



THE DISTRACTED MIND
ANCIENT BRAINS IN A HIGH-TECH WORLD



THE BOOK



The Distracted Mind

Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World

by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen



INTRODUCTION

Ever wondered why it is so hard to stay away from your devices?

The human brain has evolved to seek information whenever possible. While this evolutionary trend helped us to avoid predators in the distant past, in the modern age it leads to distraction and interruption. Now that we have all the information in the world in the palms of our hands, it's no wonder we are device addicts.

And although you may think you can multitask by checking Facebook while watching TV or texting and driving, in fact what you are doing is 'task shifting'.

The Distracted Mind explains why we are so drawn to multitasking and why it is no good for us. Starting with a thorough breakdown of how the human brain works and why it struggles to handle the overwhelming waves of information in the modern world, The Distracted Mind wraps up with essential advice on how to handle it all.

The ultimate guide to getting along in the modern world, The Distracted Mind is as much a guide book as it is educational. It's a must read for anyone who feels like they are lost in the digital age.



5 BEST QUOTES

"Distractions are pieces of goal-irrelevant information that we either encounter in our external surroundings or generate internally within our own minds."

"Humans have always lived in a complex world, one rich with enticing distractions and teeming with countless interruptions via alternate activities that threaten to bar us from accomplishing our goals. While goal interference has likely existed for as long as modern humans have walked the Earth, the last several decades have witnessed profound changes."

"So many technological innovations have enhanced our lives in countless ways, but they also threaten to overwhelm our brain's goal-directed functioning with interference. This interference has a detrimental impact on our cognition and behaviour in daily activities. It impacts every level of our thinking, from perceptions, decision making, communication, emotional regulation, and our memories."

"Our technology continues to find a way to attract our attention because this is what brings 'eyeballs,' and the common marketing wisdom is that eyeballs bring money."

A study of more than 200 employees at a variety of companies investigated the factors that predicted employee stress levels. While having too much work to do was the best predictor, it was only slightly stronger in predicting exhaustion, anxiety and physical complaints than outside interruptions, many of which were electronic in nature."



9 BIG IDEAS

1. TWO TYPES OF THINKING

Humans have evolved to seek information.

A reaction to stimuli at the basic level is called a 'bottom down' reaction; you touch the hot stove, you remove your hand... it is instinctive and instant.

Information seeking behaviour is 'top down'. This means taking that extra moment to think before acting or reacting. When you decide to pick up your phone, this is top down thinking. This top down thinking is an intrinsic part of what makes you human and has led to all of humanity's amazing achievements.

However, this top down thinking evolved to make us eager to seek out new information at all times. When an ancient human ancestor came across a stream, before taking a drink, he would stop and assess the environment, mining it for information about the possible presence of predators or other dangers. Now that there are smartphones, access to information is at unprecedented levels. That means there is a lot of temptation, giving us many more decisions to make each day.

2. GETTING DISTRACTED

When you get distracted in your search for information, it can take a long time to get back on task. Other than the obvious danger of crashing a car or incidents in other high risk scenarios, distraction is a huge drain on productivity.

Distraction is a form of interference that can be internal or external; a noisy room or your own thoughts for example. Interruption is the other form of interference, which can be internal or external.

An external interruption can be a notification on your phone, while an internal interruption is deciding to check for notifications on your phone. Whenever one of these interruptions takes place, it derails your brain and makes it difficult to get back on task.

3. HUMANS CAN'T MULTITASK

No matter what you think, multitasking simply isn't possible. Gazzaley and Rosen explain that when you think you are multitasking what you are actually doing is 'task shifting'. The term multitasking comes from computing to describe when a powerful computer performs multiple tasks simultaneously.

Even most computers shift between tasks as needed! The human brain certainly can't perform two complex tasks at once. Sure, you can walk and talk, and eat and watch TV but you can't read a book and listen to a conversation at the same time. You are actually switching between the two.... and you are missing more than you realise.

Try listening to the television while you listen to someone talking to you. You will realise that you phase one out. This is why attempting to multitask is so risky and disruptive. When you task switch, you are not fully engaged with one task or the other.



