

--- Intro ---

You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

Hello, and thank you so much for having me. My name is Jaime Zander, and I am a primary care psychologist with Allina Health. I primarily work with children, adolescents, and families, and mostly school aged kids. Before I even get started, I want to express my gratitude for the important work you all do to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for your students. You have been asked to do some challenging and incredible work over the last few years, and I continue to be both impressed and grateful for ongoing collaboration and the amazing work you all do.

In this episode, I am going to talk about maintaining focus throughout the work day. Without getting into the nitty gritty aspects of attention, I am hoping to offer some basic tools or topics to reflect on to help promote focus. Attention and concentration are under the larger umbrella of executive functioning. Executive skills are basically higher order cognitive skills that help us self-regulate. There are many aspects of attention and concentration, and I am specifically going to talk about divided attention or in more common terms: multitasking.

In modern day work environments, our attention is constantly being pulled in many different directions. I know for myself, during my writing breaks or lunch break, I often find myself returning calls, having hallway conversations, or responding to urgent messages. It is rare that I am actually taking a true break, and I imagine it is the same for many of you. I think often times, we can **feel** productive if we are engaging in many tasks at once or engaging in what most people call "multi-tasking." Multi-tasking isn't actually doing several things at once, but switching our attention back and forth quickly between tasks.

So, when we are trying to work on a project, and we experience an email pop up notification, our attention is shifting and switching focus for even a split second. Now, I am sure you can all imagine this situation: you are trying to write a thoughtful email. A colleague pops in to ask a "quick question." You go back to the email. A minute later, your phone receives a text notification, and you glance at it briefly and put it down. Then you hear something outside the door, so you check to making sure everything is ok. An email, which should have taken 10 thoughtful minutes in theory ends up taking twice as long due to the many things going on around you that seem to require or even demand your attention.

Research by cognitive psychologists have continually shown that our brains are not really wired to take on significant mental switching or juggling and that it often comes at a cost of time loss (APA, 2006). Of course we all differ on how effectively we can switch tasks back and forth, however, in general, the human brain isn't designed to do this long term or to take on significant switching demands.

So then, with the many demands on our attention, how can prioritize focus and attention to help improve overall productivity. I am going to ask you consider 4 things:

1. General self-care practices to consider to promote attention
2. Minimizing distractions
3. Setting intentions
4. Productive rest

### General Self-care practices

First off, I think it's important to first address general wellness practices that absolutely impact our ability to focus and be productive throughout the day. So, it is important to first reflect on and take inventory on some of your daily life style choices that could be having an impact on attention. For example, our sleep can absolutely impact our ability to focus and pay attention. When we are tired or mentally fatigued, it can impact our ability to focus, recall and retain new information, and make thoughtful decisions. Additionally, stress can impact one's ability to focus and pay attention. For example, when you have racing thoughts or many things going on in your mind at once, it can be difficult to focus attention on just the one thing in the present moment. Finally, we know that hunger, fatigue, and poor nutrition can all impact our ability to perform at our best. If you are feeling as though you need assistance in any of these areas, please reach out to a primary care or mental health provider for support.

### Minimize Distractions

Second, one of the most important things we can do to improve productivity and focus throughout the workday is minimizing all the outside distractions that lead to divided attention. When you really want to hone in and focus on a project or a task, it is so important to work in a quiet, controlled, distraction free environment. When we think of this kind of physical space, we want to make sure our workspace is free of clutter, clean, and distraction free. This may mean turning the phone upside down, putting a sign on the door for no interruptions, or reminding family members or colleagues of private work time. Electronically, this can mean limiting the amount of tabs you have open, setting the status as away, or even having only selective times to check emails. This can reduce the amount of interruptions or quick glances that may occur when having popups, notifications, or others demanding your attention.

### Set intentions

Next, I think it can be valuable to set your intentions for the day. Intention setting is all about setting up your purpose for the day, the task, or the job. This could also mean understanding your "why." Dr. Heather Crabtree created an awesome podcast that goes in depth on intention setting and how to incorporate this practice into your daily routine. I really encourage you all to check it out!

In discussing intentions, I want to speak on setting intentions and priorities for the day. Often times, we can become stressed or overwhelmed by the endless "to do" tasks, that can leave us feeling frozen or stuck on where to start. With this, I like to set up a top 3 priority task list for the day. What are the 3 things I know I need to accomplish today for sure? After that, everything else that gets completed is a bonus. This allows for prioritizing what is truly most important for the day at hand.

The other tool that can be really useful, is breaking down larger projects, into smaller, more manageable goals. In a similar way, it is easy to become overwhelmed by large projects or tasks you know will

require significant time and mental energy. In the situations, I often find it most helpful to make a sort of project plan-understanding what is step one, step two, and so on. This can be done with just about anything and can often help with stress management and having more clear, intentional goals instead of a larger more abstract goal.

### Productive Rest

Finally, I want to make a brief comment on rest as productive. Rest and quality rest is an essential component to wellbeing and energy, which thus directly impacts our attention and focus. Now what do I mean by quality rest? It so easy to pick up a phone, scroll, and just zone out whenever we get a minute or two of downtime. But I want you to think about about what really re-charges your battery or leads to true feelings of rest within the body.

When I think about restorative rest, I think about social connection, moving our bodies, even if it is for a brief walk up and down the hall, or stepping outside for fresh air and sunshine, even for just a minute. I encourage you to reflect on what truly clears your mind and what may allow for brief moments of still and quiet.

I hope this information provided you with some tool or things to reflect on about improving focus. Here are 4 things I would suggest trying out in the next few weeks to see how they feel:

1. Consider how you are sleeping, eating, moving your body and general stress level and seek support if needed.
2. Minimize distractions in your work environment, whether that is setting an away status, turning off notifications, or put the phone somewhere out of eye sight.
3. Setting intentions- set a top three priority list or consider breaking larger tasks into smaller, more manageable goals
4. Productive rest- consider how you are spending your down time and if it truly feels restorative

Thank you so much for having me! And again, thank you so much for all you do!

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at [www.changetochill.org](http://www.changetochill.org). In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!