

(ON)

GIRL INTERRUPTED

^ COULD YOU GO A WEEK WITHOUT MULTI-TASKING?

You're used to juggling a dozen things at once, but does it make you any more efficient? Natalie Reilly embarked on a "multi-tasking diet" to see if cutting back on distractions can boost productivity



GETTY IMAGES; ANTHONY ADAMSON

When my editor sent me an email about putting myself on a "multi-tasking diet", I was on my couch eating lunch, flicking between two TV shows with four websites open on my laptop. I also had an earbud in one ear as I was hooked up to iTunes while waiting for the washing machine to finish. So distracted was I by ... well, everything I was doing, that I skimmed her email and misinterpreted it as a weight-loss story. I was halfway through a conversation with myself about how I could probably stand to drop a few kilos when, taking the earbud out, I re-read the email. Properly. Looks like this assignment - to ban all multi-tasking for one week - was made for me.

I'm not an overly anxious person. I am not on Facebook. I'm not even a mother. So I have no excuse for not doing just one thing at a time. I have a fast-paced job, but doesn't everyone? Why then, must I multi-task? And why, when I am familiar with its drawbacks, am I doing five things at once on my day off?

Psychiatrist Edward M Hallowell, who wrote *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, And About To Snap!* (Random House, \$23.95), says we are suffering ►

in the modern world from “attention deficit trait”, a “culturally induced ADD” brought on by our overloaded brains. We’ve become so conditioned to not just instant technology but the distractions, interruptions and frenzied pace of life, that we now not only accept being pulled in several different directions every day, we’re addicted to it.

OK, so I’m an addict. But am I not also a woman? I’m biologically wired to juggle, right? Alas, the belief that women can multi-task better than men is an old wives’ tale. “I think this idea arose because women, particularly women with children, have traditionally been responsible for performing many tasks at once,” says Dr Joanne Cantor, author of *Conquer CyberOverload: Get More Done, Boost Your Creativity, And Reduce Stress* (CyberOutlook Press, \$16.95). “However, research has not been able to demonstrate any constant evidence of women’s superiority over men in multi-tasking.”

In fact, multi-tasking itself is a myth. Unless a task is an “unconscious” one (think walking and chewing gum at the same time), we’re never doing two things at once. Our brains are actually rapidly switching from one task to another, and this why we can make mistakes because our brains don’t handle interruptions as well as we think they do.

A 2009 Stanford University study found that “people who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.” In other words, mono-tasking is more productive.

Research by the University of California, Irvine (UCI), in 2005 shows the average office worker is interrupted every 11 minutes. But according to a 2003 study by Microsoft, it takes about 15 minutes, once interrupted, to properly knuckle down again. Is my sense of distraction due to the open-plan office? No: the UCI research also shows we’re actually just as likely to interrupt ourselves. So it’s a week’s rehab for me to see if I can change my unproductive patterns.

THE DETOX

I have decided to do what serious dieters do: start with a complete detox and then

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loosen the reigns as the week goes on. Dave Crenshaw, business coach and author of *The Myth Of Multitasking: How “Doing It All” Gets Nothing Done* (John Wiley & Sons, \$12.95), advises freeing up my office from distractions, including visual ones on my computer and desk.

When I break it to him that I work in an open-plan office, he says I can still succeed by listening to instrumental music (lyrics divert us and our brain counts this as another task, so it’s bye-bye to Kanye’s acappella remix of “Runaway”). He also advises not answering the phone and then returning all calls between five and 6pm. Crenshaw also wants me to “turn off the automatic email or any message notification” – my worst nightmare. He explains, “Even if it’s just a fraction of a second, it’s going to take another few seconds to refocus.”

So in the morning I do not check my iPhone (on which the email and internet has been dismantled) and I do not listen to my iPod while I’m on the bus. I stare out the window while judging a couple of loud talkers about the silliness of their panicked conversations. I arrive at work and sip coffee outside the building. Crenshaw would probably allow me to sip coffee while I check emails as drinking is an unconscious activity. But according to Dr Cantor, taking time to enjoy just one thing slows down my addictive need to be everywhere at once. I feel relaxed and a tad smug as I glide into work.

I sit at my desk – now barren – make a list of everything I need to do and then I begin answering emails. I give myself until 11 before I shut them down and feel confident as it’s only 9am. At 9.45am, a coworker interrupts me to ask a question. I’m tempted to raise up a single finger to my lips to signal “silence”, but

decide that might look pompous and so I answer her question, which accidentally turns into a monologue about how amazing the club scene was in the late ’90s.

I was feeling OK about this interruption, as Dr Hollowell recommends cultivating “human moments” because the more face-to-face meetings I have, the less my coworkers will need to interrupt me with questions.

I’m in the middle of doing the “running man” when I recognise this is no longer a “human moment”, but a “me moment”, so I bid my coworker goodbye and settle back down to work ... for 10 minutes, until my boss sends me an email, which I am unable to ignore because, you know, she’s my boss. I end up dissecting it at her desk until she utters that most ominous of phrases, “While I have you ...” and we launch into a brainstorming session, which morphs into a dissertation about Charlie Sheen’s mental acuity. So much for smug.

THE DE-STRESS

Another one of Dr Cantor’s requirements is meditation. She says it will help me become more mindful, thereby lessening the chance of stress, while helping me manage what Dr Hollowell calls the “low-level guilt and panic” the average person feels when they’re only doing one thing but feel they should be doing more.

