraction and increase attention is to quiet down ambient noise. Remember, noise is processed in the brain as something urgent that needs to be attended to immediately. So outsmart your brain by sticking in those earplugs! *Tip: invest in the slightly nicer ear plugs--when you use them a lot, even a slight increase in comfort makes a difference!*
- **Drown out environmental noise with a white noise device** or download a white noise app and play it on your phone. Some people prefer this to the silence that comes with earplugs, and white noise is a good way to not get distracted by conversations or other things going on around you. You can also pop in your headphones if you have others around you whom you don't want to bother.
- **Play instrumental music that doesn't have lyrics.** Since your brain processes words automatically, you'll often get distracted more easily by songs with words than you will with songs that have no lyrics. The one exception to this is when you're doing monotonous, routine, or repetitive tasks. If the task is cognitively simple and doesn't require very much effortful thinking, then music with words usually doesn't distract quite as much (think data entry, folding laundry, mowing the lawn, etc.).
- **Block out anything that distracts you visually.** Every time you see movement (e.g., someone walking by), it will pull on your attention ever so slightly. So if there's a way to face a direction where you don't see people walking by as much, or you can put up a "screen" or "separator" so there isn't movement in your line of sight, it will help you stay focused. A simple room divider might be just what you need.



Distraction page 4

Human Distractions

When we are trying to stay focused or complete a task, we are often interrupted by those around us. People don't mean to knock us off our game, but however well-intentioned the interruption, these small attentional hiccups add up to more lost time and lost productivity than we think.

- **Talk to those around you and agree on designated "focus blocks,"** where you actually put up a sign or something on your door or desk that indicates that you don't want to be interrupted for the next hour or two. This seems socially difficult to do at first, but those who set up these boundaries, and then provide opportunities to socialize and collaborate outside of their "focus blocks," find that people around them adjust and adapt pretty quickly. The underlying idea on this is "chunking," or pre-planning certain times in your day to be distraction-free.
- **Designate physical spaces (as opposed to calendar spaces) that are "distraction-free zones."** It can sometimes be easier for people to remember not to interrupt if they know that there are certain locations that are off limits for interrupting, and other locations where it's okay to mingle, collaborate, and ask each other questions--to "interrupt" each other. Physical space can be a powerful reminder to cue others that you don't want to be interrupted.

A Final Word:

Given the onslaught of information that hits us every day, reducing distractions is an incredibly difficult thing to do. The idea here is not to become completely detached from your phone or other sources of entertainment or news. The idea *is* to get back into the "driver's seat" of your own mind, instead of having a device in the driver's seat. On some level, this is about regaining control over your attention and where you focus it. It's about becoming a decision-maker, rather than someone who's controlled by circumstances. Getting better at this keeps you in control of your day, and helps you act from a place of intention, rather than reaction.