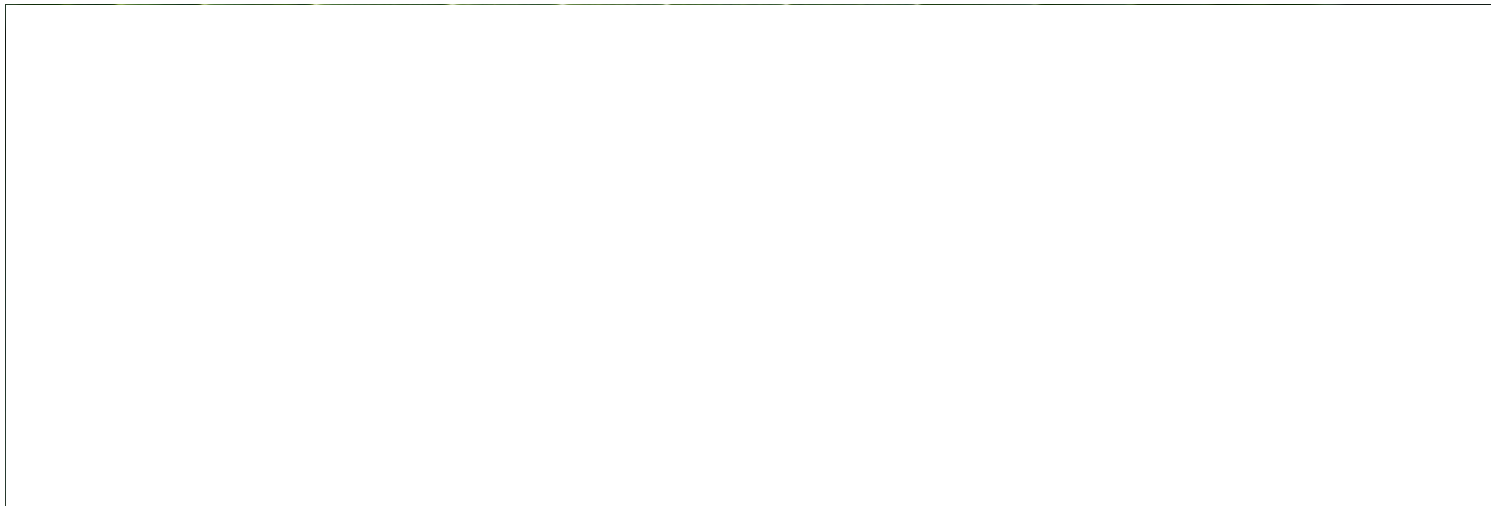




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# Age of distraction

It's not just the kids. Parents can't focus either. What's the answer?

By Deborah Farmer Kris | Nov 10, 2022, 2:20pm PST

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Michael Driver for Deseret News

Since starting this paragraph, I have been distracted by a police siren, an Instagram alert and a text from my spouse. I suddenly remembered that my son didn't put on sunscreen before camp and that I needed to pick up beans for dinner. And then the doctor's office called to schedule my annual mammogram. When I hung up, I started a new document because, in my fidgety preoccupation, I had closed the old one.

Attention is the ability to direct our limited mental resources when and where we need them. The key word here is "limited." Attention is a finite cognitive resource — a battery drained by overstimulation, multitasking, worry, distraction, pings and dings.

I have worked in schools for over 20 years, and I have never heard so much dismay about the inability to focus as I have the last couple of years. Mostly from parents. Talking about themselves.

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In a quest to resuscitate my own executive functioning — and support my children’s attention skills — I have found cause for optimism in the work of neuroscientists and learning experts. This article doesn’t address medication (though that can be beneficial for some people in consultation with their doctors). They offer hope in the form of understanding how attention works, what drains it and how we can restore it.

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## The Myth of Multitasking

Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger is best known for the “miracle on the Hudson,” successfully landing a commercial airliner on the river after both engines were disabled by birds. In recounting how he approached this unthinkable task, he said he relied on more than his aviation training: He drew from his understanding of neuroscience.

“I knew that multitasking is a myth. I knew that when we think we’re multitasking,

well.” Instead of trying to do everything in those pivotal minutes, he said he “chose to do only the most important things but do them very, very well.”

He’s right. Our brains cannot effectively do two tasks at the same time if both activities require focus. Sure, most of us can walk and talk at the same time because walking is an automatic process. But if we are suddenly distracted by a siren or a scream, we will stop walking and devote our full attention to understanding the situation.

Likewise, we can’t read our texts and talk to our kids at the same time. And our kids cannot simultaneously watch TikTok videos and do math homework. We can try (and we will), but the result is a bad game of mental pingpong. This rapid task-switching drains our attention battery much faster than unitasking, or doing one task at a time.

**ltitasking is a myth. When we think we’re multitasking, what we’re really doing is switching rapidly between tasks and not doing any of them well. —Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger**

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## Cognitive Downtime

Barbara Oakley, author of the book “Learning How to Learn: How to Succeed in School Without Spending All Your Time Studying,” points to another attention myth: that you only learn when you are focusing.

Think of your brain like an athlete in training, Oakley told me. “You can’t keep running at top speed for hours at a time, just as you can’t run at top speed mentally for hours at a time.” Most people can only devote their “top mental concentration” for an average of four hours a day.

