

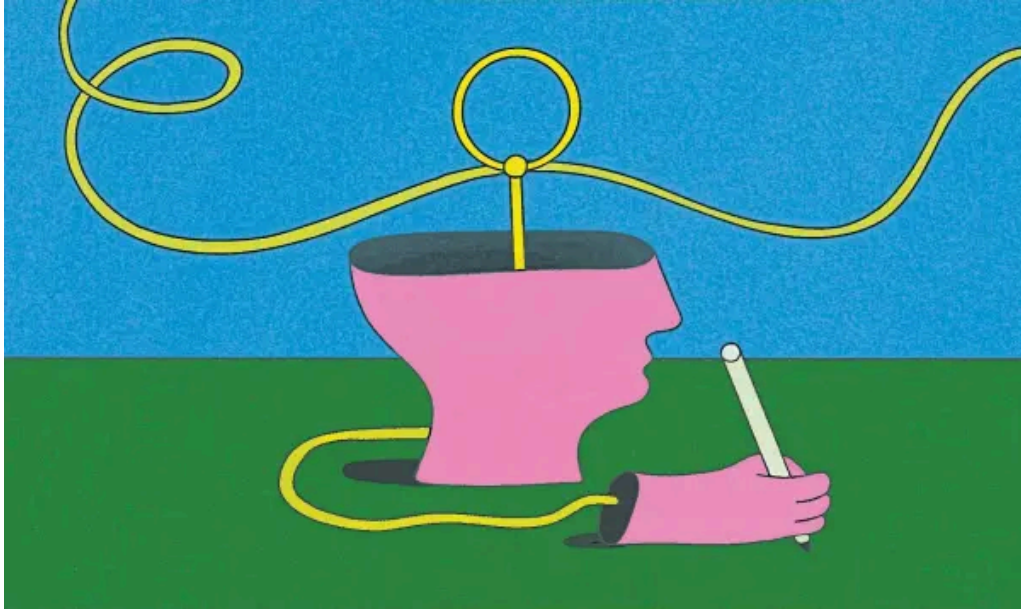
- Attention

HOW TO BE GOOD AT MULTITASKING

A multitasker's guide to regaining focus

Bangkok Post · 26 Mar 2024 · 1 · ANNA BORGES

Multitasking is just the way many of us live. How often do you text while stuck in traffic, lose track of a podcast while doing chores, or flutter between the news and your inbox?



“We get stuck in this multitasking trap even without realising that we’re doing it,” said Nicole Byers, a neuropsychologist in Calgary, Alberta, who specialises in treating people with burnout.

There are a few reasons for our collective habit, she added. Most of us avoid boredom if we can, Byers explained, and multitasking is a reliable way to ward it off. There’s also a lot of pressure to do it.

“How many times have we seen a job posting that says must be an excellent multitasker?” she asked. “Our modern world — where so many of us spend most of the day on screens — really forces our brain to multitask.”

The fact remains that we’re not great at doing it, and it’s not great for us. But there are ways we can be smarter in our approach.

YOUR BRAIN ON MULTITASKING

First, “multitask” itself is typically a misnomer. According to experts, it’s not possible to do two things at once — unless we can do one without much thinking (like taking a walk while catching up with a friend).

“Usually, when people think they’re multitasking, they’re actually switching their attention back and forth between two separate tasks,” said Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, and author

of *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way To Restore Balance, Happiness And Productivity*.

Let’s consider what happens when you engage in a single task like cooking dinner. From the moment you decide what to make, different regions of your brain, collectively referred to as the cognitive control network, collaborate to make it happen, said Anthony Wagner, a professor of psychology at Stanford and the deputy director of the university’s Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute.

This network includes areas of your brain that are involved in executive function, or the ability to plan and carry out goal-oriented behaviour. Together they create a mental model of the job at hand and what you need to accomplish it. Your brain might do this, Wagner said, by drawing on both external and internal information, like the ingredients in your fridge or your memory of the recipe.

Mark compared this process to drawing on a mental whiteboard. But if your friend calls you to rant about her day, that whiteboard gets wiped clean. “Every time you switch your attention to a new task, your brain has to reorient itself,” she said.

If you know the dish like the back of your hand or your chat is nice and breezy, switching might be simple. But the more effort each task takes, the more your brain has to sort through competing information and separate goals.

THE DOWNSIDES OF MULTITASKING

As you would probably expect, the potential harm varies depending on the activity and how adept you are at doing it. But, generally, “when we switch between tasks, we pay what’s been dubbed a switch cost”, Wagner said. “We’re going to be slower and less accurate than we would have been if we stayed on a single task.” Speed and precision aren’t the only risks, either. Multitasking is more cognitively demanding, even when we’re doing things we find enjoyable or easy. When we multitask, we can tax our working memory, or our ability to hold and handle information in our mind, Byers explained.

“The more we overload that system and the more we’re trying to keep in our brains at once, the more mental fatigue it can lead to,” she said. And other studies have found that multitasking can set our heart racing, raise our blood pressure, trigger anxiety, dampen our mood and negatively impact our perception of the work at hand.

HOW TO FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME

Mark suggested you start by observing yourself throughout the day, noticing when and how you task-switch without realising it. From there, the advice is simple yet challenging. You’ll need to practise monotasking, or doing one thing at a time, to gradually retrain your focus and build your tolerance.

If you’re struggling, start small. Can you monotask for five minutes? How about 10? “When it comes to our brains, slow and steady is always a good strategy,” Byers said.

WHEN TO KEEP MULTITASKING

Your life is probably going to include some level of task-switching, but there are ways to be more intentional about it.

Stick to your strengths. Certain activities “strain our systems and drain our brain power more or less than others”, Byers said. So if a task is stressful or requires a lot of mental effort when doing it solo, you probably won’t be better off multitasking. For example, you might be good at crocheting while watching TV, but a beginner might need full concentration to avoid skipping stitches.

Weigh the risks. Some tasks might feel like second nature, but there are still times when you want your wits about you. “Even if we feel able to do something without paying much attention, we cannot predict the unpredictable nature of the world,” Wagner said. “Highly skilled drivers can’t anticipate when a car will swerve into your lane.”

The stakes don’t have to be life or death for multitasking to be not worth it: It can leave the door open for serious mistakes at work or stop you from being as present as you want to be at home.

Find break points. When and how we switch tasks matters, too. Rather than pivoting at the drop of a distraction, Mark suggested swapping at what she called “break points”, places in your work flow where it will be “easy to pick it up again without having to do redundant work”. As you read this article you might try getting to the end before checking your notifications. If that’s not possible, you might aim for at least the end of this paragraph.

Use multitasking when it actually helps. Stacking habits, particularly activities you like with ones you don’t, can give your brain more positive reinforcement than monotasking alone. If, for instance, you’re more likely to do the dishes with the TV on, it’s probably worth sacrificing a bit of attention. “Our brains may not like change,” Byers said. “But they do really like rewards.”