

MANAGING DISTRACTING THOUGHTS

Maintaining focus for a long period of time can take practice, and environmental factors make a big difference. Here are some suggestions for managing the distractions that are a natural part of trying to get work done.

Find or make a good (virtual) space

Controlling your environment is a good first step to avoiding distractions. We're often more productive in a dedicated workspace rather than a space we associate with other activities. Going to a library or study space, or creating one in your home, can help you focus your thoughts. Please see the Work from Home handouts in the [Academic Success Resource Library](#) for more information on this topic.

If you're unable to go to a different location to do your work, consider virtual [Study Hubs](#) to help you get into a productive headspace.

Get over the initial hurdle

Starting work is often harder than continuing. Our brain's limbic system is hardwired to avoid stressors and to pursue immediate pleasure, whereas the neocortex controls decision-making and thought. When we try to start something difficult, our limbic system responds with avoidance, despite our best intentions. We often need strategies to help the "rational" neocortex overpower the "irrational" limbic system, especially at the start of a work or study session.

- Set out your goals. Try the [SMART Goal method](#): instead of planning to do a project over a weekend, break the job into specific, measurable, achievable, rewarded and timely steps. A focused goal that you know you can do, and that comes with a deadline and a reward for completing it, helps both your intention and your drive for gratification.
- Tip the balance in the neocortex's favour by making it easier to do the things you want to do and harder to do the things you don't. Studies have shown that making things even 15 seconds easier, like putting out your materials beforehand, significantly improves our odds of following through on our intentions. Making things just 15 seconds harder—like having to cross the room to get your phone—can help us resist the urge to distract ourselves from hard work.

- Try the five-minute strategy. The avoidance response from the limbic system becomes significantly weaker after a few minutes of work. Choose a starting task and set a timer for five minutes, during which you work on the problem you've set for yourself. Even writing "I don't know what to do" repeatedly is OK. Think of it like brainstorming by yourself. You might find yourself with ideas to act upon, issues to address, or questions to ask. If you're unable to move forward, send a message to ask for help, and move onto another job.

Keep on moving

People have varying attention spans, so try to figure out ways of working that suit you best. One of the classic methods of managing work is known as the Pomodoro Method, named after the tomato timer that Francesco Cirillo used to structure his time. He found that working for 25 minutes with five-minute breaks allowed him to stay focused and get work done. After a few "pomodoros," he took a longer break for food and started again. Some people find that these pomodoros are too long, others that they are too short to make useful progress. Experiment with what helps you and adjust the intervals accordingly.

Distractions are natural, but you don't have to give in

"Unfocused" thoughts arise when we try to pay attention to one thing: sometimes they're a matter of problem solving from diverse angles, sometimes they're about something else that needs to be addressed, and sometimes they're general worries or hopes. Different approaches can be used for all of these.

- **If the intrusive thought is about something that needs to be done**, ask yourself if it's more urgent or important than what you're doing now. Prioritize importance over urgency: for instance, a less-valuable assignment that's due sooner than your current task might not be worth giving attention to, so weigh out the gains and losses of each course of action. If there is a good reason to change tasks, make some notes of where you are on your work

and your next steps before moving to the other job. If the other job is equally or less urgent or important, jot down the idea to work on later, so it doesn't keep occupying your thoughts.

- **If the intrusive thought is a “what if” concern**, take some time to confront the worry and its likelihood of working out as badly as you think. Sketch out both the worst-case and the best-case scenarios, then, evaluate the probability of either scenario happening. You'll probably realize that the most likely outcome is between the two extremes. If you are still worried, try figuring out what you can do if they happen, but keep your priorities in focus.
- **If the intrusive thought is a worry about something you can't control**, see if someone else can help, and reach out to them. Again, consider your priorities in how you use your time. If you can't find resources or allies, or if you're waiting for help or for things to change, do your best to acknowledge the worry without it taking over your ability to do other things.
 - One method of dealing with worries we can't control is to compartmentalize. You can do this in several ways. For instance, writing down the worry in detail and scheduling “worry time” to address it—just like a to-do list—can help you train your brain not to get stuck in an idea. Another strategy is to visualize putting the worry in a box. Put the box into a closet and close the door; leave the room the closet is in and close that door too. Take a few minutes to do this, focusing on the details of the visualized experience.
 - Another method is to simply acknowledge that your brain has brought up the intrusive thought again. For people who struggle with compartmentalization, trying to ignore the worry can be like trying not to think about the pink elephant: once it's mentioned it becomes an object of focus. Like in some meditation practices, allow yourself to notice the thought as it drifts through your mind without holding onto it, and refocus your attention on the present. Have faith in the fact that you can grow and change, and that with practice you can learn not to let distracting thoughts take over.

- **If the intrusive thought is about a hope**, some of the previous strategies might still work. You can acknowledge it and let it go, compartmentalize it or make “what if” plans, but you might also consider making it a reward for having done less enjoyable things. If you're looking forward to an event in the future, you could make it contingent on meeting a SMART goal. Linking something that you're truly excited about with work that you must do can help you stay on track. Instead of facing a choice between distraction and work (where the limbic system might undermine your neocortex), you'll be facing a choice between distraction and something better.

While these suggestions can help mitigate distracting thoughts, there are many personal factors that can complicate your ability to focus. Remember that you're not alone! The University has many resources and services to support you.

- If you want to learn more about the mental health supports available to you, [Navi](#) is a chat-based virtual assistant that can quickly provide you with contact information and direct links to U of T and community resources.
- If you know or think you may have a temporary or ongoing disability that is impacting your work, [Accessibility Services](#) can help you to navigate disability-related barriers to your success and to develop strategies that suit you best.
- [Health & Wellness](#) offers programs and services for your mental and physical health, to support your personal and academic goals.
- You can get confidential support for any school, health or general life concern through [U of T My SSP](#): as a U of T student you can talk to or chat with a counsellor for free, whenever and wherever you are.

Want to know more?

Academic Success has resources, workshops, events and appointments to support you:

- look us up online at [AcademicSuccess.utoronto.ca](https://academicSuccess.utoronto.ca),
- register for appointments and events at CLNx.utoronto.ca,
- or email us at mail.asc@utoronto.ca