

HOW TO FOCUS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

FRANCES BOOTH

The Distraction Trap

ASSESS 53

- How often do you use it?
- What time of day do you switch it on? And off?

Now, thinking in general terms, ask yourself:

Are you pulled to one digital distraction particularly?

- Email
- Social media (including Facebook and Twitter)
- Smartphone
- Internet
- Other (name it).

Onto the scales

We have seen that digital distraction exists on a spectrum, from serious addiction (for which you should seek professional psychological help) to moderate or non-use.

If digital users were split into three groups, which group would you be in?

These are some of the traits of these three types (intended as a general guide only).

Sometimes, traits from one type may be experienced by a person of another type who has a weakness in a specific area (being constantly on email, for example).

See which group rings true the most for you.

Which type are you?

Dangerously distracted

• Has email constantly on when computer or phone is on.

- Rarely switches off smartphone (if ever).
- Responds instantly to texts, updates, emails, messages.
- Spends more of the day switched on and using digital devices than switched off.
- Frequently simultaneously uses many different platforms – 'multitasking'.
- Frequently experiences long stretches of time 'disappearing' while online.
- Carries phone in hand at all times.
- Rarely communicates face-to-face or by phone call.

Slippery slope

- Sometimes loses track of chunks of time while browsing the Internet.
- Often does two or more things at once (e.g. Internet shopping while emailing).
- Uses social media without screening out certain feeds or setting a time limit.
- Spends longer than wanted on email.
- Defers to phone in company or before other things that need doing.
- Often gets derailed from tasks by demands from other people via social media/email/phone.

Mostly focused

Tends to use one platform at once (singletasking).

- Switches smartphone, mobile, laptop, tablet, etc. off on a regular basis.
- Doesn't respond instantly to messages.
- Has decided upon an email policy which is not default 'always on'.
- Is very aware of exactly how long is spent online for any digital task.
- Rarely gets distracted from a task.
- Has long spells of being disconnected.

If you're in one group and want to move up to a less distracted group, pinpoint some of the areas you want to start working on. Perhaps circle the things you most want to work on. These are some new behaviours to begin to aim for.

DIGITAL DISTRACTION DIARY

Now you've got some idea of your level of distraction in broad terms, and an idea of which digital platforms could be causing this, it's time to see exactly what is causing your distraction (whether that be mild, moderate or severe).

Many people are surprised at what a big influence their digital behaviour is having over their life and their work, once they start looking closely.

Get yourself a sheet of paper or a notebook and a pen, and write today's date on it. Done that? Great.

This is your distraction diary. It doesn't need to be anything fancy – the important thing is that you carry it around with you in your pocket or handbag all day.

Each time you are distracted, simply note down the time, what you were distracted by, and what you were distracted from.

Here is a template:

Time:	
Distracted by:	
Distracted from:	

For example:

Time:	11.30 am
Distracted by:	Text message
Distracted from:	Walking down street thinking

Time:	2.15 pm
Distracted by:	New email sent to me
Distracted from:	Work I was meant to be doing

Time:	7.30 pm
Distracted by:	Facebook
Distracted from:	Conversation in living room

Get the idea?

It's important not to judge, just observe it and note it down, then carry on.

What about if you intend, for example, to log in to email for 20 minutes?

That's fine – you can note it down if you want (4.07 pm: planned email session for 20 minutes) but you don't have to write it down.

Also note down any distraction that tempts you but that you resist.

For example:

Time:	4.47 pm
Tempted by:	Going off on Internet meander
Almost distracted from:	Writing mind-numbingly dull report
Resisted digital distraction by:	Getting cup of tea instead

Aim to keep your distraction diary for a whole week (it helps to see what you do on different days).

At the end of your week, clear a bit of time (20 minutes should be enough) and sit down and have a look at your distraction diary.

Get a pen or pencil and circle anything you notice.

Is there one thing that comes up again and again? Do distractions come at a certain interval? Do distractions always come at the same time of day?

Look for any patterns you can spot.

Remember, this information is just for you. It's to help capture data about your digital distraction habits.

Looking at your distraction diary for the week:

- What surprised you?
- What were you pleasantly surprised by?
- What seems to be your number one distraction trap?

Don't throw away your diary – we'll look at it again in the next chapter when we look at some common distraction patterns like trigger times of day and trigger tasks.

TIME FOR A TANTRUM

Are you tempted to put the book on the shelf and give up yet?

Working through the process of tackling digital distraction is particularly difficult to start with (remember all the automatic pathways in the brain you are fighting against), so you'd be perfectly entitled to a tantrum.

Go and get yourself a cup of tea or coffee as a well done for getting this far. There's no pretending that it's easy.

You might be particularly frustrated once you start to realise how much time and energy digital distractions are 'taking' from you, yet you haven't yet learnt to stop being distracted by them.

Acknowledge your frustrations by writing them down ('It's too hard.' 'I'm getting nowhere', etc. etc.).

The good news is that, as you get towards the end of this process, you can expect things to change.

You'll feel calmer, less stressed, and healthier. You'll have a strong sense that you are spending your time better. You'll notice the alarming rate of progress you are making on projects that mean something to you.

If you're really frustrated at this point, skip straight over to the next chapter and start working on your focus...

In the rest of this chapter we'll look at the mind, and at a definition of Internet addiction.