

A considerable amount of research attests to well-being benefits of mindfulness, such as being less stressed, says the writer. Attention regulation is an important life skill in this day and age that arguably children would benefit from learning in school, and adults can also train their attention muscle by engaging in exercises such as mindfulness practice, he adds. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



# Are you paying attention? Or are you multitasking?

Doing more than one thing at the same time is usually not productive. Try mindfulness and focus fully on a single task.

## Jochen Reb

As a professor, I see students trying to multitask a lot during class. I say “trying” because they rarely succeed. They attempt to follow the class and, at the same time, catch up on their social media or e-mails. They believe they can do both.

Yet, when I call on them, their poor (and sometimes apologetic) response shows that they weren't paying attention. The temptation to “multitask” in this manner is amplified in online courses and in working from home, one reasonable argument employers use for requiring staff to return to the office.

Most of us face the challenge of trying to “get everything done”. This challenge arguably has been amplified by several trends, including smartphones, the Internet and the resulting 24/7 connectivity.

To make matters worse, in this age of the attention economy, a lot of companies' business models are based on monetising our attention: The more time we spend on their apps, games or websites, the more money they make through advertising or purchases. As a result of all these technological, social and economic developments, we experience task, information and

attention overload: At the end of the day, many of us feel attentionally – and emotionally – drained.

While some systemic attempts to address this problem are being implemented (such as organisations turning off their e-mail servers overnight), ultimately, I believe it will be neither possible nor desirable to entirely “turn back time” and disconnect. As a result, I believe we need to get smarter about how we manage our attention.

Multitasking, or trying to do (at least) two things at the same time, has been a way in which we have been trying to cope with overload. The argument seems logically sound: If we can do two things simultaneously, we should be able to get twice as many things done – doubling our productivity! No wonder managers tell their staff to multitask.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. It is very difficult to pay attention to two things at the same time. As the eminent German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer puts it: “Human attention can fully focus on one task alone, meaning that multitasking leads to a decrease in performance on the task(s) that demand focus.” This is why researchers refer to multitasking with the more technical and accurate term “rapid task

switching”.

What really happens when we multitask, and the two tasks draw on the same attentional and cognitive resources, is that we rapidly switch between the tasks. Multitasking feels productive, but research with objective measures has again and again shown it leads to lower productivity.

Each time we switch, we incur costs such as time lost in switching, increase in errors, and use of scarce attentional resources. Over multiple switches, these costs add up. Moreover, when we switch, an “attention residue” still remains “stuck” with the previous task, implying that we cannot bring 100 per cent of our attentional resources to the current task. These factors explain why we are not only less productive but also feel more exhausted in the end.

### DON'T TEXT WHILE DRIVING

By now, we are (hopefully!) all very aware of the dangers of texting, or generally looking at our mobile phones, while driving. It is an incredibly dangerous illustration of when multitasking doesn't work. The reason is that these two tasks (texting and driving) require the same resource: visual attention. In contrast, having a casual conversation while driving is quite doable for experienced drivers. The reason is that these tasks draw on different resources – vision versus speech. Thus, we can see that multitasking is possible in certain situations. Our unconscious mind, fortunately,

can also do tasks such as keeping us breathing and our hearts beating while we do other things.

However, at work, many of the tasks we do draw on the same resources, such as our visual attention and our cognitive resources. So, what can we do instead of multitasking?

I do not believe in one magic bullet that can solve these complex challenges we face as individuals and societies. Some of the approaches are systemic – such as societal and business norms that allow people to switch off and disconnect during certain times (at night, at weekends, and during holidays, for example). Some approaches are technological, such as turning off attention-grabbing – and thus interrupting – notifications.

My own research and practice, as a professor and director of the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU, has been focused on mindfulness. Mindfulness can be defined as a state of present-centred, open awareness. It is closely aligned with the concept of task focus: Being mindful means being fully attentionally engaged with whatever we are doing right now. For example, when we are having a conversation with a colleague, our spouse, or our children, we are fully focused on the conversation, not peeking at our phones or thinking about something else such as some work-related problem.

### WHY MINDFULNESS WORKS

The basic philosophy is “one thing at a time”. Do you ever read the news or watch a video while eating? If so, have you noticed how you don't notice the taste of the food? In mindful eating, you appreciate the sensory experience, not just the taste but also the look, fragrance and texture of the food. In practising this, the experience becomes richer and more satisfying.

A considerable amount of research attests to well-being benefits of mindfulness, such as being less stressed. Research that my colleagues and I have conducted in a workplace context also suggests a broad range of beneficial outcomes. Among others, mindful employees are evaluated as performing better

and they themselves are more satisfied with their jobs. And mindful leaders are seen by their employees as more authentic, respectful and effective.

In a recent research project, we have been looking specifically at whether mindfulness can buffer negative effects of interruptions.

What we found is promising: Employees who were more mindful reported reduced negative effects of being interrupted, in two ways. First, with respect to their attention, they could re-engage better with their original task, suggesting that mindfulness may help reduce the attention residue that is carried over from the interruption. Second, more mindful employees felt lower negative impacts – such as frustration – that usually come with being interrupted. This could be because mindfulness may help in accepting that an interruption has occurred and then moving on, rather than getting upset about it.

A key reason I have been focusing on mindfulness is that it can be trained, making it eminently practical. Drawing on a long tradition of meditation practices in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, mindfulness researchers and practitioners have developed practices adapted for secular contexts and purposes such as stress reduction and decision-making. These practices are increasingly well researched, providing a considerable evidence base for their benefits.

I see mindfulness practice as a way to take back control of our attentional autonomy that has been taken hostage, if you will, by our devices. By training our “attentional muscle”, we strengthen our ability to self-regulate our attention to direct it towards and stay focused on the task we want to focus on, to inhibit unwanted distractions from hijacking our attention, and to (re)direct our wandering minds.

As William James, one of the fathers of psychology, wrote in *The Principles Of Psychology*, “the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will”.

James further argued that an “education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence”. Consistent with James, I believe we need to learn to get smarter about our attention.

Attention regulation is an important life skill in this day and age that arguably our children would benefit from learning in school, as an essential part of education. And we, as adults, can also train our attention muscle by engaging in exercises such as mindfulness practice.

I believe that training our minds to be fully engaged with whatever we are doing, one thing at a time, is not only more productive than trying to multitask and rush through our to-do lists, but also allows us to experience life more richly.

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