

Where's my phone?



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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Don't you just hate it when you are on your phone with a colleague, rushing to get out to catch the bus while carrying a heavy backpack, keys and water bottle in hand, about to lock the door and then realize that you can't find your phone?

Are you nodding and smiling because that frequently happens to you, or do you, like me, sometimes not realize that your phone is in your hand?

In my last column I spoke about being overwhelmed, as a nation, with all that has happened in the past few years, and today I want to focus on how, as individuals, we each lack focus and get more easily overwhelmed, in large part due to so much extraneous stimulation.

Remember those days when you sent a letter by post and happily waited for several weeks before receiving a response? Now we send a WhatsApp message and wait with concern if we don't receive a response within minutes. Few people today experience the same pleasure they once felt when they sat down, slowly tore open the envelope, noted the pretty postage stamp, the smell and feel of the paper and reveled in the personal response. Remember the excitement from those tissue-thin aerograms that a loved one sent on their year abroad? Those days were special and can't compare with our feelings of dread when our bosses and others think we should be available 24/7 in case they need to share a thought or have an urgent request. Life has become so much busier and more distracting.

So how, for one full minute, did I actually forget that my phone was next to my ear and not still sitting on my desk? Was I simply not paying attention? Do I not multitask as well as I once did? Was I, with too many responsibilities, preoccupied or sleep deprived? Have I developed age-related memory issues, or simply become a statistic in the spiraling, all-time-high rate of ADD diagnosis? Was it a symptom of long COVID or simply of 2023, when most people spend too much time on their phones for all the wrong reasons? I'm guessing that, sadly, it may be a little bit of many of the above and that I am not alone.

Here are some ideas to consider.

- Keep track of objects near and dear to you. While it may be easiest to wear your phone around your neck, making a mental note of when you generally use it and where you had it last, often works for most people. Choose a designated home for your phone, keys, glasses, backpack, water bottle and other objects of importance and make sure that at night they are where they belong, so that in the morning you can grab them and run.

- Before you leave the house, count the items you typically need to have with you. I taught my children "two mittens, two boots, scarf, coat and hat." By listing your items and repeating them aloud, they become more salient. This is a way to mindfully ensure that you have everything with you. Repetition, rehearsal and reinforcement can successfully enhance your memory. Learning a mnemonic definitely works, too, as long as you can remember it.

- Use your senses to enhance memory consolidation. Visualizing where everything is in a room can help remind you of what object is where. Stating that you are taking your medication and moving it to another place when done will help you keep track, too.

- Focus on what you need to do, not just on what



TODAY MANY people choose the comforting distraction of social media over completing a task. (freestocks/Unsplash)

you may want to do. I am reminded of a pop quiz in one of my psychology courses years ago. The directions instructed us to read all the questions before attempting the test. Most people ignored the directions; when seeing that it was a timed test with many questions, they simply began. Those who read the test through first as directed were rewarded by the last "question," which said, "Write your name on the top of the test and do not answer any questions." They were the ones who passed.

Today many people inadvertently choose the comforting distraction of social media over completing a task and then wonder whether it was a lack of time or of interest that stopped them accomplishing the tasks at hand. If you are doing something with little enthusiasm, neither you nor others will derive much gratification from it and this may ultimately be to your detriment.

- If you multitask, can you "chunk" things to be done into smaller groups, making things more efficient? This, for example, is a great technique when you need to buy groceries. I often make up my grocery list according to the market's layout, grouping similar items. This mental map speeds up shopping. If you are doing multiple things simultaneously, you'll need to practice being intentional in each of your tasks; or, in attempting to do two things at once, you may discover that you are not doing either particularly well. This is true, perhaps, if you tend to talk on your phone (hands free, of course) when driving. You may also need to turn off the radio when backing up, in order to concentrate without distraction.

- Ask yourself whether you are doing too much. Do you have too many things that all seem to need your attention at once, leaving you with insufficient time to complete them? Are you overwhelmed by tons of paperwork, or by time spent waiting for someone on hold? Are you unhappy with something that is taking both your time and energy and feels unsolvable? Check out your expectations. They may not be at all realistic.

- Ask yourself whether you have serious memory issues. Many people experience age-related changes as they get older. You may find that you learn more slowly, retain less information and feel that your memory seems less sharp and reliable. You may go blank when trying to recall a person's name, retell a story or enter a room.

Stressing over this may actually make the situation temporarily worse, so try to be calm as you wait for the "reboot" in your brain to kick in. It usually does.

That said, we all know people in their 90s whom you envy for being so sharp that they don't miss a beat. You

may wonder how they have time to work on a hobby, meditate, walk their 10,000 steps a day, read for hours or acquire a new language, all with a sense of calm, great interest and joy. Good sleep, healthy relationships, a proper diet and giving your brain a workout all contribute to memory and can protect against the effects of aging. If you are concerned about memory loss, you owe it to yourself to seek professional help.

- Compare how old you feel – and think you act – with your true chronological age. How do they match up? Is it good or bad? Do people value your opinions because you have life experience, or think that you no longer have a contribution to make to society? And how do you see this? Do you view "old" as a phenomenon that is simply in your mind, or is "old" someone who is "x" years older than you, and this keeps increasing as you yourself age?

- Put your life in order. Declutter your home, organize your finances, and simplify your daily routine so that you can make room for the things you value and decrease the clutter in your head. Create a memory-friendly environment. Utilize a calendar, a watch, a daily journal and a to-do list to help keep you organized. Take pen to paper when writing notes. The actual process of writing slows things down and enables you to give the task more attention both motorically as well as visually. This in itself is thought to make neuronal wiring more effective. Pat yourself on the back literally and praise yourself for tasks well done. This may sound silly but also helps you to solidify memory and make the praise more memorable and meaningful.

- Notice the extraneous noise in your environment and find ways to appreciate the quiet – even if only briefly. Between the occasional noises from the water-cooler and the refrigerator, the hum of the air conditioner and the whir of the fans, you may be subjected to an unwanted symphony that may affect your state of calm without your awareness. Add to it the LED display lights in red, green and blue, and you may discover that you can practically read in the room even with the overhead lights off.

Finally, even a phone on vibrate is very distracting when 50 people on a group list chime in to wish someone a happy birthday instead of writing to that person in private. Do we really all need to know? Do you need to hear the incessant bings and pings, not to mention the ringing of someone else's phone or their conversations in public areas? Add these distractions to already feeling overwhelmed by the endless emails, WhatsApp messages and more, and you may sadly discover yourself checking your phone at three in the morning when you cannot sleep. Is it any wonder that most people are more distracted than ever before?

Your task now must be to notice and acknowledge the distractions in your life. Be attentive to all the things that you may need to change in your environment, and you can set yourself up for success. Whether you decide to charge your phone in another room; set aside meals or Shabbat as digital-device-free time; actively pay attention and be there with someone and for them, in the moment; not get caught up in social media; organize your time differently; or try some of the other ideas suggested above, you are indeed the one person who can reduce your level of stress and make all the difference in your life. Good luck! ■

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