

THE SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR

# SCHOOL SUCCESS

Use Your Brain's Built-In Apps to  
Sharpen Attention, Battle Boredom,  
and Build Mental Muscle



Ron Shumsky, Susan M. Islascox, and Rob Bell

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To all the kids who've taught us what attention is really about.

And to our families for supporting us in writing that up: Hi-chan, Mi-kun, and Naho; Isaac and David; Max and Maya and Christina.

# contents

<b>Introduction: Attention and Success</b> .....	1
Attention Apps .....	2
The Payoff: Ruling at School—and Beyond .....	3
How to Use This Book .....	4
Who Are We? .....	5
List of Reproducible Forms .....	6
<b>Menu of Attention Apps</b> .....	7

## **APP 1**

### **YOUR MIND'S SITE SELECTOR** 11

*Paying attention when bored to tears*

## **APP 2**

### **YOUR MIND'S PIZZA CUTTER** 30

*Slicing work down to size*

## **APP 3**

### **YOUR MIND'S VIDEO SCREEN** 41

*Picturing yourself atop Mt. Work*

## **APP 4**

### **YOUR MIND'S CHEERLEADER** 50

*Psyching up & getting pumped (for school!)*

## **APP 5**

### **YOUR MIND'S PIGGY BANK** 62

*Choosing work over play  
(and what a marshmallow has to do with it)*

**APP 6**  
**YOUR MIND'S ACTIVATOR** 74

*Cease C's and attain A's*

**APP 7**  
**YOUR MIND'S WORKBENCH** 92

*Just what was I supposed to do next?*

**APP 8**  
**YOUR MIND'S SPEEDOMETER** 108

*Going 80 down the highway and 8 down the alley  
(not vice versa)*

**APP 9**  
**YOUR MIND'S CALENDAR** 120

*Linking what to do with when to do it,  
without double-booking*

**APP 10**  
**YOUR MIND'S OBSERVER** 136

*How not to act clueless*

**They're Your Apps—Use Them**..... 145

**Acknowledgments** ..... 150

**Index** ..... 151

**Meet the Authors**..... 154

# introduction

# Attention AND

# SUCCESS

At a lot of schools, people have this idea that successful students are intelligent, and students who struggle are not. This idea is wrong. There's a lot more to school success than being intelligent, and there's a lot more to school struggles than being . . . *not*.

Take math homework, for example. Maybe you're a math genius, even the greatest genius of all time. That's great, but if you don't do the assignment, you'll get a zero. And doing it requires much more than knowing math. You have to plan ahead and make time. You have to turn off your screens, get to work, stay focused, not space out, work at the right speed, and more.

It takes certain skills to do these things. We call them "attention skills." Others call them "executive functions," "self-directing," or "self-regulation."



It doesn't really matter what you call them. What matters is that you use them.

Plenty of evidence shows that attention skills have more influence on school success and life success than intelligence does. That means that if you want to do well in school and beyond (and who doesn't?), controlling your attention is essential.

Even more evidence shows that *not* controlling attention is the number one cause of poor school performance. So if you're doing poorly in school, or if you're just not doing as well as you'd like, it doesn't mean you're not smart. Much more likely is that you're not applying attention well.

## Attention Apps

Think of attention this way: It is how you **apply** yourself and use your intelligence. This book teaches you 10 tools to help you do that. We call them **attention apps**.

### \*Your Brain and Your Mind

The Apps in this book are for “your mind,” the part of you that thinks, imagines, and remembers. All that activity happens in your brain. In this book, we use both words—*mind* and *brain*—to mean the same thing.

Your brain\* is like a powerful computer, sort of like a smartphone, but much smarter and more powerful. The Attention Apps enable you to use your brain in ways you might not have known about before or haven't been very good at. With the Apps you can target

and solve typical problems—like finishing math projects, staying awake in science class, and taking on work you have little interest in doing.

