

Your brain needs you to focus on one thing at a time

Nahla Davies

Most of us have heard of the fable of the tortoise and the hare. Slow and steady progress can be more beneficial than fast or rushed advancement. In the information age where speed is coveted, splitting your attention and multitasking seems like an important skill to master. However, is our habit of multitasking as efficient as we think it is?

WHAT IS MULTITASKING?

Multitasking, particularly on tasks that require attentiveness, can lead to more errors and mistakes. Additionally, while it seems you're getting more done while multitasking, you may be taking longer to complete tasks because of constant context switching. It can cause brain shrinkage and short-term memory loss.

However, the dangers and disadvantages of multitasking don't stop there. The cingulate cortex is primarily responsible for helping us manage and interpret emotions. However, the damage that you can potentially incur from multitasking does not stop there.

As it is, we're all living in exceedingly stressful times. This is particularly true for small business owners who have been forced to adapt to the demands of the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by FreshBooks, 65% of these business owners were concerned about how the COVID-19 pandemic would impact their businesses.

While we may be tempted to meet additional business requirements through multitasking, the additional stress is unhealthy. An increase in stress hormones such as cortisol can lead to high blood pressure, generalized anxiety, depression, and other health issues.

Therefore, we can see that the costs for multitasking outweigh the benefits by a large margin. Now the argument for single-tasking becomes clear: It's not only an option—it may be essential for your health and longevity.

THE BENEFITS OF SINGLE TASKING

Single-tasking or monotasking describes focusing on a singular task at a time without distraction. According to recent research, only 2% to 2.5% of the population can effectively multitask. From this, we can conclude that the average human brain is suited more to monotasking. However, single tasking because your brain is made that way is not the only reason to do it. It can be beneficial to your health and productivity.

Nevertheless, some of single tasking's key benefits include:

- May increase retention of information
- Decreases errors and mistakes
- Increases productivity
- Lowers stress
- Encourages a flow state
- May increase overall wellbeing
- Reduces frequency of directed attention fatigue
- Increases mindfulness

Additionally, single tasking can be highly beneficial to those who suffer from impaired executive functioning due to conditions such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In fact, most coaches, therapists, and teachers employ some of the tools and principles you'll find further down this guide.

However, even neurotypical or people without certain disabilities can benefit from single tasking. Although it's important to note that optimal monotasking takes practice to master, especially if you've spent years multitasking. You'll need to integrate its principles into your daily work and home life. Breaking old habits and replacing them with new ones can be an arduous task. As such, we advise that you implement a few tools and techniques to help you along the way.

THE BEST TOOLS, TRICKS, AND TIPS FOR SINGLE-TASKING

You can obviously learn how to single-task on your own. After all, it's just a matter of engrossing yourself into a single activity at a time, right? No, most people will find it hard to cut off distractions and concentrate on a single task. In this section of the guide, we'll explore the top three best tips and tools to increase your productivity through single tasking.

1. *Tailor your browser*

Thanks to the advent and popularization of cloud computing and software as a service (SaaS), most software is accessible through the internet. This makes your browser a portal to all sorts of tools and web applications. While this can be incredibly convenient, it can also be a curse. Thanks to multi-tabbing, browsers encourage multitasking. What's more, modern browsers feature notification messages that inform you when your favorite websites have new content.

People also tend to habituate themselves to using their web browsers for leisure. To be more efficient, we should compartmentalize work and play. This could mean blocking certain websites during working hours (or completely) or using web-based applications more conducive to single-tasking. Nevertheless, here are a few things you can do to optimize your web browser for single-tasking:

2. *Install a website-blocking extension*

While Facebook and Instagram can be used for professional and promotional purposes, getting lost in the social media rabbit hole is easy. The easiest and most effective way to block attention-sapping and productivity-killing websites is with an extension for your browser.

The BlockSite extension is seemingly the most popular option. It's available to install from the Google Chrome Web Store and Firefox add-on website. You can create custom blocklists, schedule site blockings, access productivity reports, and initiate time interval blocking.

3. *Use and keep open only a single tab*

Single tabbing means only using one tab at a time. While it's a simple enough technique to apply, some people may find it harder to let go of all their tabs. You can ease yourself into single tabbing by slowly reducing the number of tabs you have opened concurrently each time you use your web browser. You can make it even easier for yourself by using extensions such as Limit Tabs for Firefox and xTab for Chrome. They allow you to limit the number of tabs that your browser can have opened at a time.

4. *Disable web push notifications*

Many websites have what is known as web push notifications, which typically inform you of new content or offers. They are a relatively recent invention. Nevertheless, they can be pretty distracting and annoying, especially if you have them enabled for almost every website you've visited. To encourage single-tasking, you need to eliminate as much distraction as possible. This means blocking all web push notifications from your web browser.

5. *Remove unnecessary extensions*

Web browser extensions can be useful—even for single-tasking. However, they can also clutter your taskbar and become distracting. Additionally, the more extensions you have, the more system resources your web browsers use. Although you can hide extensions from your taskbar, we suggest that you terminate or uninstall any unnecessary ones.

6. *Replace your web browser*

If you feel that customizing your browser for single tasking is too time-consuming and challenging, you can replace it with a minimalist browser. Not only are they built to eliminate distractions, but they're also fast and forgiving on system resources.

Nonetheless, you don't have to uninstall your primary browser. You can have separate web browsers for work and leisure. It's essential to find a healthy balance with your workplace tech and software.

7. *Use the Pomodoro Technique*

Francesco Cirillo established and named this strategy after his tomato-shaped (pomodoro-shaped) kitchen timer. And though it pops up often as a popular trend, the time management hack has been around since the late-1980s. The technique requires you to concentrate on a single task without distraction for 25 minutes before taking a break. However, there are variations. For instance, you can set a timer for 20 minutes or 30 minutes.

These "deep work" intervals are known as pomodoros. Once you complete a pomodoro, you can reward yourself with a five-minute break. However, the Pomodoro technique doesn't stop there. It can also be used as a complete time management technique. This involves tracking the number of pomodoros required to complete a task, rationing your time out accordingly, and planning ahead.

With skyrocketing unemployment rates, it's never been more critical than it is now to invest in a side job or side hustle. According to recent research, job losses increased from 4% to 5% from November 2020 to January 2021. We must learn new techniques to manage time and ensure that our focus goes towards securing our financial futures. This is where the Pomodoro technique comes in handy. There are a wide variety of books and blogs written about mastering it.

However, using a web or phone application may be more manageable. For instance, Focus To-Do for Android and iOS features an adjustable Pomodoro timer and a to-do list, and tasks can be synced among devices.

8. *Use noise-canceling technology*

Using noise-canceling headphones, earplugs, or sound-canceling earmuffs can dampen and cancel outside noise. If you work from home in an area with considerable noise pollution, getting things done may be a little tricky. While some people may find the enveloping sound of office noise calming, it may be better to work in complete silence.

If you want to single-task effectively, you need to minimize external distractions, including noise. While we recommend that you work in a clean and quiet room with adequate lighting, adding noise-canceling headgear can improve how well you single-task. Playing music through your headphones or speakers may also improve your focus and productivity.