

The Lies We Tell Ourselves About Multitasking

by Rachel Feintzeig



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Alison Cate was walking on the treadmill while tapping away on her laptop and taking a selfie. Until she wasn't.

Her foot slipped. Her ankle rolled. The desk attachment clipped to the treadmill wobbled as she tried to steady herself.

"I need to do this, I need to do that. And so let me do it all at once," Ms. Cate, a 39-year-old marketing manager in Des Moines, Iowa, says of her mind-set much of the time. "There's gonna come a day when you crash."

Multitasking is a way of life for most of us. We eat lunch while we work, take calls at the gym, reply to messages while logged on to Zoom. (I'll bet that a lot of you reading this right now are doing something else at the same time.)

The tools of our lives, from car dashboard screens to buzzing phones, fracture our attention while promising that we can do it all, all the time. Except we can't.

"You can't multitask," says Earl K. Miller, a neuroscience professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Picower Institute for Learning and Memory. Our brains are wired to do just one cognitively demanding thing at a time, he says. We tell ourselves we're multitasking, when what we're actually doing is task-switching, rapidly shifting from one thing to the next.

As we toggle, our minds stumble as we try to recall where we were and what we were doing, he says. Juggling tasks makes us less creative and more prone to errors; the quality of our work suffers.

Multitasking myths

So many of us continue to equate hopscotching from thing to thing with productivity. Job listings seek multitaskers, as evidenced by 141,069 hits for the phrase "multitask" in a recent search of posts on Indeed.com. Workers tout themselves as multitaskers on their résumés, and even at home I feel guilty about folding laundry without popping in my AirPods and returning a call from my mom.

“How do you stop?” wonders Tim Sloan, a 61-year-old who lives in Ashland City, Tenn. Things moved slower when he got started in the construction industry decades ago, he says.

Now a project manager for a drywall company, he often fields calls from customers while reviewing pricing information on one of his five computer screens and scrolling emails on another.

“Everybody’s got to have it right now,” Mr. Sloan says. If he doesn’t get it done fast, customers will head to a competitor. “Do we really have a choice?”

One thing at a time

We need to get back to monotasking—doing one thing at a time. The first step is weaning ourselves from distraction, says David Strayer, a University of Utah professor who has done pioneering research on how brains handle tasks. Not only do our phones and notifications disturb us, we’ve grown to crave their interruptions, too.

Set your inbox to batch incoming messages every 10 or 15 minutes, Dr. Strayer recommends. Turn off all your notifications. And try a version of the Pomodoro technique, where you focus in small bursts. Set a timer for 15 minutes of deep work on one thing, then take a five-minute break.

It can help knowing that a built-in respite is always ahead, Dr. Strayer says. Feel free to do anything you want—watch cat videos, grab a cup of coffee—during the break, as long as it’s not the task you’re focused on. You’ll be refreshed when you dive back in.

Walking, especially in nature, can help revitalize us, too, he says, as long as you are just walking. In one study, Dr. Strayer and colleagues compared two groups of people strolling an arboretum. One group chatted on their phones. The others had their devices taken away.

After the walk, the people who didn’t carry their phones were in a much more calm and rested state than the chatters, researchers found.

You’re probably not a ‘supertasker’

Dr. Strayer also places participants in driving simulators. When they talk on the phone, their brake reaction time slows. They start hitting other cars. Their phone conversation skills suffer, too.

There are exceptions, whom Dr. Strayer dubs “supertaskers.” In their day jobs, they’re often high-end chefs, fighter pilots or professional athletes. They’re able to absorb multiple streams of information simultaneously, and keep it all straight.

He says about 2.5% of people are supertaskers, although he estimates nearly 20 times as many people think they are.

The rest of us are left with our 12 open browser tabs and five half-written emails, says Maura Thomas, a productivity trainer based in Austin, Texas. One obstacle is that we take any pause—a speaker fumbling with a microphone at a conference, a webpage taking time to load—as a chance to tackle something else, she says.

She prescribes more empty time to let random thoughts flow and new connections form.

“Mind wandering is doing something,” she says.

People who do too much

You might be thinking, who’s got time for daydreaming? Well, us, if we prioritized better.

Sometimes the urgent things on our to-do lists aren't really the most important. Instead of rushing into action, think about how to better use your limited time and put your focus there.

In Raleigh, N.C., Thais Cooke's mornings had become a blur of unloading the dishwasher while she cooked eggs, packed her older daughter's lunch and wiped down the counter. And, oh wait, did someone need their shoes tied?

The data analyst and mother of two loved crossing things off her mental to-do list. But it kept getting longer. So she decided to stick to the bare minimum that had to get done daily to ensure everyone got to school and work.

Now, after those few things are completed, or delegated to her husband, she stops and sits down next to her girls.

"The time left," she says, "is for me to enjoy with them."

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