Making the link: Digital multitasking and stress



It's only 11:30 a.m. You're trying to complete the quarterly sales projection, write a new business plan, and create an agenda for tomorrow's executive meeting. You're working with multiple screens, scanning documents, checking your emails for updates, monitoring Twitter feeds, doing last minute research online while participating in a teleconference with your sales office in Germany. And don't forget about a client or a co-worker calling your office line and your son texting asking what time you'll be home. You're feeling unfocussed, exhausted, and stressed! Wasn't technology supposed to make life easier?

Technology has certainly transformed the way we access information and communicate, but it also made multitasking the norm. In theory, being able to do six things at once should make us six times as efficient but in reality it can reduce our productivity by up to 40 percent. It's also stressing us out.

Multitasking and the brain

There are some people who excel at multitasking, in fact, their jobs depend on it: air traffic controllers, first responders, and chefs to name a few. But for the rest of us, it's difficult to focus on several things at once – our brains aren't built that way. Just as bouncing between multiple windows and programs can cause a computer to slow down, freeze or crash, repeatedly and rapidly switching our attention from one thing to another can cause our brain to do the same.

Multitasking means multi-stress

When we multitask, the continual onslaught of new information and demands can overwhelm our brain, sending it into a "flight or fight" response. Hormones and chemicals are released into the bloodstream to help prepare for a real or perceived threat. The heart pumps harder to increase blood flow to the brain and muscles, sugar levels rise, palms sweat and pupils dilate. We feel anxious and stressed.

While some stress can spark creativity and help us reach last minute deadlines, prolonged stress can lead to many health problems, including gastrointestinal complaints, chronic pain, depression, and sleep issues. Long-term stress has also been shown to play a role in the development of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

Multitasking and millennials

While we're all feeling the effects of digital multitasking, it's Millennials who are perhaps paying the greatest price.

The Millennials (those born between 1980 to 2000) are the first truly digital generation. They grew up multitasking and as adults they effortlessly switch between media platforms 27 times an hour. But has a lifetime of digital multitasking hurt them?

There is research to suggest that prolonged multitasking can actually damage developing brains, especially areas controlling cognitive and emotional functions. This may explain why Millennials, as a group, are easily bored and expect their hard work to be quickly recognized and rewarded.

Millennials are also burning out – often before the age of 30. While they may be used to doing several things at once digitally, they are finding they can't do several things at once in life.

Reducing digital stress

So what can we do to safeguard our physical, mental, and emotional well-being? Try the following:

- Check email and voicemail once an hour or twice a day. Set email and voicemail alerts to say you will respond by a certain time.
- Use your online meeting calendar to block off time so you can focus on a priority or challenging task without disruptions.
- Your body and brain need regular breaks to rest and refresh. Taking regular brief breaks actually improves focus – but make sure you're not spending your break checking social media or glued to your smartphone.
- Establish regular technology free times. For example, leave your smartphone behind when out with friends or spend Sunday afternoons offline.

However you do it, managing multitasking is worth the effort. You'll be more productive, do better work, and actually complete task more quickly. You'll also help reduce your stress. For other ways to cope with our fast-paced digital world, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.