



Digital multitasking and stress

It's almost impossible to focus on one task at a time these days. At work, we can be calling one customer while texting another, writing a report and updating a spreadsheet and taking part in an international conference call – at the same time! Throughout the day there are also the constant interruptions of answering emails, meeting requests, and telephone calls. Multitasking has become the norm. But far from making us more productive, multitasking can hamper our efficiency through missed deadlines, errors, wasted time, and increased stress.

Multitasking means multi stress

Some people excel at multitasking, in fact, their jobs depend on it: air traffic controllers, first responders, chefs, servers and event planners to name a few. But for the rest of us, it's difficult to fully focus on several things at once – our brains aren't built that way. Instead, the constant barrage of demands overwhelms the 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. You feel anxious or stressed.

This works well as a short-term response, giving you a boost of energy and mental sharpness to handle a sudden challenge. However, living in a prolonged state of "fight or flight" can take a serious toll on your physical and mental health.

To reduce digital stress – and really make the most of your time, you need to reduce the temptation to multitask as much as possible. Try the following:

- Resist the temptation to constantly check emails, texts, and phone messages. Depending on the nature of your job, set aside specific times to do so – once an hour or twice a day. Use your voice mail and email alert to say you will respond by a certain time.

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- Schedule meetings in blocks. Meetings reduce the time you have for your own work – and they invariably go over schedule. If you can, schedule all your meetings in blocks so that one begins right after another. This helps meetings to start and end on time and leaves the rest of day free for important tasks.
- Meet with yourself. Use your online meeting calendar to block off time so you can focus on a priority or challenging task.
- Use the 80/20 rule. This states that you achieve approximately 80 percent of your results with just 20 percent of your efforts. You spend the rest of your time on digital disruptions – the teleconferences, emails, texts, phone calls, and so forth. The key to increasing your effectiveness is to focus more on the 20 percent of effort that actually produce results. These are likely to be complex, demanding, time-consuming tasks, but they are what should be at the top of your daily to-do list. The rest should take a lower priority.
- **Take breaks.** Your body needs regular breaks to prevent eye or muscle strain, headaches and leg cramps and your mind needs short breaks to rest and refresh. Studies show that taking brief breaks can actually improve focus. Taking a break doesn't mean checking social media or your smartphone.

Very few of us can actually perform more than one activity at a time. Instead we quickly switch between them. And this switching is exhausting and stressful. To improve productivity and creativity, and reduce stress and errors, we need to focus on one task for a while, then another task. We need to give our brains a break.

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