9 BIG IDEAS

4. TECHNOLOGY IS ADDICTIVE

When you reach for your phone, it's likely that your brain is receiving a dopamine hit; a rush of positive feelings. This is what keeps you coming back for more.

According to the seminal research of B F Skinner, sporadic reward is highly addictive. When you check your social media or email, most of what you see is of little interest. However, those posts or emails that trigger interest or spark joy are just common enough to keep you coming back for more.

The fact that you never know for sure how satisfying it will be to check social media is what keeps you reaching for that screen. The exact same principle keeps people gambling. You just never know when you will win.

5. THE TECH REVOLUTION HAD THREE GAME CHANGERS

After explaining how the world has gone through a number of technological revolutions including the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, Gazzaley and Rosen talk about the current Information Revolution.

The Information Revolution was made up of what Gazzaley and Rosen call three game changers; shifts in technology that created monumental change.

- Game changer one was the advent of the internet
- Number two was the rise of social media
- Number three was the take over of smart phones

These three game changers created the digital environment in which we now live. Without these, there wouldn't be the same access to information and sheer scale of interruptions and distractions.

6. METACOGNITION

One of the four areas that Gazzaley and Rosen recommend working on in order to change your behaviour, metacognition, in simple terms, is 'thinking about thinking'.

For the purposes of The Distracted Mind, altering your metacognition means becoming aware of the reasons why allowing distractions to happen can be bad for you. The most simple example is thinking about the fact that many drivers are killed or injured each year because they were texting and driving.

Making the decision to think like this is the key to creating the motivation to change your habits.



9 BIG IDEAS

7. ACCESS

Access is the second key behaviour and one that can be altered quite simply in many instances. For example, if you are driving, place your phone in the boot or on the back seat where you can't reach it.

Removing access can be more difficult in some circumstances of course, such as when you need to do work on the computer. Gazzaley and Rosen recommend not having more than one tab open at a time as a start.

It is also a good idea to contact anyone who may interrupt you and let them know that you will be unavailable for the next hour or so or whatever time you need to get your work done.

8. BOREDOM

Naturally, one of the key triggers to distraction is boredom. The Distracted Mind lays out some key strategies to fight boredom, including listening to audiobooks or podcasts while driving and taking sufficient breaks when working on a high focus task.^{12a}

The key is to work with and around your boredom and to keep it to a minimum. By making tasks less boring or planning what you will do in your breaks, you can stop boredom from making you pick up your phone and getting off task.

9. ANXIETY

The final factor that often has you reaching for the phone or checking email is anxiety.

This can be caused by fear of missing out or worry that you might miss an important work email. Meditation and mindfulness are two good steps to help reduce anxiety in general. Getting out into nature has also been shown to help reduce anxiety and to make people happier.

Using some of your access strategies can also help anxiety. Letting people know you won't be available except in emergencies means that you know no one will be sending you messages unless it is vital. And if you are not expecting any messages, you will not be anxious about what you are missing!

**3 ACTION STEPS****1. UNDERSTAND THE HUMAN MIND**

Metacognition is the act of ‘thinking about thinking’. By employing metacognition and understanding how your actions impact you, you’ll take the first step to changing your actions.

Without that understanding, you have little reason to change.

2. LIMIT ACCESS

One of the most obvious problems with digital interruptions is that they are so intrusive. This is because our devices are always around. Tell people that you are busy and keep your devices at a distance when you need to knuckle down and concentrate.

3. FIGHT BOREDOM

Boredom is one of the main reasons you reach for your phone. Find ways to fight boredom by taking breaks or making your tasks more entertaining. By reducing boredom, you reduce the desire to break concentration and pick up your device.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key takeaway of *The Distracted Mind* is that despite the interruptions and distractions of the digital age, you can still make the world we live in work for you. By altering your behaviour and sometimes using outside aids such as getting out into nature, you can shift the paradigm.

You are not a slave to your devices! Let them work for you to optimise your life. You don’t have to let them chain you to a lack of genuine productivity.

By making some slight adjustments to your metacognition, digital access and boredom levels, you can get back to being productive. Digital technology should be an aid and not a burden so shift your focus and let it work for you.



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A neuroscientist and a psychologist explain why your brain is wired to chase distraction, and what all that switching quietly costs you. Then they hand you the fixes.

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