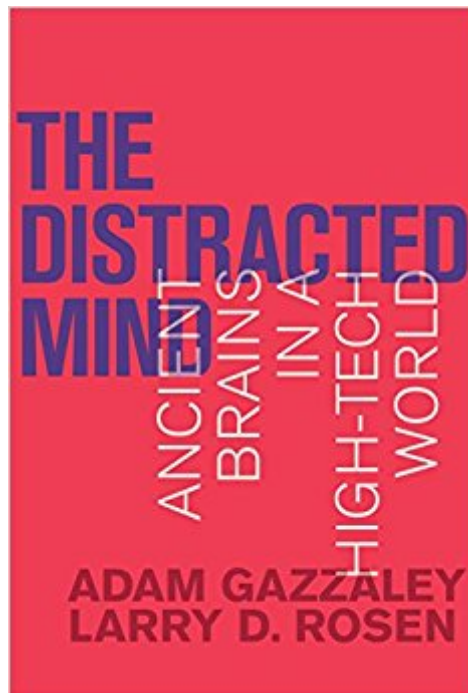




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# The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains In A High-Tech World (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

"Brilliant and practical, just what we need in these techno-human times." -- Jack Kornfield, author of *The Wise Heart*

Most of us will freely admit that we are obsessed with our devices. We pride ourselves on our ability to multitask -- read work email, reply to a text, check Facebook, watch a video clip. Talk on the phone, send a text, drive a car. Enjoy family dinner with a glowing smartphone next to our plates. We can do it all, 24/7! Never mind the errors in the email, the near-miss on the road, and the unheard conversation at the table. In *The Distracted Mind*, Adam Gazzaley and Larry Rosen -- a neuroscientist and a psychologist -- explain why our brains aren't built for multitasking, and suggest better ways to live in a high-tech world without giving up our modern technology. The authors explain that our brains are limited in their ability to pay attention. We don't really multitask but rather switch rapidly between tasks. Distractions and interruptions, often technology-related -- referred to by the authors as "interference" -- collide with our goal-setting abilities. We want to finish this paper/spreadsheet/sentence, but our phone signals an incoming message and we drop everything. Even without an alert, we decide that we "must" check in on social media immediately. Gazzaley and Rosen offer practical strategies, backed by science, to fight distraction. We can change our brains with meditation, video games, and physical exercise; we can change our behavior by planning our accessibility and recognizing our anxiety about being out of touch even briefly. They don't suggest that we give up our devices, but that we use them in a more balanced way.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Overwhelming evidence for why cultivating moment-to-moment awareness of our outsized and addictive distractibility in the digital age and robust lifestyle strategies to stabilize and sustain our attention in the present moment is becoming an absolute necessity. (Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR); author of *Coming to Our Senses* and *Full Catastrophe Living*) Gazzaley and Rosen's work is brilliant and practical, just what we need in these techno-human times. (Jack Kornfield, author of *The Wise Heart*) *The Distracted Mind* by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen is a highly engaging read of how we cognitively pursue our goals and how our brains have to frequently overcome internal and external interference, including that from modern technologies, to do this successfully. The book includes excellent, clear examples of what these problems of goal interference are and how they might affect us in our daily lives. It is a very informative and extremely interesting read, which is strongly recommended for all those with an interest in neuroscience, psychology, and the impact of technology on society. (Barbara J Sahakian, Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural and Clinical Neuroscience Institute, University of Cambridge; coauthor of *Bad Moves*) The book strikes an outstanding balance between cutting-edge scientific knowledge and practical suggestions for effectively coping with today's unprecedented technological demands, which result in distracted minds at all ages and make us want to believe in the myth of multitasking. (Pat DeLeon, former President of the American Psychological Association)

Adam Gazzaley is Professor in the Departments of Neurology, Physiology, and Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, where he is also Director of the Neuroscience Imaging Center. He wrote and hosted the PBS special "The Distracted Mind with Dr. Adam Gazzaley." Larry D. Rosen is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. He is a blogger for Psychology Today and the author of *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us* and six other books.

