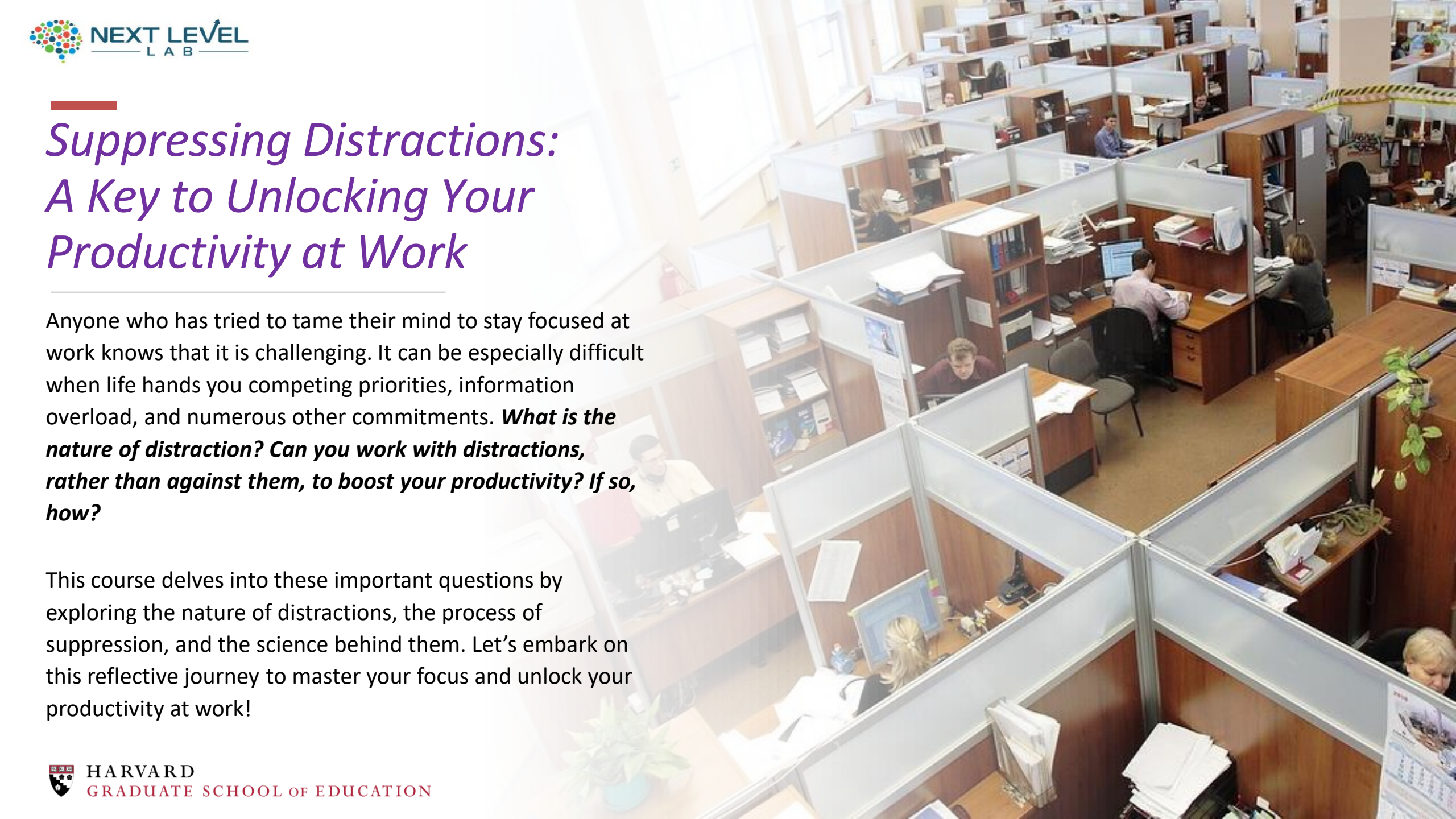
NEXT LEVEL LAB

Suppressing Distractions: A Key to Unlocking Your Productivity at Work



Anyone who has tried to tame their mind to stay focused at work knows that it is challenging. It can be especially difficult when life hands you competing priorities, information overload, and numerous other commitments. ***What is the nature of distraction? Can you work with distractions, rather than against them, to boost your productivity? If so, how?***

This course delves into these important questions by exploring the nature of distractions, the process of suppression, and the science behind them. Let's embark on this reflective journey to master your focus and unlock your productivity at work!

