

Curtail digital distraction to reduce stress

The buzz signaling a new text message, a flashing instant message icon, or an email notification sliding onto your screen all tell you that someone wants to communicate, and subtly hint that their message is more important than anything you're working on right now.

The endless distractions of workday communication can bring frustration and anxiety as they interrupt the flow of work, put deadlines in jeopardy, and add to the day's unpredictability.

To curtail that reactivity and the stress that comes with it, take control of those notifications, says Robby Macdonell, CEO of RescueTime, which helps people understand their digital habits and how their time is spent.

"If you feel like you're not in control of your time, the best thing you can do is be deliberate and intentional about your communication," Macdonell said. "Make it more proactive and less reactive."

Macdonell, who spoke with LivingRight at the 2018 SHRM Conference and Exposition, offered these suggestions for making communication less distracting and stressful:

1. **Flip the switch to "off."** Turn off notifications for phone messages and apps, which may be on automatically if you have not changed the default settings. Also, use Quiet Hours in Windows 10 to halt notifications on a desktop computer. (To access Quiet Hours, use the Action Center button in the lower right of the screen). "Everybody has those moments they really notice the weight of those notifications, and it's possible just to turn that stuff off," Macdonell said.
2. **Or be choosy.** If you're hesitant to turn off message notifications from a social media channel, email, or instant message system, leave them on, but when a notification pops up consider whether you really need to know that information before opening the message.

"Is it really that important that I get information from this source and have it pull me away from what I need to be focused on?" Macdonell said. "Most days that's not the case."

3. **Don't start the day with email.** Work on one project for the first hour of the day, and then check email as needed during the day. "Overwhelmingly the first thing that people do is dive into email," Macdonell said. "That sets the tone for the rest of their day; it never really goes away."
4. **Train yourself to focus on one thing.** "You see a lot of examples on TV shows with people hustling, doing eight things at once, and that's fiction," Macdonell said. "Human brains are just not set up for multitasking. "Once you get habituated to doing things all the time, that makes it more difficult to focus. [Focus is] a skill that needs to be built up."

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To improve your ability to focus, reduce distractions by turning off email and setting your phone aside. It can also be helpful to spend some time doing mindful meditation exercises, which help you learn to concentrate and can improve your ability to stay tuned to the task at hand.



Additional Stress Relief Resources

5 Things You Should Know About Stress

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>

The National Institute of Mental Health offers general information about stress on this website.

Mental Health and Travel

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/mental-health>

This website from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention includes information about stress relief as it relates to international travel.

Help for Mental Illness

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml>

This resource from the National Institute of Mental Health provides information on where to obtain support for mental health concerns.