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Multitasking, Can we really do it?

There are a bunch of reasons why people “try” to multitask. Most are because they have multiple things to do at the same time, but the main reason to me is because people don’t know how to devise their time. There has been a decision matrix created by President Eisenhower that can help people decide how to use their time better.

Is multi-tasking good or bad? Studies show that multitasking isn’t the best thing to do to be successful. Sarah D. Sparks, “Studies on Multitasking Highlight Value of Self Control” gives examples of why it is a bad thing to do. “Not only can people not process two tasks simultaneously, but it also takes longer to multitask than it would to do the individual tasks one after the other, according to Steven G. Yantis, the chairman of the psychological and brain sciences department at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.” (Sparks) “It's fine to walk and chew gum at the same time, but when a person tries to do two things at the same time that each require a choice, there's a brief "bottleneck" in the prefrontal cortex—the decision making part of the brain—that delays the second task, he said.” (sparks) When people try to multitask it usually leads them to do worse than they would have if they focused on one thing at a time. Studies show that people the age of about 13-18 use more than six types of media simultaneously when they aren’t in school. There have been tests performed like the ones by Stanford’s researchers, they called it the Marshmallow Test. It tested the self control of 4 year olds by giving them a marshmallow and telling them not to eat it until they were instructed to after the 15 minute time period. Fewer than one-third of the children were able to do it, but the children that did accomplish the task showed more academic and social success than the children that didn’t complete the task in the following years. Mr. Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, Dominquez Hills created a test with very similar results, this test was known as the New Marshmallow Test. He randomly selected 185 students that had A and B grade averages then had them watch a lecture video, during this video he texted each student several times. The results of the experiment show that students that checked their phones generally did 10% worse then the kids who waited till after the video to check their phones. The students that tried to multitask by putting their focus on the lecture video and their phones didn’t do as well as the students that kept their focus on the lecture video the whole time. This proves that multitasking can be very difficult, even though people think they can do it, they really might not be able to. This test was known as the New Marshmallow Test. The New Marshmallow test had very similar results to the old marshmallow test, in the new test if students checked their cellphones they did slightly worse than the kids that didn’t check their cellphones. In the old marshmallow test the children that ate the marshmallow before the teacher allowed them to generally did a little worse in their overall success compared to the children that waited until they were instructed to eat the marshmallow. This lead to the conclusion that it is better to just focus on what’s important before you try to put your attention to something else.

I have tried multitasking before and it is very difficult. I usually try to do it when my friends are over, and that is almost everyday. I hangout with my friends and try to study and do homework at the same time, this is very hard for me to do because when I get focused on my school work my friends will yell over to me telling me to look at something or for us to go do something. It happens almost every time I start paying full attention to my work, this leads to me never fully paying attention to my work but paying continuous partial attention on my friends, my homework, and my studying. This lead to my realization that multitasking doesn’t really work. Not only is it hard to just study and work on two different subjects at once, but it is almost impossible to study and work on two subjects and talk to your friends all at the same time. It lead me to pay more attention to my friends because talking and hanging out with my friends doesn’t take any brain power like studying and doing homework does. I started seeing a decline in my grades and realized that I shouldn’t try to multitask so much, because it doesn’t work out the way I would like it to. In order to get something done as good as I want it done I need to stop trying to multitask and just try focusing on one subject at a time when I study and do my homework and not invite my friends over till I’m done doing what I have to get done. Some people say they can multitask well, but it doesn’t do me any good, especially not when it’s during something like school work.

