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Anti-Virus Programming: Addressing the Virus of Distraction

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Abstract:

There are various epistemic methodologies to study a subject. Some look at it from a third person objective manner, whereas others from a subjective first person perspective. This paper is primarily a first person approach to study the inner convolutions that limit productivity owing to the virus of distraction. Drawing inputs from Indian Psychology, the attempt here is to understand, and subsequently, to keep the internal virus in check.

Keywords: *Anti-Virus Programming, Distraction, Indian Psychology, Productivity, Wellbeing*

Introduction:

As part of the anti-virus program, I took up the task of identifying a virus that bugs the efficient functioning of my system. The attempt was to understand the nature of this virus, its source (whether it's internal or external or a mix of both) of origin, its operational dynamics as well as its impact (both temporary and lasting) on me. As the project required a modus operandi using insights from Indian Psychology, it naturally warranted a first-person approach, whereby an honest pursuit of the internal system was taken up.

The major objectives of this project were to understand my inner mechanisms better, to gain greater control over its functions, to rewire my internal convolutions, and eventually, to enhance its performance. This internal exploration was tagged to a daily dairy journaling exercise for 21 days which helped in understanding and fixing the virus to a great extent.

In this fast-paced world, it is not unusual for one to get distracted; however, rarely do we notice it and the magnitude of its impact on our overall performance. This paper attempts to understand the various dimensions of distraction and its impact on my system.

Virus and its Impact:

Thinking about a virus that bugs my system, I ended up looking at it from a productivity perspective and there is nothing that hampers my productivity as much as the virus of distraction which has its source both inwards and outwards. The source being erratic, it was difficult to trace the virus in its entirety, however, an internal examination helped in gaining greater clarity regarding its course of action.

The impact of this virus is also manifold as much as its source, which brought attention to the idea of inability to focus on a task for long, subsequently leading to a lack of productivity and increased stress levels. This is not necessarily a linear progression and doesn't end there; instead, it continues as a vicious cycle that would further lead to a great amount of distraction.

Triggers for the Virus:

Psychological viruses, just like physical viruses, manifest their true nature when attached to a host or when there is a trigger that initiates its functioning. Excessive use of smartphones, especially the tendency to look up for notifications as well as surfing through social media every now and then, is a major cause for distraction. It used to hamper my ability to stay focused on my committed work. Larry D. Rosen (2017), in her article "The distracted student mind", states that "the average adolescent or young adult finds it difficult to study for 15 minutes at a time; when forced to do so, they will spend at least five of those minutes in a state of distraction" (p. 9).

Rosen, Carrier and Cheever (2013) point out that distraction invariably leads to poor performance, and stress is a natural consequence of it. It is observed in a study that students who visited Facebook one or more times during the observation period tended to have lower GPAs than those who refrained from it (p. 16). Stress eventually leads to more distraction, as it becomes extremely difficult to focus when the stress hormones are gushing through the body. Stress and anxiety occur not simply when a deadline is missed, but equally when we are cut off from access to social media, even when it is for a short period of time. Having performed a number of studies to understand the psychological effects of smartphone use, Rosen (2017) argues that, "phone-related anxiety- often referred to as FOMO- is a major predictor of both poor performance in school and sleep deprivation" (p. 11).

Benjamin Franklin's quote "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!", which got much popularity of late, owing to the movie 'King Richard', shows the importance of planning, without which success is a distant reality. Poor planning also leads to a great amount of stress that would essentially end up in greater distraction. Also, when new works get piled up or when the planning fails, I get distracted easily as I lose the enthusiasm and momentum to pursue my goals. Unable to plan or unable to adhere to the plan, I realized, is a major cause that triggers the virus.

