

Distractions Don't Have to Control You

Did you reach for your smartphone shortly after awaking?

If so, [12 minutes later](#), you may reach for your smartphone again. If you are a typical smartphone user, you will check your phone 80 times today and feel anxiety if your phone is out of reach.

[Arguing that constant smartphone usage](#) promises “fulfillment and excitement,” historian Susan Matt presents findings showing that it enables narcissism and even loneliness. Matt argues we are losing the ability to be lonely or bored. When loneliness or boredom arises, “we’re more surprised and alarmed than our ancestors were.” Matt adds, “We don’t – even for a moment – want to be by ourselves.”

Smartphones destroy our ability to concentrate; on average, we [pay attention for less time](#) than a goldfish. [Relationships suffer](#), and so does our health.

Why did so many become addicted to distraction? Perhaps it happened because everyone’s trying to ignore uncomfortable feelings.

What uncomfortable feelings? When your eyes first open in the morning the day feels alive with possibility. Then your thinking kicks in. You feel burdened by the weight of things undone. Your personal insecurities and doubts arise. You notice the ache in your shoulder is still there. Thoughts of a recent unpleasant encounter are still active.

Your thinking is now in overdrive. You simultaneously feel tired and revved up. Yet, as with other addictive behaviors, the distraction of reaching for your phone only temporarily calms your thinking.

An Age-Old Story

Our ancestors had different technology, but history professor [Jamie Kreiner informs us](#) that even medieval monks faced the same problem of reigning in their mind:

[Medieval monks'] tech was obviously different from ours. But their anxiety about distraction was not. They complained about being overloaded with information, and about how, even once you finally settled on something to read, it was easy to get bored and turn to something else. They were frustrated by their desire to stare out of the window, or to constantly check on the time (in their case, with the Sun as their clock), or to think about food or sex when they were supposed to be thinking about God.

Kreiner observes that theologian John Cassian, (John the Ascetic) who lived during the fourth and fifth centuries knew this problem well:

He complained that the mind 'seems driven by random incursions'. It 'wanders around like it were drunk'. It would think about something else while it prayed and sang. It would meander into its future plans or past regrets in the middle of its reading.

Like the monks, our willpower seems to fail us. Kreiner warns, "Distraction is an old problem, and so is the fantasy that it can be dodged once and for all. There were just as many exciting things to think about 1,600 years ago as there are now."

Commit to a Process

A permanent solution may not be possible, but we can commit to a process that will help change habits such as smartphone addiction.

Habits expert [James Clear observes](#), "Your current behaviors

are simply a reflection of your current identity.” If you believe you are the individual who feels distracted by their thinking, you will behave like one.

You might wonder: *What else, could I be? These are my thoughts. I'm thinking them.*

You are not your thoughts; you are the one experiencing your thoughts. The cacophony of thoughts in your head that appears as soon as you wake is not you. With practice, you can enter the non-judgmental position of observing your thinking at any time. Change begins when you identify more with the observing and less with the reacting part of your mind.

Notice when your reactive mind harshly judges yourself and others. Your reactive mind poses as your ally and your protector, but it is not – it is the great disruptor of your day.

Slow down and check in; it might surprise you to see what your thinking is up to and how your thinking sabotages your purpose. You want to have a productive meeting with your colleagues, but your reactive mind wants to mentally judge them.

To enter the observer mode, consider your purpose before reacting. For example, you're about to reach for your phone for the 28th time today. Instead, pause and ask, “Is this consistent with my highest purpose?” A pause is like a speed bump on a busy city street. A speed bump is designed to slow you down and make you more conscious of your speed. An excellent mental speed bump makes you more aware of your thinking and brings back your freedom of choice.

The more you identify with your reactive thinking, the less willpower you have to avoid a smartphone addiction, overeating, or other distractions. Asking, “what is my purpose?” at once increases the choices open to you.

Remember, smartphone addiction, like other addictions, stems from seeking relief from the noisy chatter in our mind. We don't live the lifestyle of a medieval monk, but we, too, seek to connect to something larger than our often petty and trivial thoughts.

To regain the power of choice, observe when you are in a reactive mode. This is our daily practice—to increase awareness of the discordant voice that makes us miserable and learn not to listen to it. You don't need the distraction of reaching for your phone, if you are not in reactive mode.

Look for small wins, is Clear's advice. Small wins build to changed habits. Relying less on distractions allows you to lead a life with more purpose.

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