

The business of being busy

If you want something done, don't ask a busy person. Turns out, being busy isn't great for our productivity after all. Or our health. Put down your mobile phone and find out why doing one thing at a time could be the best thing you do.

We've all been multi-tasking for so long that it's become second nature. We do it without even thinking about it. But it's doing us more harm than good.

What's so bad about doing more than one thing at once?

When time is money, paying attention to a single thing feels like a luxury, even a self-indulgence.

But, contrary to our expectations, the more things we try and do at the same time, and the more complex those things are, the less likely we are to be effective. Here are some of the ways multi-tasking isn't all it's cracked up to be:

It's dangerous

It's no exaggeration that multi-tasking can be fatal. Driving while using a mobile phone affects our reactions more than alcohol, according to multiple studies, including the Transport Research Laboratory in the UK.

Using a mobile while walking is also risky – distracted pedestrians account for a growing proportion of road deaths. In Sydney and Melbourne, authorities are trying to reverse the trend with in-ground traffic signals that are more noticeable to walkers with their heads down. Others are less sympathetic. Honolulu in Hawaii introduced a law banning the use of smartphones when crossing the street.

It's unproductive

The very reason most of us do several things at once is because we believe we'll get more done. Unfortunately, multi-tasking has the opposite effect. It's the mental equivalent of running on a hamster wheel – you spend a lot of time and energy without producing much to show for it.

Multi-tasking doesn't generally mean doing two or more activities at the same time, but instead involves switching between them at rapid intervals. Adjusting between the activities takes the brain time and while that might only be a fraction of a second, it adds up to 40% lower productivity, according to cognitive scientist David Meyer of the University of Michigan.

It's harder to learn

When we shift quickly between multiple activities, each one distracts us from concentrating on the others. Not only that, but our brains process the information differently, changing the way we learn.

Instead of using the part of the brain that stores and remembers information, when multi-tasking we use the part of the brain responsible for processes and skills. Studies have found that multi-tasking reduces the level of information we remember about those activities.

It's tiring

Every time we shift our attention between activities, it uses energy – specifically, oxygenated glucose, which fuels our brains. The more we shift attention, the more tired we become. And the more brain power we use on switching focus, the less we have left to use for the task at hand.

Conversely, taking a break gives the brain a chance to recharge, restoring energy and providing resilience to get through the next session of work.

It's stressful

Rapidly switching between activities results in our bodies releasing cortisol, known as the stress hormone.

On top of that, the results of multi-tasking, such as reduced productivity and more mistakes, contribute to increased stress.

It reduces our judgement

Multi-tasking doesn't just change how we absorb and retain information, but how we think.

Complex thinking ability and creativity are reduced. We're more likely to make mistakes. And we're worse at screening out irrelevant information, which makes us even less productive, and open to further distraction. It could even change our brain over the longer-term.

It's rude

If you've spent time with a person who's more interested in their phone than in you, you'll know it's not a pleasant feeling. The greatest way to show respect is by paying somebody your undivided attention.

If multi-tasking is so bad, why do we do it?

Just as eating sugary food triggers a temporary high that encourages us to consume more, multi-tasking is physically rewarding even while it's causing harm.

We're biologically programmed to respond to distractions. They can help us escape a dangerous predator, or alert us to a distressed baby. The trouble is, modern life holds thousands more distractions than those that keep us safe. Being busy is a way of life, an expectation, and sometimes even a marker of status.

Put simply, multi-tasking is an easy and addictive habit to fall into.

Breaking the habit

Stopping multi-tasking altogether isn't likely to be a realistic goal for most people. However, knowing the impact it can have, and having ways to sharpen your focus when it counts, are steps in the right direction.

One of the single biggest differences is to turn off alerts and notifications on your computer, smartphone and other

devices. Checking notifications releases dopamine in the brain, and the rush of finding something interesting cements the association, prompting us to keep on checking. Even ignoring a notification distracts the brain.

When you take some more time to smell the roses, you might be surprised how much better you feel – and how much more you get done.

Other ways to help focus on one thing at a time:

- Set a timer and focus on a single activity for 25 minutes to an hour.
- Take regular breaks, and let your mind wander – but try to stay offline.
- Use a blocking app, like Cold Turkey or SelfControl, to help if you need to.
- Write down distractions to free up your mind from remembering them.
- Group similar tasks, like responding to emails, instead of doing them as they come up.



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