THE MIND IS A CHAOTIC PLACE. Thousands of thoughts surge daily and billions of neurons fire five to 50 times every second. And now, as the global health crisis sends us indoors, anxious thoughts may be louder and more distracting than ever. We’re in survival mode, with professional and personal life melting together. Focusing at home can feel impossible.

It turns out humans often have trouble getting in the zone during normal life, let alone in times of crisis.

“Regardless of whether it’s the pandemic time or not, attention is fragile,” Dr. Ekaterina Denkova, a neuroscientist at the University of Miami, tells Inverse. “It’s vulnerable to distraction and...
This week, *Inverse* explores how to cultivate attention, tame your brain, and find ways to compassionately center yourself. Temporal distancing, exercising, reconfiguring your space, and breaking out of crisis mode can all foster concentration while working from home.

3. **RE-WIRE YOUR WORK CUES** — Working remotely often means demands for our attention abound from partners, children, or roommates. Add on a layer of existential dread due to global events, and you have the makings of a perfect storm for distraction.

“One big distraction is counterintuitive — it’s the absence of the work environment and other people working,” Elizabeth Grace Saunders, a time management expert and contributor to the *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, and *Forbes*, tells *Inverse*. “At home, your whole environment is postured toward ‘being off.’”

Saunders says the TV, your dog, the kitchen, the couch, your partner can all be disruptive cues that signal your brain to do anything and everything but work. Designating a workspace can help rewire these work-related signals. Preferably, this is an office, but any chair, table, or corner of your home can serve the same function.

Saunders also recommends sticking to a specific start and stop time for working. That way you don’t delay getting to work in the morning and then work late because “there’s nowhere to go anyway,” she explains.

2. **TRAIN YOUR MIND** — It’s no secret that many companies and employees are operating in crisis mode. But if you constantly exist in a hypervigilant state, every new email or phone call will hijack your attention and disrupt your productivity.

“When people are under large amounts of stress, they end up operating from the lower part of their brain — the amygdala — instead of from their prefrontal cortex,” Saunders tells me. This reduces the ability to prioritize, focus, and make thoughtful, well-reasoned decisions.

To break this stressful cycle, **stop moving at a breakneck speed** and slow down, Dr. Denkova advises. Although counterintuitive to the popular principles of so-called “hustle culture,” taking breaks and time to be more intentional will prevent mistakes or lapses in judgment.
Saunders suggests utilizing the Pomodoro technique — 25 minutes “on” and five minutes “off.” This approach has been shown to enhance performance on various tasks. Exercising regularly will also help you recharge and quiet a chaotic mind, and it’s one of the best ways to optimize cognitive function.

Research also shows mindfulness training improves focus. It bolsters attention, specifically during high demand or high-stress intervals when the attention span is “shrinking and suffering from the distraction,” Denkova says.

Mindfulness training can mean a 10-minute mindfulness exercise or meditation in the morning. Or even simpler, taking a moment to drink your coffee away from your computer on the front porch or a balcony.

When every email starts to feel like an emergency, Denkova says it’s a sign you should engage in a little “temporal distancing.”

“Every time you feel stressed, or suffering, or in pain, stop from reacting, which will lead to overreacting,” Denkova says. “Stop, take a breath, and then you can respond to the email or join the meeting.”

These small moments of awareness can last 30 seconds to a minute but can help you maintain a more sustainable pace of productivity. They also help prioritize which demands warrant attention and which can be ignored temporarily.

1. **REIMAGINE EXPECTATIONS** — When you work from home, especially if you’re new at it, some distractions may be inevitable and productivity may suffer. Denkova says accepting these new limitations — that you may not be operating at peak performance — is helpful for everyone.

Denkova clarifies that acceptance doesn’t mean shutting down and doing nothing. Rather, accept what you can do in a day, she says.

“Accept that sometimes you’ll feel anxious. Accept that you might be vulnerable. And at the same time, accept that you can have a five-minute joyful coffee break and experience that moment off the clock.”
Rather than wishing you were in the office, embrace the reality of the challenges and opportunities working remotely offers.

With these strategies — rewiring signals for focus, employing mindfulness training, exercising, and working with intention — you can master distraction and streamline your days.

And here are two ways managers can support their employees at a distance:

1. **Check in regularly** by email, instant messenger, or video chat at least a few times each week. Having consistent one-on-one meetings can help ensure employees have what they need and aren’t getting lost or overwhelmed, Saunders says. “In an office setting, you could take care of a lot of interaction informally because you noticed something was off or people stopped by your office. But with everything remote, you need to be much more formal.”

2. **Be patient, flexible, and respectful,** Denkova emphasizes. “We should all accept that we are living in times that are uncertain, and we should respect how people adjust to the new daily life,” she says. If things take a little bit longer than usual, it’s not the end of the world.