Have you noticed how many people are looking at their smartphones while walking, crossing the street or even driving? Does it drive you up the wall that your friends keep checking their phones while you're trying to talk to them or share a meal? Our addiction to gadgets and gizmos has brought us to the brink of an attention crisis, which is not just harmful but dangerous. 80% of all car accidents and 16% of highway deaths result from distracted driving, and every year texting while driving kills thousands of folks before their time. In addition, hundreds of billions of dollars in

productivity are lost annually to distraction, not to mention the loss in overall quality of life. Why do we all do this even though we know it's terrible for us? And is there a cure? Goal interruption is the ultimate problem, and the culprits are distractions and interruptions (there's a difference!). According to Drs Gazzaley and Rosen, we are susceptible to them because we still have brains designed for foraging, always scoping the environment for novel information to enhance survival. Unfortunately, modern gizmos plug directly into this foraging circuit, making us go "Squirrel!" even when it's just a picture of one on a screen, and we don't really eat squirrels anymore anyway. Gazzaley and Rosen -- a neuroscientist and psychologist, respectively -- make a strong case that distraction is indeed diminishing the quality of our lives in significant ways. They lay out the science of attention and information processing in a way that is thorough yet accessible to a general audience. What I particularly like about this book is that they themselves have done some of the pioneering research on distraction and attention, so you're getting it straight from the source. I gained a lot of insight into how goal interruption happens. For example:-- Suppressing irrelevant information is not a passive process. It requires effort, and as you get older, you get worse at it, and are more distractable.-- Your brain can only handle one cognitive task at a time, so multitasking is impossible. What you're really doing when you think you're multitasking is 'task switching', and the brain can only do that via network switching: activating a whole different set of circuits. This slows you down, big time. So we've identified the problem -- now what? The last two chapters of the book propose some solutions: educational initiatives, meditation, exercise, brain games, and video games, some of which (like Beepseeker and NeuroRacer) are being developed in the Gazzaley Lab right now. This is cutting-edge stuff, folks, and potentially revolutionary. There's so much more in the book that simply won't fit in a short review. For me, the information was especially important because I've been feeling a lot of my energy and productivity frittering away from distractions like email and social media. How much more could I get done if I managed my mind better? "The Distracted Mind" non-judgmentally frames the problem as the urgent crisis that it is, while proffering some straightforward solutions. Maybe you, too, would like to take back some of your time and attention, or have a loved one that really needs help in this department. If so, this book is the persuasive wallop you need to make the change towards a more goal-oriented, productive, healthy life.-- Ali Binazir, M.D., M.Phil., author of *The Tao of Dating: The Smart Woman's Guide to Being Absolutely Irresistible*, the highest-rated dating book on Amazon for 4 years

It seems that what most of us think of as "multi-tasking" or doing two or more things simultaneously is an illusion, we transit from one task to another with impedance of fractions of a second. Danger in

driving is not just looking away from the road, but thinking away from the road. This realization is a lifesaver: the obvious remedy is to try to minimize "distractions." A scholarly approach may camouflage that there is a subtle message. The value of single mindedness and concentration are the rewards of serious meditation practices which few have mastered, but everyone can try to reduce the effects of simultaneous cognitive activities such as playing with gadgets, or trying to read while watching television programs fighting for attention with short scene cuts. Though not billed as a "self-help" manual, it gets the point across that safety and contentment may be cross linked. "Do less, achieve more" is an important lesson for all.

Lots of great and interesting research presented. There's no secret sauce in the solution, which I guess shouldn't be surprising. However the implementation of change, and its difficulty possibly warranted more focus. Changing behavior was hard before the three game changers presented. Now it must be even harder.

Everyone complains about the distractions from today's technology, but Gazzaley has the science to back it up. He outlines specific strategies that we can all use to combat those distractions and function more effectively. (Gazzaley isn't just a scientist and academic, he's also an entrepreneur. One company he co-founded turns the brain-grabbing appeal of video games into tools for improved cognition.) This is a must-read for anyone who finds themselves suffering from high-tech distraction - in other words, just about all of us!

I am a Ph.D., but a political scientist and not a neuro-one/geek. I start that by saying there are some parts of this book that are tough sledding and I'm still not sure I understand. If you are up for that, it is worth a read. One of the reasons it is worth it is that even in the tough sledding parts of it, Gazzaley tries to simplify and provide common, understandable analogies in a lot of places. Once by those tough neuro-geek parts, the book has a wealth of data-driven arguments that should give you pause the next time you pause in your work even if it is just to check your email (something I'll bet many who are reading this do far more often than they are willing to admit). It is particularly devastating in parts of how handheld, the Internet, and Social Media are affecting the young. And, no, they are not supplementing what they are learning in school, they are supplanting it. Ditto many other things for all of us as well. Some (smallish but not insignificant) number of us admit to using our handhelds during sex. Gazzaley thinks we are in the midst of a technological shift/sea change and modern, portable devices that we can access just about anywhere anytime are not just

manifestations of the computer. Hence, his inclusion of social media in that sea change. That should be enough of a hint. If I have one criticism it is that he relies some on data from the Gazzaley Institute--a bit self-serving. But the book is full of references to other researchers/studies on how our minds are now in what is close to a perpetual state of distraction.

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