

# The Responsiveness Trap

by Sarah Green | 3:21 PM June 6, 2012

If you feel sucked into a bottomless guilt vortex every time you look at your email inbox, this post is not for you. If you struggle to keep up with a deluge of 50, 100, 400 emails every day, go away. If you've clicked on this looking for tips in curtailing this incursion of correspondence, leave now.

This post isn't for you. It's for the other guy. The one who responds immediately to every message. The one who **sleeps with his smartphone**. The one who checks email on vacation.

You know who you are. And while this may be hard for you to hear, it needs to be said: you're ruining everything for the rest of us.

Every time you check your email while on vacation you make it just a little bit harder for me not to. Every time you fire off an email at 11pm, you make a capillary explode in one of my eyeballs. Every time you send me an email asking, "Did you get my email?" — especially if you sent said email within the last 24 hours — I drown a kitten in a bag.

Okay, that's not true. No animals were harmed in the writing of this post. Except for this particular human animal, who has gotten to a point with her email where she just. Can't. Take it. Any. More.

Sisyphus had a better chance of keeping that boulder on top of that hill than I do of keeping on top of my email.

I have tried the **check-email-only-thrice-per-day strategy**. (If I respond to all the emails I get three times/day, I end up doing nothing but answer email all day.) So I tried **using a time limit**, which meant I barely answered anything. I then tried the "**answer or file**" rule — anything you can answer in under five minutes, answer, and everything else gets flagged for later. This meant I answered all the easy (eg, unimportant) questions, and never had time left for the ones that required more thought or research. I've even tried a strategy of (as far as I know) my own devising: designating Friday afternoons "apology" time, as in: "Hi there, I'm so sorry I haven't been able to respond to your email yet. I will hopefully have more time next week!" The problem? This is a baldfaced lie. I will never, never, never have more time for email, next week or any other week, no matter how much false hope I harbor. Also, I think there are better ways for me to spend 3 hours out of a (purportedly) 40-hour work week.

As our inboxes have become more demanding, we have all become less responsive — because we get so many messages it's hard to keep up. But the harder it is to keep up, the more messages ("I just thought I'd send another email asking if you got my first two

emails") we send. And the more messages we send, the more we value people who demonstrate "responsiveness." It's a vicious cycle that's now spun out of control, to the point where we now value "responsiveness" so much, it's crowded out our ability to actually respond. We have chosen to spend our time saying, "I'll look into it," at the cost of being able to say, "The analysis you asked for is attached."

**We've now reached an event horizon of email where the entire point of asynchronous messaging has been lost.** Where once you could send a message whenever you had time, I could reply whenever I had time, and we could both feel maximally efficient, the new responsiveness trap just means that we're essentially communicating in something like real time, without any of the benefits of *actually* communicating in *actual* real time. Instead of talking with one person and getting something done, we're carrying on simultaneous conversations with hundreds of people and struggling to get anything done. When I look at my inbox, I hear a cacophony of voices all shouting for my attention, shouting so loud I can't hear what anyone is saying and I start wanting to scream **LOUD NOISES** myself.

The problem with "responsiveness" is that email then becomes like a hydra — cut off one head (answer one email) and you spawn nine more. The more responsive you are, the more email you receive, and the more responsive you need to be. Take this representative approximation of a recent exchange:

SARAH: Perhaps this topic is a bit too complex for email. Are you free at 2pm tomorrow for a call? Please let me know what number to call.

RESPONSIVE PERSON: Yes what time?

SARAH: I'd prefer 2pm Eastern, but if that doesn't work let me know a time that does. Are you calling me or am I calling you? I'm at 617-HAR-VARD.

RESPONSIVE PERSON: Sure what day?

SARAH: Tomorrow. Please call me at the number below.

RESPONSIVE PERSON: Will do. Remind me what this about?

Good news: This person is being responsive. Bad news: So responsive that he didn't actually read my email, and he can't actually retain the information long enough for it to sink into his brain.

And thus the email hydra grows another gruesome head.

Here is the hard truth: there is no way to be thoughtful and also be considered responsive. None. If you've said nothing more valuable than "Ping!" what you're likely to get is no more useful than "Pong!"

We have confused responding with reacting. Responding involves thinking, and thinking takes time. Taking time means we can't possibly answer all the email we get in anything like a sensible time frame — and that we might not really be able to answer all of it, period. And while it can sometimes feel good to have people react to you — *dance, monkey, dance!* — it is ultimately a false victory. Because what you want isn't a dancing monkey (unless you're in the circus business). What you want is an answer.

And so all of us will have to decide: am I going to be "responsive," rapidly reacting to every email, with my thumbs, choosing to make more work for other people and giving myself the attention span of a goldfish? Or am I going to answer email in my own time, when I can actually provide a thoughtful reply, and either spend my life apologizing or decide it's okay if people think I'm an arrogant so-and-so?

This is the choice. There is no middle ground. At least, as long as the vacation-email-answering, no-punctuating-using, smartphone-sleeping-with people are in charge.

If that describes you, please: Cease. Desist. Get a hobby. And please stop asking if I got your email.