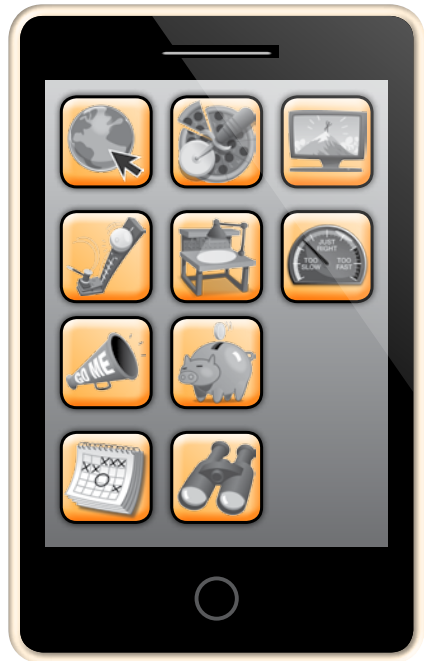


Better yet, you don't have to buy these Apps. They're already downloaded into your mind, for free. You just have to access them and practice them. This book shows you how.

## the payoff: RULING AT SCHOOL—AND beyond

Using your Apps greatly increases your chance of doing better at school. Not using them is a gigantic waste.

This table helps show what we mean. Is it worth using your built-in Attention Apps? You make the call.



Use Your Attention Apps	Don't Use Them
Show your intelligence	Feel unintelligent
Get better grades	Get poorer grades
Get adults off your case	Have adults bothering you to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “focus”</li> <li>• “concentrate”</li> <li>• “work harder”</li> </ul>
Stay on top of school and schoolwork	Play catch-up, with the clock running out
Make the most of your mind	Waste your mind's potential

Even more, Attention Apps don't just end when school ends. Like it or not, many of the same skills you need in school are also needed in your future. Here's a short list:

- Taking the initiative to do work (rather than putting it off or blowing it off)
- Motivating yourself
- Doing what you have to do, not just what you want to do
- Managing time and meeting deadlines
- Getting along with people
- Learning from mistakes

In short, your Attention Apps will make a big difference today and tomorrow in school. They can also make a big difference 5, 10, 20, and 30 years from now: in your work life, personal life . . . real life.

## how to use this book

Every chapter in this book features one Attention App. Each chapter starts with an overview that explains how the App works and what challenge it's used for. After that, you'll find four main sections:

- 1. App Operation** shows how to work the App.
- 2. App Demonstration** is the story of a student using the App. These are fictional stories based on experiences of real kids we've worked with.
- 3. App Practice** provides hands-on activities you can do to learn the App.

**4. What's Your Payoff?** shows what's in it for you. Like the table on page 3, it compares what happens when you use the App to what happens if you don't.

Throughout the book you'll also find:

- **Keeping It Real**—pointers, personal stories, and direct quotes from real students who have used the Apps.
- **Want to Know More?** boxes that explain a little more about the science behind these Apps.
- **Worksheets** to help you practice using the Apps. You can photocopy these or download and print larger versions from [www.freespirit.com/school-success](http://www.freespirit.com/school-success).

**A Menu of Attention Apps** is on pages 7–10. The Menu previews all the Apps in the book and helps you get a handle on the skills you'll be mastering. After you've reviewed the Apps in the Menu, we recommend that you start with Your Mind's Site Selector (App 1). That will help you with all the other Apps in the book. Then, refer to the Menu to see which App you want to learn next. If you have a problem right now that you think one of the Apps can help with, feel free to skip ahead to learn that one. Or, if you prefer, start with Apps that seem easier and work your way to harder ones. It's up to you. You'll get the most out of this book if you learn all of the Apps, whatever order you choose.

## WHO ARE WE?

We're educators who've been working in schools for a very long time. During that time we've learned something most adults don't know, or at least will never admit. For many kids, **school is boring.**

Too often, school is about paying attention and working hard when you're seriously checked-out and totally unmotivated. If school were always interesting and engaging, it would be much, much easier to pay attention to—and this book wouldn't be necessary. But often school is *not* (interesting) and so this book *is* (necessary). That's why we wrote it. We want to help kids like you stop feeling stomped on by school and start stomping back.

If you want to tell us about your experience with these Apps, or if you have questions or comments to share, we'd love to hear from you. You can email us at [help4kids@freespirit.com](mailto:help4kids@freespirit.com) or send us a letter at:

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## List of Reproducible Forms

Larger (8½" x 11") versions of these forms can also be downloaded from [www.freespirit.com/school-success](http://www.freespirit.com/school-success) as PDFs and printed or used electronically. You can type information directly into the PDFs on your screen.

