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3 Surprising Secrets to Maintaining Your Focus

The answer isn't working harder — it's how you work that matters



You're probably too busy to read this article.

You probably have at least 20 other browser tabs open right now (I'm ashamed to say I have 28 open as I'm writing this).

You probably have a to-do list filled with other things you should be doing.

That's exactly why you should read this article.

When life gets hectic and you feel overwhelmed, the temptation is to just try harder. Your inner voice scolds you: skip lunch, have another coffee, push through the exhaustion. Keep doing what you're doing, but do it *better*.

We'd like to suggest another way:

Stop. Breathe. Give your mind a chance to catch up to your body.

With an overflowing to-do list, it can be hard to justify taking a mental break. And when you do, it can be difficult to fully unplug. But by being strategic about when you take breaks and what you do during them, you can actually *increase* your focus and productivity.

The price of burnout

Even brief diversions from a task can dramatically improve one's ability to focus on that task for prolonged periods.

The problem with working harder is that it simply doesn't work. The human brain isn't designed to operate at full power all day long. Rather than helping you get closer to your goals, trying to focus for extended periods of time can fry your mental circuits, making it impossible to think clearly. As a result, your decision-making and creativity suffer, and your work slows to a crawl.

A [2011 study conducted](#) by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign agreed. Researchers confirmed that "The brain is built to detect and respond to change." In other words, our brains literally stop responding to something that is constant and unchanging — like that report you've been staring at for the past two hours. As a result, "prolonged attention to a single task actually hinders performance."

How can you avoid this productivity drain? Do something different, even if only for a moment. The study's authors found that "even brief diversions from a task can dramatically improve one's ability to focus on that task for prolonged periods."

In other words: Do less to do more.

Sustained productivity and focus requires giving your mind plenty of opportunity to rest and recharge, so you can come back stronger than ever.

Wait, that's it?

Well, yes...and no. Simply taking a break will help you stay focused for longer, but for real superhero-level productivity, it's vital that you take breaks in an intentional, effective way.

For starters, how often should you take a break? For how long? And what kind of break works best? There are plenty of opinions on the right balance between work and break time:

- **Pomodoro Technique** — One of the most well-known productivity methods, this was developed by Francesco Cirillo and is named for the tomato-shaped kitchen timer that inspired him. In this method, you work for 25 minutes without interruption, then take a five-minute break. Stretch your legs, grab a glass of water, go to the bathroom. When the timer goes off again, you're back to it. The good news is that after your fourth period, you can take a longer break — 15 minutes or more.
- **"52/17"** — A more recent study conducted by time-management app, [DeskTime](#), found that the most productive people work for 52 minutes, then take a 17-minute break. The secret to this method's success is what they call the "100% dedication theory." In other words, whatever you're doing, give it your complete attention. As DeskTime says, "during the 52 minutes of work, you're dedicated to accomplishing tasks, getting things done, making progress. Whereas during the 17 minutes of break, you're completely removed from the work you're doing — you're entirely resting."
- **Pulse and Pause** — This is the method endorsed by Tony Schwartz of [The Energy Project](#). Similar to the previous techniques, it recommends alternating periods of focused work ("pulse") and rest ("pause"). The difference is that, in this method, each work period is roughly 90 minutes long. Tony's research shows that "humans naturally move from full focus and energy to physiological fatigue every 90 minutes. Our body sends us signals to rest and renew, but we override them with coffee, energy drinks, and sugar...or just by tapping our own reserves until they're depleted."

Regardless of which you choose, each of these methods embraces the idea that sustained productivity and focus requires giving your mind plenty of opportunity to rest and recharge, so you can come back stronger than ever.

Take 'good' breaks

Taking regular breaks is essential for productivity, but that's only part of the story. *How* you take those breaks is equally important. When you step away from your screen (or paper, or whatever it is you're working on), make sure you're taking a 'good' break.

What does a good break look like?

1. Schedule it

The trouble with downtime is that if you don't actively plan for it, it often doesn't happen. You get caught up in what you're doing, or let guilt creep in to whisper that you're being lazy. In a [study conducted](#) by the retailer Staples, one in five workers and managers cited guilt as the reason they don't step away from their workspaces.

This is where the productivity methods above can come to your rescue. You use an alarm to wake you to go *to* work; why not set an alarm to tell you when to *stop* working as well? Best of all, having a timer tell you when to stop can actually give your conscience a pass. "I'm not being lazy," you can tell yourself. "I'm just following orders."

