

The Peaceful Productivity Podcast

Ep #90: Managing Distractions



Full Episode Transcript

[The Peaceful Productivity Podcast®](#), with your host *Kim Christiansen*

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Welcome everyone. I'm Kim Christiansen and this is The Peaceful Productivity Podcast, where I share strategies to help you get the most outta your time and feel better in the process.

Hi everyone. Welcome to another episode of the Peaceful Productivity Podcast. My name is Kim Christiansen, and I'm your host, and we're gonna talk about all things having to do with productivity, but more importantly with feeling peaceful in the process. So on that note today, what I'd like to talk to you about is overwhelm and managing distractions.

I have to admit that I have been feeling really overwhelmed lately. When I notice myself being pulled in a lot of different directions, lots of distractions, interruptions, that's when I start to really notice that it takes a toll on my energy and my mental health. And so I get myself into a bit of a state of overwhelm, and I find it really hard to break out of that.

And I'll give you some tips and tricks that really help me to break out of that state of overwhelm. But more importantly, I'd love to share with you some strategies to prevent yourself from getting into that state in the first place. Specifically, I want to talk about managing distractions. I did a little experiment, I guess it was six months ago or so.

In this experiment, I moved all of my notifications on my phone to another screen so that when I opened my phone to use the timer as an example, I wouldn't see any of those notifications, so I wouldn't get distracted. So there's lots of those types of things that you can do to ensure that your environment is free from all possible distractions.

For myself, when I'm feeling overwhelmed, I do notice that I'm more easily distracted. My theory on that is that when I'm feeling overwhelmed, that's a really uncomfortable place to be. It feels very much out of control and so, what I want to do is grasp onto the first thing that catches my attention so that I feel like I am moving again, just to get myself going, get out of that state of overwhelm.

So, I find that it works really well to set up an environment that is distraction free. Especially when I'm feeling more vulnerable to distracting myself so that I'm not wasting a bunch of time following a lot of rabbits down a lot of different rabbit holes. There's a lot that you can do to help ensure that your environment is distraction free.

Closing the door, clearing off some space to work, turning your phone right off for a certain period of time. But I think my favourite technique for making sure that my attention stays undivided is something called single tasking. You're likely familiar with this concept. It just means focusing on a single task, one task at a time until completion before starting another one.

I used to be a dispatcher for emergency services, and back in the day we used to really celebrate multitasking. Multitasking was the idea that we could split our attention and focus on more than one thing at a time. Now, what we know is that this is actually a fallacy. You can't actually focus on more than one thing at a time.

What you can do is you can shift your focus really, really quickly, so it looks like you're multitasking, so it seems like you're focusing on more than one thing at a time. Back in the day, we thought that we were splitting our focus when in reality we were just shifting our focus back and forth really, really quickly.

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Shifting our focus back and forth. This is now known as switch tasking and in emergency services in dispatching, this ability to really hyper focus on the caller and dispatching the resources. Of course, that served us really, really well. The shifting happened in between the gathering of information and the dispatching the resources, and then monitoring those resources while we continued to talk to the caller.

That seemed like we were multitasking, but in reality, we were just shifting our focus back and forth between gathering the information from the caller and talking to the resources that were being dispatched. What I now realize is that I wasn't really multitasking. I was just performing a single task such as gathering information or dispatching resources.

I was doing that single task very efficiently before starting the next one. I was collecting the information, then I was putting the caller on hold and dispatching resources, and then going back to the caller. It's kind of like driving while trying to talk on the phone. It's so fascinating because we think that we're paying attention to the phone conversation and the driving at the same time.

But in reality, brain scans show that when you talk on the phone, there's actually limited activation of your visual brain, and what that means is that you're driving without really watching. Kind of like you're on autopilot. You've probably noticed this. When you are distracted, not just with talking on the phone, but with your own thoughts, you'll drive someplace and you'll have no recollection of how you got there.

It's because there's limited activation of the visual brain during the time that you're focused on something else. This is why they now have laws in many areas of the world against doing things while you are driving to prevent that distracted driving. Because we know that you can't put your full focus onto the driving while you're doing something else. In the work environment, it's less about safety and it's more about efficiency.

What has been shown and what I know from my own personal experience is that when I'm trying to do more than one thing at the same time, I'm doing neither thing well, and lots of times I won't even get anything done. And that explains why you can get to the end of your workday and you feel like you're exhausted.

You feel like you've been running a million miles an hour all day long, and yet you don't really have anything to show for it. You look back on your day and you're like, ah, I didn't really complete anything. And the cost isn't just to efficiency, it's also to your energy, your mental energy. Every time you shift between tasks that.

Put something down and pick something up. Figuratively plays a role on your energy levels, your mental energy on your capacity. I like to think of mental energy as a gas tank, and every time you switch gears, you're essentially using up more and more of that fuel. If you wanted to test this theory, put it into practice.

One of my favourite exercises for doing this, and I wish I could remember where I got it from, but I don't. So I apologize that I can't give credit where credit is due, but the exercise was so effective that it stayed with me. This exercise was really powerful in demonstrating to myself. The time and energy that's consumed by switch tasking.

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The point of the exercise is to show yourself how much extra time and energy it takes to switch back and forth between tasks. If you wanna try this exercise, simply time yourself writing out the entire alphabet. Once you know how long that takes, then you can time yourself. Writing out the numbers 1 to 26, and then the last part of the exercise is you write it out again, but this time you're writing the letters and the numbers.

