

IDEAS MENTAL HEALTH

Why Multitasking Is Bad for You



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IDEAS *Dr. Kubu is a neuropsychologist at the Cleveland Clinic. Dr. Machado is the Chairman of the Neurological Institute at the Cleveland Clinic.*

For nearly all people, in nearly all situations, **multitasking** is impossible. When we think we're multitasking, most often we aren't really doing two things at once – but instead, individual actions in rapid succession.

The neuroscience is clear: We are wired to be mono-taskers. One study found that just 2.5% of people are able to **multitask** effectively. And when the rest of us attempt to do two complex activities simultaneously, it is simply an illusion.

We know what you're thinking: *Who cares? Multitasking. Mono-tasking. It's all just semantics, right?*

Wrong.

Trying more than one thing at a time — especially anything potentially dangerous, like texting while driving — seriously compromises our ability to complete the tasks safely and well. Equally important, repeatedly switching back and forth from project to project, like a hummingbird darting from flower to flower and then back to the original flower, can **impair** our ability to function at our finest.

While we should strive to center on singular tasks, we have technological devices and resources that foster the multitasking myth. Smartphone in hand, earbuds in place, we feel empowered to tackle the day's assignments all at once or to stay connected constantly.

The concern among neuroscientists studying the workings of the brain is that our tendency to divide our attention, rather than focus, is hampering our ability to perform even simple tasks. This can have an extremely negative impact on:

Attentiveness. Those regulations against using your **cell phone** while driving are based on scientific data. Dual tasking (doing a linguistic or auditory task during a driving simulation) is associated with reduced activity in regions of the brain important for attention, as well as poorer driving performance. Several studies have proposed that individuals who are heavy media **multitaskers** adopt a style of attention control that favors parallel processing of multiple information sources over **focus** on one primary task. Another study compared the performances of heavy versus light media **multitaskers**. Surprisingly, heavy media multitaskers performed worse on tests of task-

Learning. A 1700s adage states: “There is **time** enough for everything in the course of the day, if you do but one thing at once. But there is not enough in the year, if you will do two things at a time.” In essence, the more we multitask the less we are able to accomplish, because we slowly lose our ability to focus enough to learn. Attention is essential to learning. If we attempt from an early age to multitask constantly, we do not practice how to tune out the rest of the world, to engage in deeper processing and learning. Empirical research has demonstrated that multitasking with **technology** (such as texting, listening to music, checking emails) negatively impacts studying, doing homework, learning and grades.

Mindfulness. Those who are mindful are able to do more than just pay attention; they do so on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. This is perhaps the most advanced form of attentiveness, and it can result in **decision-making** made in a stress-free and less reactive environment. Indeed, many therapies based on mindfulness assist patients suffering from **depression**, anxiety, **chronic pain**, substance abuse, ADHD and other conditions.

To isolate out of the multitasking world brings many benefits, in all walks of life and in any setting, including the workplace. It certainly has been an essential aspect of our careers.

People assume that the skill of a surgeon is primarily in the steadiness and precision of his or her hands, and there is some truth to that. But the proficiency of surgery is the ability to single-mindedly focus on a single patient and complete a series of tasks, all in the pursuit of a given outcome that may take many hours to finish.

Surgeons are not necessarily born with this ability to mono-task. We learn it — through hours and hours of surgery, over years and years of perfecting. And it can be quite pleasant. Many surgeons say that their most loved environment in

You need not be a surgeon to benefit from freeing yourself of the multitasking myth and choosing to mono-task. Whether driving on a long trip, organizing an event, tending a garden or filling an order, we unequivocally perform best one thing at a time. Try it.

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