



# SEDUCED BY THE SQUIRREL

10 DISTRACTIONS YOU CAN AVOID



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We're all busy. We can all fill up a to-do list with the greatest of ease.

But if you're anything like me, it's difficult to get all of the stuff we put on the to-do list done. We spend time developing strategies and planning out our work. **But even the best strategy can be thwarted by an untimely or irresistible distraction.**

In the words of Mike Tyson, *"Everyone has a strategy until they get punched in the face."*

Instead of trying to take a punch, I'm learning to duck some of them. I'm learning to avoid many of the distractions (which often serve as obstacles) I put in my own way or **allow** to be put in my way. Once you recognize them, it's easier to avoid them.

Here's a list of ten distractions I work to limit or avoid. The good news is that it's in my control to do something about them. Perhaps you'll recognize some of these blocking your own productivity.



## THE UNSTRUCTURED TIME DISTRACTION

If we don't schedule our own time, someone else will. When we schedule our priorities and tasks, we have a better chance of completing them. That's right...we need to take our to-do list and put those tasks on the calendar. Mark ourself as "busy" during those times.

The most productive people plan out their day **before** it happens. They leave space for the unforeseen circumstances, but they're very intentional with their time. Those who have unstructured time will be distracted by anything interesting that comes along. When we block out our time, we now have a built-in response to lesser priorities, "I'm sorry, I already have a commitment at that time."



## THE LACK OF CLOSURE DISTRACTION

Most tasks will take as much time as you are willing to put into them. This is why it is crucial to put a deadline on tasks, not only for a certain day, but also for a certain amount of time.

Imagine what a counseling session would look like if the counselor didn't keep things to the prescribed, hour time slot. It's easy to get stuck spending more time than necessary on the tiniest thing. This often keeps us from completing the project as a whole. A deadline (even giving ourselves 25 minutes) forces us to do our best to get it done in the time allotted.



## **THE SOCIAL MEDIA DISTRACTION**

Statistics show that the average American spends 3.2 hours a DAY on social media. That's over 21 hours a week. If we complain that we don't have enough time, this is the first place we should look.

If we're serious about avoiding this distraction, the best step is to delete the social media apps off of our phones. If that sounds too difficult, then turn off all notifications. Most smart phones have the capability of measuring how much time we spend on each specific app. Perhaps we can at least try to limit it to less than 3.2 hours a day.



## **THE DO-IT-ALL-YOURSELF DISTRACTION**

There is a tension, especially for those in leadership, between feeling responsible for everything and feeling like we have to do everything. The reality is, we can't do everything. Sometimes, the work we should have delegated gets in the way of the work we should be doing. In order to resist the distraction of doing it all, we have to ask the question: am I the right person to do this?

Take another look at the to-do list. Identify the items on the list that can be handed off to someone else. How do you decide which items are the ones that only you should be doing?



## **THE PERFECTIONIST DISTRACTION**

How many times have we failed to complete a task or project because of one small detail that just wasn't quite right? More than we can count? If that's true, then we are card-carrying members of the "perfectionistic-tendencies" club.

This distraction is subtle. We think we're being productive because we're working on the task. But it smacks right in the face of the law of diminishing returns. We need to realize when we're spending too much time on something that won't add any additional value. Perfection is an illusion. We should strive for excellence (that's achievable).



## **THE URGENT DISTRACTION**

The phone rings, the notification goes off, the mail shows up, someone stops by, and we suddenly remember that thing we forgot to do yesterday. We are all bombarded by people and tasks demanding a response...now. Without a plan in place, we could spend our days like a pinball, ricocheting from one urgent need to the next.

The cure for the urgent distraction is to figure out what's important. Establishing our priorities is a HUGE step in becoming more productive. The reality is: if everything is important, than nothing is important. When we identify what's important, we can better decide what urgent matters need to wait.



## **THE ACCESSIBLE-MEANS-AVAILABLE DISTRACTION**

There we are, in the zone – completely focused on a project or task. Then, someone shows up. Someone stops by. We really are social creatures. And productivity takes a hit. Sometimes we must be a bit more intentional when it comes to protecting our time (and space).

People may assume that if you're accessible, you're available. But that isn't always the case. We may need to find a special place that can protect us from unrequested interruptions (like the library on the other side of town or the conference room in the next building). We can also help people know when we're available by setting expectations. For example, I always share this rule with those around me: My door is always open...unless it's closed.



## **THE TEXTING DISTRACTION**

The online chatroom was a great invention. It has evolved into the ability to pass notes to almost anyone with a smartphone. It moved quick communication from talking to typing.

Unfortunately, it also led to people expecting every type of electronic communication to exist in **real time**.

As typing out our messages becomes the norm, we feel pressure to answer every text, tweet, email, status update, or comment **immediately**. Or worse, we constantly check to see if someone has responded to us on one of these channels. This is simply sucking away our productive time.



## THE MULTITASKING DISTRACTION

The human brain is not wired to multitask. You may think you're the exception. Unfortunately, you're not. None of us are that good. We are most productive and do our best work when we can focus on ONE thing at a time.

If we try to do more than one thing, it takes our brain time to shift. We lose the focus we had on one thing and have to work to get it back as we transition to the other. And back again. It's not effective.



## THE MEETING DISTRACTION

Most meetings aren't a good use of time. A meeting must have a purpose. It must gather the right people in the room to solve a problem. If the meeting is informational-only, then it's not a good use of time. If we're in the meeting and we don't need to be, it's not a good use of time.

Meetings are often scheduled to fit into a 30 minute or 60 minute time slot. But most meetings don't need that much time. This takes away from the time we need to work on our priorities. This may be an area that we don't have total control over. But if we can find a way to both avoid and not schedule unnecessary meetings, we'll all have a lot more time to do the work that is necessary.

## Conclusion

It seems like we live in a generation of distraction. Productivity is something that few people ever take the time to improve and that fewer still ever master. However, if you are willing to put in the work and eliminate the distractions ruling your time, you will have less stress, more success and an overall better quality of life.

So start with these ten distractions.

Ruthlessly eliminate them from your life, and see how things improve.



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Tim Milburn is the founder of Lifelong Leaders.

The Lifelong Leader Community is for those who want to learn how to help others navigate toward what's next.

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