The Myth of Multitasking

Although we often hear about the power and benefits of doing more than one task at once, it seems that our biology does not match this belief. Even though we often hear that younger generations are better than ever at multitasking, such as watching television, texting, and engaging in a conversation with a family member all at the same time, the field of neuroscience is shedding light on the fact that living this way is not good for our health. In fact, it may even be toxic for our brains and result in reduced productivity and unsatisfying relationships.

One of the leaders in the field of cognitive neuroscience, Dr. Sandra Bond Chapman, has been researching how people might improve their creative and critical thinking skills, support healthy brain development, and reach their cognitive potential at any age. As the Founder and Chief Director of the Centre for Brain Health at the University of Texas at Dallas, Chapman has learned that multitasking actually reduces productivity and accuracy. It also causes stress in the body, and needlessly exhausts the brain.

This is because what your brain is actually doing when it is confronted with several tasks at once is switching back and forth very quickly between them. It is working so hard that you come to believe that you are actually doing several things at once when this is not the case at all. Chapman's findings help to explain why talking on your cell phone while driving is so dangerous. When you are trying to both see and talk, either the visual cortex or the auditory cortex is not engaged at any given moment. This explains why you can miss seeing a car slam on the brakes in front of you while you are concentrating on what someone has just said to you.

Neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to adapt and change, provides many options for alleviating the harmful effects of multitasking. For instance, you can begin to focus on one activity at a time and reduce interruptions such as texts and emails to change your brain for the better. Chapman reports that it can take an average of twenty minutes to return to a task after an interruption. So, you truly will be working more efficiently by concentrating on only one activity. Try to focus on the most important tasks on your to-do list first.

Another helpful strategy is to condense large amounts of information into a few brief sentences and/or create a seven-word thought or question about it. Furthermore, moving between the details and the big picture in various situations will help your brain to work at its best. Utilize your creativity and seek out new ways to develop your knowledge and skills. Do not always take the usual path in work or home situations. Making these simple changes on a consistent basis will help your brain to restore itself to optimal health.

When talking with other people, put your sole focus on them instead of multitasking. Take time to respond to others by pausing for a few seconds to breathe and reflect. If you need time to respond authentically to someone's thoughts, requests or feelings, let him/her know this truth. Often, giving your brain a rest for just a few minutes can go a long way to keeping an

interpersonal situation calm, satisfying, and effective. In this way, improving your brain health can benefit not only you, but all those around you.

Just like the body, the brain also needs rest. Frequently disengaging from tasks and quieting the mind, rather than constantly multitasking, can improve problem-solving, productivity and your relationships. You will feel better, and so will your loved ones, because you will be less stressed, more constructive and focused when they need you. All of the findings at Chapman's Centre for Brain Health seem to provide substantial evidence for the time-honoured and simple phrase, "Do one thing at a time". Following this advice might be one of the greatest changes you can make to improve your brain's performance and life satisfaction.

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