Instead of doing them consecutively, you're going to interchange them, so you'll write A one B two C three, et cetera, et cetera, all the way to the end. When I did this exercise for myself, if I just did it right now, writing out the letters of the alphabet took me 16 seconds. Writing out the numbers, 1 to 26 took me 22 seconds, so writing them out one at a time took a combined time of 38 seconds.

When I interchanged the letters and the numbers, it took me a minute and 16 seconds. Compared to if I had single tasked 38 seconds. So I find this fascinating because it took exactly double, the amount of time to multitask to go back and forth between letters and numbers took me double the amount of time then it did.

If I just wrote out the letters first, then the numbers. So fascinating, but I think the most interesting part of this experiment is how I felt during the experience writing out just the letters and then just the numbers. I felt totally confident and focused, and I knew that I would be getting to the end shortly.

There was no question in my mind about what comes next. However, when I did the part of the exercise where I was going back and forth between the letters and the numbers, what I noticed is that it was a little bit stressful because I was like, okay, what comes next? What do I have to do? And then I was also second guessing myself and trying to improve the process as I was doing it.

At first, I was looking at the letters and then mashing them up with the numbers, and that was going really slow. So then I started to look at the previous letter and the previous number to see what comes next, and all of that took up way more mental energy than any of the prior exercises because I was trying to problem solve and trying to figure out what comes next while I was doing the exercise.

It's such a great demonstration of not just efficiency, but the mental toll that multitasking can take. So hopefully if you weren't convinced before, you're convinced now that multitasking can be a drain on your time, attention, and focus. So what's the next step? How do we put single tasking into play? As I mentioned earlier, setting up your environment to be distraction free is really, really helpful.

So closing apps, shutting down your phone and making your work environment as distraction free as possible is really helpful. And then becoming more intentional around single tasking. One of my favourite ways to. Employee single tasking in my own work routine is to use the Pomodoro technique.

The Pomodoro technique, in case you haven't heard of it before, it's just simply setting a block of time to completely focus on one single task and then giving yourself a break. We know that breaks help to maintain and refresh our attention and energy levels. Having a focused amount of time followed by a break can make your next focus time even better. So breaks are key, but the Pomodoro technique also lends itself well to focusing on a single task for a prescribed amount of time.

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The number one thing that helps to determine the length of time for that focused time, is to have an understanding of what works best for you. So when are your ideal focus times? Are you a morning person, an afternoon person? For me, I'm a morning person, so I tend to schedule my focus time in the morning.

In the beginning, I was doing it for 20 minute blocks, followed by a short break. Now I'm up to about 45 minutes or even an hour, followed by a short break depending on what kind of task that I'm doing. But I do find that my ability to focus is kind of like a muscle in that it does get stronger the more that I practice it.

As does my ability to single task to focus on one task and ensure that I'm not distracting myself during that time. Once you've determined that length of time for your focus time, something else that can really be helpful is to practice your thought awareness. Chris Bailey wrote a new book. I haven't read it yet, but I'm looking forward to reading it about focus, and he's got a TED Talk supporting the book.

And in the TED Talk he talks about the number one distraction is our own thoughts. And this really resonated with me because I find that to be true is that more often than not, it's not the external stimuli that are actually distracting me, it's my own thoughts and my own brain. So noticing those thoughts as they're coming up and creating a practice around just letting those thoughts go without chasing them can really help to strengthen that focused muscle.

And the last tip that I'll give you, as you're practicing single tasking is to set a definition of done. What does complete look like? And for those of us who are perfectionists, I just became acquainted with a little saying that really helps to remind my brain that the bare minimum is the optimal state.

So there's a gentleman named Craig Rochelle, and he coined the phrase GEMO, which stands for good enough to move on. And for someone like me who becomes really invested in doing more and more and more and trying to get it to a state of perfection, I think Gemo is a useful trigger, a useful reminder to let myself know that it all needs to be good enough to move on.

The other thing that sometimes helps me is to remember that I can always come back to something in the future with my intellectual brain. I know that I don't come back to things, more often than not. And so it's just the ability to get myself to move on, to let go of something when it's good enough, GEMO. Good enough to move on.

So thank you to Craig for that little phrase that's kind of catchy. Okay, so I covered a lot of ground in today's episode, so I want to give you a summary of all the different strategies that we talked about today in terms of putting single tasking into practice for you.

Today we talked about five strategies.

The first one was, make your environment as distraction free as possible. The second one was pay attention to your energy levels. Noticing when your levels are high so that you can schedule your focus time. Number three was try the Pomodoro technique to focus for a prescribed amount of time, followed by a short break.

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Number four, use the GEMO phrase to remind yourself that it only needs to be good enough to move on. And the last one, number five, when you notice distracting thoughts coming up, practice letting them go instead of following them.

Above all, remember that this is a practice. Some days we're really focused. In other days we're just not. And accepting that we all have our different fluctuations, our highs, and our lows, and it's all part of the human experience. I hope you found this episode helpful, and if you did, I would love it if you could leave a review and recommend it to your friends. Thanks everyone, and I hope you have a very peacefully productive week.

Take care. Are you looking for a coach who will help you increase your business profit while protecting your time and your wellbeing? If so, I'll invite you to check out my website, financialwellnesscoach.ca.