

Your Mind on Media Newsletter:
How to Think Big Even When You Can't Turn Off Your Alerts
(c) Joanne Cantor, Ph.D., July 16, 2012

So much research tells us that constantly being interrupted by incoming communications wreaks havoc with our ability to think.* And yet, sometimes there's a good reason to monitor everything that's coming in so you don't miss that one important message that absolutely can't wait. Here are some possible scenarios:

- a family emergency
- a crisis or breakdown at work that only you can resolve
- critical information you're waiting for, that contributes to the work you're doing

Let's say you're in a situation like this and you still have serious work to do that requires your full, creative, deep-thinking brain. Here are some strategies that should allow you to make progress even though you have to monitor incoming messages:

- 1) **Commit yourself to focusing** on your important task and minimizing the impact of your necessary vigilance.
- 2) If you can, **identify those few "drop-everything contacts"** and arrange for them to contact you through the one method you'll monitor. For example, have them call, not text or email you, and be sure you can identify their caller ID.
- 3) If you can't be sure and must screen all calls, **let them all go to voicemail** and check the messages when they appear. Listen only to the ones that have a possibility of being that emergency call, and save the rest for later.
- 4) As soon as the phone rings, **jot down the thoughts in your working memory** so you won't have to fumble to re-create them when you come back. Pad and pencil work great for this. You'll have plenty of time to jot things down if you let the call go to voicemail. Or if you must answer, wait until the second or third ring and just jot down a word or two before answering.
- 5) If you actually pick up a call but discover that this isn't the emergency you feared it might be, **have a polite script ready to pronounce** so you can get back to your bigger thoughts as soon as possible. Something like,

"Thanks for calling. I really want to help you with that but right now I'm in the middle of a conversation, and I'll need to get back to you when I can focus on *your* issue. Is it OK if I call you back in ___)?"

Then make a note of that commitment and head right back to what you were doing.

- 6) When returning to your main task, **use the cues you jotted down** to help you refocus on where you were.

Remember, unless the bulk of your job is to serve as a receptionist or staff a call-center, **you must balance** your need to be responsive with your responsibility to think big thoughts and solve big problems.

*(See other posts in my Newsletter Archive if you're not up-to-date on these findings.)

Wondering why it's so hard to ignore *silly* distractions, **even when your work is urgent but your distractions aren't?**

See my post in *Psychology Today*:

"Five Reasons We Can't Stop Distracting Ourselves
and 5 ways to Resist Those Electronic Temptations"

(The link to my *Psychology Today* blog is at the top of my *Resources* page)

Recent Sightings

--Media (See Links on my *Media* page)--

The Province (Vancouver):

"Take a Social Media Break: Unplug Yourself and Re-connect with Your Life"

"Healthy Digital Habits"

In the past week, I've done interviews with three different media outlets on three different stories:

- How old should a child be when she gets her first cellphone?
- How does the fact that we're now constantly taking pictures change our experiences?
- Are college students overly dependent on their smartphones?

--How the portable digital revolution is affecting our lives is a very hot topic. I'll post the articles as they appear.

For more Media Sightings, see my *Media* page.

--Speaking--

Last month I was speaking about CyberOverload to a gathering of Police Chiefs. If you're looking for people who feel they can't ignore any incoming phone calls, you'll find many of them there. Even when you're trying to focus on making big decisions or just spending some time with your family getting away from it all, it may be hard to ignore a call if it *might* be

telling you that a political protest has turned violent or a hostage situation is developing in your district. Interestingly, however, a bit of a disagreement emerged about this, with some chiefs arguing that a strong leader should train deputies to make good decisions in their absence, so that even leaders can feel comfortable getting away from their devices from time to time.

Making These Ideas Work for You

Looking for ways to do higher quality work in less time while reducing stress and burnout? My entertaining and buzz-worthy presentations are both eye-opening and effective at providing easily adopted strategies for individuals, organizations, and corporations.

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