

The Price Of Multitasking

by Dr. Elizabeth Carr





A few weeks ago my husband and I spent an evening at Blues Alley in Georgetown. A candle-lit dinner, some adult conversation, and a little live jazz—what a wonderful way to reconnect with a loved one. At an adjacent table sat two young women. They spent the majority of the evening looking into their laps, sending text messages. It seemed like such a waste. Did they taste their food? Did they hear the music? Did they connect with their companion across the table? I wondered what sort of abbreviated cyber chat could be so compelling as to trump simply being in the present moment, for both of them.

For many of us, doing just one thing at a time has become passé, unsophisticated, perhaps even a little self-indulgent. We pride ourselves on how much we can do at one time. Maybe it is because there is so much to do and so little time that we try to multitask to get it all in. Yet multitasking is one of those curious behaviors: We generally see it as a virtue in ourselves and a liability in others. When *we* do it, we're being clever and efficient. When *others* do it they're being neglectful, distracted, and disengaged.

Why do we do it? Perhaps it is because there are never enough hours in the day, but is that the whole story? What *psychic* function might multitasking serve? Like any form of distraction, it can be a sedative for the soul. Staying busy can be a way to avoid feelings of loneliness or inadequacy. If we're

running as fast as we can, we don't have to move slowly through the moments we would rather race through.

The cost of chronically splitting our attention could be to our emotional development. That's because if we rely too heavily on a strategy of distraction, we may begin to believe that we *can't* tolerate these everyday emotions. Transient moments of loneliness, sadness, and restlessness are part of the human experience. It's in successfully tolerating these feelings that we realize our inner strength. And it is by reflecting on these harder times that we are able to recognize and appreciate the really good times.

The primary downside of multitasking is that we risk doing several things badly. One of those *things* is attending to our relationships. Have you ever found yourself trying to convince someone that you really can watch TV, read the paper, or straighten papers while listening to them? If so, the next time you catch yourself defending your dual-tasking ability, consider shifting gears and hearing the criticism as a request for your full attention. You may just find that participating fully in the moment is the best place to be.

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