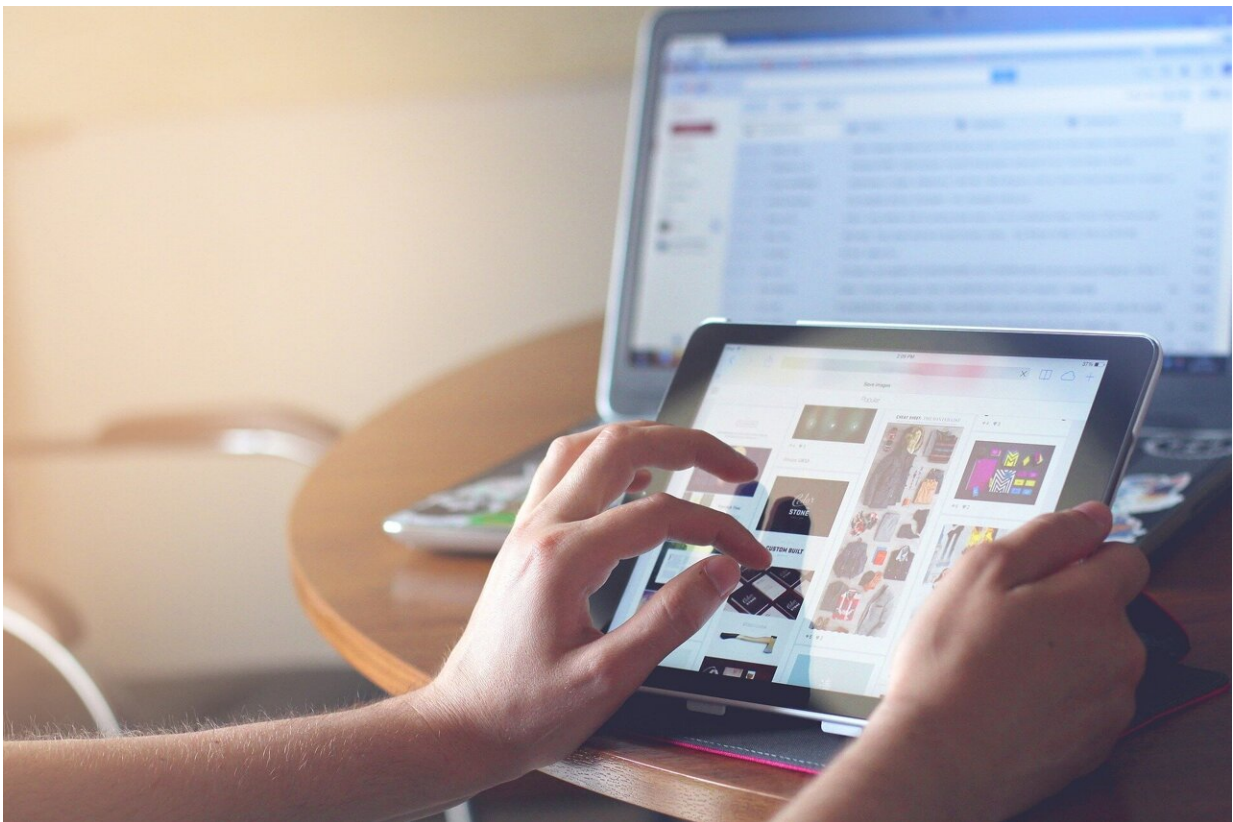


Digital multi-tasking is ruining our work, school grades and sleep; here are 7 ways we can reclaim our attention spans

June 26 2024, by Teresa Rossignoli Palomeque



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With the summer holidays now upon us, many people will be looking forward to kicking back with a good novel, or having the time to read

longer articles. However, technology is making it harder and harder for us to concentrate on long texts, and many of us give up after a few minutes. Instead, we find ourselves jumping from task to task, or from window to window on the computer, and struggle to find the peace of mind to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes.

Whether working or relaxing, we are immersed in nearly constant screen time, be it on TVs, computers, mobiles or tablets. Phones are especially hard to avoid: we take them everywhere, and use them to access basic services like banks or food shopping, as well as for videos, podcasts or games. In Spain, for example, people spend an average of [5.45 hours a day online](#), with [similar figures across Europe](#)—the UK average sits at 5.75 hours, while Portugal tops Europe's rankings with around 7.5 hours per day.

This is having an impact on our brains. We are becoming accustomed to what is known as "bottom-up" attention, where emotions or interest are triggered by external stimuli that we cannot control. Instead of voluntarily directing our attention (known as "top-down" attention), digital media catches it, whether we want it to or not.

The problem with so much "bottom-up" attention is that it makes it difficult for us to attend to less immediately attractive tasks, or ones that require slower processing, such as reading, analyzing information or studying.

Digital multi-tasking

One characteristic of how we consume multimedia content is that it forces us to multi-task: We switch between different types of content and information without processing them slowly. This way of reading [has a negative impact on school performance](#), and it creates dependency—it activates the same [areas of our brains as an addiction](#). In

other words, digital content "hooks" us to the detriment of other tasks.

What's more, it is also affecting our quality of sleep, which is closely connected to our attention spans.

Part of the problem is that we are used to being constantly connected to our devices, even when we go to bed. It has been shown that the light from screens confuses our brain, making it think that it is daytime, preventing us from generating melatonin—the hormone that helps us fall asleep. [Sleep is essential](#) to stabilize memory and to perform attentively the next day.

It is therefore no coincidence that [attention deficit issues](#) are on the rise. In order to stay focused, we need to not be constantly connected to the internet. Indeed, there is debate about banning or limiting the use of devices in workplaces and classrooms.

Fighting the effects of digital multi-tasking

There are several things we can do to improve our concentration and to process information more slowly.

1. Reduce screen time and disconnect when you need to focus on other tasks. Minimize children's [screen time](#), and limit them to [educational content](#) when they do have access to these devices.
2. Spend time outdoors and in nature. This has scientifically proven benefits for our attention spans, and even for our [overall intellectual capacity](#).
3. Do exercise. Physical activity is beneficial for both [physical and mental health](#). It is especially good for our attention spans, memory, emotional regulation and mood.
4. Ensure you have good [sleep hygiene](#) by reducing stimulation before bedtime.

5. Follow a [balanced diet](#), paying attention to [antioxidants and minerals](#), which are essential to proper brain function.
6. Build routines that [discourage](#) you from being drawn in by digital distractions. This can include [meditation, listening to music, or reading](#).
7. Adapt your environment. If you work from home, for example, keep a separate space for work, and keep anything work-related out of sight unless it is being used. More generally, use timers to carry out longer tasks and take short breaks—you can then, gradually but consciously, increase the time you spend concentrating on a task. The order of tasks is also important: do the activities that require more attention or effort first, and then finish with easier ones—our [attention](#) tends to wane as we get tired.

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