

Being Interrupted All Day

ADHD, CONCENTRATION, TASK SWITCHING AND COGNITIVE EXHAUSTION

The interruption may take seconds. Getting your brain back may take much longer.

A colleague asks a quick question. An email notification appears. Teams pings. The phone rings. Somebody needs an answer. You return to your task and stare at the screen trying to remember exactly where your thinking had reached. Five minutes later, another interruption arrives.

Workplaces often treat interruptions as tiny events because each one may only last a minute. But the true cost is not simply the minute spent answering. There is also the mental work of stopping one train of thought, switching attention, processing the new demand and then reconstructing the original task.

For people with ADHD, autism, executive-function differences, anxiety or concentration difficulties, this repeated switching can be particularly exhausting. A person may be capable of deep, detailed work and still struggle enormously in an environment where their attention is repeatedly pulled away.

A 'quick question' can create a much longer interruption inside somebody else's brain.

Why getting started again can be difficult

Complex tasks require us to hold information in working memory: what we have done, what comes next, what problem we are solving and which details matter. An interruption can displace some of that information. Returning means rebuilding the mental map before productive work can continue.

This is one reason an employee may appear frustrated when interrupted. The frustration may not be directed at the colleague personally. They may be experiencing the loss of a fragile concentration state that took considerable effort to establish.

ADHD and attention regulation

ADHD is often described simply as difficulty paying attention, but attention regulation is more complex. Some people struggle to initiate focus and then, once engaged, can become deeply absorbed. Being pulled out of that state may feel abrupt and disorientating. Re-entering it is not always immediate.

At the other end of the spectrum, a stream of notifications and requests may repeatedly capture attention before a task has had time to become established. The day can feel incredibly busy while surprisingly little of the planned work reaches completion.

Busy is not always the same as productive

Someone can answer messages, respond to colleagues and deal with small requests all day and still reach 5pm distressed because the work requiring sustained thought remains unfinished. That is not necessarily poor time management. The structure of the working day may be preventing concentration.

The Hidden Cost of Constant Task Switching

Task switching is sometimes unavoidable. Many jobs genuinely require responsiveness, teamwork and changing priorities. The problem comes when every request is treated as equally immediate and uninterrupted concentration becomes almost impossible.

The brain does not always move cleanly from Task A to Task B and back again. Part of our attention can remain attached to the previous task. Add repeated switching across emails, conversations, systems, meetings and phone calls, and cognitive fatigue can build rapidly.

Why irritation can increase as the day goes on

After the tenth interruption, a harmless question may feel much harder than the first. This does not automatically mean somebody is being unreasonable. Their regulatory and cognitive resources may be depleted. They may begin losing words, making errors, forgetting what they were doing or feeling disproportionately emotional.

For some neurodivergent employees, interruptions also involve social processing: changing facial expression, shifting communication style, interpreting what is being asked and working out whether the new request takes priority. The demand is therefore more than simply answering a question.

Protecting focus without becoming unavailable

The answer is rarely 'never interrupt anyone.' Work requires communication. Instead, workplaces can distinguish between genuinely urgent contact and requests that can wait. Teams might use agreed focus periods, status indicators, shared question lists, quieter workspaces or designated times for non-urgent queries.

Individuals may benefit from turning off non-essential notifications for periods of focused work, closing email temporarily where the role allows, using headphones as a visible focus signal, grouping similar tasks together or keeping a brief 'return note' before switching: one sentence recording exactly what comes next.

The two-minute interruption myth

A request taking two minutes from the person asking does not necessarily cost the other person two minutes. This is especially important for managers. Before interrupting, consider whether the information is needed now, whether it can be sent for later response, or whether several questions could be grouped together.

Protecting concentration is not antisocial. It is one way of protecting the quality of work.

Designing Work That Makes Concentration Possible

If an employee repeatedly struggles to complete focused work during normal hours and then catches up early, late or at home, it is worth examining the working environment. The person may not need another productivity technique. They may need enough uninterrupted time to use the skills they already have.

Managers: look at the system

How many channels are employees expected to monitor? Email, chat, phone, meetings, walk-up questions and project systems can each create their own stream of demand. Are response times explicit, or has 'available' gradually come to mean 'respond immediately'? Are people allowed to protect concentration, or is delayed response interpreted as disengagement?

Clear team expectations can reduce anxiety for everyone. Define what is genuinely urgent, which channel should be used for urgent issues, what a reasonable response time looks like and when focus time can be protected.

For the employee: understand your concentration pattern

Notice which work requires your deepest concentration and when your attention tends to be strongest. What repeatedly breaks it? How long does it take to regain the thread? Which interruptions are unavoidable and which could be grouped, delayed or communicated differently? This gives you specific information to discuss rather than simply saying, 'I get distracted.'

Where ADHD, autism or another condition substantially affects work, workplace adjustments may be relevant. Appropriate occupational-health or workplace support can help explore individual needs.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

If you reach the end of a day feeling as though you have worked constantly but completed nothing, I would want you to look at how many times your brain had to change direction. Every message answered, every 'quick question,' every unexpected request and every return to an unfinished task required something from you.

I would also want workplaces to understand that protecting somebody's concentration is not giving them an easier day. It can be what allows them to do the difficult work they were employed to do.

Different brains need different conditions to work well. Some people thrive in constant interaction. Others produce their strongest work when they are given enough uninterrupted space to think. A good workplace can make room for both.

A focus check-in: Which tasks need sustained attention? What interrupts me most? How long does it take me to return? Which interruptions genuinely need an immediate response? What one boundary, environmental change or team agreement could protect my concentration?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, safety or employment advice.