

# Must. **Focus.**

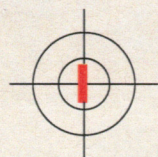
If you get distracted a lot, you're in good company. Here are five reasons you can't seem to stay on task and what to do about it.

a detour during conversations, too. While listening to a friend tell a story I'll space out and start to think about what to pack for my weekend getaway, then I'll reenter the conversation

15 seconds later, sneaking in a quick *uh-huh* to cover up my absence.

I'm only 43 but I've experienced enough of these senior moments that I've googled the symptoms of age-related memory loss to reassure myself that I'm not on the fast track to dementia. (I'm not.) I even asked my doctor if he thought I needed to be evaluated for attention deficit disorder. (He didn't.) When it comes to the big stuff—doing my job, paying my credit card bills, making flights on time—I'm high functioning. And I've never had trouble

RICHARD FOULSER/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM



find that it gets worse around the holidays. I begin a task—say, wrapping stocking stuffers for my niece and nephews. As I'm searching for gift wrap in the hall closet, I spy a pair of winter boots that need resoling. I grab the boots and place them by the front door so I'll remember to take them to the shoe repair shop in the morning. On my way back to the closet, I notice a dirty coffee mug on a side table. Thinking I'm being efficient, I do a

drive-by and pick it up on my way to the kitchen. Okay, where was I? Oh, wait, there's my empty Brita pitcher on the counter. I'd better fill it up and put it in the refrigerator. In shutting the fridge door I notice a holiday coupon I'd posted so I'd use it before the expiration date . . . which has now passed. I take the coupon to my paper recycling bin, which is overflowing . . . You see where this is going. Or not going, rather. My attention is like a wide-eyed baby's, transfixed by every shiny object dangled in front of it. My focus can take



academically, one of the hallmarks of ADHD. So why am I acting as though I have it? I went to experts for answers, and they came up with a few possible explanations for what's been going on.

➔ **I'M STRESSED OUT.** "Your brain on stress more or less functions like the brain of someone with ADHD," says Mary Solanto, Ph.D., director of the ADHD Center at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. People with ADHD tend to focus on whatever seems most pressing or interesting to them at the moment while everything else goes out the window. "The brains of those with ADHD have less activity

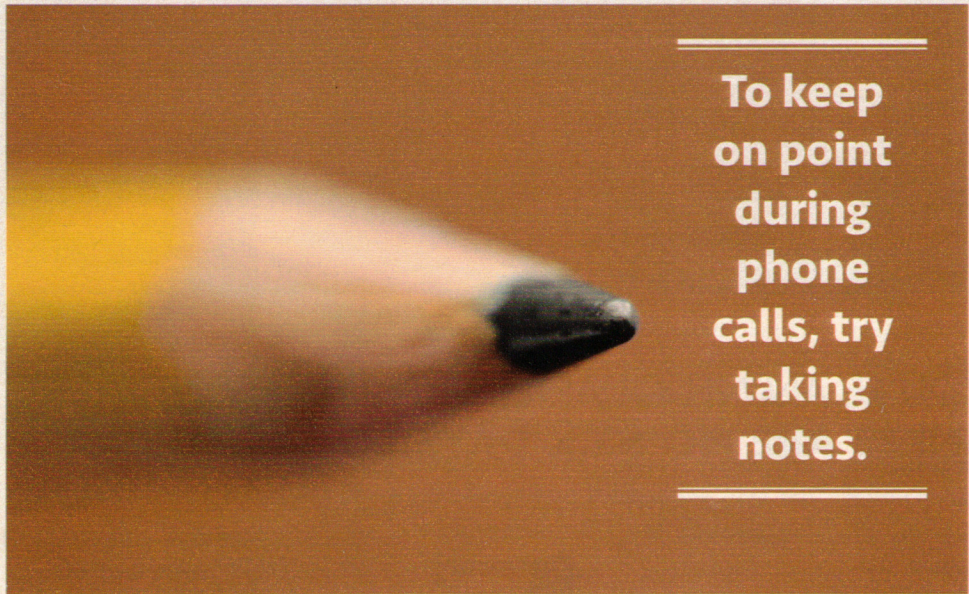
harnesses your attention and funnels it into one all-important task: *Run!* The problem is that nowadays you have little need for a fight-or-flight response, but because your brain is still wired for a prehistoric encounter with a beast, even non-life-threatening stressors can slow down the brain functions you need to tackle your to-do list. You can become overly fixated on one thing—a stressor that isn't likely to kill you—and be unable to concentrate on much else.

I know this feeling well. Several months ago I received an email from my boss with this subject line: "Can you stop by my office around 3, there's something I want to chat about." I went

(Incidentally, the meeting was about a fun assignment I was happy to take on.) It was as if I'd caught a case of ADHD. Turns out, I basically had.

