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# This Year: Avoid The Silent Killer

by Walt Hampton, J.D.

You don't see it; and yet it lurks. Unfettered. Unabated. Rampant. It kills everything you value:

- Your productivity
- Your creativity
- Your attention
- Your time
- Your relationships
- Your sanity

Distraction. Distraction kills.

**Every three minutes of the day, you suffer an interruption; or you interrupt yourself.** And every time you are interrupted or distracted, it takes (read this as "costs") you 11 minutes of your precious time to refocus. You don't need to be a math wizard to see the impact: Not only do you feel as if you never really get caught up; you never really do.

And not incidentally, distraction increases your error rate too: As in malpractice.

Here are ten ways to beat the killer at its game:

**1. Work in block time.** As peak performers, many of us like to believe that we can work 24/7/365. Except that we can't. The pace is unsustainable. Science shows that we work most effectively in uninterrupted 60 to 90 minute blocks of time in which you do just one thing, followed by a 10 - 15 minute break. The operative words: uninterrupted; one thing; break.

**2. Turn off your chimes and alerts.** You control these. And unless you're working on a space launch or a reactor meltdown, it's not likely that every single message or piece of information in real time is absolutely necessary. Endeavoring to be at the net to volley every piece of input is exhausting.

**3. Don't try to multitask.** It can't be done. Even though we think we're doing multiple things at the same time, what actually happens in our brains is that we toggle from task to task. And as high-performing attorneys, we convince ourselves that we've really good at toggling. Except that we're not. The science is uncontroverted: multi-tasking compromises our acuity, reduces our productivity, and increases our stress. It may even damage our brains.

**4. Create white space.** Having a full book of business is great. Having a calendar that looks like the color-array of an exploding galaxy isn't. Create white space on your calendar; places where there aren't appointments or commitments; small oases of time in the day to take a breath. Buffer times because things run over, and things come up. Space for you to connect again with what matters most.

**5. Schedule your social media time.** A social media presence, especially on platform such as LinkedIn and Twitter, can be critically important to the success of a practice. But social media can be an easy place to hide out when you're feeling bored or stressed or aimless. (Or suffering an Angry Birds detox.) So schedule the block of time when you'll "do" your social media; then do it, and move on.

**6. Turn off your smartphone (and your tablet too).** Our technology allows us so much freedom and flexibility. But our smartphones and our tablets have become our greatest sources of distraction, with many professionals checking them more than 100 times a day. Try going tech

free, for an evening or a day or a week. Soak in the silence. Read, write, reflect, create. Be—really be—with yourself and those you love.

**7. Work Less.** A recent study found that those who work over 55 hours a week have a 33 percent greater risk of stroke and a 13 percent greater risk of coronary heart disease. Not only that, but studies have also shown that professionals who work 70 or more hours a week actually don't accomplish significantly more than those who work "only" 55 hours. Acuity and productivity drop significantly after 55 hours; and the propensity for distraction skyrockets. Less is definitely more.

**8. Exercise.** Putting aside the obvious health benefits, exercise increases productivity and performance. Exercising, even for ten minutes, will cause the release of GABA in your body, a soothing neurotransmitter that reduces stress. You'll come back to your work with greater focus and engagement.

**9. Sleep more.** Almost every major accident and disaster from major airline crashes to the Challenger explosion to Three Mile Island all have had an element of sleep deprivation associated with them. We have a sleep famine in our culture. We think that by working longer and sleeping less, we're being more productive. But we're wrong.

**10. Use the secret weapon.** Meditation. A simple breath meditation practiced five minutes a day over six weeks will actually change your gene expression to reduce stress and inflammation and increase focus and acuity.

Distraction kills focus.

Focus is power. Your power.

Protect it. Defend it. Take it back. **CL**