

The Problem With Multitasking

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Could multitasking actually decrease your intelligence and productivity?

I used to be good at multitasking. I could remember multiple steps and details related to a variety of tasks, and I could carry them out all at once. It was a skill that helped me be an accomplished waitress in college and a top-notch medical student and intern.

As my life has become more complex (I'm now a wife, mother, teacher, and doctor), multitasking has become more difficult. I have started forgetting things and often find myself working harder to switch gears between tasks. At first, I felt guilty for becoming slack in this area, until

The better strategy is to slow down and give your full attention to one task at a time.

I realized that multitasking isn't as efficient as I had once believed. It turns out that our minds cannot focus on multiple tasks all at once. An executive control process in our brains changes focus from one thing to the next and then back again. So, in essence, being good at multitasking really just means that your mind moves quickly from subject to subject and back again.

This constant changing of focus may actually decrease our intelligence and our productivity. In one study, workers who were interrupted by incoming e-mails or phone calls scored 10 points lower on subsequent IQ tests.¹ To put that in perspective, a 10-point decrease in IQ is comparable to the effect of being up all night or being high on marijuana.

In addition, it took workers up to 30 seconds to refocus on their task (even longer if they were doing a

complicated task), decreasing their productivity up to 40 percent. A break in focus can also increase our stress, presumably because we feel like we are not accomplishing enough and live with a low level of anxiety.

So, what is a busy family physician/soccer mom to do?

First, recognize that multitasking comes at a cost. The better strategy is to slow down and give your full attention to one task or activity at a time, whether you're entering the exam room or sitting down at the dinner table. If you need help training your mind to do this, meditation or yoga can help.



Go ahead and make a daily to-do list, but be realistic and remember that you can only do one thing on the list at a time. In addition, set a designated time each day to focus on each aspect of your job. For instance, take 30 minutes at lunch to catch up on email or answer phone messages, and don't worry about those tasks until the designated time. Limit distractions while you work by closing the email program on your computer, silencing your cell phone, or shutting your office door.

Finally, enjoy the complexities of life. Don't be so focused on task completion that you miss the joy of the journey. **FPM**

About the Author

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1. Bergman P. How (and why) to stop multitasking. *Harvard Business Review Blog Network*. May 20, 2010. <http://blogs.hbr.org/bregman/2010/05/how-and-why-to-stop-multitaski.html>.