

Is Multitasking Bad for Your Brain?

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Multitasking may give you the illusion that you're getting more done. But it's actually a poor tool for efficiency.

Despite that — and after decades of ever-increasing expectations for productivity — many take pride in the attempt to juggle multiple projects

In one survey of U.S. adults, 79% said they were either “somewhat good” or “very good” at multitasking.

That contradiction — “I know this feels bad, but I think I’m good at it” — captures the strange psychology of multitasking. You may think of it as empowering, but neuroscientists say it’s really a constant cycle of mental interruption.

And your brain may be worse off for it.

What Does Multitasking Actually Mean?

Theoretically, multitasking means you're doing several things at once — accomplishing more in less time. In reality, it doesn't work that way.

The term itself has roots in computer science, but over time, many people have come to expect it of themselves. Unlike computers, which are built for multitasking, your brain doesn't have the necessary architecture — the cognitive and neural building blocks — to perform two tasks at once. Plus, even computers don't really multitask; they allocate resources to one thing at a time by the nanosecond.

While you think you're multitasking, your brain has to stop the task you're currently doing before it can switch to another. That's why neuroscientists call it task switching, not multitasking.

How Does Your Brain Multitask?

Two areas of your brain are heavily taxed when you're multitasking: the parietal lobe, which is the control center for attention allocation, and the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like decision-making, impulse control, and working memory.

"Multitasking is asking the brain to fire in multiple directions at once. It's scattershot," says Stacy Vernon, a licensed professional counselor at the Center for Brain Health, part of the University of Texas at Dallas. "If you look at images of the electrical currents as they're going through the neurons when you're multitasking, you see an overall diminished view. There's less electrical activity because it's more diffuse."

In fractions of a second, your brain goes through stages when you bounce from one task to another. The first, goal shifting, is deciding to stop one activity in favor of another. For example, if you pause making dinner to answer the phone, it disrupts your working memory. Once you put down the knife, your brain shuts off the cognitive rules of recipe-following to activate new rules for talking to your mother. But the previous task's rules don't just disappear — they linger, competing with the new ones.

Ways You May Be Multitasking

You may get so used to juggling screens, family, work, and the demands of daily life, you might not realize how much you're multitasking. It comes in many forms.

Task switching

When you're trying to do two tasks that both require concentration, your brain can't actually do them at the same time. Instead, you're task switching. As a result, you perform the new task more slowly and less accurately than you would if you'd stuck to one task.

The stop-and-start action can claim up to 40% of your productive time — an effect known as “switch cost.”

Emotional multitasking

This involves managing multiple emotions at once. Say you're [grieving](#) the loss of a loved one, but on the job you must remain cheerful. It's not an academically studied phenomenon, but psychologists describe it as exhausting and distancing from your true emotions.

Digital multitasking

Digital multitasking or media multitasking is so widespread, a survey found that 90% of Americans use two devices at once on a weekly basis — and 42% do it for more than an hour every day. Heavy media multitaskers are more at risk of problems with memory and executive function.

“Texting while watching Netflix? Are you also checking email? Do you find it hard to do one thing at a time, especially when it's media?” says Therese Huston, PhD, a cognitive scientist and author. “If that feels boring and that you're understimulated, chances are, you're a heavy media multitasker.”

Passive multitasking

The lopsided approach is the closest your brain gets to true multitasking. It pairs tasks that need concentration with physical activities that are so automatic, you don't have to think about them. So, you can fold laundry while talking on the phone, or listen to a podcast on the bus — your brain only has to focus on one of the two activities.

Low-effort vs. mentally draining multitasking

Here, the distinction is less about the type of multitasking and more about the effects of passive vs. active multitasking.

“Let's say I'm watching a show I'm very familiar with while I'm doing some repeated task with my hands,” Vernon says. “It's less cognitively demanding on either side, which tends to be

less deleterious, as opposed to if I'm doing something that requires quite a bit of my concentration and I'm answering emails while I'm doing it."

What Does Research Say About Multitasking?

In a 2025 study, neuroscientists used functional [MRI](#) to see what happens in the brain when people switch between different cognitive tasks. They found that your brain holds a fuzzier, less precise version of the new task, compared to when you're focused on just one. In trials, both adults and children showed lower accuracy and longer response times after switching. That means task switching doesn't just require your brain to reconfigure; it ups the odds you'll make mistakes.

What problems can multitasking cause?

For one, it takes mental energy to switch from one topic to another.

"If we do that one time, it's not so bad," Vernon says. "But if we repeatedly do that, we can train the brain to get used to interrupting focused thought. It can begin to feel not comfortable to focus for 15-20 minutes."

Research has repeatedly shown that trying to force your brain to do two things at once can lead to trouble, including issues with decision-making, planning, and prioritizing. You're more likely to make mistakes, and you may get cranky.

"Multitasking is definitely harming me," says Holly Leber Simmons, a writer from Silver Spring, Maryland. "But how else are you going to get everything done?"