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Next Level Lab User's Manual to the Mind

This module is part of a set of self-guided courses designed to help people develop a "user's manual" for their minds.

There are four self-guided courses.

1. Embodied Minds
2. Attention Matters
3. Memory Moves
4. Adaptive Expertise



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This module is part of the following self-guided course:

Attention Matters

To Support Development of a "User's Manual For Our Embodied Minds" Building Upon Research in the Learning Sciences, Neuroscience, and Cognitive Science

The course has four modules:

1. Allocating for Attentional Blink
2. Suppressing Distractions
3. Navigating Mind-Wandering
4. Maximizing Attentional Structures

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Course Level Understanding Goals:

- Attention is one of the most important resources that we have. Its impact is ubiquitous in our lives and interacts with every aspect of learning and work performance.
- Our beliefs about the nature of attention impact how we attempt to deploy it and how we feel about our efforts, and subsequently, ourselves.
- While attention is certainly a deployable resource, outdated ideas about how attention and perception work often lead to untenable practices by educators and by learners.
- Understanding how human cognitive architecture engages attention will help us to work with its limitations and affordances to offer the best strategies for deploying attention.

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These materials include three framing concepts related to Next Level Learning:



Contextualized Leveraged Agency: Behaving Like Fast Fish: *Learning and performing effectively is accomplished by modifying our contexts to support our best work, just as fish create vortices in water to push off from—enabling them to swim their fastest.*



Generative Moves: Transfer to One's Own Situation*: Instead of teaching one approach or strategy that loses nuance and applicability as problem levels change, people are taught broadly applicable information about learning and the mind and are invited into a process of generating specific, contextualized strategies that apply to their own circumstances.*



Rationale Revealed: Understanding the Mechanisms Behind the Moves: *When people understand the rationale behind the thinking moves, they are more likely to use the strategies and apply them flexibly as needed.*

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Suppressing Distraction Module

In this module, we will explore:

- *What does it take to be focused?*
- *Why are we prone to distractions and how do they work?*
- *What adjustments and strategies could help us improve focus and productivity at work?*

There will be four main sections of this module

1. Understanding Human Attention and Distractions
2. Internal and External Distractions
3. Evaluating the Cost of Suppressing Distraction
4. Generating Moves for Suppressing Internal and External Distractions as a Fast Fish Learner

The module will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. It invites you to engage in multiple reflection activities throughout the module.



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How does this module interact with other modules and courses in the Next Level Lab series?

The *Suppressing Distractions Module* focuses on how being able to attend is a balance between focus and our ability to suppress internal and external distractions that make it challenging.

This module connects to and complements concepts in the *Calming for Concentration Module* within the *Embodied Minds Course,* which focuses on how our internal states interact with sense of calm and focus. It also addresses external distractions to the extent that these impact this internal calm and focus. It considers how emotion and body states can prevent deep concentration or pull us towards it.

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Suppressing Distraction Module

As you begin the specifics of the module on the next slide…

- …take time to engage with the thinking that it entails.
- …take notes to support your ability to reflect on your thoughts without having to hold too much in mind.
- …if you find yourself racing through and not making time to engage in the thinking, stop and schedule a time when you can actively process each slide and apply it to your own contexts.
- …if you are working in a group, make sure to take turns sharing out your thoughts and processing them as a group.
- …create a “parking lot” either on a group white board/chart paper or in your notes to “park” any questions or puzzles that you wish to return to later.

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Press the button to play the Dichotic Listening Task.
(The audio can be accessed with captions on Youtube.)

Imagine that you are at your company's cocktail party. There are many conversations, noises, and other distractions going around you. But somehow, you are just able to focus (as least when you try hard) on this colleague in front of you telling you about their vacation plan to Italy.

This "*cocktail party effect*" demonstrates how human attention is often limited and requires intentionally distributing limited resources to targeted use.

To mimic this effect, we are going to engage in this dichotic listening task.

Click on the arrow on the left to listen to an audio that has two channels. Listen to the audio and see if you can focus on *just one* channel, either the left or the right. Please use headphones for the best result.

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As you might have noticed in the last task, you need to very intentionally suppress one audio channel in order to hear the other properly.

This is only a simple task, so imagine this level of **push** (effortful focus) and **pull** (suppressing distraction) being multiplied while we are engaged in more complex tasks at work.

Human attention is so limited that any distraction can impact our ability to concentrate, especially when engaging in more complex tasks. Every effortful focus comes with active suppression of distractions.



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Now that we've started talking about focus and distraction, think about the last time you talked about distraction, or heard others talk about distraction – what was it like?

