Finding Focus in a Distracted World
Tips for focusing attention to the job at hand:

How many times do you get interrupted every day at work? Whether it’s a big crisis or a simple relaxation break, chances are you don’t even realize how much time you’re losing to those interruptions.

There are 24 hours in a day and a traditional job has most people working for eight of those hours. But it turns out people spend much of their time being distracted and only a few hours being productive. Whether it’s web surfing, engaging in personal phone calls, or gossiping by the water cooler, a great deal of working time slips away.

Of course, time-loss impacts employers, but the biggest effect is often on the employee. Many feel dissatisfied, or even guilty about falling short of their best. Individual employees can take steps on their own to combat how distractions affect their productivity. We’ll address the three most common culprits: Email, Chatty co-workers, and self-interruption.

MANAGE TIME WITH FRIENDS AND CO-WORKERS:
It’s not just technology that contributes to workers having trouble staying focused: A study by researchers at Cornell University found that low-level noise in open-office plans can end up increasing stress and decreasing the motivation to accomplish tasks. Increasing emphasis on collaborative work leave workers exposed to regular chatter. And it isn’t just in offices—distractions from chatty co-workers happen on the production floor, the build-site and, well, pretty much anywhere you have people working together!

Spending time getting to know and enjoy co-workers is part of maintaining a positive work culture. It is important to have opportunities to share and laugh together. However it is important to be careful about your time. The best way to get out of a distracting conversation is to be kind and straightforward: “I’ll have to excuse myself. I have to get back to my work.”

CHECK EMAIL LESS FREQUENTLY:
Some studies have shown that people checked their email up to 40 times per hour…..That’s almost every minute!

Time management experts suggest limiting this process to 3-5 times per day-- and never first thing in the morning. Many people have a hard time with this concept— in the current business culture there is a sense that you must always remain “available.” But studies show that in most cases, client and co-worker relationships are not impacted negatively by waiting an hour or even more to respond to email. So, in an 8 hour work day, checking every hour or two could be sufficient. A helpful tip is to turn off email alerts that appear on your screen or make a noise. These small interruptions can be enough to pull you away from what you are doing, and the sound alerts can even distract co-workers. Instead, set an alarm to help you check email at long but regular intervals.

LIMIT MULTI-TASKING:
Wait, what!? Isn’t multi-tasking good? …maybe not. Studies continue to show that when people switch tasks, it takes time for their brains to change focus—up to 20 minutes! Most people switch tasks more frequently than every 20 minutes, which means that they are simply not operating at their best most of the time.

When you jump from item to item, you are only giving part of yourself to what you are currently doing. According to the Wall Street Journal, 44% of participants in one survey said that they interrupted work flow themselves, as opposed to being interrupted by others. They simply moved on to other tasks, whether the first one was finished or not. Of course, the temptation of social-networking streams and status updates make it easy for workers to interrupt themselves.

Most people jump from task to task because they are looking for stimulation throughout a long work day. But there are better ways to break up monotony. Taking a walk and sticking to a steady diet can help workers resist the urge to indulge an interruption. Scheduling mini-rewards, such as having a healthy snack or a scheduled visit with a co-worker, for completing specific tasks is a great way to keep on track.

DO A SELF CHECK:
Do you find that you are consistently distracted, or not able to focus as you would like? Sometimes, this can be a sign of anxiety, depression or other health problems. Call EAP to meet with a counselor who can help you assess your concerns.

A counselor can also help you balance the demands of home and work, which can often help you be more present in both roles. Remember that your EAP benefit covers all who reside in your home.