External noises such as the TV sound, people talking outdoors, loudspeakers etc. are a major

cause of distraction, however, it is the internal noises that make it even more difficult. Regulating these inner noises is the greatest challenge as it is difficult to trace its source and magnitude. The occurrence of such passive thoughts upon which we hardly have any control is brilliantly illustrated by Frankfurt in the essay 'Identity and Externality' (1998):

But to some of the thoughts that occur in our minds... we are mere passive bystanders. Thus, there are obsessional thoughts, whose provenance may be obscure and of which we cannot rid ourselves; thoughts that strike us unexpectedly out of the blue; and thoughts that run willy-nilly through our heads. The thoughts that beset us in these ways do not occur by our own active doing. (p. 62)

A word of demotivation, often leading to over thinking, is a trigger for such inner commotions. Hence, it became important to regulate my response to such external triggers.

Methods to Address it:

Addressing the issue of distraction was not easy, and I'm not sure if I have fully succeeded in that. However, I must discuss the strategies adopted to tackle the issue which can be looked at from a dual perspective: internal re-engineering and external regulations. The former will be discussed in due course, therefore, the external regulations part will be discussed first.

Technology being the greatest external cause for distraction, cutting down on social media use was the first step to it. There was a constant temptation to check the notifications whenever the phone vibrated. In order to avoid this obvious distraction, I decided to keep my phone on silent mode when I sit down to study. However, it wasn't enough to address the issue as I involuntarily checked my phone even when it didn't vibrate or ring. Hence, I realized that the problem was not limited to external noises alone. This is when I thought of using technology to tackle technology. Employing the pomodoro technique, I used my phone as a timer to study/work for a duration of 25 minutes after which I would compulsorily take a 5 minutes break. This cycle would continue for 3 or 4 times until I felt the need to take a longer break. Breaking down my task, I felt, helped me stay focused and reduced my distraction to the minimum. Elaborating some strategies to sharpen the focus and attention of students, Larry D. Rosen (2017), proposes something similar:

Have her set an alarm for 15 minutes, silence the phone, turn it upside down, and put it within sight- this should keep her from becoming anxious, since 15 minutes is not long to wait. When the alarm rings, allow her one minute to check her messages and social media, and then repeat the process." (p. 13)

A timetable was also designed to buttress my plan and strategy which, I believed, would reduce distractions as it offers a great amount of stability and hence, less amount of stress. My day was hence re-designed to accommodate both work and leisure in a systematic manner.

Apart from all these, some inner re-engineering was also done, mainly for a period of three

weeks as part of the dairy journaling exercise. Meditation and breath control were practiced to keep the virus of distraction in check. Understanding the distortions in my breathing pattern (especially when I am nervous) and correcting it helped in controlling my inner vibratory patterns. Meditation, on the contrary, helped me stay focused as I practiced this art by pinning my mind on a certain image. It was effective in sharpening my focus, even though there were some apparent obstructions due to some external noises that hampered my ability to focus.

Effects of this approach- benefits and challenges:

Designing a proper strategy along with meditation and breath control helped me reduce my stress to a great extent. It also instilled great confidence in me as I was able to meet most of my deadlines smoothly. The element of distraction eventually reduced which gave me greater stability and control over my life.

Having said that, I also experienced the challenges of being too rigid with my schedule as I had to compromise on other important things like family functions and other emergencies that came my way. In order to address this conflict, I relied on the Buddhist philosophy of “madhyam marg” (middle path). Eventually, I decided to strike a fine balance between rigidity and flexibility so that I maintain stability in my life without having to be machine-like.

Conclusion:

Through this anti-virus programming, I realised that such bugs, even though are removable, can't be fixed overnight. The deeper entrenched these viruses are, the greater should be the effort from our part to remove it from the system. Conscious and sustained effort is needed to create lasting results. It is all the more important to stick to the process and to believe that such small and incremental efforts that are put on a regular basis will pay off manifold times in the future. It eventually takes us to the realisation that any psychological virus can be fixed if only we tried. Moreover, it also makes it clear that the virus was actually within and the external factors were only aggravating it and hence, it makes it even more relevant to address such issues in its root.

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