I asked Dr. Solanto if techniques that work for her ADHD patients could also work for a garden-variety stress case like me. Absolutely, she told me—though her first piece of advice would be to address the source of the stress. Exercise and deep-breathing techniques could also help. In the meantime, she says, if you're having trouble staying focused for any reason, whether it's ADHD or stress, you need to be extra careful and extremely consistent in using standard organizational

strategies. It may sound basic, but get a day planner and find ways to motivate yourself to actually use it. Create a ritual: Every morning, once you get your coffee, take 10 minutes to write out the day's to-do list and prioritize it. Be realistic: Ask yourself what has to be done no matter what, which tasks can wait and what you can delegate. Then map out your day, thinking about each task and how long it will take. If you



To keep  
on point  
during  
phone  
calls, try  
taking  
notes.

in the prefrontal cortex—the area where organization and time management take place," Dr. Solanto explains.

The thing is, even if you *don't* have ADHD that same area of the brain starts to shut down when you're anxious, stressed or depressed, and your attention shifts to whatever's upsetting you. This ability to narrow your focus is a handy trick if, say, you're a cave woman being chased by a bear. Planning and time-management functions fade into the background as the stress response

cold. It was incredibly vague and I immediately began filling in the blanks with the most awful possibilities. I worried that she was going to lecture me about my morning lateness or, worse, lay me off despite having just enthusiastically hired me. Not surprisingly, my work performance that day suffered: I missed a meeting because I was calling a friend to dissect the mysterious email and I spaced out during a phone conversation with a coworker and misrouted a manuscript as a result.

have a smartphone or a computer, set alarms and reminders about your appointments and deadlines.

To stay focused during a conversation, take notes if you can and get in the habit of restating what the other person just said in order to stay on point and get the content. If you find it hard to start something because you're stressed or overwhelmed, don't even think about tackling the whole project, Dr. Solanto advises. Instead, break it down into smaller tasks.



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➔ **I'M MULTITASKING.** Even when you're not super-stressed your brain can only process so many complex tasks simultaneously before it fills up and freezes. "The average number of mental goals a person can manage at one time ranges from three to nine, but keeping track of even four or five goals at once can be challenging," explains David Meyer, Ph.D., an authority on multitasking and director of the Brain, Cognition, and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan. The skill of focusing on multiple immediate tasks is called "mental goal stacking," and if the stack gets too high, some goals will naturally get lost, he says.

Don't I know it! Last week I had an unusually packed day—cable guy at 8, meeting at 10, doctor's appointment at noon, project deadline by 5, pick up dry cleaning by 6, blind date at 7 (don't ask). Jump to midnight that night, as I lay in bed congratulating myself that I'd managed to (a) not kill the cable guy for interrupting my Internet service for 5 hours, (b) email the assignment to my boss by 4:30 and (c) go on my blind date. It wasn't until I was lying there in silence that I realized I'd missed my doctor's appointment.

When I ask Dr. Meyer how I can increase my goal-stacking limit—or at least avoid dropping goals in the future—I expect him to let me in on a cool memory trick used by neurologists. Instead, he says something that sounds as if it came off a refrigerator magnet: Finish what you start. When he explains the logic, however, it rings true. "Leaving some of your jobs unfinished just adds to your set of unfinished tasks," Dr. Meyer says. And that ever-growing pile of unfinished goals can gnaw away at you like a child asking repeatedly, "Are we there yet?" Better to tackle one thing at a time so it gets removed from the stack.

Dr. Meyer also recommends practicing mindfulness, the technique of focusing solely on one task or thought, whether it's just cooking dinner (no watching *Housewives* while chopping onions!) or just berating the cable guy (*ahem*). The more you train yourself to focus single-mindedly, the easier it will be to do it automatically.

➔ **I MAY BE ENTERING PERIMENOPAUSE.** For most women menopause doesn't just suddenly happen. Before your periods stop there's perimenopause, which often means a



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## Getting a bit forgetful in your 40s? That's normal, but there are things you can do to boost your brainpower.

five- to 10-year stretch of all those lovely symptoms you've heard about. As if night sweats, erratic periods and mood swings weren't bad enough, the impending change of life can also affect your ability to concentrate and remember things, says Susan Hellerstein, M.D., an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Harvard Medical School. Experts aren't certain whether there's a hormonal connection at play—a dive in estrogen being the suspected culprit—or if it's because women in perimenopause have a hard time getting enough sleep, which is crucial for first-rate concentration and memory, Dr. Hellerstein explains.

To make matters worse, these hormonal and sleep disturbances come at a time when many women are faced with life challenges that demand turbocharged multitasking: aging parents, growing children and careers that are at their peak. So if you drop a ball now and then, give yourself a break, experts suggest—you're probably shouldering too many duties to begin with. Still, if you suspect you're perimenopausal and the symptoms are robbing you of shut-eye and making it tough to think straight, talk to your doctor, since there are medications that could help.

