



The Myth of Multi-Tasking what the research says:



- People who believe they can multi-task effectively share a dangerous delusion: that paying attention to several things simultaneously actually increases their available attention above 100 percent. **Impossible.**
- Our total awareness is limited to only three or four objects at any given time. We can concentrate fully on only **one**.
- It can take the mind up to **15 minutes or more** to get back to full attention on the task that you previously were working on.
- Every **extra** task takes attention away from all the others.

©2017 True North Partnering Peter Vajda, Ph.D. All rights reserved.

The Mistake of Multitasking

September 7, 2018 Problem Practices Clifford Nass, distracted driving, linear thinking, multitasking, Nicholas Carr, poor listening, productivity, working memory Gary C. Woodward

There's near unanimity in the literature on comprehension that critical thinking and accurate listening decline when we fragment our attention.

Fall's quicker pace in the school and workplace offers the chance for a timely reminder that some work habits are self-defeating. In terms of attention to detail, perhaps nothing exacts a higher price than the belief that we can do several things at once.

As I've noted in this space before, the fundamental problem is that no one is good at multitasking. We are simply not wired to fully deal with a variety of stimuli at once. We may think otherwise. But how often do you hear someone else offering reminders that suggest our attention was elsewhere? "I told you that yesterday," "You must have missed it," or "You left some important things in that email" all serve as useful indicators.

In computer terms, we are better at serial processing than parallel processing. Technology writer Nicholas Carr explains why our brains cannot successfully process more than a few competing bits of information:

There's near unanimity in the literature on comprehension that critical thinking and listening declines when we fragment our attention. To put it simply, multitasking makes us just a little bit stupid. As researcher Clifford Nass famously noted, multitaskers are "suckers for irrelevancy." Because "everything distracts them," their intellectual performance on important tasks deteriorates. Sometimes the person addicted to a digital stew of stimuli is the last to know that they have become functionally impaired.

It's a common mistake to assume that being "busy" means being "fully engaged." We perform our busyness as a badge of honor. But it's closer to the truth to conclude that the more we structure lives to include distractions, the less we are able to get past this self-induced noise that complicates the completion of an important task.

Try a simple experiment. Read your email or a series of text-messages while also listening to someone explain how to get to an address on the other side of town. No GPS device allowed. An active and full-time listener will probably process the directions correctly, or ask questions until they have the mental map they need. The split-time listener is more likely to end up lost, often compounding their distraction by calling from from a moving car to get new directions. Alas, that makes things even worse. Distracted driving is a form of multitasking that kills more pedestrians each year.

Look for models in those from all walks of life who still have the will to engage with one thing for an extended period. These linear thinkers may be younger readers happily caught in the thrall of a writer or literary genre; newspaper consumers who will follow an investigative story across three pages of a broadsheet; or the curious who are in the thrall of a speaker or performer over a sustained period of time. To be sure, these individuals increasingly seem to be outliers. We now tend to notice an "unusual" passion for thirsty listening, 'doing' or reading. These linear thinkers are now much more out of the norm, different from the rest of us swamped in a clutter of trivia.

The Unintended Consequences of Multi-Tasking

Today, I wonder, what has multi-tasking done to us?

Posted Jan 13, 2017 Psychology Today

I remember becoming acutely aware of students' multi-tasking abilities in 2005. I watched my daughter, who was a senior in high school, do her homework while also enjoying four other inputs—music from her iPod, a

television show, her laptop and her phone, which enabled her to continue an ongoing conversation with a friend about a boy.

Today, most of us can't imagine doing life without multi-tasking. Our calendars are so full and our expectations so high, we feel we must accomplish two or more tasks at any given time. In 2007, students from Kansas State University [surveyed](#) themselves and discovered they cram 26.5 hours of activity into every day—multi-tasking. I think that number is conservative.

Today, I wonder, what has multi-tasking done to us?

As busy people, most of us would agree that multi-tasking is helpful. We pick up our child at school while talking with a friend on our mobile device, all the while running errands that enable us to cook dinner that evening. Unfortunately, at the same time, it seems that few people really pay [attention](#) to one thing well. We lack clarity. Multi-tasking seems to make us:

- shallow, not deep
- fuzzy, not focused
- distracted, not aligned
- live with duplicity, not integrity

What's Wrong with Multi-Tasking?

Thanks to social media, our students have grown up multi-tasking, but has all of the multi-tasking been poor for their health? After some digging I've concluded that multi-tasking is damaging. Apart from the obvious dangers like "texting while driving," multi-tasking plays a significant role in the [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) levels our students experience. A squirt of [dopamine](#) is released when we accomplish one of the items on our multi-tasking list. It makes us feel good. We tend to pursue more short-term tasks that give us this dopamine shot, and soon we're caught up in quantity over quality. We actually work harder, not smarter. And we don't really focus. We assume we're doing more and better, but in reality we trade in value for speed and volume.

MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller [reveals](#) that our brains are “not wired to multitask well . . . when people think they’re multitasking, they’re actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there’s a cognitive cost.”

A [study](#) at the University of London demonstrated that people who multi-task while performing cognitive tasks experience measurable [IQ](#) drops. Believe it or not, the IQ drops were akin to what you see in those who skip a night of sleep or who use [marijuana](#). Wow.

Most of all, doctors tell us that multi-tasking causes an increase in the production of cortisol, the stress [hormone](#). When our brain consistently shifts gears, it creates stress and tires us out, leaving us feeling mentally fatigued. In addition, the barrage of information is overwhelming. Figuring out what you need to pay attention to and what you don’t can be down right exhausting.

A Game Plan: Mono-Tasking

I have a challenge for you. Why not talk this over with your students or kids and encourage them to look at the data. Then—invite them to trade in “multi-tasking” for “mono-tasking.” You read that correctly. Mono-tasking has become a lost art. It means concentrating on one important task, instead of four or five. It’s giving your best effort to one item—not your mediocre effort to several. Most importantly, it enables a student to integrate their life. Integration is taken from the same root word as: “integrity.” It means being one person. Clear. Focused. On-mission. It’s choosing to shun duplicity and hypocrisy in favor of [authenticity](#). It’s really all about [mindfulness](#).

Integration is the smoothest path to overcome stress, and mindfulness is the best path to take toward integration. Mindfulness has become a buzzword in many circles today. In layman’s terms, mindfulness is clearing one’s mind of the clutter of multi-tasking and focusing on the here and now. It can go as far as deep breathing and meditation, but it can begin by simply pushing “pause” on the noise and activity of a [stressful](#) day. Neuroscientist Moshe Bar, at Harvard Medical School, tells us our brains switch back and forth from activity to recovery mode. Our brains need periods of recovery, but rarely get them. Mindfulness is about consistently choosing to stop our relentless “juggling acts” (multi-tasking) for a specified amount of time—in order for our brains to recover. The benefits are tangible. “The American Psychological

Association cites it as a hopeful strategy for alleviating depression, anxiety and pain.” It’s a step to combat the:

- over-stimulated,
- over-taxed,
- over-connected,
- over-committed,
- overwhelmed

lifestyles our young have accumulated. “The American Psychological Association tells us that 34 percent of Americans say their stress has shot up in the last year.” I believe it’s even more so among our youth.

Making a Trade

So, today, I’m suggesting one simple step. To trade in multi-tasking for mono-tasking. To trade in scattered minds for mindfulness. Then, to encourage our students to do the same thing. Rebel against the inclination of our culture for noise and clutter. Rebel against the compulsion to be aware of everything all at once and be mindful. Reject FOMO ([Fear](#) Of Missing Out) and let’s do MONO . . . as in mono-tasking.