I last for two minutes – I don’t have the time to spend sitting around, observing my breathing! (That’s right, I felt the aforementioned low-level guilt during meditating.) I sip my coffee outside and as workers stream into my building, I feel like Anne Hathaway and James Franco must have when they co-hosted the Oscars: hopelessly underqualified for the task. Still, I do better by shutting down emails in the afternoon. I have a couple of meetings, too, which lessens the need for interruptions. The other bonus of the “human moment”, according to Dr Hollowell, is that it sucks all the ambiguity out of communication, meaning it’s harder to take things the “wrong way”. Dr Hollowell calls it an “anxiety antidote”.

I falter at 2pm and answer the phone to my friend when I really shouldn’t have – I have too much work to do and so begin using what Dr Hollowell calls my “email voice”, where it’s obvious I’m not listening. The clicking keys on my keyboard ►

and vague “hmm mms” were apparently a giveaway – who knew? I vow to do better and I call my friend back that evening. As I’m sitting on the couch, I notice I can empathise with her more than if I was preparing dinner at the same time. Dr Cantor believes that part of the lure of social networking and addictive texting is based on our need to feel important and loved. But I realise I get those same feel-good endorphins by listening to my friend.

THE PAINFUL BIT

Dr Cantor suggested I not only break for lunch, but take two five-minute walks every day to reduce stress and bump up my mindfulness. I feel vulnerable walking around sans technology, so I strut purposefully with a scowl on my face, lest any coworker should spot me and doubt I have somewhere very important to be.

The real stress comes later at my boyfriend’s house, where I am used to interrupting him, or myself, to answer an email or text. Or Google to find out what other movies that guy from *30 Rock* has been in. I feel like a snail without a shell, but remind myself of Crenshaw’s findings on multi-tasking in relationships. The word that keeps coming up is “unimportant”. Spouses feel like they don’t matter if they’re trying to talk while their significant other is glued to a screen.

However, without my own little screen to divert to, our interaction feels almost unnaturally intimate: a whole lot of gazing into each other’s eyes between sips of white wine. I can’t handle it! What did people do before techie toys? Oh, that’s right, they hid behind newspapers.

THE SLOG

My editor sends me an email to check how my diet’s going. I’m in the middle of explaining how great I’m doing when I interrupt myself to check out another email. Damn. I have a life coach, Rhondalynn Korolak, lined up for these exact moments when I need someone to talk me down from the frenetic urge to check and recheck my electronic devices. She comforts me by explaining that any habit needs 21 days to be broken, so I’m going to fail sometimes. She tells me it’s progress, not perfection, I should be aiming for, so if I catch myself opening up an email, I can close it saying, “Let me be grateful I only

opened one.” She also advises not calling it a “diet”, as I’m reinforcing the belief that I am depriving myself, when instead I should say, “I want to be more productive” because that’s the truth!

GETTING THE MANTRA

It’s the weekend and, waiting in line at the shops with no smartphone to look at, I feel naked. I focus on my breathing and repeat my new mantra under my breath: “Be Here Now!” But instead of feeling powerful, I feel like a disciple of a cult as well as naked. When I talk this over with Korolak she calls smartphone scrolling “the new smoking” – the perfect way for people to seem occupied and popular when they’re alone. Later, at a night out with friends, we get into a heated debate about the lyrics of Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start The Fire” and I feel like a lump on a log when one of my friends announces “To the iPhones!” in order to Google the lyrics, while I have only my flimsy memory to rely on.

That night I skip my usual habit of watching TV, so I may never understand the miracle that is the infomercial star product ShamWow!, but I do know that if I watch television I’m not interested in, I’ll end up hopping on the internet, too. But I sleep better and awake feeling something I haven’t felt in years: rested.

WORKING THE MANTRA

I’m still meditating and I’m up to 10 minutes. It seems to set my mood to “calm” for the day. When I finish I see that my friend has texted me a link and I do the

unthinkable: I switch on my internet and email on my smartphone and a flood of information from work hits me like a wet mackerel in the face. I wince and shut it all down again. The rest of the day is spent relaxing, something I would have previously termed “lazing about” had I not been freed of low-level guilt on this diet – excuse me – journey.

I receive a couple of texts from friends and, tempted as I am to reply straightaway, they know I can’t until my designated hour of “Text Time” at 4pm. This works until I forget to text back one friend for a week and she ends up texting, “Are you DEAD?” Dr Hallowell was right: this is indeed a culturally induced phenomenon and few are immune.

I am back at work for my final day and, on the advice of Crenshaw, I pop in my earbuds to listen to John Coltrane. Apart from feeling incredibly highbrow, I feel focused and I find that I can stay that way for longer periods of time. I’m happy to discover that I can complete tasks straightaway because without the excuse of email, I can’t procrastinate.

I go for a walk that night with my boyfriend and I find I can pay closer attention to what he’s saying and as I do, I am able to soak up my surroundings.

LIVING THE MANTRA

A week later, I appear to have unearthed a calmness in myself. My iPod is back on, as is my smartphone, but I’m less irritable now that I’m not allowing myself to be pulled in different directions. I still check emails constantly, but I am more disciplined about not answering them. I sit and look out the window while I wait for the washing machine – shocking, right?

In fact, I do a better job of completing tasks big and small now because I’m devoting proper focus to each one. But who knows how long that will last. I’m more “present” with people, too, and my relationships seem to have a new zest. Novelist Max Frisch once wrote: “Technology [has a] knack of so arranging the world that we don’t have to experience it.” And I can now appreciate that my attempts at mono-tasking helped me to slow down at least a little and properly see the world around me – instead of just a fractured, dizzying version of it that, when I look back on now, I know was driving me nuts. ■

