

A Mindful Guide to Email in 20 Minutes a Day

I recently did a challenge with my friend Jesse of Samovar Tea: check email just twice a day (at 10am and 4pm) for 30 minutes a session.

In addition, we couldn't check email in the morning unless we did an hour on a specific project that morning. It ended up that on most mornings, I couldn't do an hour of that project, so I only checked email in the afternoons.

What amazed me is that I only needed about 20 minutes a day to process email, if I focused and worked efficiently. I'd like to share how to do that, if you're interested. (I'm continuing the challenge for at least another week, btw.)

To start with, this isn't about being hyper-efficient. It's not about optimizing our life or becoming productivity masters. It's not about rushing through things.

It's about limiting our distractions (for me, email is one of my go-to distractions) and when we do allow them, it is purposefully. And with focus and mindfulness.

Email is necessary in my life, so I don't want to cut it out. I do want to keep it to a minimum, so it doesn't expand to fill my day, or become something I run to.

OK, with that clear, let's dive into the "how to."

How to Limit Email Checking

It used to be that I would check email first thing in the morning, before getting out of bed. But I realized that this was a procrastination method that *felt* productive, that was a way for me to postpone meditating and important work.

Email also was something I'd check whenever I was bored, didn't want to work on something hard (but still wanted to feel productive), or just had an itch to see what people were writing to me about.

But Jesse asked me a good question: What would happen if you didn't check email for a week? (My projects would fall behind and customers would think I'm unresponsive.) What would happen if you just checked once a day? (Nothing bad, probably.)

So we made a challenge: just check twice a day, at specific times. If you messed up, you'd have to pay the other person \$1,000 (!). That was a ridiculous amount for such a trivial thing, so it was guaranteed that we wouldn't check email.

There was a small caveat: if you needed to send an email (to get a report to someone, for

example), you could *send* the email only, but would have to pay \$1,000 if you checked any other emails.

So I recommend a similar challenge. Try it for a week. Find an accountability partner, promise to pay a really big amount, set specific terms, and see if you can limit your email checking. This won't work for people in customer service, for example, who need to check email all day long to do their job, but for most of us, email just *seems* like something we need to check often, but nothing bad happens if we don't.

Try it, see if you can limit yourself to twice a day. Or be bold, and do once a day!

How to Process Email in 20 Minutes

The "20 minutes" is actually relative to whatever volume of email you need to process, of course. Some people will need 30 minutes. But most people can do it in less, and if you find yourself going beyond 30 minutes, it's possible you need to do a couple things:

1. Unsubscribe from as many newsletters, promotional emails, notifications and other fluff as you can (if it has an unsubscribe link at the bottom of the email, use it). Get those out of your inbox, so you can just focus on the important stuff.
2. Decide that you're not going to get to everything today, just the important ones that you can do in 20-30 minutes. Let go of the rest — getting to empty isn't more important than other things you need to do.

OK, with those two key ideas in mind, here's how to process your email in 20 minutes:

1. **Set a timer for 20 minutes.** Set your container, and work within it.
2. **Process email top down, and completely deal with each email.** One email at a time. Deal with it completely (see next two items) before you allow yourself to move on to the next. Don't put it off, don't say, "I'll deal with that later."
3. **Take one of three actions.** You only have three choices: a) delete (or archive), b) reply right now (and/or take care of the task it requires right now) if it will take 2 minutes or less, c) put it on your to-do list or calendar if it will take longer (see next item) and file in a "to-do" email folder. Basically, do what it takes to get the email out of your inbox. And again, unsubscribe whenever you can.
4. **Put longer tasks on your to-do list.** If it will take longer than 2 minutes, put the item on your to-do list. Or if it's a link that you need to read, put it on a read-later list. Sometimes I'll reply to the person to let them know I'll try to work on it today (or by a certain date), and then put it on my to-do list or calendar.
5. **Be mindful as you work.** It's easy to get into the "do this as quickly as I can" mode. But there's also a mindfulness you can bring to the activity. As you send this email, are you being helpful, kind, clear, truthful, compassionate? How is your body feeling? Are

you sitting upright? Can you smile and appreciate this beautiful moment?

When the timer goes off, find gratitude that you had that time to communicate and take care of important tasks. Let go of the rest (for now), close your email, and resist the urge to check it again later. Refocus yourself on something important.

Breathe, and meet the rest of your day with joy.