

MASTERCLASS

Find your focus drifting in the middle of the day? Three experts share their top tips on how to regain your work mojo quickly, writes Natasha Boddy.



From the dreaded 3pm slump to the distraction of non-stop Slack messages, emails and phone calls, it doesn't take much to lose focus during a typical day at the office.

For professionals wanting to regain their focus quickly, sometimes awareness is half the battle, says business coach and Hello Coach founder Victoria Mills. "Once you are aware of what drains your energy you can start to put in super easy solutions," says Mills, who has been coaching CEOs and executives for two decades.

Here are four easy hacks to regain focus at work quickly.

1 Turn off notifications. Mills says it can take seven minutes to regain focus after being distracted by a notification on smart devices.

"When that concentration breaks, there is what psychology calls a 'switching cost' for us to get back to that deep work," Mills says.

Mills also recommends trying what she calls narrowing "visual focus" when starting or returning to a task.

"Pick a spot about eye level and two to four metres away and stare at it for 30-60 seconds," she says. "Hard to do, but it will quiet your mind and help regain focus."

Productivity specialist and author of the *It's About Time* book series Donna McGeorge recommends doing an "hour of power".

"Set a timer for 60 minutes and put your head down. Put your computer and phone on do not disturb during this time [but] if an hour is too much, try 15 minutes, then 25 minutes," she says.

Users of Apple devices can use the focus function, which silences notifications and syncs across multiple devices.

2 Do key work within four hours of waking. Mornings are usually the best time to do intense mental work, both analytical and creative.

"The first four hours after you wake is the best, because the cortisol that floods your system upon waking and the dopamine that is released, especially from early morning exercise, increase your focus and mental acuity," Mills says.

Scott Stein, a leadership specialist and author of *Leadership Hacks*, agrees and says prioritising challenging tasks during a peak energy period is one easy hack to regain focus at work. "This makes it easier to start, easier to finish and easier to complete the things that we procrastinate on," he says.

3 Ditch the email brain drain. Rethink how you tackle emails, from reading through to hitting the send button.

Just 10 per cent of emails actually require a considered response, says McGeorge, who



Hello Coach's Victoria Mills says mornings are usually the best time for intense tasks.

recommends sending routine emails after lunch when energy levels may have dipped.

"Scan to check for anything urgent, and then leave it until after lunch," says McGeorge. "You can then process the 90 per cent that just require small amounts of attention while your mental capacity is lower [following the after-lunch slump]."

Similarly, try to send emails that are easy for others to action. Where possible, avoid sending long and cumbersome emails that are bland and force the recipient to read everything.

"Use bold, bullets and headers to make it easier for people to read – and understand your message," says Stein.

"If you want to focus even further, you can put in the subject line one of the five outcomes that we are trying to achieve: FYI, Need Information, Decision, Action to Take, or Meeting Required."

4 Plan ahead. Mills also recommends structuring meetings at the same time each day, as well as ditching long meetings and instead replacing them with 15-minute "stand-ups" with a clear outcome and agenda. She also recommends making a "next day" list at the end of each day, which can help some people to hit the ground running each morning.

"You gain time each day by completing the tasks you didn't get to at the end of each day, so the next morning you start with immediate focus to tick off tasks from the prior day," she says. **AFR**



Productivity specialist Donna McGeorge recommends an hour of power, leadership expert Scott Stein says emails should be easy for others to read and follow.