➡ **I'M JUST PLAIN GETTING OLDER.** I'm mostly joking when I complain to my friends about my *Golden Girls* moments. Yet every once in a while I truly freak out that I'm racing toward a future of day-of-the-week pill containers. I may indeed get there

eventually, but experts reassure me that it's perfectly normal for your memory and critical thinking skills to dull as you age. "Normal age-related cognitive decline tends to start around the mid-40s," says Dr. Hellerstein. "It's subtle, but you'll find you don't learn things as quickly, or it takes longer to process a complex mental task, and your short-term memory may suffer a bit."

Cold comfort, you say? I agree, one reason I was thrilled to discover that just because it's normal doesn't mean it's inevitable. In the last decade researchers have discovered that you can potentially grow new neurons—boost brainpower—by doing activities that are a heck of a lot more fun than playing hide-and-seek with your keys. Dancing, traveling and knitting have all been linked to a reduction in cognitive decline. "These activities seem to work because you're engaging in them cognitively, physically and often also socially," says Amy Jak, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine who does research on aging. Challenging your brain to think in new ways and asking your body to move in new ways seems to fire up the neurons involved in memory and attention. Juggling—like a circus clown, not like a soccer mom—is one example of a brain-stimulating activity, researchers say. But just staying physically active will make a big difference. Study after study links regular exercise, even brisk walking, with a reduced risk for cognitive impairment like memory loss.



## ➡ I'VE GOT A LITTLE TOO MUCH ON MY PLATE.

Maybe some things slip through the cracks simply because there's no way you could summon enough energy and focus to do it all. When I describe my recent absent-minded ways and messy living space to Michelle Riba, M.D., past president of the American Psychiatric Association, she points out that absentmindedness and messiness could have a variety of causes. As far as messiness goes, it could be about priorities, Dr. Riba suggests. Maybe instead of spending time tidying up your living room, she says, you'd rather go for a walk. Maybe you're feeling too tired to clean up. And there are times when the problem may not actually have much to do with disorganization or absentmindedness, Dr. Riba points out. "If there's too much on your plate, if you're saying yes, yes, yes to everything, there's just no way you can do all that."

That sounds familiar. Like many women, I have a difficult time saying no when someone needs my help, leaving me less time to accomplish my own goals and chores. Meanwhile, many of us have to keep track of our children's tasks as well as our own. "For moms, the expectations for

memory and performance can be exceptionally high," Dr. Hellerstein notes. "We have to keep track of everything our kids need to be doing, in addition to sticking to our own schedules." Saying no when you have the option becomes especially crucial when you consider you often don't have the choice. It's a habit worth honing and I intend to start invoking my right to say no at least once a day . . . at least when I can remember to do so.

Even if, despite these experts' tips, I continue to live life on a Tilt-a-Whirl on my craziest days—tasks flying in and out of focus—I won't view it as failure or a fatal character flaw. I was thrilled to discover that there is an upside to being a bit scatterbrained: increased creativity, for one thing. "When your mind wanders, that enables new ideas to come forward," says Dr. Meyer.

Dr. Riba puts a positive spin on my roaming attention, as well: "You may actually enjoy life more than someone who is a compulsive neatnik or a type A personality because you end up doing what you want to do in the moment," she says. In other words, I'm not distractable, I'm just spontaneous and life-affirming. I like it! ■

## SCATTERBRAINED OR SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS?

Some lapses in concentration and memory could signal a medical condition.

### • ADHD

Talk to your doctor if you've been highly distractable or "spacey" since childhood and **you have trouble focusing in a number of different settings**—at home, at work, during social interactions—to the point where it significantly affects your life and relationships.

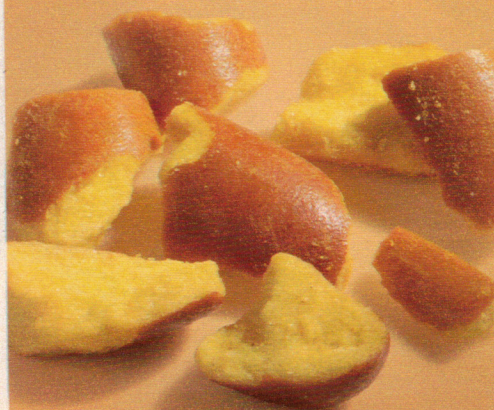
### • ALZHEIMER'S

Talk to your doctor if your changes in memory and focus are interfering with daily functioning—for example, if you have trouble concentrating while driving, if **you find speaking, writing or math more difficult** or if you don't recognize things in familiar surroundings.

### • DEPRESSION

Talk to your doctor if you're having trouble with thinking and memory and **you're sad or anxious, losing interest in activities you used to like**, or experiencing other symptoms of clinical depression like insomnia or excess sleeping, appetite changes and fatigue.

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