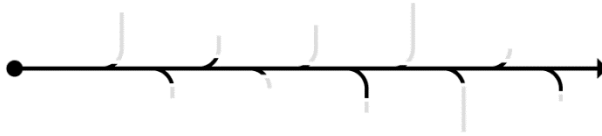


This is a free sample chapter from the book ADHD Pro.

You can get the full book online at <https://adhdpro.xyz/>

Chapter 24

Distractions



Why we get distracted so much

Think about a time you were playing a video game or your favorite sport. A time when you were “in the zone.” Some people call this “flow state.” Were you fighting to keep from being distracted?

Now let’s imagine you’re playing soccer. You find yourself right in front of the net with the ball. You have a perfect, easy shot to score a goal. How difficult is it for you to keep focused on the soccer game? Did you have to delete your apps to remember to kick the ball into the net?

“Eliminating distractions” is a final optimization in a good strategy. If you do all the proper steps with mindfulness, planning, infrastructure, and motivation, you’ll be less likely to be distracted by all the common enemies of focus that you’re so used to fighting.

First, let’s talk about why we get distracted. Your brain is not stimulated enough by your current task, so it looks elsewhere for stimulation. People with ADHD have executive dysfunction and thus have a harder time avoiding alternative stimuli. This is the phenomenon that creates the stereotype of the hyperactive ADHD boy who is distracted in class. Despite the social pressure of his parents, teachers, and peers, this kid just can’t sit still. The assignments and lectures are not stimulating. His brain starts to wander, so he stands up or starts to fidget. He starts becoming a distraction to those around him. The stereotype persists.

This stereotype also contributes to a lot of confusion about what ADHD actually *is*. The inability to sit still in the second grade is just one manifestation of ADHD. I was undoubtedly distracted as a child, but I found the most stimulation in my own brain and imagination. I would “zone out” in class regularly, despite appearing like I was paying attention. When the teacher called my name, I might have seemed “stupid”

because I snapped back to reality and had no idea what the lecture or assignment was about. Since I was not “hyperactive,” I did not fit the stereotype for ADHD. Fortunately, I was clever enough to hide my inability to pay attention, but it’s clear to see how ADHD symptoms can make someone look “stupid” or “slow.”

Internal Struggle

Regardless of how distractions manifest in your life, whether you were a hyper kid or someone who zoned out into your own imagination, it’s vital to understand that the external stimulations are not at fault. If you are not stimulated or motivated to do some work, the alternative stimulations your mind seeks out are just symptoms. The root cause is likely the work itself. That’s why people who try their best to block out all distractions usually fail in the long run because all they did was lock themselves into a room with something they don’t want to do in the first place.

Three Types of Distractions

1.) Alternatives to your boring work

If you’re not stimulated by your work, your brain will try its best to make itself stimulated. This is why I mention motivation before I talk about distractions. If you’re

sufficiently motivated by something, you'll do it. If you're "kind of hungry" and you have a delicious meal in front of you, you'll just eat. If you're not really hungry at all, it's challenging to eat, and you'll want to do something else. No matter how many distractions you remove, you'll only be able to eat if you Force Yourself. Clearly, you shouldn't be eating this meal in the first place. The distractions aren't at fault.

2.) Bad Habits

Humans form habits. If you've ever looked into how to build better habits, you will have stumbled across the idea of the "cue → routine → reward" loop. All this means is that your brain acts upon specific cues, does some routine, and expects to find a reward.

The reward can be anything from satisfying hunger to the clean feeling of having freshly brushed teeth. The cue might be "my teeth feel dirty" or "it's time for bed," the routine is "brush my teeth," and the reward is "my teeth feel clean and minty." There's dopamine action going on here, of course. The action you take to start brushing with your toothpaste releases some level of dopamine as the anticipation of the reward manifests in your mind.

Some of the distractions you have in your life are simple habit loops that you can identify and change. Personally, I have the bad habit of checking Twitter every single time I finish a small piece of what I'm working on. For example, if I finish coding some part of a website, I check Twitter. My cue, in this case, is that I've finished some small checklist item, my routine is to check Twitter, and my reward is the fresh content I find on my timeline. Now that I know about this habit loop, I can be mindful of it and try my best to change it by creating a replacement routine. When I hit my cue of finishing some checklist items in my work, I can make a conscious decision about what I would prefer to do instead.

You will notice that most of the habits you find distracting will sound something like “checked Twitter” or “checked Instagram.” There is no goal. The dopamine from checking your timeline or notifications is the invisible reward. This “checking” generally solves and accomplishes nothing.

