

Alexander Graham Bell, noting how the sun's rays ignite paper only when focused in one place, advised, "Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand." Yet ordinarily our attention wanders, a sitting duck for whatever distraction comes our way – especially when our email inbox alone offers constant distractions that seem urgent, but are just not that important.

Then there's multitasking, which really means switching from one narrow focus to another – the mind cannot hold more than one at a time in what's called "working memory." So interrupting one task with another can mean taking many minutes to get your original focus back to speed.

The opposite of multitasking is single-tasking, the ability to bring our focus to bear fully on just what we are doing. It comes to us naturally in those do-or-die times when a deadline forces us to focus fully. But how can we have that full concentration during the rest of our work life – or our life in general?

Mindfulness is one answer. When we are mindful we bring an even, full attention to whatever is at hand. It gives us the power to move our concentration from place to place as we move through our day – finishing a report, relishing a meal, loving a child.

Mindfulness gives us the capacity to notice when the sea of distractions we swim through in any given day has pulled us in: here I am again, scanning my inbox, instead of finishing what I want to be doing. Mindfulness strengthens our meta-awareness, the ability to track where our attention goes.

When we find ourselves stuck in our inbox instead of that other important task, we can have a second thought – I don't need to do this now – and move our attention back to what we need to be doing. A mindful awareness offers the antidote to mindless multi-tasking. We can single-task.

An increasing number of companies, from Google to General Mills, are offering their employees training in mindfulness. And Jon Kabat-Zinn, an old friend and pioneer in introducing mindfulness in all its pragmatic applications, has just updated his classic book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, including a review of the new, powerful research on the benefits of mindfulness.

For the Google program, now offered by the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, Stanford researchers found increases in self-awareness and empathy, better self-management of upsetting emotions, and better listening.

That sounds like an upgrade in emotional intelligence to me.

Mindfulness: When Focus Means Single -Tasking

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