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# Think You're Multitasking? Think Again

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*“The shortest way to do many things is to do  
only one thing at a time.”*

~ Sir Richard Cecil

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**W**e are living in an age of information overload. Studies estimate that scientists have collected as much information in the last 25 years as in all of human history before that. What does that mean for your everyday life? You are bombarded with information from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep. Some of that information comes to us from the TV, the computer, our smartphones, or from newspapers and books. Some of the information comes to you from the people around you, or that you are in contact with. Every time you communicate with someone, you are exposed to information that often requires you to respond in some way. In addition, every second of the day your senses are exposed to millions (or billions) of bits of information that is taken in by your senses and filtered or prioritized by your brain. If you smell smoke or hear a fire alarm, for example, your brain prioritizes those sensory inputs in a way that affects your behavior. When you think about how much information your brain and body process in a day, it is exhausting.



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Unfortunately, the human brain has not had time to evolve and change to catch-up with the exponential increase in stimulus that you are expected to respond to, so humans have had to develop coping strategies, such as multitasking, in order to assimilate. The concept of multitasking originated in the 1960's as a concept related to computers. While you can do two things at the same time, the brain cannot concentrate on two tasks at the same time. Thus, the concept of multitasking is a myth; it is a state of reduced efficiency and diminished performance. When you think you are multitasking, it is your brain switching tasks quickly rather than doing multiple things at the same time. For example, cooking dinner while helping the kids with their homework and thinking about the deposition tomorrow or some other work-related deadline with the TV on in the background. The problem with switching tasks quickly is that making the brain "stop and go" requires tremendous energy that can deplete chemicals in the brain needed to concentrate and process information.

Regularly attempting to multitask leaves us feeling exhausted, unfocused, and cloudy headed, in addition to making multiple mistakes and experiencing the release of stress chemicals that can compromise our health. There is no escape from the need to

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multitask from time to time, but there are simple ways to avoid the depletion of energy that your brain needs, and maximize the type of realistic “multitasking” necessary in today’s world:

- ♦ **Plan the tasks you will be multitasking and place a limit on them:** combine tasks that have a natural connection in your mind, or that inspire completion of each other.. For example, dictating notes or email responses while doing housework or exercising, or researching similar topics for different cases during the same time block. The trick is to plan these together and limit the number of topics or actions to just two or three, rather than four or more.
- ♦ **Set aside an abbreviated time for each task and reduce distractions:** prioritize tasks and spend at least 10 minutes on each one or choose a realistic block of time. It is crucial to eliminate distraction during the time blocks; put your phone on silent, shut down your email, close your door, etc. during those periods of time.
- ♦ **Reserve time to review your work and your to-do list:** multitasking can lead to various errors in work product, so be sure to reserve time to double-check your work before submission, filing, or sending. It is also helpful to review your master list periodically throughout the day. Rather than keeping notes scattered on sticky notes, try transferring lists onto a dry erase board or bulletin board where you can easily remove and add to your list.
- ♦ **Identify the multitasking:** when you are switching tasks, take a moment to consciously recognize that you are changing direction. If the brain is prepared for the “stop and go,” it depletes less energy than mindlessly flying back and forth between tasks.
- ♦ **Schedule breaks and rest:** take a walk outside, even a brief one, while purposely thinking about something positive, to reset your neural nets. Getting a good night sleep is the best way to help the brain reset itself, especially in combination with taking a brief nap or at least “resting your eyes” during the day to process information. The majority of us, however, do not have the luxury to take naps (even for 10-15 mins) during the weekday. If that is the case, designate time on weekends or days when you can fit that nap in.

The bottom line? SLOW DOWN. Do whatever you are doing with awareness and prioritize your schedule. Bring yourself back to the present moment. Be sure to prioritize rest and relaxation into your day, especially on days you know will be insanely busy, or during the days that “go sideways.” ●

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