

Productivity Tips for People Who Hate Productivity Tips

 getpocket.com/explore/item/productivity-tips-for-people-who-hate-productivity-tips

“Traditional approaches to staying focused don’t work for me.” “I know what I should do to be more productive, but I just don’t do it.” I hear sentences like these repeatedly from coaching clients. Many have read articles and books — and have even been trained in productivity methods — but still find staying focused to be an uphill battle. Why do people who know a lot about what helps people focus still struggle to focus? Through my work, I’ve identified several reasons, as well as strategies that may help you gain control.

Assuming that others’ preferred productivity strategies should work for you can yield frustration and a sense of defeat. A friend or an author may advocate their own approach so enthusiastically that it seems fail-proof if properly implemented. But if you experience the approach as inauthentic or constraining, it may not be right for you. Trying to make it work can send you into a rut where you repeat unhelpful behaviors while beating yourself up over your lack of focus.

For example, a subset of my coaching clients has an aversion to structuring their time usage with widely recommended tools like spreadsheets, planners, calendars, if-then rules, and timers. These are often the same clients who are closely attuned to the quality of their work experience, who find joy in flow and seek to create more of it, and for whom the introduction of industrial productivity levers feels stifling. If this describes you, you’ll benefit by paying attention to what’s happening within yourself as you work and using what you observe to inform your strategies.

If you feel defeated, two things will help you move forward and feel more in control. The first is to accept where you are and have compassion for yourself. When you admit to yourself, “I’m stuck. This feels awful,” and let that admission sit in your awareness without fighting it or using it to berate yourself, it loses its power to derail you. Treat yourself with compassion by recognizing your strengths, recalling challenges you’ve overcome in the past, and affirming your capacity to solve problems.

Then move forward by experimenting and reflecting. I encourage my clients to check in with how their work process feels at different points throughout the day and make adjustments to improve the quality of their work experience. Being flexible helps. If one approach isn’t working, try another rather than continuing to hammer away fruitlessly. Frustrated sitting at your desk? Take your work outside or to a coffee shop for a couple of hours. Computer screen making your eyes go buggy? Switch to working on paper or using voice recognition. Perhaps you’re determined to complete something before lunch. But if frustration is building, stepping away, taking a walk, and getting something to eat may be exactly what you need to facilitate smooth and rapid completion of the task after lunch.

Leveraging the connection between mind and body is key to knowing when to make a change. For instance, I've learned that I need to get out of my chair to stretch several times a day. Tightness in my shoulders or numbness in my buttocks triggers the urge to move. If I feel myself hunching or my jaw getting tight, I'll walk to the window or go outside and breathe for few minutes. I also build in exercise nearly every day, typically towards the end of the workday or before something that doesn't require close attention as I find that it diffuses rather than sharpens my focus. Your body can provide you with important cues to optimally manage your focus.

Some people like to keep track of what they plan to accomplish by when. On the other hand, focusing on the process of work rather than the output is a powerfully facilitative perspective shift for many. For instance, my client Nora learned that if she frames her main goal for the day as "finish project," she feels increasingly stressed as time goes by if the project isn't moving along as quickly as she'd hoped — and she's ultimately demoralized at the end of the day if the project remains incomplete. She's much better served by an intention to "work on project" or "make progress on project," particularly when she identifies discrete tasks and little milestones that can serve as indicators of progress.

Staying focused doesn't have to be a struggle. While it may not be easy, managing your focus can and should be self-affirming and fulfilling. Making progress on work that is meaningful is among the most energizing and satisfying experiences anyone can have. Therefore, it makes sense to engineer your workflow for ease and progress. University of Minnesota professor Theresa Glomb recommends organizing your work for a "downhill start." Like parking your car on a slope facing downhill, what can you do to set conditions such that you need only lift your foot from the brake to get moving? Clear off your desk before you start a new task? Write down your two top priorities for the next day before leaving in the evening? Perhaps you're a big-picture person who gets bogged down in details. To move your big idea toward realization, you must pinch a manageable task out of your vision and perform it. Ask yourself, "What's one tiny step I could take?" For example, if I get an idea for an article I'd like to write, I know that the inspiration will dissipate if I don't convert it to action. I can do a rough outline in a few minutes (tangible progress). If I have time, I'll develop it into a more extensive outline (more progress). Outlining is much faster and easier than writing a whole draft, yet it's a concrete step forward that feels good and facilitates the next phase of writing. Waiting for inspiration to create something big from scratch doesn't work; in fact, it slams the brakes on productivity. What does work is finding ways to take small steps and enjoying the resulting sense of progress.

If someone else's productivity strategy feels artificial to you, it probably won't motivate you. For instance, some people can increase their productivity by setting a series of deadlines for themselves. For others, a deadline only promotes focus when it's real, interpersonally relevant, and has serious consequences attached, not when it's made up by themselves or someone else for seemingly arbitrary reasons. A real deadline for me is, for example,

knowing there will be an audience waiting to hear me speak at a particular time. With that kind of deadline, I'll be ready and I will deliver an excellent talk. By contrast, me stating to myself or someone else that I plan to have my slides done two weeks in advance won't help me focus.

Productivity strategies also lose their potential to motivate when they don't feel meaningful. Try reframing something you have to do in terms of your core values for stronger and more sustained focus. Let's say I need to schedule interviews with employees at a client firm. Managing the e-mails and the scheduling process feels tedious if I consider these tasks mindless administrative details. But when I think of them as opening conversations that hold the keys to helping people grow and thrive, they become engaging.

Many people fall prey to distractions, both internal and external, in their quest to focus. A useful tool to fend off distraction is an inquiry into the costs of giving in to it. Surrendering to distraction, while temporarily soothing, will later generate feelings of regret and even incompetence. On the other hand, making progress boosts the wonderfully self-affirming sense of mastery. In the face of temptation to give in to distraction, ask yourself the following question: "What are you saying no to right now?" When you take stock of the fact that tumbling down an internet rabbit hole means letting go of the reins and giving up time for the things you really want to do, you may well find the strength to focus.

Finally, accept that focus is dynamic, a work in progress. There's no single tool that will help you develop laser-like focus that never wanders. The best response to a few hours given over to distraction is not self-recrimination, but self-compassion paired with curiosity. Regardless of whether your focus has been ideal or not, take a few moments at the end of each day to note what you accomplished and to set yourself up for a smooth downhill start on the next day's targets for progress.