**WHAT I’M READING THIS WEEK:**

Esther Perel, psychotherapist, and Adam Grant, organizational psychologist, discuss the phenomenon of people-pleasing at work on *Gimlet’s “How’s Work” podcast series*

- How posture influences productivity
- What it’s like to graduate in an economy on the brink of a depression in *The Cut*

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“These findings are a strong demonstration of what just 20 minutes of meditation can do”

STRATEGY

MEDITATION: RESEARCHERS FIND 3 COGNITIVE BENEFITS WHILE WORKING REMOTELY

Working from home brings many benefits. There’s no commute, you can eat home-cooked meals, and wear whatever you want. (We won’t tell anyone you’re not wearing pants.) But telework can also be stressful. It’s not quite like a snow day from when you were in school. After all, you’re surrounded by distractions, and the line between your home and work life is nonexistent.

Thankfully, there’s a solution that will not only lead you to be less stressed but sharpen your mind, boost your focus, and even help you cut down on mistakes. What is it? Meditation, the practice of being still and focusing on your breath. Best yet, according to research, a little can go a long way. Let’s break down the benefits of meditation, according to science.

3. Better Focus
Your mind can’t end to wander when working anywhere, but especially from home, where
entertainment and family members are a room away. A study from the University of Waterloo
found that 10 minutes of daily mindful meditation helps keep your mind on track and is
particularly effective for people who have repetitive, anxious thoughts.

For the experiment, 82 participants performed a task on a computer. The researchers then
presented interruptions to gauge their ability to stay focused. Participants were split into an
experiment and control group: The former was asked to engage in a short meditation exercise
prior to being reassessed and the latter was given an audio story to listen to.

"Our results indicate that mindfulness training may have protective effects on mind wandering
for anxious individuals," said Mengran Xu, a researcher at Waterloo. "We also found that
meditation practice appears to help anxious people to shift their attention from their own
internal worries to the present-moment external world, which enables better focus on a task at
hand."

**2. SHARPER MIND**

A key part of meditation is focusing on the breath, and research out of Trinity College Dublin
found that breathing directly affects the levels of a natural chemical messenger in the brain
called noradrenaline.

According to a release explaining the study, “This chemical messenger is released when we are
challenged, curious, exercised, focused or emotionally aroused, and, if produced at the right
levels, helps the brain grow new connections, like a brain fertilizer. The way we breathe, in other
words, directly affects the chemistry of our brains in a way that can enhance our attention and
improve our brain health.”
The participants in the experiment group who focused well while undertaking an attention-demanding task were found by researchers to have greater synchronization between their breathing patterns and their attention than those who had poor focus. This result, they said, means it’s possible to use breath-control practices to stabilize attention and boost brain health.

“Our attention is influenced by our breath and that it rises and falls with the cycle of respiration,” said Michael Melnychuk, lead author of the study. “It is possible that by focusing on and regulating your breathing you can optimize your attention level and likewise, by focusing on your attention level, your breathing becomes more synchronized.”

1. FEWER MISTAKES

To err is human, but surely everyone wants to be less error prone. Meditation can help with that, according to a study from Michigan State University. Researchers recruited more than 200 participants, who had never meditated before, and tasked them with a 20-minute open monitoring meditation exercise while their brain activity was measured through electroencephalography (EEG). They then completed a computerized distraction test.

“A certain neural signal occurs about half a second after an error called the error positivity, which is linked to conscious error recognition,” said study co-author Jeff Lin, who noted that meditators didn’t see any immediate performance boost. “We found that the strength of this signal is increased in the meditators relative to controls.”

His co-author, Jason Moser, added, “These findings are a strong demonstration of what just 20 minutes of meditation can do to enhance the brain’s ability to detect and pay attention to mistakes. It makes us feel more confident in what mindfulness meditation might really be capable of for performance and daily functioning right there in the moment.”

Now that you know how meditation can help you to more effectively work from home, check out our list of the best meditation apps of 2020.

Abstract:

A nascent line of research aimed at elucidating the neurocognitive mechanisms of mindfulness has consistently identified a relationship between mindfulness and error monitoring. However, the exact nature of this relationship is unclear, with studies reporting divergent outcomes. The
current study sought to clarify the ambiguity by addressing issues related to construct and operationalization of technical variation in mindfulness training. Specifically, we examined the effects of a brief open monitoring (OM) meditation on neural (error-related negativity (ERN) and error positivity (Pe)) and behavioral indices of error monitoring in one of the largest novice non-meditating samples to date (N = 212). Results revealed that the OM meditation enhanced Pe amplitude relative to active controls but did not modulate the ERN or behavioral performance. Moreover, exploratory analyses yielded no relationships between trait mindfulness and the ERN or Pe across either group. Broadly, our findings suggest that technical variation in scope and object of awareness during mindfulness training may differentially modulate the ERN and Pe. Conceptual and methodological implications pertaining to the operationalization of mindfulness and its training are discussed.

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