

How NOT to Multitask – Work Simpler and Saner

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You're working on two projects at once, while your boss has placed two new demands on your desk. You're on the phone while three new emails come in. You are trying to get out the door on time so you can pick up a few groceries on the way home for dinner. Your Blackberry is going off and so is your cell phone. Your co-worker stops by with a request for info and your Google Reader is filled with 100+ messages to read.

You are juggling tasks with a speed worthy of Ringling Bros. Congratulations, multitasker.

In this age of instant technology, we are bombarded with an overload of information and demands of our time. This is part of the reason GTD is so popular in the information world — it's a system designed for quick decisions and for keeping all the demands of your life in order. But even if we are using GTD, sometimes we are so overwhelmed with things to do that our system begins to fall apart.

Life Hack recently posted How to Multi-task, and it's a good article on the nature of multi-tasking and how to do it while still focusing on one task at a time.

This post is **How NOT to Multi-task — a guide to working as simply as possible for your mental health**.

First, a few quick reasons not to multi-task:

1. **Multi-tasking is less efficient**, due to the need to switch gears for each new task, and the switch back again.
2. **Multi-tasking is more complicated**, and thus more prone to stress and errors.
3. **Multi-tasking can be crazy**, and in this already chaotic world, we need to reign in the terror and find a little oasis of sanity and calm.

Here are some tips on how NOT to multi-task:

1. **First set up to-do lists** for different contexts (i.e. calls, computer, errands, home, waiting-for, etc.) depending on your situation.
2. **Have a capture tool** (such as a notebook) for instant notes on what needs to be done.
3. **Have a physical and email inbox** (as few inboxes as possible) so that all incoming stuff is gathered together in one place (one for paper stuff, one for digital).
4. **Plan your day in blocks**, with open blocks in between for urgent stuff that comes up. You might try one-hour blocks, or half-hour blocks, depending on what works for you. Or try this: 40 minute blocks, with 20 minutes in between them for miscellaneous tasks.
5. **First thing in the morning**, work on your Most Important Task. Don't do anything else until this is done. Give yourself a short break, and then start on your next Most Important Task. If you can get 2-3 of these done in the morning, the rest of the day is gravy.
6. When you are working on a task in a time block, **turn off all other distractions**. Shut off email, and the Internet if possible. Shut off your cell phone. Try not to answer your phone if possible. Focus on that one task, and try to get it done without worrying about other stuff.
7. **If you feel the urge** to check your email or switch to another task, stop yourself. Breathe deeply. Re-focus yourself. Get back to the task at hand.
8. **If other things come in while you're working**, put them in the inbox, or take a note of them in your capture system. Get back to the task at hand.
9. Every now and then, when you've completed the task at hand, **process your notes and inbox**, adding the tasks to your to-do lists and re-figuring your schedule if necessary. Process your email and other inboxes at regular and pre-determined intervals.
10. There are times when an interruption is so urgent that you cannot put it off until you're done with the task at hand. In that case, **try to make a note of where you are** (writing down notes if you have time) with the task at hand, and put all the documents or notes for that task together

and aside (perhaps in an “action” folder or project folder). Then, when you come back to that task, you can pull out your folder and look at your notes to see where you left off.

11. Take deep breaths, stretch, and take breaks now and then. Enjoy life. Go outside, and appreciate nature. Keep yourself sane.

See also:

- [Are Your Days Crazy? Take Control](#)
- [Edit Your Life Part 1: Commitments](#)
- [Edit Your Life Part 2: Your Rooms](#)
- [Develop Clean House Habits One at a Time](#)
- [Slow Down to Enjoy Life](#)
- [Zen Mind: How to Declutter](#)

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