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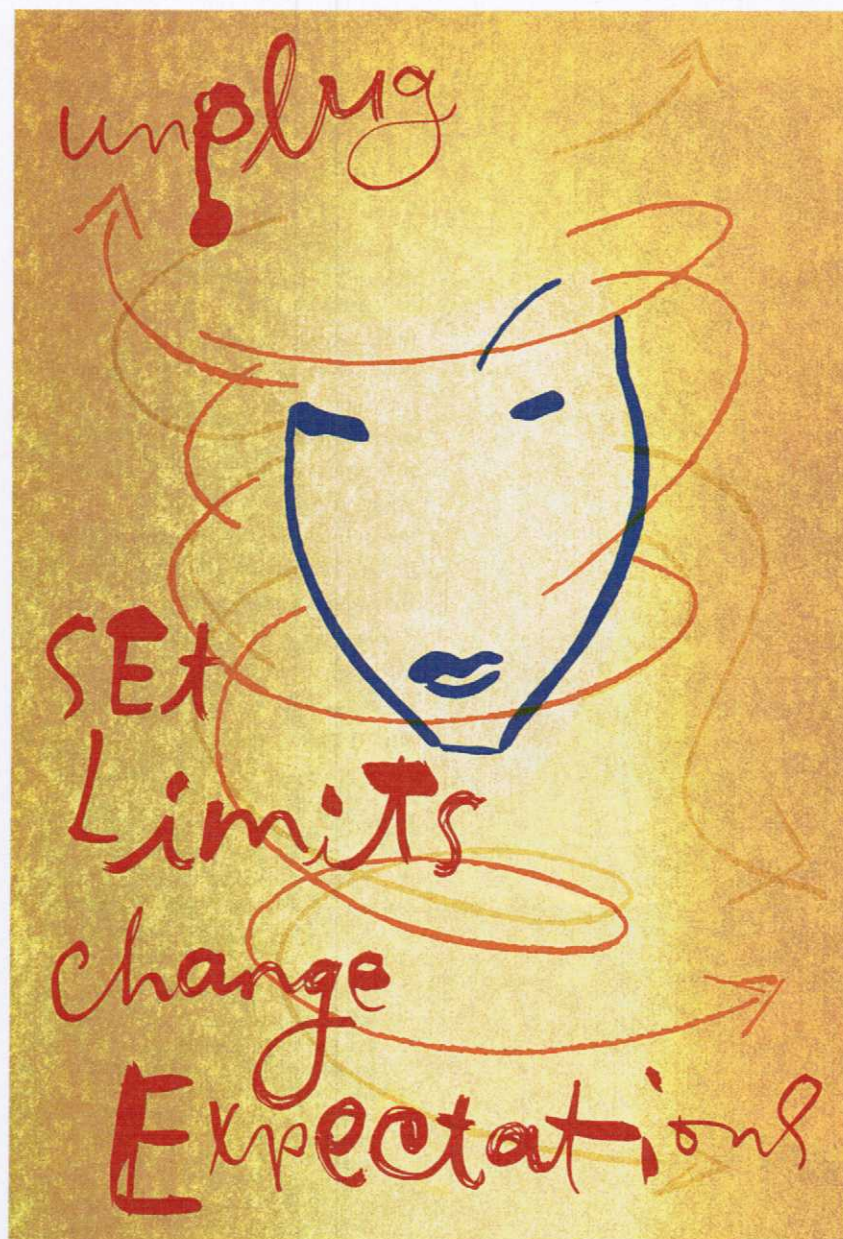
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# Regain Your Focus

Feeling scattered? Learn how to keep your attention where you want it.

BY ERIN O'DONNELL ILLUSTRATION BY WARD SCHUMAKER



You start a sentence, then forget what you're saying. You're this close to wrapping up a project, but days pass and it lingers on your desk. Between family obligations and work demands—not to mention the constant temptation to see who's saying what on Twitter and Facebook—concentrating these days feels next to impossible.

It's no wonder. The modern world, quite frankly, overstimulates our brains. "Technological advances have given us unprecedented opportunity, but they've also thrown off our brain chemical balance by keeping us adrenaline-based," says psychologist Lucy Jo Palladino, Ph.D., author of *Find Your Focus Zone*. Over time, too much adrenaline fries our focus. But you can regain it by figuring out your own problem areas—what tends to trip you up?—and using the following strategies to reel in your attention.





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## whole health

### FOCUS FOGGER: INTERRUPTIONS

Your computer dings to say you've got mail. Your cell phone buzzes constantly. Meetings pepper your schedule. Continual interruptions chop up your day, eliminating long stretches of focus time and wrecking concentration.

To look into this phenomenon, researcher Gloria Mark, Ph.D., of the University of California, Irvine, studied the modern office. She found that employees are interrupted (by others and themselves) or switch tasks an average of every three minutes during the day. Once interrupted, you need an average of 23 minutes to get back to the point where you left off—and that shapes the way you think. "You need a certain amount of time to get into a topic before you can even think creatively about it," says Mark.

