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Tickle Your Brain

Driving? Maybe You Shouldn't Be Reading This

By ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG
Published: July 13, 2004

Am I the only person who still prefers doing things one at a time?

My fellow New Yorkers have raised multitasking to an art form. People talk on their cellphones while jogging, do their homework on the subway, listen to books on tape while walking, put on makeup in the back seat of the taxicab and - always, everywhere, constantly - talk on their cellphones while they're busy doing something else.

This isn't how things were meant to be. Our brains are not built to work this way, no matter how many times teenagers insist that they're paying full attention to their homework, despite the fact that they're also watching television, listening to music and sending electronic instant messages to friends who are doing their own homework amid comparable chaos.

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The brain works best "on a single task and for sustained rather than intermittent or alternating periods of time," the neurologist Richard Restak writes in "The New Brain: How the Modern Age Is Rewiring Your Mind."

"This doesn't mean that we can't perform a certain amount of multitasking," Dr. Restak writes. "But we do so at decreased efficiency and accuracy."

And danger. Studies have shown that if you do anything distracting while driving - drinking coffee, fixing your hair, changing CD's and, of course, talking on a cellphone - you're significantly more likely to end up in a crash.



Joe Teodorescu

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In the last few years, 30 states have considered legislation to outlaw the use of hand-held cellphones while driving. Most have failed. But three states now have such laws. The most far-reaching, New Jersey's, which went into effect this month, prohibits drivers from doing anything else - not just talking while holding a cellphone but restraining a pet, reading a map or eating a Krispy Kreme doughnut on the way to work. The ultimate antimultitasking law.

What could make more sense than to make people who are operating two- or three-ton projectiles at speeds exceeding a mile a minute actually focus on their journey? Yet most states managed to kill such legislation, defending multitasking as an almost inalienable right.

We are all so steeped in the ethos of doing more than one thing at a time that we are hardly aware of it. I serve brunch to my daughter's friend and only later realize that she has, while eating bagels and seeming to enjoy our conversation, been text messaging on her cellphone to two or three other friends, managing it all so skillfully - under the table, during a bathroom break - that none of us has even noticed.

I talk to my brother on the telephone and hear him clicking at his computer in the background, or to my mother and hear her loading the dishwasher. Is it any wonder that occasionally one of them will interrupt the conversation with "What did you just say?"

I do it, too. Just not as flashily as the text messagers or the people at the gym with books propped on the treadmill handlebars. When I'm out for my morning walk, disdaining the people who are walking their dogs while reading the newspaper, talking on the cellphone and drinking a latte, what am I doing? Listening to an audio book on my iPod. Wouldn't want to waste time by just exercising, would I?

Still, in the long run, multitasking is what wastes time. Last year, psychologists at the University of Michigan reported that when they asked subjects to perform two or more experimental tasks - solving arithmetic problems, say, at the same time they identified a series of shapes - the frontal cortex, the executive function center of the brain, had to switch constantly, toggling back and forth in a stutter that added as much as 50 percent to the time it would have taken to perform the tasks sequentially instead of simultaneously.

In another study, scientists at Carnegie Mellon put subjects in an M.R.I. machine and asked them to listen to complicated sentences at the same time that they mentally rotated geometric shapes. The two tasks activated different parts of the brain, but each region was operating at a suboptimal level. Here, then, was high-tech confirmation of the common-sense wisdom of Publilius Syrus, a Roman philosopher from the first century B.C., who warned, "To do things at once is to do neither." (Publilius also came up with "Better late than never" and "A rolling stone gathers no moss.")

But things have changed in the last 2,000 years.

"We are awash in things," James Gleick writes in "Faster," "in information, in news, in the old rubble and shiny new toys of our complex civilization, and - strange, perhaps - stuff means speed. The wave patterns of all these facts and choices flow and crash about us at a heightened frequency. We live in the buzz."

And probably, the buzz is something we will adjust to, because we are at our core a species that, whether we do it one step at a time or all at once, usually manages to adjust.

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