It's easy to see how if you had an activity you keep doing that interrupts your work, it might be just a habit you've formed as opposed to some external force attacking your productivity. If you think that such a pattern is distracting from the work you actually want to do, the solution is simply to be more mindful of this habit, and try to change the routine and reward, NOT

to try and totally block it. If you simply try to “stop” all of your “undesirable” habits at once, you’re going to be expending most of your mental energy on ignoring habits instead of actually doing the work you want to do in the first place.

3.) Dopamine Faucets

There are distractions that you *should* eliminate from your life, but only if they fit specific criteria. These I call Dopamine Faucets.

Dopamine Faucets are activities that overpower your agency by overloading your brain with a constant stream of delicious dopamine. These are not addictions, but they feel similar. They’re so appealing to your mind that they dwarf your motivation to do the work you want to do. Dopamine Faucets are a constant stream of desire to do something else. No matter how much you want to do your job, these activities will always have a superior appeal, and you will spend a considerable amount of mental effort just trying to ignore them.

Some common Dopamine Faucets are video games, binge-watching TV shows, YouTube, and many mobile apps such as Instagram or Twitter. Most are digital and designed explicitly for something called “engagement.” I’ll spare you the edgy new-age minimalist TED Talk, but basically, teams of smart

engineers spend years optimizing these creations to output as much dopamine as possible.

Dopamine Faucets affect ADHDers in similar ways that hyperfocus does. We get totally immersed and forget about the rest of the world. Some of us can successfully avoid this in the moment, but sometimes it's better to remove them from our lives in the first place.

When to eliminate distractions

Eliminate distractions if you have done everything else first. Are you doing all you can to become more mindful? Do you have a plan? Have you ensured that your infrastructure is in place? Are you motivated to do the activity that you're getting distracted from?

If you've done all of that and are *still* having trouble staying focused, then you should start paying attention to what's distracting you. You're likely already aware of what your distractions are. After all, you wouldn't be aware of "getting distracted" unless you caught yourself in the act.

So what *is* distracting you? Is it a video game you're compelled to play? Is it social pressure to hop online and spend 8 hours playing? Social pressure is a distraction in itself, and it's a very tempting one. This is where the "eliminating" rhetoric starts to

break down. You're obviously not going to abandon your social circles, but maybe you start making yourself unavailable in a polite way. Not permanently, but just enough that you can do what you need to do. This is a rare time to expend as much mental effort as you can. Once you've said "no," the pressure is usually off.

If it's something else, try your best to delete or remove it. It won't last forever, and you won't be perfect, but at the very least, it will let you know if the availability of the accused distraction is actually as distracting as you think it is. Often times merely living without the offending distraction for a day or two is enough to understand its previous effect on your work.

Practical Implementation

Eliminating distractions is mentally challenging. They are dopamine sources that our mind will miss dearly. Please use your mental effort wisely. Do not try to become a robot overnight. Try to just pick one activity to change at a time, and do more as time goes on.

This is how I would go about eliminating distractions:

To start, find a notebook, a piece of paper, or open a note-taking app on your phone. Nothing fancy, just somewhere to write notes that you can take with you.

At the start of your day, write down every single lapse of focus you have. Anything biological should be omitted (i.e., bathroom breaks or food).

Your list might look like this at the end of the day:

- Checked Twitter
- Checked Instagram
- Checked Reddit
- Played video games for 2 hours
- Checked Twitter
- Watched Netflix for 1 hour
- Checked Instagram

Whenever I do this, I cringe at the vast amount of “checking” I do. Noticing the volume of time wasted on actions I don’t remember is enough to prompt me to stop doing it. Just being aware of these actions gives you the control to decide whether or not you want to keep doing them.

If you decide you don’t want to visit a particular website anymore, use whatever means necessary on your phone or web

browser to block it. If the video game you're spent 2 hours on is not something you want to play anymore, delete it.

That's pretty much it. There isn't any magic to eliminating distractions. The magic happens before you even get distracted by building a better overall strategy. Figuring out how to stop craving these actions rather than hiding them is usually rooted in some other underlying causes. If you're done all of the other components of your strategy, you'll likely be less prone to distractions in the first place.

You might eventually fail at eliminating distractions. For any game you delete, you might reinstall it somewhere down the road. This same goes for apps and websites. The point isn't to be perfect and become a robot. The point is to build yourself up to a point where you are living a life that is stimulating enough to not need these distractions in the first place. This takes practice, patience, and persistence. If you try your best as often as possible, you *will* reduce the number of unwanted distractions in your life.