

# Why can't we focus any more?

**Aytekin Tank** explores the truth behind our modern culture of distraction and what we can do to combat it

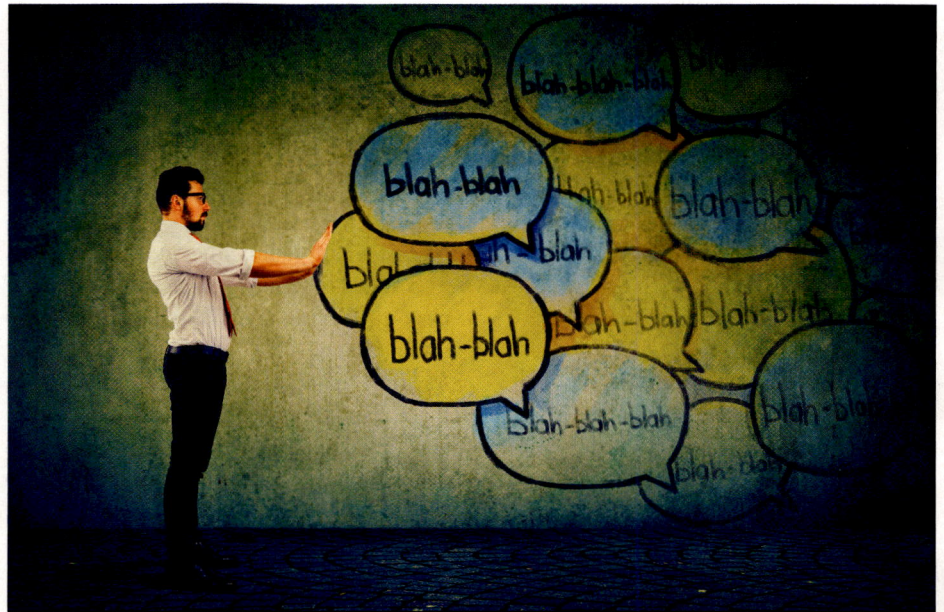
**WE DON'T** always have what it takes to shut off the noise in the background. It's easy to think that being distracted is just the inability to focus, when in fact it's more complicated than that.

As Seth Godin, the content god himself, said in one of his essays: "If you're not paying, you and your attention are the products." We let ourselves getting sucked into an endless cycle of distraction while the gatekeepers are busy selling our attention to advertisers.

One of the problems with distraction is that we are being handed what we believe is available out there. We never second-guess whether there's anything else we should know, as we're being fed with information we think we need.

Tristan Harris, a former Google design ethicist, has learned first-hand about what technology does to our vulnerable minds. Harris put it best when he compared how technology works with how a magician works, in giving us the illusion of choice.

"The more choices technology gives us in nearly every domain of our lives – information, events, places to go, friends, dating, jobs – the more we assume that our phone is always the most empowering and useful menu to pick from."



We fail to see what other options are out there because we simply think that what we have in our hand is the only set of options we can choose from.

A close look at how we get through an hour in a day can tell us so much about how we decide to direct our attention. As the founder and CEO of Basecamp, a project management hub that champions efficiency,

Jason Fried might be the voice we want to listen to: "Time is the most precious thing there is," he says, "yet we split it up and give it away like there's an endless supply. And whatever time you do have, you have even less attention."

Where do we lose all the time we have? In waves of interruption: chat, notifications, presence and always-on expectations. The

effect, as you might guess, is the more fragmented hours we clock in to finish what could have been done in an hour or two if we were to consciously choose to silence all the unnecessary noises.

Detaching ourselves from the overwhelming noise around us requires some determination, though. Detaching means taking active steps towards a space where absolutely nothing can get in the way of our full attention. That means putting away the smartphone or even not having internet access for a day – or a week, if you dare.

### What multitasking does to our brains

Not switching between tasks is a realistic approach to take in our effort to refocus. Single-tasking, as Manoush Zomorodi, the author of *Bored & Brilliant*, calls it, is a way out that we've come to believe is less efficient than its sophisticated, overrated cousin: multitasking.

"Humans' neural resources are not infinite, and switching between tasks, especially for those who work online, can happen upward of 400 times a day," Zomorodi says. No wonder we're all zombies with missed deadlines.

This reinforces another issue introduced by Daniel Levitin, professor of behavioural neuroscience at McGill University, which is that the mind should be allowed to wander between finishing one task at a time. Only then is attention to single-tasking not fragmented, and, as a result, we become more productive and successful in completing challenging tasks.

The idea that spacing out is necessary might be contradictory to what we're wired to believe, which is to never let one's mind wander aimlessly. Being bored is so heavily

associated with negative connotations that we don't even bother to consider that only out of boredom comes the stimulation-seeking part of our mind, explains Sandi Mann, a psychologist and author of *The Upside of Downtime: Why Boredom is Good*.

Neuroscientist Marcus Raichle also pointed out that when our minds wander, it activates the default mode network in our mind, allowing us to think back and forth. It allows us to access our subconscious

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minds and not focus on goal-oriented tasks. Different connections in our brain circuits then fall into place, creativity takes over, and self-awareness gives us more of a chance to refocus ourselves.

### How to reclaim our attention

Tristan Harris at Google, has created the Time Well Spent movement, which aims to educate people on how not to be abused by online products that profit from our endless attention. And neuroscientists Ramsay Brown and T. Dalton Combs co-founded Boundless Mind with a mission to disrupt America's addiction to technology.

The American Psychological Association revealed in 2018 that 65% of survey respondents believed that periodically unplugging would improve their mental health. Another study by the University of Texas in 2017 found that the mere presence of our

smartphone, face down on the desk in front of us, undercuts our ability to perform basic cognitive tasks.

There's no way of getting rid of technology once it's adopted, Brown notes. Instead, Boundless Mind is trying to use these persuasive technologies to promote a healthy and democratic society. Essentially, the organisation is trying to change the way our minds are controlled by campaigning for upfront transparency for the companies

it's representing. It's helping people's engineered minds be what they want to be and not just robots with more eyeball time.

The conversation needs to start – the ability to control our own minds must belong to us. Despite all of these companies advocating for us, we can always start with ourselves. As Derek Powazek, the author of *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*, puts it: "We are not the product if we educate ourselves enough." **MPA**

**Aytekin Tank** is the founder and CEO of JotForm, an online form creation software with four million users worldwide and more than 100 employees. A developer by trade but writer by heart, Tank shares stories about how he exponentially grew his company without receiving any outside funding. For more information, visit [jotform.com](http://jotform.com).