<b>Site Selector</b> .....	28
<b>Stay-Focused Strategies</b> .....	29
<b>Your Mind's Pizza Cutter</b> .....	40
<b>Using Your Mind's Video Screen</b> .....	49
<b>Your Mind's Speedometer</b> .....	119
<b>How Clueless Am I?</b> .....	143–144

# Menu of Attention Apps

## APP 1: YOUR MIND'S SITE SELECTOR



Just about everyone who's ever been in a classroom has faced this basic problem: How do you pay attention to the teacher when there are much more interesting things to think about? The Site Selector solves this problem. When you use your Site Selector, you click on the "Teacher Site" and turn off other sites. In short, the Site Selector enables you to block out distractions so you can focus.

The next few Apps—Apps 2 through 5—help you with thinking and working hard. In psychology terms, this is called *controlling mental effort*.

Probably, you've been told to "work harder." But, probably no one has actually shown you *how* to do that. The next four Apps make working *hard* a lot *easier*.

## APP 2: YOUR MIND'S PIZZA CUTTER



This App cuts large, intimidating tasks down to size. If you have a lot of homework or a huge project, you "pizza-cut" it into smaller slices. That makes it a lot easier to handle.

Pizza-cutting is especially useful when you feel overwhelmed. Sometimes your workload might seem so huge, you just can't bring yourself to start it. But when you cut it down to size, it becomes much more approachable.

**APP 3: YOUR MIND'S VIDEO SCREEN**

When facing work that feels hard or pointless, you use Your Mind's Video Screen to *visualize* the benefits of working. These might include getting good grades or overcoming a challenge. In this way, you see reasons to work and goals to strive for.

**APP 4: YOUR MIND'S CHEERLEADER**

This App is used for *self-cheering*—giving yourself messages that encourage you to keep trying and to keep going. When not using this App, you're at risk for *self-booing*—giving yourself discouraging messages. When you do that, you're more likely to give up.

**APP 5: YOUR MIND'S PIGGY BANK**

This App gets at the basic question of why you do work in the first place. Why should you do something that feels difficult and boring, like staying home and studying for a math test, instead of doing something fun? The reason is because doing schoolwork is saving and investing in your future. When you choose work over fun, you're putting off small rewards now in return for large payoffs later. This is called *delaying gratification*, and Your Mind's Piggy Bank helps you do it.

**APP 6: YOUR MIND'S ACTIVATOR**

Have you ever studied for a test and thought you "got it" only to do a lot worse on the test than you expected? Often, the reason is you didn't study actively enough. For many tests,

it's not enough to just read over notes or chapters. You have to *do something* with the information. For instance, summarize it in your own words, predict test questions and answer them, and make examples of what you've learned. You use Your Mind's Activator to control how actively you think. When preparing for tests, you crank it up to a level where you can study actively and *really* get it.

### APP 7: YOUR MIND'S WORKBENCH



Your Mental Workbench is a place for holding several things in mind while thinking about something else. It's also called *working memory*—same App, different brand name. To follow instructions, for instance, you need to hold the instructions in mind while thinking about how to do each step. When reading, it's trouble if you forget one paragraph while reading the next. You also have to remember how to spell words while thinking about how to use them in a sentence. You use your Mental Workbench for just about everything at school.

### APP 8: YOUR MIND'S SPEEDOMETER



This App helps you balance speed with accuracy when working. With work that's clear or easy for you, you go full speed ahead. When things get tricky, you slow down and proceed more carefully. Without using Your Mind's Speedometer, you risk working at the wrong speed. You may go too quickly, making careless mistakes in your haste (think 90 mph down a narrow street). Or you may work too slowly, proceeding so carefully that it takes forever (think 20 mph cross country).

**APP 9: YOUR MIND'S CALENDAR**

So much to do, so little time. For example, if you stay after school for sports practice, you may get home too late to study enough. If you study more, you don't have time to practice your sport and stay in shape. Perhaps you could squeeze in sports and studying, but that wouldn't leave time for friends. What about band, scouts, and tae kwon do? Your Mind's Calendar is used for managing time. It helps you balance what to do with when to do it. Use it for making schedules and sticking to them, planning ahead, and prioritizing.

