NEWS LESSON

Why a Notification Can Distract You Before You Open It



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Which notification is genuinely worth interrupting you for?
2. Does a silent phone still tempt you to check it?
3. Would you prefer one daily update or messages as they arrive?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**cognitive**	☐	A	the ways in which something works or happens
2	**perceived**	☐	B	lasting only a short time
3	**mechanisms**	☐	C	to get rid of something that keeps bothering you
4	**appraisal**	☐	D	a careful judgement of how good or important something is
5	**negotiation**	☐	E	having the right to something
6	**entitled**	☐	F	seen or understood in a particular way
7	**shake off**	☐	G	a discussion in which people try to reach an agreement
8	**short-lived**	☐	H	connected with thinking and understanding

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A banner flashes on your phone and you glance at it, then go back to work. A 2026 study found a slowdown of roughly seven seconds after notifications under particular conditions, not permanent cognitive decline.

1 A banner flashes on your phone. You glance at it and return to the work in front of you. The interruption took seconds, but finding your place can take longer. Research on notifications asks what happens in that gap, and why some interruptions are harder to shake off than others.

2 A 2026 study published in Computers in Human Behavior examined how social-media-style notifications influence cognitive processing. While participants performed an attention task, incoming alerts produced a temporary slowdown lasting roughly seven seconds. The effect varied with the perceived relevance of the notification and with habitual patterns of phone interaction, rather than simply the total amount of time spent using a device.

3 The findings offer a more precise account of distraction than the familiar claim that smartphones are destroying our ability to concentrate. The experiment identified short-lived changes under particular conditions; it did not measure permanent cognitive decline. Nor would it be reasonable to generalise from one task to every kind of reading, work or conversation. There are good reasons to resist sweeping conclusions. Most experiments measure performance under specific conditions, whereas ordinary life involves different devices, habits, ages and reasons for checking a screen.

4 Nevertheless, the mechanisms are familiar. Notifications play on our sensitivity to potentially important information. A message might concern an urgent matter, an invitation or an irrelevant advertisement, but we often assess its significance only after turning our attention towards it. That repeated appraisal competes with the activity we originally intended to complete.

5 Digital connection brings considerable advantages. Quick communication supports families, workplaces and social networks, while accessibility tools and educational resources can make everyday tasks easier. The issue is therefore not an argument for doing away with smartphones, but for distinguishing essential communication from an endless stream of low-value interruptions. Rather than blaming every lapse of concentration on smartphones, the useful question may be which interruptions we can reasonably design out of the day, and which genuinely matter.

6 The study also raises a question about the organisation of digital life. Notifications are not merely technical signals; they communicate an expectation of attention. When employers demand immediate responses, or friends interpret delayed replies as a personal slight, managing interruptions becomes a social negotiation rather than a simple matter of self-control.

7 Individual settings such as scheduled focus periods can help, but they work best alongside shared expectations about urgency and availability. Organisations may need to consider the productivity cost of systems that continually interrupt employees, even when each notification appears trivial. The responsibility for concentration should not rest exclusively with the person receiving alerts when communication practices are designed to make attention permanently accessible.

8 A more deliberate approach to alerts could restore some control over concentration. If we choose when to check rather than responding to every signal, we may reduce needless interruptions without rejecting the technology itself. The key question is no longer whether our phones can attract attention. It is whether we have designed our daily lives so they are entitled to it.

Sources: Computers in Human Behavior. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The study suggests that total time spent on a phone is the main factor behind the slowdown. T F NG
2. A notification can compete with a task even when its content turns out to be irrelevant. T F NG
3. The writer believes that individual settings are enough on their own. T F NG
4. The slowdown was longer for participants over forty. T F NG
5. The writer accepts that phones have benefits but still wants changes in how alerts are managed. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

deliberate	exaggerate	exclusively	generalise	habitual	momentary	restore	slight

1. As a _____ late-night scroller, he no longer noticed how long he stayed online.
2. The company made a _____ decision to switch off email after six, rather than letting it happen by accident.
3. The report blames teenagers _____ , although adults check their phones just as often.
4. He took his colleague's late reply as a personal _____ , though she was only busy.
5. A weekend without email may _____ the energy you lost during a busy week.
6. It would be unwise to _____ from a single experiment to the whole population.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The _____ of the findings is limited because only one task was tested. (APPLY)
2. Employers who demand instant replies show little _____ for their staff's private time. (CONSIDER)
3. Constant interruption is a serious _____ to deep thought. (HINDER)
4. The study's _____ depends on how the participants were chosen. (RELY)
5. She was _____ to put her phone down, even during dinner. (WILLING)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Look at the word before the gap. Fixed combinations such as prone to cannot be guessed from meaning alone, so learn them as chunks.

against	amid	between	for	on	to	with

1. The research draws a distinction _____ short-term slowdown and lasting harm.
2. Heavy users may be more susceptible _____ distraction than occasional ones.
3. Whether a policy works often hinges _____ how staff are treated.
4. Managers were criticised _____ expecting replies at midnight.
5. The firm's approach is at odds _____ its claim to value work-life balance.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Who should decide what counts as an urgent notification?
2. What would you switch off if you could try it for only one day?
3. Should apps have to earn the right to interrupt you?

9 Role-play: the ten-minute reply rule

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the manager

You want your team to answer work messages within ten minutes, even in the evening. Explain why. Ask at least two questions, then decide: agree a rule, change it, or keep it.

Student B · the employee

You want to switch off work alerts after six o'clock because you can't concentrate or rest. Explain how it affects you and suggest a rule that works for both of you.

Useful phrases

I'd like to switch off alerts after six.
Which messages are really urgent?
I can't concentrate when my phone keeps buzzing.
We're a small team, so I need quick answers.
Could we agree a time to reply?
That's a fair compromise.

Afterwards, tell the class: what rule did you agree, and is it fair for both people?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 F · 3 A · 4 D · 5 G · 6 E · 7 C · 8 B

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 habitual · 2 deliberate · 3 exclusively · 4 slight · 5 restore · 6 generalise

6 Word forms

1 applicability · 2 consideration · 3 hindrance · 4 reliability · 5 unwilling

7 Language focus

1 between · 2 to · 3 on · 4 for · 5 with

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