

The Zeigarnik Effect

Closing open loops for deeper, less intrusive focus

WHAT IS AN OPEN LOOP

- ☐ Any unfinished task the brain has flagged as important
Zeigarnik (1927) found unfinished tasks are recalled ~2x more often than completed ones
- ☐ Interruptions create open loops even for trivial tasks
The brain does not distinguish task importance when flagging incompleteness
- ☐ Open loops surface as intrusive thoughts during unrelated work
This is the mechanism behind mid-task mental interruptions

THE CLOSING MECHANISM

- ☐ Writing down a plan for an unfinished task closes the loop
Masicampo & Baumeister (2011) found a written plan reduced intrusive thoughts as much as finishing the task itself
- ☐ The brain responds to intention, not just completion
A specific next-action plan signals resolution to working memory
- ☐ Vague reminders do not close loops — specificity does
"Finish report" is weaker than "Draft section 2 at 9am Tuesday"

PRE-SESSION CLOSING RITUAL

- ☐ Write every unresolved task on one capture sheet
Externalizing removes the rehearsal loop the brain uses to avoid forgetting
- ☐ Assign each item a specific next action and time
Converts an open loop into a scheduled intention
- ☐ Set the list aside, out of view, before starting deep work
Visible lists re-trigger the same interruption pattern they were meant to resolve

MID-SESSION INTRUSIONS

- ☐ **Keep a small notepad within reach during focus blocks**
A 10-second capture is cheaper than a broken attention state
- ☐ **Write the intruding thought in 3–5 words, then return to task**
Full elaboration is unnecessary — the brain only needs acknowledgment
- ☐ **Do not evaluate or act on captured items until the session ends**
Acting mid-session reinforces interruption as the default response

WEEKLY REVIEW

- ☐ **Process every capture note within 24 hours**
Unprocessed notes become open loops themselves
- ☐ **Track which task types generate the most intrusions**
Recurring intrusions usually indicate poor upstream planning, not poor focus
- ☐ **Close the week with an empty capture list**
Starting the week with zero open loops measurably reduces next-week interruption frequency