

# THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



## # 1578 The Importance of Focus – Part 2

Yesterday, we began a conversation on focus, attention, and being productive. We spoke about what we do when we get off-track, in an effort to keep our work flow up and not fall behind. I'm Jerry Roberts, and today, we'll get further on the topic, digging further into the science behind it. More focus is the goal, and that's coming next on The Extra Point.

In the first segment of this discussion, we highlighted the battle about focus, and what we do when we lose it.

We try multitasking, but there's a whole mixed bag about whether that's even real or a myth, and even whether it's detrimental to our overall work well-being.

Multitasking is now being seen as reducing IQ, and causing emotional distress in some people.

After that, we tried caffeine and sugar, with less than optimal results. Longer hours didn't save us, either.

The researchers suggested monotasking, the art of doing one thing at a time, finishing one thing before starting another.

Digging into the subject matter, I found that there are different types of attention, according to Gloria Mark, PhD, professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine. Mark studies the impact of digital media on people's lives, and her book, *Attention Span*, takes a deep dive into this topic.

Mark says that humans have four different types of attention. As well, we're most likely to lose attention right around the post-lunch afternoon slump.

Her position is that we should know which type we are, and which times of the day are best for us to do highly focused work.

This switches the issue of time management over to energy management. We need to be

aware of the things that drain us of energy and lead to prolonged slumps.

We also want to check our behaviors when we run up against a challenge or frustration of some kind. Do we back off and go check our email. Do we get up and walk around, taking in some chit-chat. This can be illuminating, displaying habits that many of us don't know we have.

Here Mark's four types of attention:

1. Selective attention. This is our ability to focus on a specific task while filtering out distractions. We do what's important. This form of attention is crucial for reaching a high level of productivity.
2. Divided attention. This is the domain of multitaskers, but science is not on board. Research shows that our brains are not particularly adept at true multitasking. Divided attention leads to decreased performance and cognitive function.
3. Sustained attention. This is the ability to maintain focus on a task over an extended period of time. It's what allows us to stay on-task and see complex projects through to completion. Sustaining attention requires mental effort and can be depleted by factors like fatigue, stress, and distractions.
4. Executive attention. This higher-level form of attention refers to the higher-order cognitive processes that allow us to consciously control and direct our focus, thoughts, and behaviors.

I'll try to explain this in non-researcher lingo. Executive attention gives us the ability to shift our attention between different tasks and ideas, and to adapt to changing demands.

We can suppress impulses, ignore distractions, and resist temptations that could derail our focus.

(Con't.)

It governs our working memory, trying to achieve goals, and problem-solving,

By training and strengthening this higher-level attentional capacity, we can optimize our overall mental performance.

How do we train our executive attention? Here's the short list.

Mindfulness, meditation, and prayer. Do challenging cognitive exercises like brain teasers, logic puzzles, and strategy games.

Exercise regularly. Aerobic exercise (that's cardio) has been demonstrated to improve executive function by increasing blood flow and oxygen to the prefrontal cortex. Even a brisk walk can provide a boost to our attention and cognitive control abilities.

Minimize multitasking, get sufficient sleep, and manage stress.

You can achieve the focus you need. Make a plan, work the plan, and stay with it.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3FM, the Ray Gibson Show, and First Hawaiian Bank, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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