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LIFE + FAMILY

Nail your to-do list

Office gossip, cute cat videos, your *phone*: Distractions are everywhere. But it's not totally your fault that you can't stay focused. "We evolved to crave new information, because hundreds of years ago being aware of a rustling bush could've saved your life from a tiger," says Earl K. Miller, Ph.D., professor of neuroscience at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Picower Institute. While we no longer risk being gobbled up on our way home, there is so much new information around us that our brains can't help but pay attention to every buzz, ping, or random thought. Turn the page to find smart solutions for staying on track, customized to how *you* get derailed.

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JEFFREY COOLIDGE/BETTY IMAGES.

» TARGET YOUR PROBLEM AND FIND THE EASY FIX

THE PROCRASTINATOR

► **THE PROBLEM:** The new season of *The Handmaid's Tale*—or even a pile of mail to sort—makes the choice to put off doing dishes seem very reasonable.

► **WHY YOU'RE LOSING FOCUS:** A lot of decisions, like turning on Hulu, come from below your level of consciousness. And it's up to your consciousness to convince itself that you made a good call. In other words, procrastinators are just great rationalizers. (That'll sound way better on your résumé.)

► **HOW TO REGAIN IT:** Dillydalliers are more easily distracted, so steer clear of time sucks like your phone and your TV. Then set a timer for a short period, like 10 minutes, to keep you on track. When it goes off, check a few emails or read an interesting article before returning to the task at hand.

THE MULTITASKER

► **THE PROBLEM:** You think you're tackling all your to-dos at once, but you're actually wasting more time than you save.

► **WHY YOU'RE LOSING FOCUS:** Switching from one thing to another tires out your frontal lobe, the part of your brain that helps you accomplish goals, because it keeps having to backtrack and figure out where you left off. "Meanwhile, there are competing goals below your level of consciousness vying for your attention," Miller says. It's when your frontal lobe grows weak that they sneak in and trick you into thinking they're more important.

► **HOW TO REGAIN IT:** Prioritize the more important responsibilities (like paying the bills) so you won't feel pressured to multitask later on (like when the laundry has piled up).

THE DAYDREAMER

► **THE PROBLEM:** During a (dreadful) morning meeting, your mind drifts to what you're going to make for dinner.

► **WHY YOU'RE LOSING FOCUS:** A tendency to let your mind wander might mean you have a more efficient brain. "Some people grasp ideas earlier than others, and their brains subconsciously direct their attention to finding new data instead," says Eric Schumacher, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

► **HOW TO REGAIN IT:** "As long as you get work done, you may not need to worry," Schumacher says. But if this habit cripples your productivity, studies show that scheduling a finite chunk of time to daydream can help you be more present when it really matters.

THE WORRIER

► **THE PROBLEM:** Panicking about getting everything done in a day (how is 14 hours still not enough?!) prevents you from getting stuff done.

► **WHY YOU'RE LOSING FOCUS:** Worry comes from your amygdala, the nucleus in your brain responsible for emotional responses. Those of some poor, unfortunate souls work at a higher rate than others', so they can't help over-worrying—whether it's reasonable or not.

► **HOW TO REGAIN IT:** Luckily, your brain is very flexible, and practicing common meditation exercises, such as homing in on your breathing or a nearby noise, can help train it to quiet your concerns, Miller says.