As hard as it may be to stop negative talk, remind yourself that taking a break is actually doing yourself (and your work) a huge favor. Regular breaks allow you to perform at a higher level for longer, so you can accomplish more in four to five hours than most people accomplish in eight — or more.

2. Avoid common break "traps"

The secret to success here is controlling your focus. During work periods, your attention should be solely on the task at hand. Conversely, rest periods should be exactly that. Not checking email or surfing the web (sorry, [BuzzFeed!](#)). When that well-earned break comes around, step away from your laptop, leave your phone where it is, and try to think about anything other than work.

Believe it or not, even chatting with colleagues can be a trap if all you do is discuss what's going on in the office. When that happens, your mind isn't able to disconnect and you're stuck in the same stress-inducing loop. Instead, try to find areas of common interest that don't revolve around work: favorite bands, an awesome movie you just saw, or your plans for the weekend instead.

It's also important to manage your energy levels throughout the day by making sure that your body is properly fueled. If you're lucky enough to work for a company that provides lunch and/or healthy snacks (thank you, Evernote!), take advantage of the opportunity to keep some smart food options close at hand. Just keep your portion sizes on the smaller side to avoid the notorious 'food coma.'

3. Get moving

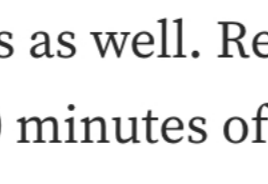
The easiest way to make sure you're taking a 'good' break is to get active. Stand up and do some light stretching, or if it's a nice day, go for a walk outside. Even making a trip to the bathroom, or to the kitchen for a glass of water, can be enough to get your blood moving and pump oxygen to your brain. That will help clear your mind and recharge your focus.

While it might not be possible depending on where you live and work, getting back to nature is a great way to improve your concentration and mood. In "[The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World](#)," Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen say "Natural environments capture our attention in a bottom-up fashion because natural stimuli are so inherently compelling to us (presumably owing to evolutionary factors). They draw us in but generate minimal top-down responses."

And as anyone who has experienced the euphoria of completing a challenging workout knows, exercise is not only good for the body but can improve mental clarity and focus as well. Researchers from the University of Sao Paulo [discovered](#) that just 10 minutes of exercise is enough to boost memory and attention performance throughout the day. If you're prone to the dreaded mid-afternoon slump, consider a lunchtime spin class or treadmill run. [One study found](#) that a moderate level of cardio activity can increase productivity and creativity for two hours afterward. Just the thing to help you power through the rest of the day.

The next time you find yourself overwhelmed and feeling like your creative spark has disappeared, take a break. Rather than trying to crash through that barrier like it's Platform 9¾, stepping back might be exactly what you need to find a better way forward.

What are your favorite tips for maintaining focus? Share your thoughts in the comments below!



Anthony Bartlett is trying to be more productive, but if he doesn't watch all those cat videos, then who will?

Productivity Time Management Focus Stress Work Life Balance

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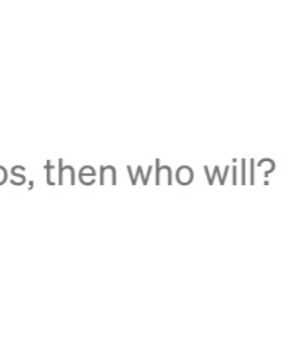
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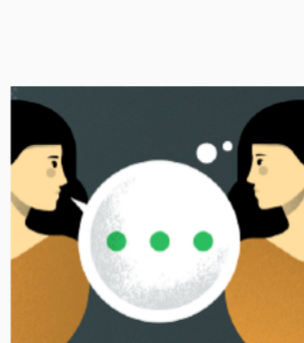
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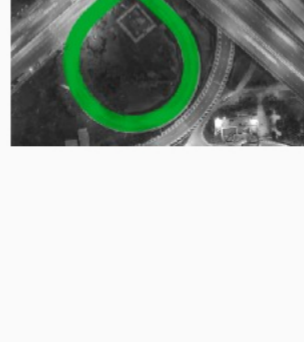
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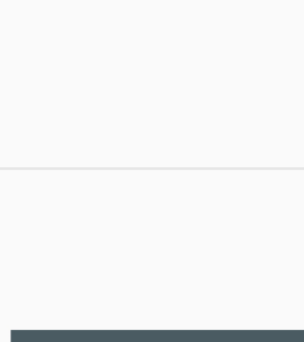
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