

Too Much Information? Here's How to Cut Stress and Stay Connected

Just what you need: More information. But don't tune out this article just yet. Read on, because it will help handle the flood of e-mails, news, cell phone calls, text messages and all the other distractions and annoy that modern technology throws at you.

Believe it or not, all that information can be managed. You can stay in touch with co-workers, friends and rest of the world while lowering your stress level.

If you feel stress from TMI (too much information), you're not alone. A recent survey by the Pew Internet American Life Project showed that workers have mixed views of the Internet and e-mail. Among the 62 percent of adults who say they use such technology at work:

- 80 percent say it has improved their ability to do their jobs
- 58 percent say it gives them more flexibility in their work hours
- 49 percent say the Internet and e-mail increase the level of stress in their job
- 49 percent say these tools make it harder for them to disconnect from work when they are at home on weekends

Attention a limited resource

Psychologists and other experts say the stress of TMI springs from a basic fact about the human brain: Its to process what we read, hear and think in real time is not unlimited. "Attention is a limited resource," says Stuart Sidle, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of New Haven. We can only take in and respond to so much information effectively.

When the load gets to be too much, we try to divide our attention by multi-tasking. But multi-tasking (ans a BlackBerry® message, for instance, while trying to pay attention at a meeting) is neither easy nor efficient. Most people don't do it very well.

When you multi-task, says psychologist Jean Cirillo, "you never do as well on one task as if you had focus that task alone" because you have to use energy ignoring one of the tasks while doing the other. "Even if you have five senses, they go into the same brain," she says, and it takes effort to tune out distractions.

Managing TMI

Here are some tips for conserving your attention, fighting information fatigue and making sure that you're not part of someone else's TMI problem:

- **Take control of your time.** You can't control when people might want to send you an e-mail or text message or call you. You can, however, have some say over how and when you respond to information coming at you. For instance, you can let others know that you might not answer a message right at certain times when you need to focus on your work. "Speak your mind about how you would like to be reached," says Sidle. Cirillo advises, "Tell people you check your e-mail at a certain time."

Both Sidle and Cirillo acknowledge that your ability to control your time depends on your position in an organization. Putting your boss on hold may not be a smart move, but not everyone sending you e-mails needs to get the same level of attention. "Everything can't be a top priority," says Sidle. "People have to prioritize and be clear on that."

- **Follow the 10-minute rule.** You can waste a lot of time surfing the Internet. You can also spend a lot of time trying to catch up on long-deferred tasks such as cleaning out your e-mail in-box or getting rid of unneeded bookmarks. Management consultant Karen Leland recommends applying a 10-minute rule to such activities, as well as answering e-mails. Give yourself 10 minutes at a time for surfing or for cleaning out bookmarked sites to see if you still want them on your list (or take 10 minutes to organize your bookmarks into folders).

Leland has a similar rule for answering e-mail messages. "If an e-mail takes 10 minutes or less to deal with it then," she says. Otherwise, delete it or delegate it to someone else to handle. A few e-mails may have to be set aside for later, but the first 3 of Leland's 4 "D's"—dump, delegate, do or defer—take care of most of them.

- **Turn off the bells and whistles.** If you need to focus on the work at hand, the last thing you need is a computer or phone that breaks your concentration. Leland advises muting computer sounds, such as the ding on incoming e-mail, and silencing your cell phone.
- **Use technology to manage the info-load.** The same tools that deluge you with information can also be used to make that information less stressful to handle. For example, the calendar feature of Microsoft Outlook can be used as a way to set up meetings and send invitations. That cuts the e-mail flow while getting needed information into the right hands. Managers can reduce office e-mail even further by requiring non-essential messages—on the question of, say, where to have lunch—be posted on a Web site rather than be circulated.
- **Cull your subscriptions.** Look over the mail clogging your in-box. Some of it may be truly unwanted genuine junk mail—but much of it may come from sources that once put you on their list because you asked them to. Take 10 minutes now and then to sort through the incoming mail and cancel subscriptions for newsletters and other features that you find you've stopped reading. The same rule can be applied to more traditional forms of information, such as magazines.
- **Don't waste words.** Short, clear messages take less time to read, thus easing the burden on recipients. For senders, a message that gets to the point clearly and succinctly is more likely to be read and understood than a long-winded one. "Communicate with impact so that your message is not lost in the crowd and people aren't stressed trying to figure it out," says Sidle, who advises senders to craft their longer messages like news stories—in so-called "inverted pyramid" style, with the most important facts first.

first.

- **Be careful what you forward, and minimize your carbon-copy footprint.** In other words, don't be part of the problem. "When you 'cc' people who really don't have a need to know, you end up wasting time and you end up sending them information that doesn't need to be in their work space," says Leland. The same goes for excessive forwarding. It takes just a few keystrokes to carbon-copy and forward messages to a mailing list. But think twice before doing so, and think about all the people who will read your message. Their time is every bit as valuable as yours.

Sources:

Stuart Sidle, PhD, professor of industrial psychology, University of New Haven; Karen Leland, Sterling Corporation Inc.; Jean Cirillo, PhD

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