

Don't be a distracted eater

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Have you ever used your phone or watched TV while eating? For many of us, viewing some type of screen during a meal is routine. Besides the negative health implications that distracted eating can have (such as poor digestion, weight gain, and overall unhealthiness), it is also harmful in a different way. When we are distracted by a device such as an iPhone or a TV program instead of the actual food we are eating, we are not tasting or savoring the food, but rather, mindlessly consuming it. Our minds are too occupied with thoughts to permit full immersion into what is right in front of us.

The same idea is present in many different areas of our lives. As Moshe Bar, a neuroscientist and professor at Harvard Medical School, explains in his article “Think Less, Think Better,” “too often we eat meals without tasting them, look at something beautiful without seeing it. An entire exchange with my daughter (please forgive me) can take place without my being there at all.” In a study published in the Psychological Science Journal, Dr.

Bar and graduate student Shira Baror demonstrate that “the capacity for original and creative thinking is markedly stymied by stray thoughts, obsessive ruminations and other forms of ‘mental load.’” Their findings suggest that “innovative thinking” is the mind’s default mode when it is clear, which is unlike the common assumption of many psychologists that the mind is always inclined to follow a routine ideation when it is left to its own devices. Dr. Bar and Shira Baror conducted a series of experiments in which they gave participants a “free-association task while simultaneously taxing their mental capacity to different degrees.” Two groups of participants were asked to respond to questions while remembering a string of seven and two numbers, respectively.

They found that the participants with seven digits to recall had the most statistically common responses, while participants with two digits to recall gave less typical and more creative ones. In another experiment, Ms. Baror and Dr. Bar found that longer response times were associated with less diverse responses, ruling out the “ possibility that participants with low mental loads simply took more time to generate an interesting response.” It appears that with a higher mental load, one needs more time to generate even an ordinary thought. These experiments suggest that the occupied mind seeks the most familiar and inevitably less interesting solution, though its natural tendency is to explore and favor novelty.

Dr. Bar says that there is tension between experimentation and exploitation in our brains. When we are exploratory, we are inquisitive and curious, having an open mind and desiring to learn. As Dr. Bar says, “ other times, we rely on, or ‘ exploit,’ what we already know, leaning on our expectations, trusting the comfort of a predictable environment.

” Most of our lives are spent somewhere between these extremes. We tend to be more exploratory when we are in a different country, while we are more inclined to exploitation when we have just gotten home after a rough day at school. There are benefits to both outlooks: exploitation prevents us from taking too many risks that may end up harming us, while being exploratory allows us to discover new things that may benefit us. Ms. Baror and Dr. Bar’s study suggests that our internal exploration is too often lessened by an over-occupied mind, which is also the case for our experience with our external environment.

In our everyday lives, we may find ourselves overloading our minds in different ways: memorizing vocabulary terms for a test so that we don't forget them, practicing what we're going to say during a class presentation, or rehearsing the name of someone we just met so that we don't forget it. There are also the "ever-present wanderings of the normal mind." Additionally, there are more chronic sources of mental load, such as anxiety, stress, and depression, which are characterized by ruminative thought patterns. These thoughts can consume mental capacity, leading to dull thought patterns and a lessened ability to experience pleasure. Dr.

Bar says that he gives himself a yearly "birthday gift" of a week of silence at a meditation retreat. By being silent for a week, he aims to empty his mind of thought and become more aware of his presence and surroundings, such as what the food that he is eating tastes like, and the visual pleasure a flower's beauty can bring. He would feel gratified after looking at a flower for as long as 45 minutes and "wondered how a simple tomato could taste so good." When he returned to the act of thinking about something, he noticed that his thoughts were noticeably more unique, fresher, and surprising.

Although we may not have the desire or the time to go on a week long meditation retreat, we can take some time once in a while to focus on our present actions and feelings in an effort to "expel the mind-wandering and ruminations which become a tax on the quality of our lives," as Dr. Bar says.

We overlook many aspects of the world and fail to experience life to the fullest when our minds are cluttered or overwhelmed. Having the ability to remove our mental load, even for a few moments, can improve the quality of our contributions to our classes and conversations. Even something small,
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such as trying to eat our meals without watching an electronic device, or seeing the beauty in a simple object, can help us keep our minds in the present so that we can produce more original, creative thoughts.