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ADD Adults: Singletasking Makes Sense

For ADHD adults, multitasking saves time - but can lead to costly mistakes. Expert advice on becoming more efficient by tackling just one thing at a time.

by Sandy Maynard

To many adults with attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD), multitasking is second nature. Doing two (or more) things at once might not be as gratifying as doing them separately, but there's no doubt that multitasking helps you with time management.

Or does it?

With simple tasks you've done a thousand times - folding laundry while talking to a friend on the phone - multitasking is clearly more efficient. It would take longer to perform the two tasks separately.

But when tasks are even slightly more demanding, trying to do two at once can actually *decrease* your productivity. For example, it might seem easy to watch the kids while preparing supper. But between telling Joey to stop pulling the cat's tail and answering Susie's homework questions, you end up burning the spaghetti sauce. The time and effort spent preparing supper were wasted... and it's take-out again.

Shifting focus

The human brain simply doesn't work as well when doing two things at once. Actually, the multitasking brain never really attends to both things at the same time; rather, it shifts its focus back and forth between activities. And each time the brain shifts focus, it takes a fraction of a second to readjust. It's like the delay in changing channels with the remote, or shifting from one computer program to another.

Fractional seconds here and there may not sound like much, but they add up. Thus, multitasking might not be saving you as much time as you'd think. In certain situations, of course, a fraction of a second is the difference between life and death - the shift of focus from talking on a cell phone to hitting the brakes to avoid an obstacle in the road. After all, a car going 60 miles an hour travels 88 feet in one second.

The latest research

A recent study of multitasking, conducted by scientists from the Federal Aviation Administration and the University of Michigan, suggests that multitasking saves time only if the activities being done simultaneously are simple and familiar. The FAA's Joshua Rubenstein, Ph.D., and Michigan's David Meyer, Ph.D., and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., devised an experiment to measure how much time was lost when people shifted between activities of varied complexity and familiarity. They found that any task-shifting involved some loss of time, but that significantly less time was lost when the tasks were simple, familiar, or both.

In light of this finding, let's see how you can make the best use of precious time:

1. Identify the activities that lend themselves to multitasking.

Again, the two considerations are simplicity and familiarity. Most of us can mate socks or file our nails while watching TV, but mating socks while answering e-mails probably won't save any time at all. Even the simplest task, if done infrequently, may not lend itself to multitasking. If a complex task is done on a regular basis, it may be "multitaskable."

