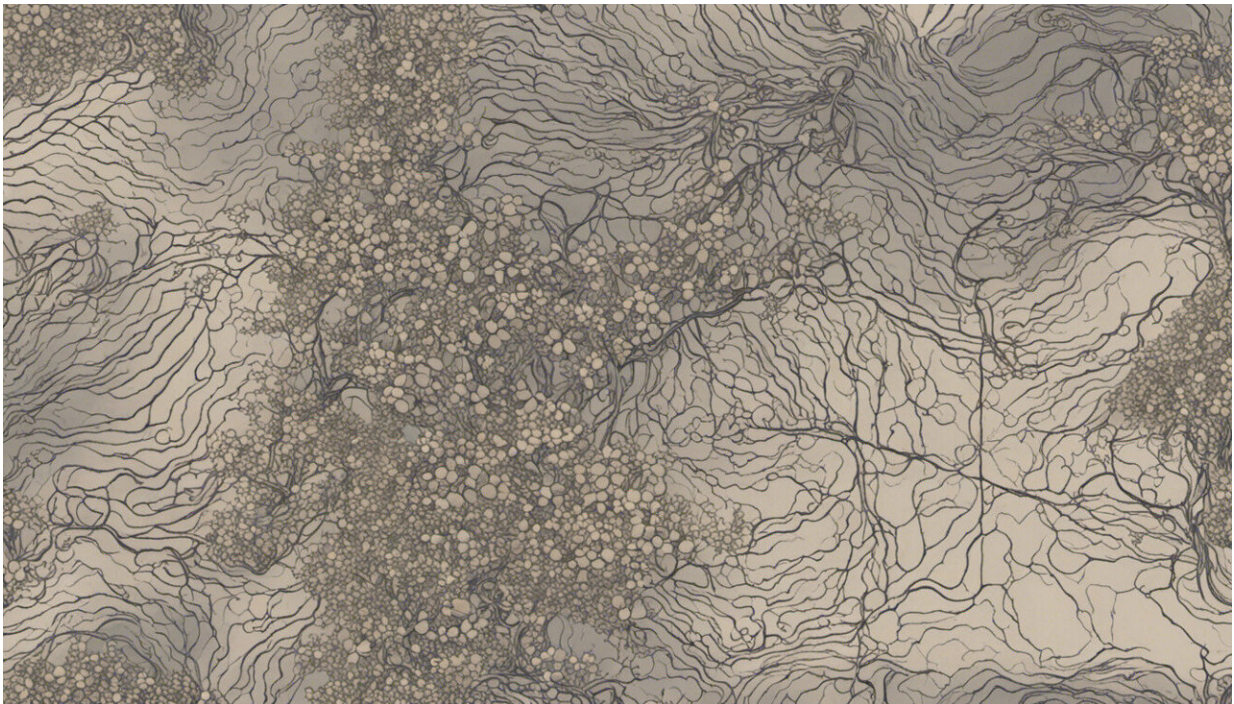


Ping, your pizza is on its way. Ping, please rate the driver. Yes, constant notifications really do tax your brain

December 8 2022, by Sharon Horwood



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A ping from the pizza company. A couple of pings from your socials. Ping, ping, ping from your family WhatsApp group trying to organize a weekend barbecue.

With all those smartphone notifications, it's no wonder you lose focus on what you're trying to do do.

Your [phone](#) doesn't even need to ping to distract you. There's [pretty good evidence](#) the mere presence of your phone, silent or not, is enough to divert your attention.

So what's going on? More importantly, how can you reclaim your focus, without missing the important stuff?

Is it really such a big deal?

When you look at the big picture, those pings can really add up.

Although estimates vary, the [average person](#) checks their phone [around 85 times a day](#), roughly once every 15 minutes.

In other words, every 15 minutes or so, your attention is likely to wander from what you're doing. The trouble is, it can take [several minutes](#) to regain your concentration fully after being [interrupted](#) by your phone.

If you're just watching TV, distractions (and refocusing) are no big deal. But if you're driving a car, trying to study, at work, or spending time with your loved ones, it could lead to some fairly substantial problems.

Two types of interference

The pings from your phone are "exogenous interruptions". In other words, something external, around you, has caused the interruption.

We can [become conditioned](#) to feeling excited when we hear our phones ping. This is the [same pleasurable feeling](#) people who gamble can

quickly become conditioned to at the sight or sound of a poker machine.

What if your phone is on silent? Doesn't that solve the ping problem?
Well, no.

That's another type of interruption, an internal (or endogenous) [interruption](#).

Think of every time you were working on a task but your attention drifted to your phone. You may have fought the urge to pick it up and see what was happening online, but you probably checked anyway.

In this situation, we can become so strongly conditioned to expect a reward each time we look at our phone we don't need to wait for a [ping](#) to trigger the effect.

These impulses are powerful. Just reading this article about checking your phone may make you feel like ... checking your phone.

Give your brain a break

What do all these interruptions mean for cognition and well-being?

There's increasing evidence push notifications are associated with [decreased productivity](#), [poorer concentration](#) and [increased distraction](#) at work and school.

But is there any evidence our brain is working harder to manage the frequent switches in attention?

One study of people's [brain waves found](#) those who describe themselves as heavy smartphone users were more sensitive to push notifications than ones who said they were light users.

After hearing a push notification, heavy users were significantly worse at recovering their concentration on a task than lighter users. Although push notification interrupted concentration for both groups, the heavy users took much longer to regain focus.

Frequent interruptions from your phone can also leave you [feeling stressed](#) by a need to respond. Frequent smartphone interruptions are also associated with [increased FOMO](#) (fear of missing out).

If you get distracted by your phone after responding to a [notification](#), any subsequent [procrastination](#) in returning to a task can also leave you feeling guilty or frustrated.

There's [certainly evidence](#) suggesting the longer you spend using your phone in unproductive ways, the lower you tend to rate your well-being.

How can I stop?

We know switching your phone to silent isn't going to magically fix the problem, especially if you're already a frequent checker.

What's needed is behavior change, and that's hard. It can take several attempts to see lasting change. If you have ever tried to quit smoking, lose weight, or start an exercise program you'll know what I mean.

Start by turning off all non-essential notifications. Then here are some things to try if you want to reduce the number of times you check your phone:

- charge your phone overnight in a different room to your bedroom. Notifications can prevent you falling asleep and can repeatedly rouse you from essential sleep throughout the night

- interrupt the urge to check and actively decide if it's going to benefit you, in that moment. For example, as you turn to reach for your phone, stop and ask yourself if this action serves a purpose other than distraction
- try the [Pomodoro method](#) to stay focused on a task. This involves breaking your concentration time up into manageable chunks (for example, 25 minutes) then rewarding yourself with a short break (for instance, to check your phone) between chunks. Gradually increase the length of time between rewards. Gradually re-learning to sustain your attention on any task can take a while if you're a high-volume checker.

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