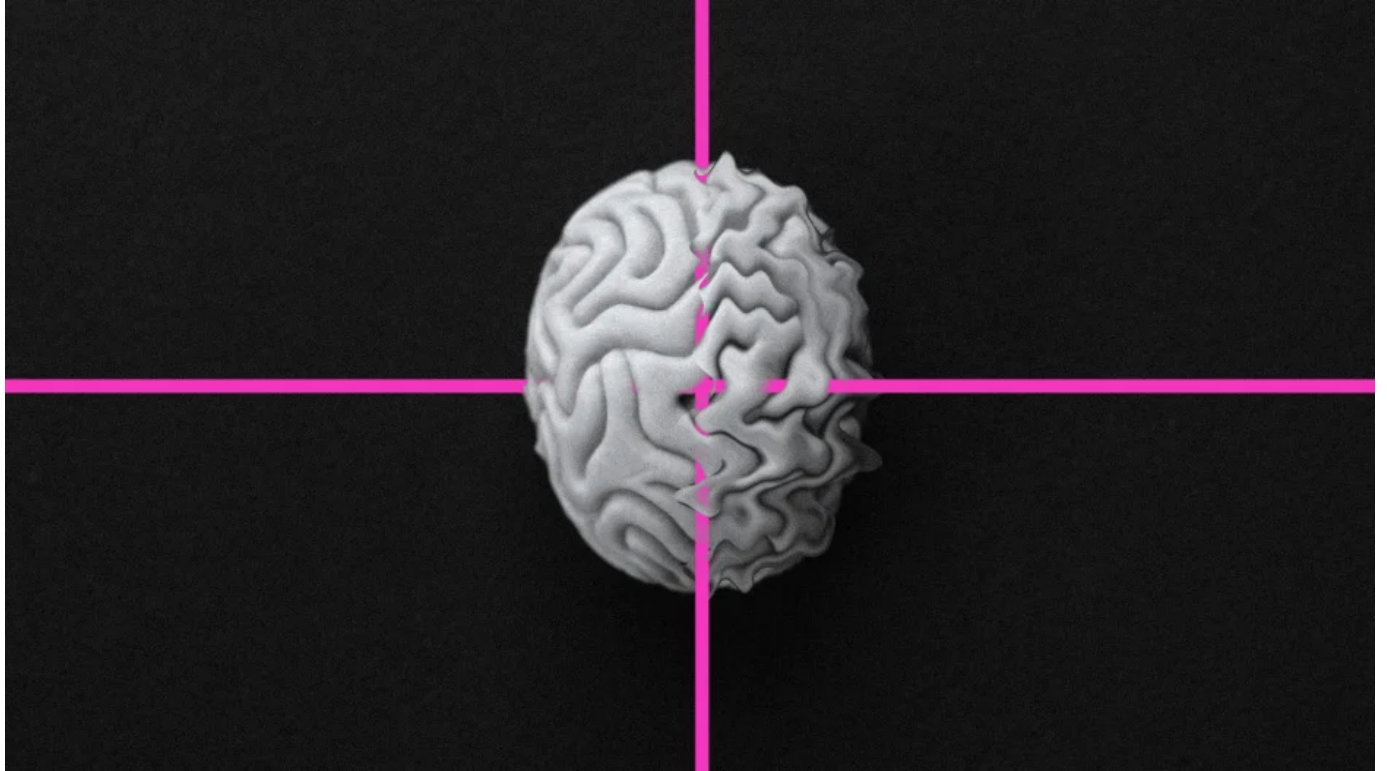


These are the 4 boundaries your brain needs to feel less overwhelmed

So many of us feel overwhelmed. Setting boundaries allows you work in a more sustainable—and less reactive—way.



[Photo: [EKATERINA BOLOVTSOVA](#)/Pexels]

BY **STEPHANIE VOZZA**

5 MINUTE READ

Ever wonder where the day went? It's not uncommon to reach the late afternoon, and marvel at why you didn't gain more traction on your to-do list. That's because the workstyle most of us use is reactive, says Joe Robinson, author of *Work Smarter, Live Better: The Science-Based Work-Life Balance and Stress Management Toolkit*.

“It's survival mode, and we go with whatever factors the most recent in our brain,” he says. “It's autopilot and it causes stress in the process.”

Many of us are feeling overwhelmed, and remote working arrangements aren't necessarily helping, because they increase the amount and forms of communication you must track. The challenge is our brain's instinctual reaction to overwhelm.