**APP 10: YOUR MIND'S OBSERVER**

This App is used for watching yourself. With Your Mind's Observer, you can ask yourself, "How am I doing?" and "How did I do?" Then, if you don't like the answers to those questions, you can change what you're doing. With schoolwork, you use Your Mind's Observer to check your work and see what needs correcting. If you don't use it, you could make the same mistakes again and again.

Your Mind's Observer is even more useful socially. You watch others' reactions to what you say and do, then adjust based on how they react. For example, say you tell a joke and no one laughs. Your Mind's Observer advises you that the joke didn't work and that you ought to give it up. Without this App, you could keep telling the same bad joke over and over, unaware that it's not working.





# APP 1

## YOUR MIND'S SITE SELECTOR

### Paying attention when bored to tears

Picture this . . .

You're sitting in history class. It's 11:30 on Friday, and your stomach is growling because it's almost lunchtime. The weekend is only a couple hours away. And your best friend, who sits right behind you, is telling you about a hilarious YouTube video he saw last night. In front of the class, your teacher is droning on about iron ore production during the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This poses an all too familiar problem for students. How are you supposed to pay attention to the teacher when there are so many things you'd rather pay attention to? Food, weekend fun, friends . . . pretty much anything other than Austro-Hungarian iron ore.

What's the solution? Use Your Mind's Site Selector to click onto the Teacher Site. Block out the Food Site,

Weekend Site, Best Friend's YouTube Story Site, and everything else that distracts you. That way your attention is focused where it needs to be: on your teacher.

In other words, controlling attention is kind of like being online. When you're online, you select one site to be on and block out the millions of others. With Your Mind's Site Selector, you do the same thing in class. You click onto the site you need to pay attention to—your teacher—and stay off the ones you don't.



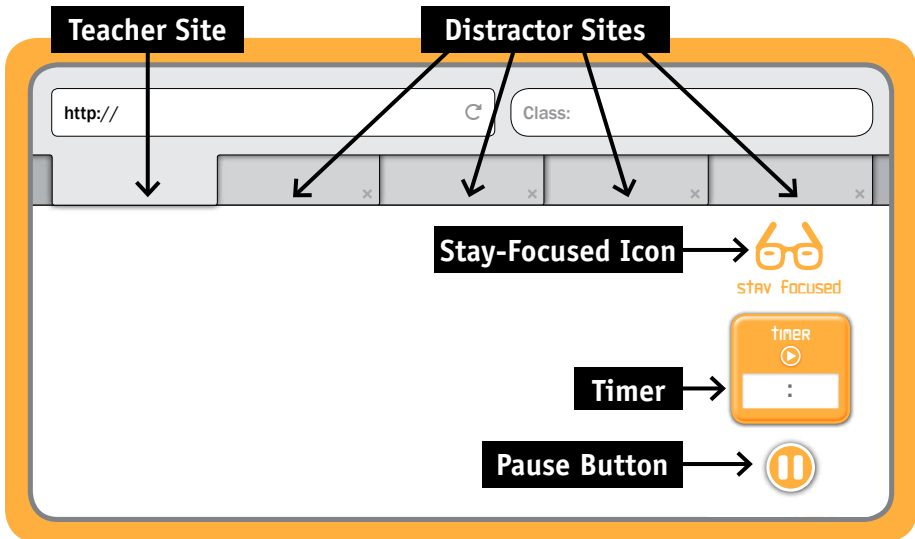
It's not your fault if you're easily distracted. Paying attention to something that's boring to you is just not natural. To do it requires excellent control of Your Mind's Site Selector. But you *can* do it, and this chapter shows you how.

## APP OPERATION

Your Mind's Site Selector has several key features for managing attention. Here's how they work:

To start, get a copy of the Site Selector worksheet (see page 28). The electronic version is a PDF you can type into and even add digital pictures to. But you can just write on (or glue pictures to) a paper copy if that's easier. Once you master the Site Selector, you won't need the worksheet anymore.

Think about a class where you have trouble staying focused. Now you're ready to get started.



### STEP 1.

#### MAKE THE TEACHER SITE

In the center of the worksheet, under the "Teacher Site" tab, add a symbol of your teacher. This can be a photo, drawing, icon you invent, or simply the name of your teacher. You want this symbol to be bold and

 **Warning!**

Offensive and embarrassing teacher pictures can be trouble. Keep it something your teacher won't mind seeing.



noticeable—something you can easily focus on. Use bright colors or decorations, or put a bobbed sombrero on the picture of your teacher. The specifics are up to you. The point is that you want your teacher to **stand out**, because what **stands out** is what the mind best pays attention to.

