

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Dealing with Information Overload

Knowledge is power, and technology can help us work better and faster. But it can also lead to information overload and end up making life more difficult and/or stressful. One study found that every day we see the equivalent of about 174 newspapers' worth of information, which is five times as much as 30 years ago. With technological advances, we don't even need our hands to access emails, texts, voice mails, instant messages, tweets, or phone calls—at all hours of the day.

Having easy access to information has benefits, but it can keep you from accomplishing the tasks at hand and can impact relationships. One way to stay on top is to develop a system for sorting and managing not only the information, but the amount of time spent using technology.

At work

At work you may feel pressure to respond immediately to incoming emails, voice mails, instant messages, or texts. Experts recommend the following strategies for coping with the deluge.

Know your priorities. At the beginning of your workday, make a "to-do" list if you haven't done so the day before. Rewrite your list as additional priorities crop up, but give less weight to less vital tasks. If you're not sure how to prioritize your work, talk with your manager.

Take charge of your email. Check your email at set times during the day. For most jobs, unless you're expecting an urgent message, checking your email just two or three times a day—in the morning, after lunch, and before you leave for the day—is enough. Turn off email alerts that let you know each time you receive a new message. Checking each new message as it comes in interrupts your thoughts and makes it hard to accomplish anything else.

Automatically screen your email. Set up your email system so that it automatically delivers incoming messages on specific topics to predesignated folders and eliminates spam. Then you can check those folders at your convenience. Or set up the system so that it displays your email by category instead of by time of arrival.

Look into organizers for text messages. Filing systems for texts are still in their infancy—they aren't as sophisticated as email organizers—but they do exist. Search online for "SMS Organizers" and try out a few to see if they might help you.

Do triage on email and voice mails. When scanning your inbox, separate emails into three categories: those that need an immediate response, those that can wait a day, and those that don't require a response. This way, you'll make sure you see the urgent messages and can respond to less urgent messages when it is convenient. You can use a similar system for tackling voice mail. Make note of the less urgent messages so they don't fall through the cracks.

Separate work and personal communications. Have your friends and family send texts or email to a personal account, not your work address. This reduces on-the-job interruptions.

Use email effectively. Use specific and detailed subject lines, and try to include a brief reminder of why you are responding so others don't have to refer to previous emails. Many teams use collaboration tools for team documents and discussions—these can streamline interactions.<
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Use email with discretion.*S*end copies of messages only to people who need them, and avoid using "Reply All" if only one or two people need to hear from you. Consider whether you could resolve the issue more efficiently by picking up the phone or walking over to a co-worker's desk instead of sending an email. Also be mindful of passing on jokes, chain messages, and other mass emails. These clutter inboxes and may be prohibited in your organization.

Control your instant messaging. Before setting up instant messaging on your device, make sure your organization allows it. If you spend too much time IM-ing, uninstall the software. Alternately, turn it off or change your availability when you don't want to be interrupted.

Minimize distractions when work requires heightened concentration. If you find that you are frequently interrupted in your work space, see if you can use an empty office or conference room. Alternately, block out time for focused work by letting co-workers know that you're unavailable, setting your phone so that voice mail automatically picks up, setting an "out-of-office" or "busy" auto-reply message on your email, and blocking out time in your schedule. Hang a "do not disturb" sign on your door or cubicle.

Away from work

In our "always on" 24/7 world, information can follow you wherever you go. Here are some tips on coping away from your workplace.

Take time to disconnect. Spend some time each day disconnected from your devices. Turn them off at a certain hour, or leave them behind while you take a walk or spend time with others. Some people feel rejuvenated by taking "data fasts" where they go an extended period of time without devices.

Make the most of vacations. Try to disconnect completely for a while. Ask co-workers, family, and friends to contact you only in an emergency, and try to avoid regularly checking work and personal email. Staying connected during your downtime might negatively impact the benefits of time away from work and stress.

Drive safely. When driving, focus your full attention on the road. If you need to make a call, pull over to a safe location. Talking on a phone while driving raises your risk of having an accident, even if both hands are on the wheel. Never text and drive. In addition to being dangerous, it is illegal in most states.

Plan ahead. If you sit down at your computer or open your device without a plan, an hour can go by before you know it. To save time, make a checklist of what you want to accomplish. This might include checking and responding to email, reading the news, searching for specific information, checking social media, or shopping online. Set time limits for activities that could take up a lot of time, like reading the news, shopping, or checking social media.

Screen your calls and texts. Letting calls go to voice mail allows you to focus on the activity at hand without interruptions. Return the call at your convenience. Most text messages don't need immediate responses—turn off alerts so you can check them at a better time.

Use a separate email address for messages from shopping and social media sites. Don't let messages from social media sites go to your work email address—the notifications may distract you and may be against company policy. Check the inbox for these addresses once or twice a day before or after work.

Other tips

Share your plan. You may find it easier if you let others know what you're trying to do and ask for help. For example, you might say to your partner, "I'm going to turn off my cell phone for 20 minutes so we can talk. Let's turn off the TV, too."

Organize. Save digital files or photos in a way that allows you to find what you're looking for quickly. You might save some items on external hard drives or in an online storage site, such as Dropbox, iCloud, or Google Drive, so they won't overload your main hard drive. If you have a lot of digital photos, look into software that will help you organize them.

Reduce the amount of incoming information. Unsubscribe or cancel subscriptions from email newsletters, magazines, and newspapers you don't read. Avoid giving your email address to retailers who send ads and offers, or create a junk mail account so these emails don't clog your important inboxes. Limit the number of people you follow on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Fine-tune your internet search techniques. This will help you find accurate information faster. You might start with "**How to search on Google**."

Think carefully about the technology you use. Make sure any new device—whether it's TiVo, a tablet, a Fitbit, or a smart watch—will really help you before purchasing it.