The Importance of Focused Attention in an Age of Distractions

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In our rapidly evolving, digitally saturated society, the skill of focused attention has become an indispensable asset, a notion persuasively articulated by Oliver Burkeman in his compelling 2023 essay, "Today's Superpower is Doing One Thing at a Time" (Burkeman, 2023). Burkeman makes a compelling case against the prevailing culture of multitasking, exacerbated by the age of constant connectivity and technological interruptions. He strongly posits that the most invaluable skill for navigating the challenges, uncertainties, and potential crises that characterize our contemporary existence lies in our capacity to focus deeply and thoroughly on one task at a time. While I find myself in agreement with Burkeman's essential premise, I feel that his position could be fortified by a comprehensive scrutiny of the challenges that plague our efforts to focus on a world awash with constant distractions and interruptions.

My journey through the initial year of a computer programming course at Seneca College provided a testament to the power of focused attention. Before this, multitasking was my standard approach, a method that seemed efficient but was deceivingly counterproductive. The constant toggling between tasks led to not just a decline in the quality of my work but also an escalation in stress levels. However, once I began to practice what Burkeman preaches — concentrating on one task at a time — there was a palpable improvement in my coding skills and overall academic performance. This shift underscores the importance of dedicated focus, a stance further supported by empirical evidence. A seminal study by Levy et al. (2012) explicitly states that "multitasking negatively impacts the quality of work." Such findings resonate with my experiences, cementing the assertion that a singular focus can be transformative.

Despite Burkeman's poignant insights, his essay could benefit from a more thorough examination of the obstacles we face in our pursuit of concentration. In the digital age, distractions are omnipresent, with devices continually competing for our attention. This constant barrage of notifications, coupled with societal expectations to always be "on," can make single tasking seem like an insurmountable challenge. Burkeman’s omission of the deeply ingrained culture that celebrates multitasking as a prized skill is conspicuous. Highlighting a study by Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010), it’s revealed that individuals "spend 47% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing." Moreover, Burkeman mentions the “curse of busyness” that hampers our ability to focus, which is a pertinent point that augments the narrative on the hurdles of maintaining focus in today’s world (Burkeman, 2023).

Adding weight to the importance of focused attention, Cherry (n.d.) asserts in her detailed article "The Cognitive Costs of Multitasking" that "dividing attention across multiple tasks undermines our performance efficiency" (Cherry, n.d.). Cherry's viewpoint aligns well with Burkeman's, yet it subtly underscores the need for a more nuanced dialogue on the subject. Integrating such scientifically backed insights could add greater depth and credibility to Burkeman's essay. It would offer readers not just validation of what they might already suspect but also a concrete guide to better manage their attention (Cherry, n.d.).

Wrapping up, while Oliver Burkeman's exploration of focused attention serves as a beacon in our turbulent, distraction-filled existence, it could gain from a more in-depth exploration of the barriers to focus. Acknowledging these challenges and offering pragmatic solutions would make his insights more actionable. As we traverse the labyrinth of modern life, be it in academia or the professional realm, the ability to channel our attention on a singular task is not merely beneficial; it is imperative. Hence, championing this cause and understanding its intricacies is of the essence as we gear up for the challenges of the future.

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