



According to a Harvard study, the average Jane or Joe is distracted about 47% of the time. Other research yields similar results. So, overall, many of us are physically present but mentally absent about half the time.

We hear a lot about the unhappy consequences of distractibility. Some are tragic, as in car crashes, hot car deaths, fires and other accidents from carelessness, pedestrian-vehicle collisions, industrial mishaps, and the like. Then there are calamities such as tripping, falls, dropping valuable items, and, of course, going ass-over-teakettle (sometimes fatally) while snapping selfies. Some research shows that, when distracted, we have a 20% increased risk of making a mistake or omission. Vehicular miscues, in particular, increasingly result from distracted driving, often involving smartphones and dashboard displays.

On the less serious, but still significant, side of things, the next time you have lunch with a friend, there's a 50-50 chance one or both of you are present in body only. In the workplace, this is called "presenteeism" (as differentiated from "absenteeism"), meaning mind and body are no longer together in space and time. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in meetings, where, at any given moment, at least half the bodies in the room have psyches that have gone elsewhere. Based on my experience with many meetings, one can hardly blame them.

Distractibility and technology are joined at the hip. When people spend hours each day flitting from device to device, from screen to screen, they are literally rewiring their brains to hop from one thing to another. This game of mental ping-pong also speeds up the brain's internal clock, which is what we use to measure the passage of time while engaged in an activity. The result is a common malady called "hurry sickness," which compels someone to rush about even when the circumstances don't call for it. In turn, when we hurry, we are more likely to get angry, because rarely does our headlong rush to whatever go unimpeded. Think road rage.

So, the behavioral equation goes something like this: Distractibility + Hurrying = Mishaps & Anger.

Of course, there are also interpersonal consequences. At least subliminally, most people can sense when the other person in their physical presence is mentally absent. Consequently, in our interactions with others, many of us feel less heard, attended to and affirmed. When interacting with others, being physically present while mentally unavailable is disrespectful.

There are antidotes for this mental malady. Today, we frequently hear the term “mindfulness,” the reason being that it helps us stay in the present moment. This capacity can be enhanced by meditation and other contemplative practices, as well as nature interaction. In fact, any activity that wholly absorbs one’s mental faculties helps keep the mind in the here-and-now, as opposed to the there-and-then.

As for those who are proponents of multi-tasking as a means to greater productivity, research shows you’re kidding yourselves. So-called multi-tasking is actually a form of multi-distracting. It proves the point in a quip from the old comedy troupe, *Firesign Theater*.

“How can you be in two places at once when you’re not anywhere at all.”

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