**STEP 2.****MAKE THE DISTRACTOR SITES**

In the tabs along the top of the worksheet, make symbols for your Distractor Sites. The Distractor Sites are different for everyone. Just make sure your sites are the ones that distract you in class.

Here are a few common ones:

- **Friends Site.** Where your friends distract you
- **Weekend Site** and **Holiday Site.** Where you focus on all the fun times awaiting you outside of class
- **Food Site.** Where you pay attention to feelings of hunger
- **Anxiety Site.** Where you worry, worry, and worry some more
- **Love Site.** Where special feelings for a special someone distract you
- **Imagination & Fantasy Site.** Where you daydream or go off to your happy place
- **Nothing Site.** Where you zone out and think about . . . uh, where were we?

- **Sports Site.** Where baseball, volleyball, skateboarding, snowboarding, or other sports compete for your attention
- **Gaming Site.** Where you obsess over a video game or computer game
- **Hobby Site.** Where a favorite activity like a musical instrument or Lego project distracts you
- **Pet Site.** Where you keep picturing your pet

You can write in your Distractor Sites, as in the picture above. You can also use symbols or icons like these:



What matters is that those sites stay in the tabs and are less interesting than the Teacher Site. That way the Teacher Site stands out as much as possible. When you look at the Site Selector, you want your attention to be drawn to the Teacher Site, not the Distractor Sites.

### STEP 3.

#### SET THE TIMER

The timer helps you keep track of how much longer you have to stay on the Teacher Site. It really helps to be able to see the end. You can focus better because you know that this class will not last forever—even if it seems like it will.

To “set” your timer, determine how long you can realistically focus on the teacher. You do this by thinking about two key factors.

- **The Class.** The first key factor is the class itself, including the teacher. If it’s a class that is extremely boring to you, it’s probably very hard to pay attention to. That means you should set your timer to just a few

minutes. If the class is boring but not *super*-boring, or the teacher is kind of interesting, your tolerance is probably a little higher.


- **The Distractions.** The second key factor is how interesting the Distractor Sites are in that class. Maybe it's the only class all day when you get to see your best friend. That's probably a big distraction. Or maybe the distractions are smaller—for example, gazing out the window at something, anything (or nothing) out there.

**Now put the key factors together.** If the class is very hard to focus on and the distractions are powerful, you should set your timer for a short amount of time. Five or ten minutes is a good place to start. If your boredom in the class is somewhat tolerable, or the distractions aren't so bad, set your timer for longer. Try 15 or 20 minutes.

Write the number of minutes into the timer space on the Site Selector. Now your timer is set. This is how long you'll pay attention before you hit pause and take a break.

#### STEP 4.

#### PLAN YOUR STAY-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

The strategies you use to stay focused are at the heart of your Site Selector App. You'll write them down on your Stay-Focused Strategies planner (found on page 29; you'll need to make or print extra copies). Before you go to class, plan ahead how you'll use each of the strategies on pages 17–20. The planning ahead part is really key. First of all, simply knowing you have a plan can help you stay focused and tuned in. In addition, when your attention starts to drift, you don't have to struggle to figure out what to do. You just follow your plan. (The "Stay-Focused" icon on the Site Selector worksheet will help you remember.) 

### Strategy: Deal with Distractions

On your Stay-Focused Strategies planner, write the names of your Distractor Sites in the column labeled "Distractor Sites." Then find a way to make each of these Distractor Sites less distracting to you. For example, if you have a distracting friend in the classroom, write "Friend Site" in the Distractor Site column. What can you write in the "My Stay-Focused Strategies" column? One idea is to sit apart from your friend so she can't distract you as easily. Another idea is to talk to her before class and ask her not to bug you so you can concentrate in class. Write at least one way to stay focused for each Distractor Site.

#### Want to Know More?

Site Selecting helps you direct your own mind. Psychologists call this "selective attention"—selecting what to think about and what to filter out. We call it **putting yourself in charge**. When you're using your Site Selector, you're telling your mind what to think about (for example, the teacher in class) and what not to think about (the distractions). When you're not using your Site Selector, it's almost as if your mind has a mind of its own. It's pulled here, there, and everywhere by this distraction and that distraction, rather than going where you tell it to go.

