

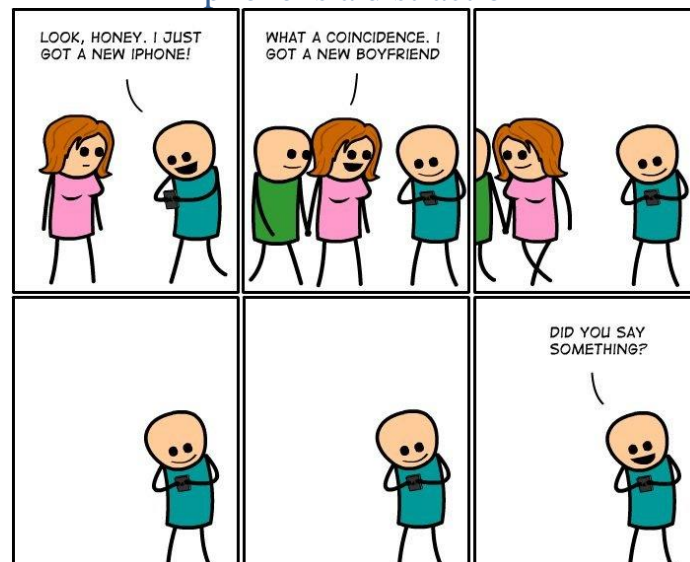
Psychology study

(.n)
/dɪ'strækʃən/ - [dis·trac·tion]

distraction

The act of distracting; a drawing apart; separation.

Iphone is a distraction



Is distraction a curse or a blessing? Not giving full attention to what we should be doing makes us miss deadlines, fail classes, and crash into other drivers. Distraction certainly has a price. Nonetheless, we love our distractions! Social media, spectator

sports, movies, books, TV shows, the news, video games — what would we do without them?

Clearly, there are benefits to distractions as evidenced by the fact that nearly everyone on earth seeks them out. But why? Although they seem to pull us away from more important things, what purpose do they serve? And, when at times we seem to give in to distractions, how do we ensure they serve us well?

Distractions Can Ease Pain

Our brains have a limited ability to focus. We can't pay attention to everything around us all at once so we must choose what to focus on. For example, we may choose to focus on work while struggling to resist more interesting distractions.

However, in some situations, we can leverage this biological limitation to our advantage. In her book, *SuperBetter: The Power of Living Gamefully*, Dr. Jane McGonigal, describes how distractions can be a powerful tool for reducing the impact of painful or negative experiences.

For example, children are notoriously anxious before surgery. Their levels of preoperative anxiety are known to reduce the effectiveness of anesthesia and increase recovery times. Physicians need alternatives to sedative medications to keep them calm. A study, cited by McGonigal, used distractions to effectively reduce their stress.

In the study, one group of children was given anti-anxiety medication before surgery, another group played handheld video games, while a third control group was given no medication and no video games before surgery. The kids in the video game group were the only ones to show a decrease in anxiety before surgery. They also required less anesthesia during the procedure and suffered from fewer medication side effects after surgery than children in the other two groups.

The video games proved effective, researchers believe, because they distracted the children from the pain and uncertainty of the surgery. The engaging nature of the video game helped children direct their attention away from their fear and towards the challenge of the game.

This study isn't alone in demonstrating the power of distractions to lessen negative experiences. Burn patients are typically given large doses of medications to help them through the excruciating pain of cleaning their wounds. A new virtual reality game designed by scientists at the University of Washington Seattle demonstrated the extraordinary power of distractions in fighting pain. The researchers found that patients who played the game during wound cleaning felt up to 50 percent less pain. In fact, playing the virtual reality game was more effective at reducing pain than using medication. The researchers concluded that the more immersive and engaging the game was, the more it helped direct attention away from the pain of the procedure.

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When are Distractions Destructive?

Clearly, distractions can help us deal with pain and build our courage to tackle future challenges. However, don't distractions pull us away from our priorities? What about the many products and services, like video games and social media sites, designed to be so good we want to use them all the time? Sometimes we have trouble limiting their use and find ourselves sucked into distractions.

Whether personal technology distractions are a force for good, McGonigal explains, depends on *why and how* we use them. "Do you play to escape your real life, or do you play to make your real life better?"

McGonigal describes two modes for how we engage with distracting activities: self-suppression and self-expansion.

Self-suppression is using distractions to avoid negative experiences; while self-expansion is using distractions to promote positive ones. Sounds simple enough, but McGonigal warns that at times, it is hard to tell the difference between the two. The same activity could be expansive for one person and suppressive for another. It all depends on *why* the person is engaging in the distraction and for how long.

How can you tell if a distraction is good or bad for you? McGonigal suggests first asking yourself, "Why am I doing this?" If your response is to avoid a negative feeling such as "Because work is boring," or "I don't want to deal with anything right now," the distraction may be self-suppressive.

Of course in some instances, such as burn victims or children about to go into surgery, distractions can be an effective coping strategy. However, these are justified in that the distractions are used as a temporary solution. Once the patient is healed physically, they no longer require the escape from pain.

However, problems can arise when distractions become a permanent escape from an uncomfortable reality. McGonigal warns of solutions that don't build our ability to deal with pain in the future. Temporary distractions used for too long may backfire because, "Over time self-suppression actually diminishes our sense of self-efficacy ... We no longer see ourselves as people who can effectively solve our own problems." When we rely on pain-relieving distractions, be it personal technology, drugs, or other escapes, we may never build our capacity to deal with a painful situation, either physical or psychological.

In contrast, self-expansive distractions involve achieving goals, building skills, or attaining new knowledge that can be used over the long-term. These distractions help us improve ourselves and can build self-efficacy.

For example, answers to the question “Why am I doing this?” that sound like, “I want to learn a new language,” “I want to build a bigger career network,” “I want to know more about my health,” or “I want to improve my well-being,” are the kind of answers that a self-expansive technology can help with. Using distractions with an expansive mindset builds strength, while using them with a suppressive one simply shields us from the pain we are avoiding.

Attention Span Test

How long can you focus on a task without getting distracted? Your attention span can have a major impact on your performance at work or school, and your ability to deal with the tasks of everyday life - one lapse in attention can result in missing out on important information, errors, or worse. Take this test to find out more about your level of attentiveness.

1. Do you get distracted easily (e.g. by background noise, other people's conversations, etc.)?

Yes

Sometimes

No

2. How often are you late for work or an appointment?

Quite often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Almost never

3. How often do you catch yourself daydreaming at work?

Quite often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Almost never

4. Do you jump from task to task because you just can't seem to focus long enough to finish one completely?

Yes

Sometimes

No

5. How do you deal with boring, repetitive tasks?

I'm fine with them; I have very little trouble getting them done.

I don't mind them, but I may end up needing a break from time to time.

I can't stand them - they bore me out of my skull.

- 6 You're on the phone with a friend just as your favorite TV show starts. How difficult would it be for you to pay attention to the conversation?

Extremely difficult

Very difficult

Somewhat difficult

Slightly difficult

Not at all difficult

- 7 When reading a book or magazine, how often do you find yourself re-reading the same paragraph or skipping ahead?

Quite often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Almost never

8. Do you have a knack for noticing details (e.g. typos in a document)?

Yes

No

9. Do you lose your patience easily?

Yes

Sometimes

No

10. How often do you interrupt people during conversations?

Quite often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Almost never

To be continued

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