

Whatever Happened to Good Old Singletasking?

Multitasking saves time—but can lead to costly mistakes. New research suggests when to tackle only one thing at a time.



To many adults with ADD, multitasking is second nature. Doing two (or more) things at once might not be as gratifying as doing them separately, but there's no doubt that multitasking helps you get everything done on time.

Or does it?

With simple tasks you've done a thousand times—folding laundry while talking to a friend on the phone—multitasking is clearly more efficient. It would take longer to perform the two tasks separately.

But when tasks are even slightly more demanding, trying to do two at once can actually *decrease* your productivity. For example, it might seem easy to watch the kids while preparing supper. But between telling Joey to stop pulling the cat's tail and answering Susie's homework

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questions, you end up burning the spaghetti sauce. The time and effort spent preparing supper were wasted...and it's take-out again.

Shifting focus

The human brain simply doesn't work as well when doing two things at once. Actually, the multitasking brain never really attends to both things at the same time; rather, it shifts its focus back and forth between activities. And each time the brain shifts focus, it takes a fraction of a second to readjust. It's like the delay in changing channels with the remote, or shifting from one computer program to another.

Fractional seconds here and there may not sound like much, but they add up. Thus, multitasking might not be saving you as much time as you'd think. In certain situa-

tions, of course, a fraction of a second is the difference between life and death—the shift of focus from talking on a cell phone to hitting the brakes to avoid an obstacle in the road. After all, a car going 60 miles an hour travels 88 feet in one second.

The latest research

A recent study of multitasking, conducted by scientists from the Federal Aviation Administration and the University of Michigan, suggests that multitasking saves time only if the activities being done simultaneously are simple and familiar. The FAA's Joshua Rubenstein, Ph.D., and Michigan's David Meyer, Ph.D., and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., devised an experiment to measure how much time was lost when people shifted between activities of varied complexity and familiarity. They found that any task-shifting involved some loss of time, but that

significantly less time was lost when the tasks were simple, familiar, or both.

In light of this finding, let's see how you can make the best use of precious time:

1 Identify the activities that lend themselves to multitasking. Again, the two considerations are simplicity and familiarity. Most of us can mate socks or file our nails while watching TV, but mating socks while answering e-mails probably won't save any time at all. Even the simplest task, if done infrequently, may not lend itself to multitasking. If a complex task is done on a regular basis, it may be "multitaskable."

2 For complex tasks or assignments, block out time in your schedule to devote solely to one activity. Take your phone off the hook. Hang a "do not disturb" sign on your door. If an assignment is especially complex or unfamiliar, block out extra time to complete it. I tell my clients to estimate how much time a particular task will take—then to set aside *twice* as much time.

3 Establish a morning routine, and do the same things in the same order every day. The more often you do a task, the more familiar it becomes. Eventually, you may be able to add it to your list of multitaskable activities.

4 Monitor your efficiency while multitasking. What is your error rate when you try to answer the phone while balancing your checkbook? How does that

rate compare to what you observe when you focus solely on balancing your checkbook? Based on the comparison, decide whether or not it makes sense to multitask.

5 When you decide to multitask, try to eliminate distractions. If your child interrupts, for instance, give her the "shhhh" sign and say, "Not now, honey. I'm right in the middle of programming my new cell phone. I'll have to get back to you when I'm done," or "Leave a note on my desk and I'll take a look at it when I finish this spreadsheet."

6 Stay off the cell phone while driving. Pull off the road and come to a full stop before answering or placing a call. Several of my clients have repeatedly had automobile accidents—and all the accidents occurred when they were speaking on cell phones.

If you'd like to save time, place calls while folding laundry, sweeping out the garage, or doing another simple, familiar task.

7 Be a strategic chef. On weekdays, when the kitchen is a busy place, prepare only easy-to-make meals that you have prepared many times before. Save new recipes (ones that require some experimentation or take longer to make) for the weekend, when you can send the kids off to play.

8 Get enough sleep. Sleep deprivation makes it hard to think clearly, and that can interfere with your getting things done. ▲



Do you like to do several things at once? Share your ideas on multitasking by writing to ADDitude, 39 West 37th Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10018, or by e-mailing letters@additudemag.com.