

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters: Staying Focused and Avoiding Digital Distractions Makes a Difference

Love it or hate it, we live in a digital age. And during this time of COVID-19 digital distractions have possibly increased and can play a key role in our kids' ability to develop and maintain their ability to concentrate and focus on the task at hand — this, by the way, is the same for people of all ages. Of particular concern is our kids, as their brains are developing and under construction. As they prepare to return to the structure of school after months of rather unstructured existence and possibly considerable digital distraction, there may be a significant increase in their inability to pay attention and avoid distractions.

Many things can interfere with our ability to focus, which is a brain performance task and part of the science and innovation work of the Brain Health Initiative. The brain is part of our organ system so things happening in our bodies — from illness and aging to lifestyle factors such as sleep and nutrition — play a key role in our ability to pay attention and focus. The neurochemical fluctuations that govern our mood can also play a role. But perhaps one of the biggest impacts on our ability to concentrate may be the avalanche of digital distractions we experience every day.

Our ever-present and excessive use of smart technology, such as phones, tablets, and computers can have an impact on our brain health and performance and may be a risk factor for brain illness. The ability to remain focused on a task is an essential aspect of learning, understanding, and achievement. Simply hearing the sound or feeling the vibration of an alert presents a distraction, even if we don't take time to view the message and this interferes with brain performance, impacting our ability to receive information, master, and accomplish, no matter our age. According to a 2018 survey by the technology company, Asurion, we check our phones an average of 80 times a day, with some of the highest users reporting 300 daily phone checks. Every time we interrupt a task to check our phones, we break our concentration and have to start over again.

For students, especially those participating in remote learning, digital distractions can be harmful to study habits, breaking their concentration and rendering online learning ineffective. While

smartphones and other mobile devices can be used for positive purposes in the classroom, the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University says evidence suggests that cell phones and pop up communications on our computers, for example, generally are a distraction for students. Most humans are not wired for multitasking, and that includes using cell phones during class. An [article from the Bok Center](#) highlights studies comparing students who text during a class or while studying with those who didn't and found those who text often took lower quality notes, retained less information, and performed worse on tests. In addition, several studies showed that device usage is distracting to others.

In addition to being distracting, our devices emit blue light that can produce insomnia. Studies show that blue-light exposure an hour before bed can decrease sleep time and reduce the body's production of melatonin, the hormone connected with normal sleep cycles.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

The Bok Center says that while instructors, including online learning environments, may want to consider banning mobile devices and pop up communications during class. There are certainly benefits to including technology in learning. They suggest finding ways to keep students positively engaged during classes to avoid distractions from text messages or social media posts, such as:

- **Incorporate social media into the class.** Ask students to crowd source questions using social media and see what their friends know about a topic or use clickers (classroom and audience response systems) to quiz students before and during the lecture.
- **Use humor and variety.** Students pay attention to humor. They are also more likely to pay attention when engaged so find ways to engage students in discussions.

For those of us who are attempting to stay focused while we work, the Society for Human Resource Management offers some tips for avoiding digital distraction, both in the office and if working from home.

- **Turn off e-mail notifications.** Just knowing that you have an incoming email is a distraction. You need to manage this constant attack that drains mental energy and makes you more vulnerable to distraction.
- **Close any nonessential websites or apps during focused work or study periods.**
- **Put away personal devices.**
- **Create alerts.** Let people know you are focused on work and the best times to reach you.
- **Take a short break every 60 to 90 minutes.** Breaks should allow you to clear your mind —take a walk outside, exercise, talk to another person, listen to music.

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.***

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