#### + What You Can Do

**UNPLUG** To focus deeply, turn off your cell phone and silence e-mail alerts. Fight the temptation to interrupt yourself with frequent Internet visits by installing a program that temporarily blocks Web access (check out Leech-Block or Mac Freedom, both available online for free).

**CHANGE EXPECTATIONS** Plan deep-focus periods ahead of time, and speak to the people who interrupt you most often. Let them know that you won't be reachable for a certain time frame because you need to concentrate. Palladino says this helps family, friends, and colleagues understand your silence, which can be disconcerting in the age of instant messaging. It also relieves some of the pressure we feel to get back to people immediately, she says.

**SET LIMITS** Cap periods of high-intensity focus at roughly 90 minutes. "People hate to take breaks because they say 'Oh, I don't want to lose my momentum,'" Palladino says. "But often we're kidding ourselves about the quality of work. Every 90 minutes or so you need a break of some length." If possible, maximize your time-out with a restorative practice like meditating or

sitting under a tree for 10 minutes; such routines help reduce adrenaline levels and boost calming serotonin.

### FOCUS FOGGER: TOO MUCH STRESS

Nothing shakes your ability to focus like feeling angry, worried, or overwhelmed. Anytime we encounter a stressor, from an argument to an over-draft notice, the brain releases a flood of the fight-or-flight brain chemicals, including that focus-fryer adrenaline, causing our thoughts to either narrow or scatter, Palladino says.

When stressors make us angry, we tend to narrow our focus and thus miss important cues, she explains. Unable to see the big picture, we get stubborn, argumentative, and self-critical. When stressors make us feel anxious and overwhelmed, another set of symptoms take hold: Our thoughts jumble, or we freeze like a deer in headlights, and we're drawn to escapist activities like playing online games.

#### + What You Can Do

**TAKE A BREATH** The simplest solution? Stop and breathe deeply for 60 seconds, Palladino says. This simple act quenches stress chemicals.

**COACH YOURSELF** Stressful situations can send your inner critic into over-drive, putting calm attention further out of reach. When this happens, replace the downer thought with an optimistic one. "Instead of 'I'll never get this done,' say, 'I've done hard jobs before. I can do this, one step at a time,'" Palladino suggests.

**PULL UP YOUR PLAYLIST** Music can help you refocus when stressed, says Palladino. Compile a playlist of songs that make you feel great, and keep it handy for when you need a mood booster.

### FOCUS FOGGER: BOREDOM

It seems counterintuitive: We never have enough time, so how can we be bored? Because we're accustomed to stimulating activities, our brains crave more, explains Palladino. It goes like this: The more we activate receptor



sites for adrenaline-based brain chemicals like dopamine, the more dopamine we need to get the same effect, building our tolerance for stimulation.

#### + What You Can Do

**MULTITASK STRATEGICALLY** Constant multitasking exacerbates the problem, overstimulating your brain. But strategic, limited multitasking can keep you focused and motivated during boring tasks, says Palladino. It forces your brain into the mental equivalent of channel flipping, she explains, clicking quickly back and forth from one task to the other. The rapid switching can help you stay juiced. Palladino recommends choosing a very simple other "task," such as occasionally pointing and flexing your feet. This probably doesn't seem like a task, but the act of doing something other than what you're focused on serves the purpose without distracting you.

**CONSIDER "FLOW"** Certain jobs come naturally, absorbing our attention without much effort, says Winifred Gallagher, author of *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*. Researchers call this state "flow." "But many people don't know which activities engage their full attention and skills," she continues. "They don't challenge themselves enough and thus become bored." To identify what leads you to flow, keep a diary of daily activities and record how you feel while doing them, suggests Gallagher. Look for cues like intuitively knowing what to do and time passing quickly.

**TRY A DIFFERENT WAY** To get through tedious tasks you can't avoid, perk up your interest with a new approach. "Focus on doing a task as beautifully as you can, even making it into a game," says Gallagher. Use a pen in your favorite color and keep a vase of flowers in view. Or challenge yourself: What's the most efficient way to unload the dishwasher?

ERIN O'DONNELL is a freelance writer based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



# Shift Your Mood with Aromatherapy

What is the aroma of sunshine? If the waning light of summer had a scent, it might be a bit like bergamot orange or eucalyptus—fresh, sweet & bright. If the shorter days and graying skies of fall make you seasonally sad, reclaim a bit of sunshine with this fizzy bath salt.



#### Sunshine Fizz Bath

- 1 tablespoon sea salt
- 1 tablespoon vitamin C powder
- 1 tablespoon baking soda
- 15 drops Aura Cacia® bergamot essential oil
- 12 drops Aura Cacia® eucalyptus essential oil

Blend ingredients and dissolve in hot bath. Extra Tip: Toss in a couple bags of peppermint tea to infuse your bath with even more fresh memories of summer sunshine.



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