“We have a hangover from our ancestors that doesn’t really work in the modern world,” says Robinson. “Anytime your ‘ancient’ brain perceives that something is more than you can handle, it sees it as a threat and triggers the stress response. Stress today is social stress, but it still sets off the automatic response of fight or flight.”

It’s possible to manage our thoughts so we’re not just reacting in panic mode all day long. Robinson says setting these four boundaries will help you work in a more sustainable way.

ATTENTION MANAGEMENT

Part of your brain is always asking, “What’s wrong?” “How am I going to make it? “What’s next?” says Robinson. “Self-inflicted stress is the frenzy and frazzle to get to the next item on the list,” he says.

To get anything done during the workday with focused attention, you need tap into your working memory. The human brain is limited to three or four thought chunks for only a few seconds, says Robinson.

“The more attention you have, the longer you are able to remember what you’re doing and the faster you get it done,” he says. “If you have a situation where your skills meet a challenge you can have what’s called an optimal experience where you’re fully absorbed in the moment of what you’re doing. That’s as good as it gets.”

Unfortunately, interruptions blow up working memory. “We have the rise of what’s called ‘attention deficit trait,’” says Robinson. “It’s not ADHD—something you’re born with—but it mimics the same symptoms. Your attention span shrinks, you have a hard time staying on task, you flit from one thing to the next, and you have more time urgency because you’re falling behind.”

To regain your attention, calm your mind. Robinson suggests counting backward from 100 to zero in your brain. “Since we don’t do this every day, we have to pay attention to it,” he says. “If your thoughts stray, just come back to the next number down the line. The exercise is relaxing and calming.”

Exercise is also a good stress reducer because it brings your brain back to center. Or focus on your breath. “It massively increases your attention,” he says. “Deliberative breathing shuts down the acceleration of the stress response. It’s strongest in the immediate few minutes after the button gets pushed.”

INTERRUPTION MANAGEMENT

In order to have more attention, it's important to set the terms of engagement with your devices.

“The more you check email, the more you have to check email, because you lose your ability to regulate your impulse control,” says Robinson. “Disruptions erode your impulse control, and interruptions make anything you do seem more difficult and aggravating than it is. Humans are allowed to set the rules on the devices.”

The impulse control mechanism is located in a part of the executive attention function of the brain called effortful control, says Robinson. “Interruptions shred it and make us self-distract and lose ability to regulate impulsivity and stay on task,” he says. “Managing interruptions, then, is key.”

A [study by Harvard Business School Professor Leslie Perlow](#) looked at what would happen when employees had two no-interruption zones—no phone or email—in the day. Having a no-interruption zone in the morning from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. increased productivity 59% and a no-interruption zone from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. increased productivity 65%.

“BARKING” MANAGEMENT

Another boundary your brain needs is the ability to let things go in order to return to work. Robinson calls this “barking” management.

“Does your dog bark hours, days, months, or years after another dog walks past your yard?” he asks. “He drops the event as soon as it's over like it never happened. But that's not what humans do. We keep barking. We hang on to the event, and that's what causes our stress—but we don't have to.”

Hanging onto stress is rumination. Robinson says we can play a big role in shutting down this ancient reflex by managing the thoughts in your brain. Robinson suggests using a tool called “thought labeling.”

“We're very verbal creatures, and a lot of words are flowing through our brain,” he says. “They attach themselves in a random way. They fuse with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and moods in our brain and come out in the form of a thought.”

For example, if you have a confrontation with someone at work and your thoughts drive you to a conclusion that you can't take it anymore, you'll be worse off than you

were because you've self-defined yourself as being in a bad state, says Robinson.

“Instead, tell yourself that a thought is not self-defining,” he says. “You can say, ‘I’m having the thought that I can’t handle this anymore.’ Labeling your thoughts as thoughts, separates you from knee-jerk, emotion-word fusions that hold you hostage to false beliefs. The stress response stops in three minutes after you turn off the false life-and-death signal.”

REFUELING MANAGEMENT

Sticking to the previous three boundaries requires giving your brain a break so it can rest and reset.

“We are not hard drives with hair,” says Robinson. “After two hours of time on task, the brain has to get off task to relieve strain and reboot.”

The brain needs daily, weekend, and vacation resets. Robinson says productivity goes up after 10-minute breaks, 20-minute breaks, and dramatically after a vacation. Recreation and relaxation also allow you to put away whatever you've been thinking about over and over and recover. If you don't, you'll come back to work the next day with a stress still there.

“Managing stress is really all about managing our thoughts,” says Robinson. “We think because something's in our head, we got to pay attention to it. We don't.”

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