What were some of the emotions involved while thinking about these distractions?

Take a few moments to reflect upon these. Try to write down a few notes for later reference.

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What does social media say about distraction?



How I *Quickly* Removed Distractions and Started a New Life (you can too) |...

2.1M views • 2 years ago

Dr. Anuj Pachhel

What to do when you are stuck in life? When facing **distractions** and lacking productivity, I tried to summarise how I faced these ...

4K



Why You're Always Distracted - 5 Mistakes Ruining Your Focus

1M views • 7 months ago

Ali Abdaal

How to improve focus is one of the questions I get asked most about. ...

4K

6 chapters Introduction | Mistake 1 - Not Having...

What are some ways to keep yourself from getting distracted while working or studying?

195 answers · Last followed May 30

Answer | Follow · 1.4K | Request

How can we control our mind from distraction?

790 answers · Last followed Jan 30

Answer | Follow · 1.1K | Request



How to never get distracted?

1.4M views · 4 years ago

Think School

VIDEO INTRODUCTION: **Distraction** is like a parasite that sucks all the nutrients from the apple tree eventually killing it, exactly ...

CC

What themes do you notice in the headlines?

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Social media can really portray one framing over another and shape our perspectives about distractions. Distraction is often cast as a villain that we can only fight to defeat or get defeated by, or as a fault that we succumb to.

In contrast to this popular framing, the ability to attend to distractions actually has an adaptive function. Think about how you were saved by that sudden, loud honk that distracted you when you are walking on a busy street and talking on your phone. (Phew!)

Dispelling the myth of distraction as a villain or a fault reduces the sense of guilt of individuals. Rather than viewing distractions as a simplistic deficit of our mind, it invites a more critical stance and delves deeper into its complexities.

This moves us one step closer to accurately capturing the gist of distractions and a better understanding of our mind and ourselves…



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Internal and External Distraction

To better understand distractions, we can also see distractions on the spectrum of

external- what's going on around us and **internal**- what's going on in our mind.



External distractors are any sensory distractions that appear in our surroundings, meaning anything significant captured via our sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch.



Some distractions are an interaction between the two – just like how the Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) starts with external stimuli and then results in internal feelings like anxiety and shame that are hard to suppress.



Internal distractions include mind wandering, as well as emotions such as excitement, anxiety, self-doubt, fear, and worry that prevent you from focusing on your task. It could also just be that gut feeling that something is not right.



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Now that you've learned more about types of distractions, try to reflect upon a time when you got distracted. It could be a previous experience or the distraction that you've experienced while going through this course.

- Was the distraction caused by an internal or external factor, or an interaction of both?
- How did you feel when you were distracted?
- Did you try to suppress the distraction? What steps did you take?

Take a few moments to reflect upon these. Try to write down a few notes for later reference.

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One way of thinking about distraction is to imagine that you are sailing a sailboat in a busy harbor.

The underwater currents are the internal forces that push against your boat; this could be any internal thoughts or emotions that are derailing you from your intended route. Some currents are more challenging than others.

Some internal distractions are very hard to suppress. This is especially true for emotional distractions. Anxiety, fear, trauma, and even excitement can behave just like those unpredictable currents.

At the same time, there are external stimuli such as the colorful buoys or interesting landmarks around the harbor that pull you away from the current route.

Some of these external distractions are hardwired and adaptive (such as that loud honk preventing you from being run over), or unavoidable, like a sudden emergency signal or severe weather report that needs your attention.





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Strategies that only focus on top-down control and treating suppression as a matter of willpower are unlikely to be successful. Think about the push and pull of the underwater current and the strong wind around the harbor. Rather than taming them, you could make strategic predictions and plan ahead. In other words, be ready to ***ride the wave***.

Suppression of distraction can have huge cognitive costs. Therefore, knowing when to pause and take breaks, or actually attend to the distractors, are just as important…



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What the Research Says About Suppressing Distractions



Suppressing External Distractions

Identifying distractors in your surroundings before starting a task can help you reallocate your limited attention. Try to analyze any distractors (conversation of other colleagues, large movements in your visual periphery) and prepare to minimize them as much as you can.

Sometimes, voluntarily interrupting a task during work and taking what are called microbreaks (e.g. standing up, taking some water) does not necessarily harm productivity. In contrast, being passively distracted or intruded upon without any plan to counteract them could harm work performance.



Suppressing Internal Distractions

When facing internal distractions, we need to carefully analyze the cognitive effort required to suppress them and whether we could adjust the environment to help us do so effectively.

