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# The Mediocre Multitasker

By RUTH PENNEBAKER

Read it and gloat. Last week, researchers at [Stanford University](#) published a study showing that the most persistent multitaskers perform badly in a variety of tasks. They don't focus as well as non-multitaskers. They're more distractible. They're weaker at shifting from one task to another and at organizing information. They are, as a matter of fact, worse at multitasking than people who don't ordinarily multitask.

You know what this means. This means that the people around you — the husband who's tapping the computer keys during an important phone conversation with you, the S.U.V. driver with the grande latte and the cellphone, the dinner companion with the roving eye and twitching thumbs — are not only irritating, they are (let's not be fainthearted) incompetent.

But, wait. Should it be breaking news that a single person can't juggle knives and explain quantum physics while polishing off an artichoke?

Breaking news and a shock to the researchers themselves, as it turns out. Originally, the team of researchers, whose findings are published in the Aug. 24 issue of the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), were trying to find out what unusual cognitive gifts multitaskers possessed that made them so successful at multitasking.

They're still looking.

"Multitaskers were just lousy at everything," said Clifford I. Nass, a professor of communication at Stanford and one of the study's investigators. "It was a complete and total shock to me."

Initially suspecting that multitaskers possessed some rare and enviable qualities that helped them process simultaneous channels of information,

Professor Nass had been “in awe of them,” he said, acknowledging that he himself is “dreadful” at multitasking. “I was sure they had some secret ability. But it turns out that high multitaskers are suckers for irrelevancy.”

The study tested 100 college students rated high or low multitaskers. Experimenters monitored the students’ focus, memory and distractibility with a series of electronic images of different-colored shapes, letters and numbers.

Eyal Ophir, the study’s lead investigator and a researcher at Stanford’s Communication Between Humans and Interactive Media Lab, said: “We kept looking for multitaskers’ advantages in this study. But we kept finding only disadvantages. We thought multitaskers were very much in control of information. It turns out, they were just getting it all confused.”

The study’s results were so strong and unexpected that the researchers are planning a series of follow-up experiments. “It keeps me up late at night,” Professor Nass said. “I worry about both the short-term and long-term effects of multitasking. We’re going to be testing the heck out of high and low multitaskers.”

To the rest of the world, though, the people who trudge through life excited and unnerved by an occasional cellphone call while walking or watching the sun set (isn’t that multitasking?), the study’s findings aren’t quite so shocking. A constant state of stress, deluges of ever-changing information, the frenzied, nanosecond-fast hustle and bustle — this is bad for you? It’s surprising and it’s news that it’s bad for you? Before they lie down to take a well-deserved and uninterrupted nap, the trudgers of the world would like to say, “We told you so!”

Still, their sad sense of inferiority to the flash and dash of multitaskers lingers and may even interfere with a good sleep.

“The core of the problem,” Professor Nass said, is that the multitaskers “think they’re great at what they do; and they’ve convinced everybody else they’re good at it, too.”

Yes, they have. Take, for example, Robert Leleux, a New York writer and gentle soul who still struggles with a rotary phone.

“My entire life, I’ve been so thoroughly cowed by multitaskers,” said Mr. Leleux, author of “The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy.” “I find it impossible to

believe they're not superior to me. This study is like catnip! It validates my entire life."

As a child, Mr. Leleux recalls, his unitasking took a culinary turn. When eating, he could concentrate only on one food at a time.

"Usually mashed potatoes first, and then maybe a vegetable," he said. "It drove my mother crazy. She kept threatening to send me to etiquette school if I didn't straighten out. I was scared to death till I turned 18 and realized going to etiquette school wouldn't be such a bad thing."

Today, Mr. Leleux finds himself in a mixed marriage with a fast-moving, multitasking husband whose professional life, Mr. Leleux said, resembles "His Girl Friday."

"Michael can answer e-mails, talk on the phone, approve designs concepts and copy and artwork — all at the same time," he said. "As a person who can only eat mashed potatoes at one time, it's incredibly depressing there are people capable of working on 14 different things at a time."

Even with scientific validation at his fingertips, Mr. Leleux frets that the Stanford study may have been done "by a bitter unitasker like me who wants to validate his own existence."

"Look at the tortoise and the hare. Even though the tortoise actually ends up winning the race, who would you rather be? A wrinkly, fat old tortoise or a lithe, quick-witted hare? I think the answer is clear."

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