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This Is America

The case for progress

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Devices To Manage Our Devices

Suggestions for changing our relationship to our online world.


In 1890, William James, the founder of American psychology, defined attention as “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.” Distraction, its opposite, James characterized as a “confused, dazed scatterbrained state.”

Agreeing that attention is indispensable to a productive, fulfilled life, David Levy, a professor at the Information School of the University of Washington, points out that an openness to interruptions – and possible dangers – is also crucial to human survival. In Mindful Tech, he emphasizes that in an age of emails, smart phones, Facebook, texts and tweets, achieving a balance between the two is urgently important.

Levy’s book has a simple and compelling message. Many of us, Levy claims, have allowed our online activities “to be governed by unexamined rules and expectations, as well as by unconscious habits.” We can change our relationship to our devices when we bring greater
focus, self-reflection, and conscious choice to the “things that are demanding our attention” and learn to recognize internal and external triggers, pause, and respond skillfully to them.

To get the process started, Levy (who has a Ph.D. in computer science, a diploma in calligraphy and bookbinding, and an affiliation with the Mindfulness in Education Network) proposes exercises to increase our awareness of how we respond to email, multi-tasking, and unplugging. By observing “the conditions under which we normally operate and their effect on us,” Levy writes, we can discover which behaviors limit our effectiveness and plan how to respond in the moment. The four strategies he identifies for staying focused – establishing intentions, returning awareness to the breath and body, slowing down, and establishing boundaries – are, of course, relevant to almost every aspect of our lives.

They are, however, much easier to identify than to implement. The challenge, knowing when and how choice liberates and when it debilitates, and acting on that knowledge, is daunting. Consider, for example, Levy’s examination of multi-tasking. Here, in my view, his consciously crafted commitment to maintain a non-judgmental, one-size-does-not-fit-all tone seems strained and counter-productive. Levy acknowledges the dangers of texting while driving (and is surely aware of the common practice of responding to an email while talking on the phone), but defines multi-tasking as “rapid task-switching, not maintaining simultaneous attentional contact with several objects in focus.” He indicates that “a growing number of studies point to the problematic side of multi-tasking,” but includes claims that it is a “valuable, even a necessary twenty-first century skill.”

And, apparently, Levy has not followed up with the students who participated in his exercise (which involved downloading software to create a video record of their activities), many of whom concluded that task-switching reflected boredom or procrastination, to see if some (or any) of them subsequently altered their habitual multi-tasking modes.

Nor does Mindful Tech offer specific recommendations about unplugging, at a time in which the lines between work and play, weekdays and weekends, are disappearing. Levy reports that most of his students felt that unplugging resulted in increased productivity, better use of their time, more relaxation and less stress. We do not know, however, whether these responses correlate with how unplugged they were and how long they remained unplugged. And, as with multi-tasking, we do not know whether participating in the exercise had an enduring impact on their heretofore entrenched behavior.

Clearly, a lot more work needs to be done to help bring balance to our digital lives. That said, Levy’s contemplative approach to using devices and apps is a good first step. After all, these days, in our “outer-directed focus” and the urgent need we feel to get things done, we are increasingly impatient, distracted, and less attentive to what is happening to our minds and bodies. Levy’s “mindful check-in” is designed to counter these tendencies. And, clearly, the best way to evaluate this practice of guided meditation is to try it.