

## Headstrong, Part III: Second Thoughts About Multitasking

By Marian Salzman  
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I've been posting here about my adventures with a brain tumor in 2007, the ways it has changed me and the importance of brain health for all of us. Talking about brain health is part of what comes with 50 being the new 30: We're all desperate to be young of brain, especially those who understand what happens when the brain dims even slightly. It's been top of mind for me, so to speak, because this is the third anniversary of my craniotomy. But it turns out I'm right in line with the zeitgeist. The new awareness of our brains' limits just keeps growing.

I'm talking about multitasking, supposedly the holy grail of the 21st century, the key to having it all. Doing lots of things at once was hailed as the key to getting ahead in the digital age, and the ability to juggle was one of the attributes that made boomers and Gen Xers fear (and admire) their millennial competitors in the workplace. Focusing on one project or activity at a time? You might as well use a phone that's tied to a wall.

And yet...

A spate of new studies has shown that multitasking isn't all it's been talked up to be. Technology has definitely changed our brains for the better, making us more efficient at finding information and giving some of us (those who play certain video games) better visual-acuity skills. But it has also changed us for the worse, making many of us addicted to the dopamine burst we get when we discover a new e-mail or tweet, and compulsively checking our "CrackBerry" (two, in my case) for the next hit. I literally have finger craves and feel as if a day away brings detox

shakes (I've had a few addictions in my time, but all along the lines of Huckapoo shirts in junior high).

In an article responding to some of these stories, *The New York Times* quoted Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse and, according to the Times, one of the world's leading brain scientists, as saying, "The technology is rewiring our brains." She compared what the paper called the "lure of digital stimulation" with things that are counterproductive in obsessive excess, such as food and sex.

People have been crying that the Internet has been destroying our attention span ever since it began. In a much buzzed-about post, *New Yorker* writer George Packer lamented the loss of his concentration:

Just about everyone I know complains about ... the loss of books ... The other day I had to reshelve two dozen books that my son had wantonly pulled down, most of them volumes from college days. I thumbed idly through a few urgently underlined pages of Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," a book that electrified me during my junior year, and began to experience something like the sensation middle-aged men have at the start of softball season, when they try sprinting to first base after a winter off. What a ridiculous effort it took! There's no way for readers to be online, surfing, e-mailing, posting, tweeting, reading tweets ... without paying a high price in available time, attention span, reading comprehension and experience of the immediately surrounding world.

Old-media dinosaur? Perhaps. But the science backs him up. As the *Times* reported, even people who say multitasking makes them feel productive and empowered are impaired: Research shows “[h]eavy multitaskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, scientists say, and they experience more stress.” A Stanford researcher found that heavy multitaskers performed poorly on a test measuring ability to filter out distractions and another test evaluating their skills at switching between tasks.

In our defense, how on earth are we supposed to keep up with the onslaught of information? I have multiple smartphones, e-mail, IM, a Twitter feed, a Facebook page, several blogs, tons of newspaper and magazine subscriptions, cable, RSS feeds, Google alerts and so on. Not to mention I’m president of a public relations agency, accept paid speaking engagements and maintain a busy travel schedule. And have friends and family I want to see and socialize with in person -- best friends from junior high, college, my first PR and ad agencies, my stint living in Amsterdam; I collect people and like to stay on top of their news and visit them virtually and in real life.

In the face of all this, doing one thing at a time seems downright quaint, a throwback to some idealized version of the past, when life was so much simpler. And ... boring. And long gone anyway. So I’m not going to mourn the demise of monotasking.

But my own experience with brain trauma actually forced me to change my habits and to pay attention when the culture started second-guessing the almighty multitasking. Before things went awry for me, I prided myself on being the queen of juggling. But I emerged from surgery able to do only one thing at a time. Eventually I got better at keeping two or three balls in the air, but I’ve never since been able to talk on the phone, eavesdrop, daydream, watch breaking news on CNN and read the *New York Post* simultaneously. I can’t even remember how I used to get it all done -- Pilates, 12-hour workdays, writing freelance articles, drinks with one friend and dinner with another. And did I mention that I read a trashy paperback a day in my quest to digest real life?

My brain reset taught me to stop and listen and smell and touch and to move more slowly (anyone

who knows me knows I mean the latter figuratively, not literally ... I still race around like a sprinter, and typically in 3- to 4-inch heels). I never before had a single homebody instinct in my body, but this weekend I cooked dinner for four and planned a backyard party for 70. My senses somehow sense that they’ve been rebooted. Maybe it’s because they’re slightly slower. I also have earned a Ph.D. in napping--quick catnaps, which, as we’ve read, are excellent fuel for anyone’s brain. A recent UC Berkeley study found that an hourlong nap can “dramatically boost and restore your brain power” and suggests that nighttime sleep with daytime naps “not only refreshes the mind, but can make you smarter,” according to *ScienceDaily*.

Sometimes people ask me if I’ve missed multitasking the way I did it. I say I’m too busy to notice. No, honestly, I don’t miss anything, but I was frightened that I wasn’t quite me even though I still had all my responsibilities--that monster to-do list that I couldn’t imagine getting done unless I did multiple items at once. But I still think all “smell the roses,” “slow down” and “live for the day” clichés are fine for many people (Buddhist monks, yoga teachers, Sedona residents...) but not for me. Some people like living the stream; I think it’s like being drowned alive.

Given my life and my personality, like most people today I can’t always be “in the moment” or pay single-minded attention to any one thing. Instead, I settle for as much as possible with as little chaos as possible. It’s not a bad middle ground.

*In my final post, I’ll muse on the cool -- and sexy --factor of braininess in our information-packed world.*