Are there any benefits of multitasking?

Most studies have found that you're more likely to be harmed than helped by multitasking. But some people do seem to thrive with it.

"I feel like I'm taking care of many things at once," says Deborah Wassertzug, a medical librarian in Potomac, Maryland. "I come to the end of a workday and think, 'Yeah, I handled all these different things.'"

There's research to support Wassertzug's experience. People who prefer multitasking may be motivated by switching from a complex to a routine task, then back again.

Even media multitasking may have an upside. In a 2025 study, heavy media multitaskers were better prepared to switch focus, and better able to stay accurate, than lighter users.

And multitasking can make some people more creative. In one study, people who multitasked during a conference call were more creative in an after-call task than those who didn't. And in another, people who switched back and forth between two creative tasks outperformed those who did the tasks one after the other.

Why Multitasking Is Such an Easy Habit to Pick Up

Some archaeologists say being able to juggle multiple tasks is an essential part of being human —it's what helped people evolve from being primates. With the advent of easy internet access, multitasking has become as common as [blinking](#).

"There's this idea that if you're not multitasking, you're being lazy," Simmons says.

There's an expectation to juggle family, work, home, and exercise without looking like you've dropped the ball, she says.

Two-thirds of Americans consider themselves multitaskers, though there's a clear gender divide: 69% of women claim the mantle, compared to 58% of men. The cultural expectations seem ingrained.

Signs Multitasking May Be Affecting You

While there are no official symptoms of harm caused by multitasking, there are some red flags to watch for.

Crankiness. Feeling easily annoyed is one sign.

"If you find yourself irritated with colleagues for interrupting you, or irritated with someone in your family because you're trying to send that email, but you're also trying to listen to them, chances are, you're multitasking too much," Huston says. "Your prefrontal cortex is overloaded."

Sleep trouble. You can't fall asleep — or stay asleep — because your mind won't stop racing.

"That's a sign of a brain not being given the opportunity to slow down and focus on one thing or to take breaks from thinking at all," Vernon says.

"Switch cost" effects. The constant leaps between tasks take a toll in several ways, including:

- Memory lapses

- Slow response times
- Careless errors
- Missed details
- Trouble absorbing information
- Mental [exhaustion](#)
- Incomplete projects

7 Actionable Ways to Stop Multitasking

Just because it feels unavoidable, that doesn't mean you have to juggle several tasks at once. Here's how experts say to scale back.

1. Give your brain a break.

Take what Vernon calls a “brain break.”

“One thing that can help support attention, which can feel confusing, is taking brief breaks, three to five minutes, five times a day, when you're unplugged from people and devices,” she says. “It allows the brain a chance to recalibrate.”

2. Block out time.

Huston recommends setting a timer for 20 minutes, when you'll only work on one task — no checking email, no planning tonight's dinner — just the one task.

“Not that you won't check email all day, but only for this amount of time. If you're worried something might come in, it's only 20 minutes,” she says. “It's called cognitive offloading: You're reassuring your mind it's going to happen, you just don't have to think about it right now.”

3. Practice single-tasking.

Instead of multitasking, try just one thing at a time.

“We recommend at least two times in your day — where you're sitting down and having concentrated time to achieve a goal — to have a good conversation,” Vernon says. “It should be something that requires you to sit and think and be focused for 20-30 minutes.”

4. Batch your tasks.

With this technique, you group similar tasks together and complete them during a set period of time.

“One thing we know that supports active engagement is deriving meaning or creating a larger context for what you’re doing,” Vernon says. “If you’re batching tasks that have the same theme or idea or goal, that can be incredibly helpful for attention and also for memory.”

This can also work as group erranding, when you cluster all your errands into a single, geographically organized trip.

5. Control your environment.

That might mean using your phone’s focus mode to prevent interruptions, or adjusting your surroundings.

“Where are distractions in your external environment that you can do away with? What would be most supportive for your attention? Is it that you’re in a well-lit room, or outside your home entirely because your home’s chaotic?” Vernon says.

6. Adopt a new motto.

Many people are proud of being a multitasker. But Huston suggests reframing that.

“I encourage people to develop mantras,” she says. “Rather than being proud of being a multitasker, have a little motto you say in your head or out loud to other people. Try something like, ‘I juggle less, I focus more.’”

7. Try binaural beats.

Listening to two tones with different frequencies at the same time can help improve your focus.

“It’s great for someone who’s a heavy multitasker who finds it hard to do deep work,” Huston says.

Who Can Help if Multitasking Seems Hard to Control?

If you’re struggling to put these tips into action, it might be wise to seek professional help, which comes in several forms.

Rethinking the Way You Multitask

Given what we know about multitasking — your brain can’t do two things at once, and forcing it to ping-pong can cause harm — the time is ripe to change your approach to productivity in favor of single-tasking.

“The brain can juggle, but it doesn’t juggle for free. You can try to do multiple things, but it’ll cost you,” says Huston. “And the question is, is the cost worth it?”