There is a big difference between the terms urgent and important. An urgent task is one that needs to be done right away. “These are the to-do’s that shout ‘NOW!’”(McCay). Important tasks contribute to our long-term goals in life. Important tasks can be urgent, but most of the time they aren’t. “When we focus on important activities we operate in a *responsive* mode, which helps us remain calm, rational, and open to new opportunities”(McCay). People often think urgent tasks are important, but this isn’t the case. Just because something has to be done immediately doesn’t necessarily make it important. There is now a decision matrix which was created by Stephen Covey and it was based off of the ideas of President Eisenhower. This matrix is separated into four individual quadrants and each quadrant is a different interpretation of what is urgent and not urgent and what is important and not important. Quadrant one which is known as “the quadrant of stress” consists of important and urgent tasks like crises, deadlines, and personal problems. A major result of living in quadrant one is stress. People that live in quadrant one typically wait till the last minute to start important tasks like a mid-term paper. They wait till the last possible day to do it, when they could of practically eliminated all their stress by just doing it a week or two before the paper’s deadline. “While we’ll never be able to completely eliminate urgent and important tasks, we can significantly reduce them with a bit of proactivity and by spending more time in Quadrant 2”(McCay). Quadrant two which is known as “the quadrant of quality” consists of not urgent but important tasks like strengthening relationships, planning for the future, and improving yourself. “According to Covey, we should seek to spend most of our time on Q2 activities, as they’re the ones that provide us lasting happiness, fulfillment, and success”(McCay). It is hard for us to always be in quadrant two because some of us don’t truly know what is important to us. Also something called present bias can hold us out of quadrant two, people are incline to focus on a task that has to be done at that very moment, and it is naturally harder for us to get something done ahead of time when there is a deadline because then we keep pushing things off till the last minute. Quadrant three which is also known as “the quadrant of distractions” consists of urgent and not important tasks, such as phone calls, emails, and text messages. “Quadrant 3 tasks are activities that require our attention now (urgent), but don’t help us achieve our goals or fulfill our mission (not important)”(McCay). Most people spend their time in quadrant three but really think they are spending it in quadrant one, the reason for this is because even though they aren’t important tasks they often seem important because they get the feeling of helping others which in their minds is important. People who spend most of their time in quadrant three often have trouble achieving their own goals because they are constantly trying to help others before themselves. Quadrant four which is also known as “the quadrant of waste” consists of tasks that are not urgent and not important, such as watching tv, playing video games, and gambling. People who spend most of their time in quadrant four generally have trouble accomplishing their goals because they focus on things that have no significance in achieving those goals that they have set. “As a pragmatist, I don’t think you need to eliminate Q4 activities altogether from your life. After a particularly hectic and busy day, randomly browsing the internet or watching a favorite TV show for a half hour is exactly what my brain needs to decompress”(McCay). It is good to have things that take your mind off of all your important and hectic tasks but just make sure to focus on the things that are important and will help you achieve your goals. Life is full of important, not important, urgent, and not urgent tasks, it’s very important to try to keep your main focus on the no urgent but important tasks.

It’s sad to say that I spend most of my time in quadrants one and three. I am constantly stressed out because I always put things off until the last minute possible and then when it comes time to do it I’m extremely stressed because I don’t have much time left to do what I need to do. I have a History research paper due in three weeks and I’ve had almost two months to do it, this causes me to be stressed because I keep putting it off later and later by hanging out with friends and playing video games. I tend to put the important things off till the last minute because they take actual thought and work, unlike hanging out with friends or playing video games. If I can just start to take my attention away from the unimportant things and focus on the important things I wouldn’t have so much stress on me all the time. I wouldn’t have any assignments creeping up on me because they would already be complete. Focusing on the important things has always been a challenge for me because no matter what I always find some way to procrastinate. I would like to see myself get out of this state of mind and find myself in quadrant two instead of quadrants one and three because I hate being stressed out and procrastination will only lead me to being stressed.

If people could find a way to get themselves into quadrant two then there would be no stress or complications. There would be no reason to try to multitask because they would already be focused on the important things and not the unimportant or urgent things. This is hard though because if there is something due at a certain time people like to take their focus off of what’s important and tend to put their focus onto things that aren’t important at all, like hanging out with friends, texting their friends, talking on the phone, and playing video games. This leads people to “try” to multitask because they try to focus on the important things and the not important things at the same time, which also leads to them not doing the best they could. If people could find a way to focus on just one thing at a time then there would be optimum results. People would get better grades, they would have less stress, and they would just be happier because they would have a better quality life. Also, because they focus on what’s important rather than what’s not important.

**Works Cited**

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