

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Clark R. Mills

Managing Multitasking Mania

Ringling cell phones, dinging e-mails, blinking BlackBerries, beeping pagers, pulsating Palm Pilots: sending information and requests, often simultaneously, is characteristic of our world today. Thanks to technology, most people are masters of multitasking: at doing five things at once instead of one.

But does multitasking really enhance efficiency? What is the effect on body and mind of constant interruption? Dr. Mills wants patients to know about recent research that shows the gadgets we treasure may actually decrease productivity, bolster stress and slash self-worth.

Digital devices help us communicate and stay connected. However, constant transfer of mental attention has measurable destructive effects on body, mind — and even the quality of our work.

One solution to a technology-driven existence is carving out time for balance and focus — key components of the chiropractic lifestyle. For Dr. Mills, balanced living is a minute-to-minute choice to reduce stress — to focus quietly on the task at hand and limit interruptions. The chiropractic lifestyle involves time for relaxation,

stress reduction, adequate sleep, exercise, healthy eating, supportive relationships and chiropractic care, even in the midst of a digital whirlwind.

Following are details on the effects of multitasking, plus some advice on taming the tasks.

Digital Addiction

Technology, which was designed to help us master our time, often rules us.

Dr. Mills is concerned that, for some individuals, scrambling to answer a cell phone or jumping to read new e-mail may be more than a simple lack of will power; physical addiction may play a role.

Addictions — from drugs to behaviors — stem from the activation of a brain chemical called dopamine. A “pleasure pathway” in the brain, known as the “dopamine reward circuit,” reinforces addictive behaviors. The dopamine pathway is connected to areas of the brain controlling memory, emotion and motivation. It undergoes actual chemical and anatomic changes that create and prolong addiction, affecting a person’s actions.

Each time we jump to answer a gadget, we may be wiring our brains to reinforce the behavior, fueling addiction. A small amount of dopamine



is released, creating a “buzz” and rewarding and stimulating us for our action.

Technostress

It’s logical that multiple incoming messages will splinter the brain’s focus in individuals who are juggling an excessive number of tasks. This constant barrage of information is dubbed *technostress*. Characteristics of technostress are a subtle thread of irritability, distractibility, impulsiveness, frustration and anxiety — to the point where a minor interruption triggers hefty consequences.

For instance, researchers at the University of Sydney, Australia reviewed cases of 456 adult drivers who used mobile phones and were involved in a road crash. They found that cell-phone use — even up to 10 minutes *before* the accident — produced a fourfold increased likelihood of crashing. Risks were raised irrespective of age, gender and whether or not a hands-free earphone or speaker was used (*BMJ* 2005;331:428).



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The Productivity Plummet

Not all stress is bad. A controlled amount of stress boosts motivation and concentration; however, excessive competing tasks slash an individual's ability to prioritize.

Feeling guilty and inadequate for falling behind the onslaught of digital information is sadly commonplace. Ironically, workers blame themselves for not keeping up, when they should be questioning how much information is actually digestible.

Jumping from a phone call, to an e-mail, to the computer produces the appearance of productivity, but research shows that a constant bombardment of stress sharply decreases productivity, success and accuracy.

One study, performed at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., focused on 326 financial traders, a fast-paced occupation that necessitates multiple forms of technology to make rapid decisions.

Thirty-two percent of the traders reported very high or extremely high stress levels. One of the biggest stressors, besides profit pressure and workload, was the rapid decision processing required by instant access to information. Traders with strategies to reduce job-related and technology-induced stress had higher levels of performance and success than those consumed by stress (*Stress and Health* 2005;21:285-93).

Social Impact

Multitasking in social situations has direct negative influences on relationships. It also affects a person's ability to focus on and enjoy the task at hand. For example, using the cell phone at your child's soccer game — or text messaging when you're sharing dinner with friends — sends a message that what you are currently doing is less significant than something else, in turn eroding relationships. Instead, live in the moment and enjoy your present company.

Taming Technology

Here's a list of strategies for using technology to help, not hinder. You may be surprised how a few simple tweaks will recharge you.

- 1. **Turn off e-mail "ding" alert, and switch your pager and cell phone to vibrate.** Noise has a profound influence on the nervous system. You can't focus if you're constantly jarred by sounding alerts.
- 2. **Do not check e-mail or voicemails first thing in the morning.** Instead, spend a few minutes engaging in a stress-reducing form of centering, such as meditation or prayer. Next, prioritize your projects for the day, and write them down.
- 3. **Schedule time to check e-mails, voicemails and text messages.** Avoid constantly addressing them as they arrive.
- 4. **Avoid the "cc" and "reply all" buttons whenever possible.** Sorting through and replying to e-mail frequently robs workers of productive time. If you receive 50 e-mails or more each day, you most likely spend up to four hours just sorting and responding, according to one study (*Business Day* 2003;22).
- 5. **Ruthlessly prioritize.** Focus on what's really important, and don't let other people's emergencies distract you from completing your goals and enjoying the moment.
- 6. **Be realistic about your capacity to juggle.** Resist "it'll only take a second" thinking.
- 7. **Give yourself permission to block out time to zero in on one task.** Only allow emergencies to interrupt you. Thirty minutes of quality, uninterrupted time is far better than one hour of multitasking.
- 8. **Take a break to reward yourself when you've completed an allotted time of focusing.** Do this even if the task isn't complete.
- 9. **Seek out enjoyable, face-to-face social connections daily.** Communicating through e-mail or by phone is not a substitute for genuine, personal interaction.
- 10. **Make social events digital-free.** Leave digital communication gadgets at home or in your car when attending social engagements. If you must bring them, keep them in your bag or pocket, rather than on the table, and check them infrequently.
- 11. **Take digital breaks.** Deem certain activities — such as dinner with your family and working out — "off limits" to digital communication.

