



Making the link: Digital multitasking and stress

It's only 11:30 a.m. You're trying to complete the quarterly sales projection, write a new business plan, and create an agenda for tomorrow's executive meeting. You're working with multiple screens, scanning documents, checking your emails for updates, monitoring Twitter feeds, doing last minute research online while participating in a teleconference with your sales office in Germany. And don't forget about a client or a co-worker calling your office line and your son texting asking what time you'll be home. You're feeling unfocused, exhausted, and stressed! Wasn't technology supposed to make life easier?

Technology has certainly transformed the way we access information and communicate, but it also made multitasking the norm. In theory, being able to do six things at once should make us six times as efficient but in reality it can reduce our productivity by up to 40 percent. It's also stressing us out.

Multitasking and the brain

There are some people who excel at multitasking, in fact, their jobs depend on it: air traffic controllers, first responders, and chefs to name a few. But for the rest of us, it's difficult to focus on several things at once – our brains aren't built that way. Just as bouncing between multiple windows and programs can cause a computer to slow down, freeze or crash, repeatedly and rapidly switching our attention from one thing to another can cause our brain to do the same.

Multitasking means multi-stress

When we multitask, the continual onslaught of new information and demands can overwhelm our brain, sending it into a "flight or fight" response. Hormones and chemicals are released into the bloodstream to help prepare for a real or perceived threat. The heart pumps harder to increase blood flow to the brain and muscles, sugar levels rise, palms sweat and pupils dilate. We feel anxious and stressed.

While some stress can spark creativity and help us reach last minute deadlines, prolonged stress can lead to many health problems, including gastrointestinal complaints, chronic pain, depression, and sleep issues. Long-term stress has also been shown to play a role in the development of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

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Multitasking and millennials

While we're all feeling the effects of digital multitasking, it's Millennials who are perhaps paying the greatest price.

The Millennials (those born between 1980 to 2000) are the first truly digital generation. They grew up multitasking and as adults they effortlessly switch between media platforms 27 times an hour. But has a lifetime of digital multitasking hurt them?

There is research to suggest that prolonged multitasking can actually damage developing brains, especially areas controlling cognitive and emotional functions. This may explain why Millennials, as a group, are easily bored and expect their hard work to be quickly recognized and rewarded.

Millennials are also burning out – often before the age of 30. While they may be used to doing several things at once digitally, they are finding they can't do several things at once in life.

Reducing digital stress

So what can we do to safeguard our physical, mental, and emotional well-being? Try the following:

- Check email and voicemail once an hour or twice a day. Set email and voicemail alerts to say you will respond by a certain time.
- Use your online meeting calendar to block off time so you can focus on a priority or challenging task without disruptions.
- Your body and brain need regular breaks to rest and refresh. Taking regular brief breaks actually improves focus – but make sure you're not spending your break checking social media or glued to your smartphone.
- Establish regular technology free times. For example, leave your smartphone behind when out with friends or spend Sunday afternoons offline.

However you do it, managing multitasking is worth the effort. You'll be more productive, do better work, and actually complete task more quickly. You'll also help reduce your stress. For other ways to cope with our fast-paced digital world, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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Life after retirement

Retirement isn't what it used to be. North Americans can now expect to live 20, 30 or more years past the age of 65 and they have every intention of living those years to the fullest. They're volunteering, mentoring, travelling, returning to school – and working. Studies show that 53 percent of Canadians and 31 percent of Americans will keep working in some capacity and many of those plan to start their own businesses when they “retire.”

Have you begun your plans for life after retirement?

Having the means

Perhaps the most important aspect of retirement planning is being financially ready. Most financial experts agree that your retirement will be comfortable if:

- **You're mortgage free.** Money previously allocated for home payments can be used to continue investing for the years to come, fund travel and activities, and even start a business. Owning your own home also offers a financial safety net.
- **You have multiple sources of income** such as government pensions, investments, savings, rental income, a workplace pension or part-time work not only provides peace of mind but will also help you weather any economic downturn.
- **You have a realistic retirement budget.** The average Canadian retiree spends approximately \$2,400 and the average American retiree about \$3,700 a month (including health insurance). To see if this is realistic for you, try living on that amount for six months before you retire.

Having a purpose

While financial security is great, it's no guarantee you'll be happy in retirement. It's what you do with your time. Here are some tips on planning for your purpose:

- **Define your life after retirement.** For 30 or 40 years, what you did for a living was probably a big part of your identity. Leaving that part of yourself behind can be unexpectedly traumatic. You may be ready to give up the stress, commuting, and long hours but not the mental stimulation and the satisfaction of knowing you're making a valuable contribution. How will you define yourself after retirement?
- **Set goals.** Staying excited about what's to come means setting goals. Retirement is the perfect time to finally write that novel, take a cross-country road trip, become a full time artist, start your own business or even change careers.
- **Talk to your partner or spouse.** You may have different ideas about retirement and need to discuss what the future will look like for both of you.

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- **Lay foundations before you retire.** Once you've defined your life after retirement and set new goals, it's a good idea to start creating that life while you're still working. For example, lay the groundwork of your new business, get involved in the community or learn a new language in preparation for planned travels.
- **Consider your social bonds.** Saying goodbye to the office may sound great, but working can provide important social connections and friendships. Start expanding your social circle (joining professional associations and clubs or volunteering are some ideas) and plan ways to stay connected with former colleagues.
- **Stay active.** Good health is perhaps the most important part of a happy, rewarding retirement. Remaining physically active is more important as we age to help maintain strength, endurance, flexibility and balance, as well as a healthy weight and good mental health.
- **Keep your mind sharp.** Whether you're two or 92, your brain needs stimulation. Enrolling in classes – whether to learn a new language or new hobby – keeps the mind sharp and is also a great way to meet new people. Open the newspaper and do the daily crossword or go online and choose from a wide variety of puzzles and games to keep mentally fit. Don't stop learning.

So get ready. Today, retirement is not an end of a career but the beginning of new possibilities, opportunities and adventures. For more information about life after retirement, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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