### Strategy: Use Site Selector Language

Just telling yourself to focus and not get distracted rarely works. If your mind is wandering off to the Love Site and you're trying to force it back into algebra, your mind will usually win. Love is probably much more interesting to you than algebra.

So, rather than trying to *fight against* your mind, **talk with it**. Ask yourself, "What site am I on?" "What site should I be on?" If you're on the wrong site, remind yourself to click back by saying, "It's time to switch sites."

### Strategy: Stay Physically Active

Focusing is harder when you have to just sit there and take it. If you move around, it can be easier to focus. But you have to move around in ways that won't get you in trouble.

Stay out of trouble by moving in ways that won't distract others. Twiddling your pencil, bouncing your leg, or subtly stretching at your desk can be very helpful for staying focused and alert. However, tossing your pencil in the air (or sword-fighting with it, or pretending it's a hockey stick, harpoon, or microphone) will get noticed by others—including your teacher. So will stomping your feet on the floor and stretching out loudly. Those are major distractions to you and others in the room.

Just sitting up straight is a simple way to stay active. When we get bored or lose focus, we often start leaning over or slumping. This only makes it harder to stay focused. Remind yourself to sit up straight and lean forward, with eyes on the teacher or the assignment. This will help you stay more alert.

Keeping It  
**REAL**

*“I have some breathing exercises I do. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. I take really long breaths, and that takes away my anxiety.”*

—Ali

### Strategy: Stay Mentally Active

Even more useful than doing something with your body is doing something with your mind:

- **Ask questions.** When you're asking questions in class, you're exercising your mind. You're interacting with the information and the teacher and other students. And you're raising ideas that you want to understand better. All of this helps you stay focused on the Teacher Site.



- **Make connections.** Sure, some parts of school are boring. But when you're making connections to what you're learning, the boredom usually fades away (a little). Making connections means thinking about the subject in ways that go beyond what you're being taught, and—if possible—connecting it to your own life. For example, let's say you're learning about Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Probably boring, but making connections can help: "How are Tweedledum and Tweedledee similar and different?" "Which one do I like more?" "Which one is more like me?" "Do I know anybody who resembles either one?"
- **Take notes.** This is huge. When you're taking notes you're moving, so you're staying physically active. You're also thinking about what's important to write down and thinking about connections in the ideas. All this is way better than just sitting there glazed over and spaced out.



- **Make the teacher stand out.** If your teacher comes into class tomorrow morning wearing a wedding dress, bright orange jumpsuit, or scuba gear, you'll probably click right onto the Teacher Site. Assuming your teacher won't actually wear one of those outfits, you have to use your imagination. Picture your teacher in a wedding dress, scuba suit, or something similarly bizarre, and the Teacher Site should come in much more clearly.

*“Talking in class—asking and answering questions—helps me to stay engaged. I didn’t do that at first because I guess I’m kind of shy. I also didn’t realize how much my teachers like seeing me tuned in. So focusing pays off that way, too.”* —Mitch

The Stay-Focused Strategies planner on page 29 has spaces for you to fill in your own details for these strategies. Before going to class, plan ahead by filling in the blanks on the sheet with words or pictures.

**STEP 5.****CLICK THE PAUSE BUTTON**

When your timer goes off, you’ve earned a break. A break is a short period when you’re not paying attention to the Teacher Site (or whatever else you’re working on in class, such as the Group Work Site or Writing Site). In order to make sure your break is short and you can come back from it easily, you need to have a plan.

**Timers and Timing**

By the way, don’t go on break if doing so would be disruptive to others—even if your timer says it’s time. If your teacher is talking to you, you’re participating in a group activity, or a guest is speaking to class, put off your break until a better time.

**First, plan for how long it will be.** A good break in class is no more than three minutes. Use your watch, the clock on the wall, or a timer on your phone (in vibrate mode) to make sure you stay on schedule.

**Next, plan what you’ll do on your break.** A good idea is a short visit to one or two of your Distractor Sites. But choose wisely. Visit a site you can actually “click off” and come back from. Don’t visit one you’re so