Suppressing distraction is much more complex than an effortful, top-down process during the task. It involves multiple processes and might require us to plan ahead. Schedule regular temperature checks on your cognitive effort during the task and decide if you should prepare to suppress those distractions or actually attend to them.

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Now looking back at your reflection on distraction and suppression.

- How difficult was it to suppress the distraction? How successful was that process?
- If you are experiencing difficulties suppressing distractions, how would you re-evaluate the situation?
- What are strategies that you could think of to suppress internal and external distractions (or an interaction of both)?
- What are some generative moves that might help you to balance the need to suppress distractions against the cognitive costs of doing so?

Take a few moments to reflect upon these. Make a list of your ideas for possible generative moves that you can employ.

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What Others Say About Suppressing Distractions…

"I took some time to really evaluate my workspace and noticed that a lot of noise from nearby conversations and the vibrant visuals on my computer desktop were pulling my attention away. I've started identifying which of these distractors I can control, like using noise-canceling headphones or adjusting my desktop setup and acknowledging others that are simply part of the background."

"To tackle the overwhelming flow of emails, I've started blocking specific times in my calendar to handle them. Instead of constantly checking my inbox, I give myself set periods to respond. This approach prevents emails from distracting me during those critical times when I need deep focus."

"I've begun setting clear expectations with my team about when I'm available for questions or support. I communicate my 'office hours' to ensure I have uninterrupted time for focused work, while still being accessible to my colleagues at designated times."

"I've worked on establishing a consistent routine that gives my workday a predictable structure. Every night, I plan for the next day, anticipating potential distractions and brainstorming how to minimize them. This routine has significantly boosted my productivity and focus."

"I decided to give my desk a makeover by decluttering it and reorganizing everything. I removed any unnecessary items and organized my files and tools to ensure everything I need is within easy reach. It's amazing how a tidy space helps me stay focused throughout the day."

"I've realized the power of microbreaks. Every hour or so, I take a couple of minutes to step away from my desk, stretch, or grab some water. These short breaks help keep fatigue at bay and refresh my mind, enhancing my concentration when I return to my tasks."

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Look back at your own list of moves and the ones shared by others. Are any of them “Fast Fish Moves” that mediate the contexts around you to help you to allocate attention?

One way around the cognitive costs of suppression is to modify your environment.

> In what ways might you modify surrounding contexts to minimize the need for suppression and to support your ability to focus?

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In Summary:

- Focusing on a task requires considerable effort. Human attention is limited, and any distraction can impact our ability to focus, especially when engaging in complex tasks.
- Some distractions can actually be helpful and have adaptive functions. This is in contrast with the common understanding that distraction is merely a deficit or a lack of effort.
- Distractions can be thought of as internal and external, or an interaction of both.
- Certain external distractions are not suppressible. We are hard-wired to attend to very loud noises, rapid movement, etc.
- Internal distractions can be difficult to set aside, especially when they arise from the part of our brain responsible for implicit emotional memories.
- Understanding the source of distractions is important information for knowing what we can control and what we need to work around.
- Actively suppressing distractions has a cognitive cost.
- Viewing distractions as both a push and a pull can help us to understand instances of avoidance that function as a push and the emotions that pull us away from focus.
- Strategies that only focus on controlling our attention, particularly those that treat it as about a learner's will, without understanding the role of distraction, are unlikely to be successful.

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Connecting Forward:

- Try to reflect on the places where you are trying to focus. If you are having to suppress too much background noise, your work will suffer, so it might be worth the effort to move to a different space.
- Notice when you are feeling regularly distracted. Analyze what the issues are.
- Notice how your attention works the next time that you find yourself in a loud environment. Your attentional capacities actually weaken some of their connections to focus on others. Keep this in mind when you are in places that require vigilance.
- Realize that actively suppressing very busy visual images and loud noises is exhausting! Don’t be surprised when you are tired later and factor this in to how you plan the rest of your work and your day.
- Every now and then, stop to consider whether you are having to engage in too much active suppression to be effective. Consider talking with others to modify your environments so that you aren’t stuck in a noisy cubicle trying to suppress the voices of chatty colleagues!

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The Next Level Lab is pursuing this work as we articulate the findings from research in cognitive science, neuroscience, and learning sciences that inform approaches to education and workforce development. Our work sits at the intersection of mining extant research of promise; conducting research with the potential for high-leverage impact; translating research on learning and the mind for public use; and innovating in the space of technology and learning to develop new visions for what is possible in developing human potential.

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For Further Information:

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