Luckily, learning also happens during downtime. In fact, purposefully building in brain breaks supports both attention and cognition. Oakley describes this as deliberately shifting between “focused mode and default mode.”

Default mode can be described as wakeful rest: daydreaming or mind-wandering. Think of the sudden insights you have while taking a shower, walking the dog or driving a familiar route with the radio off. These are moments when you aren’t actively focusing on a task and yet your brain is still at work in the background. Research shows that default mode supports creativity, memory consolidation and cognitive connections. Even short mental breaks give the brain time to connect “new learning with other previous things you’ve learned,” says Oakley.

One of the most popular attention strategies is the Pomodoro Technique, something I learned from Oakley five years ago. It’s also simple: Choose one task to work on (unitasking!), minimize distractions, set a timer for 25 minutes and go. After 25 minutes, take a brain break — step outside and get some fresh air, move your body or just let your brain rest and clear. Then dive in for another 25 minutes.

I’m using this strategy right now. After my disastrous attempt at crafting the introduction, I turned on a favorite Pomodoro app — one that shuts down notifications on my phone. I’ve used this app so often in the last few years that my response is Pavlovian: My brain chatter settles down, my anxiety ebbs, my focus sharpens and I am suddenly able to engage with whatever project or article I’ve been procrastinating.

When I teach this strategy to students in study skills workshops (and when they actually try it at home) the response has been universally positive: “I finished my homework in half the time it usually takes me” or “I got a draft of my college essay written in 25 minutes after dreading it for weeks.”

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## Sound vs. Noise

Nina Kraus, director of Brainvolts laboratory and author of “Of Sound Mind: How Our Brain Constructs a Meaningful Sonic World,” says that sound has a profound effect on who we are and how we think. Unwanted sounds — aka noises — have “clear consequences to our ability to remember and pay attention.”

That’s because sound is our body’s alarm system and has been throughout our evolutionary history, says Kraus. Think of how alert we become when we hear an unexpected thump at night. We are suddenly flooded with stress hormones that sharpen our senses and get us ready to act. Now think of all the sound alerts on your devices — the buzzes we compulsively check, just in case it’s important.

When “we are constantly notified and alarmed, we cannot keep our minds on a single thought,” says Kraus. All of these seemingly benign auditory notifications can keep us — and our digitally connected children — in a “mild state of stress.” Is it any wonder our attention battery is constantly drained?

The task for parents is not only to reduce unwanted noise, says Kraus, but to also amplify the “positive sounds in our lives”: undistracted conversations with loved ones, music, bird calls or the crunch of leaves.

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## Attention Restoration Theory

The sights and sounds of nature are not just enjoyable, they can also serve as attention “battery chargers.” That’s the idea behind Attention Restoration Theory, says Ethan Kross, a neuroscientist and author of “Chatter: The Voice in Our Heads

effectively after spending time outside. Nature is a cognitive tool that is “hidden in plain sight,” says Kross. “Nature restores attention.”

So how does it work? “When you go for a walk in a green space, you’re surrounded by stimulating sights like trees and bushes and flowers. They capture your attention, but they do so in a very soft and gentle way,” says Kross. This is called “effortless attention”: Nature stimulates the brain without taxing it, restoring our capacity to focus. “When you leave the walk, those attentional resources are more refreshed for thinking carefully about the problem that you’re grappling with.” Even looking at pictures of nature scenes can be restorative, says Kross. “I have changed the way that I walk to work, and I’ve changed the way I decorated my office based on this work.”

Nature also helps calm another attention-drainer: mental chatter, or that voice in our head that catalogs our worries, woes and to-dos. “When chatter consumes our attention, it leaves little left over to do other things including managing our feelings. And oftentimes the tools that we use to manage our inner voice are effortful and take focus to implement,” says Kross.

Time in nature calms chatter by evoking awe, an emotion with strong mental health benefits. Awe helps us zoom out and broaden our perspective, says Kross. “You feel smaller when you’re contemplating something vast and indescribable — and when you feel smaller, so does your chatter.” He points to the pictures NASA has released from the James Webb Space Telescope. “Every dot is a galaxy. It’s mind blowing. In comparison, how consequential is the chatter I experienced earlier today because my daughter and I got into a little argument about cleaning up in the house? Multiple galaxies or the condition of the living room? Awe broadens us.”

I know what it’s like to feel attentionally tapped-out, distracted by headlines, work demands, overflowing inboxes, health scares and the endless practical minutiae that comes with raising kids. And I also know that if my kids need one thing from me, it’s my attention — not constant hovering, but at least a few minutes a day of undistracted, positive attention. No multitasking. Phone down. Doing something that fills them up without interruption. “So what’s your homework tonight? Did you put

Last night, this looked like a short evening walk. It was past bedtime, but both kids ran out to join me anyway. Suddenly, our dog found a frog in the yard, and we all spent several minutes watching the frog's hops and our pup's playful pounces under the stars. Then they went to bed, and I set a timer and settled in for a final, focused 25 minutes of writing.

*Deborah Farmer Kris is a parenting columnist for PBS KIDS for parents, an education journalist and founder of Parenthood365.*

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