$\qquad$
Conquering the Multitasking Brain Drain
By Judy Willis MD
October 25, 2016
With the increasing surge of information and the compelling distractions of social media, videos, and games at their fingertips, students are understandably drawn to engage with these distractions during homework. Most kids believe they can have it all -- by multitasking. The fallacy is that when combining these activities with homework, they are getting less done, not more. That's because the brain doesn't multitask.

Teachers, parents, and students all suffer from brain-draining inefficiency when the focus on homework is disrupted by multitasking. Consequences such as inadequate sleep, languishing on the next day's learning, or late and low-quality assignments push parents and teachers into unpleasant roles as nags, helicopters, and rule-enforcers.

What is happening in the brain that makes multitasking so counterproductive? The brain is designed to limit conscious focus to one thing at a time. Our ancestors needed single focus to remain alive in their unpredictable world. The survival-in-the-wild brain that we humans inherited from them remains designed for unifocal tasking.

What feels like doing two things at once is actually the brain shifting its processing from one neural network to another. Each shift comes with a cost of consuming time, mental effort, and brain fuel. Microseconds are wasted as the brain turns off one active network and turns on the next. The result: less done and less remembered.

## Neuro-Logical Self-Awareness Activity

Self-inventory to determine how multitasking while doing homework affects time and efficiency.

1. Make a list of all the multitasking things (potential distractions) you like to do during homework. (Examples: internet or TV, listening to music, Snapchat, Instagram, responding to texts/calls/emails as they arrive, web surfing, frequent snack or game breaks, daydreaming, others?.)
2. Select a subject where homework assignments usually take about the same amount of time each night. If possible, choose a class whose homework is often useful for understanding the next lesson. (Examples: math homework or history assignments where chapters read are discussed the next day.)
3. For the subject you choose, write your multitasking items on the following chart to collect data from your own observations.

Multitasking things:

This chart is designed to keep records of the time and outcome of homework done on alternating nights, with or without each multitasking distraction. Depending on how many multitasks are in a student's routine, it may take several nights to gather the data.

| Date | The distraction | $+/-$ | Start time | End time | Total time | Quality rating |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

## Answer these questions on a separate piece of paper:

- What did you discover?
- What multitask made your brain less efficient?
- Which do you want to resist?


## Busting the Multitasking Urge

So, you may have discovered that single-tasking, not multitasking, saves time. If reading texts and emails concurrently during homework are the big time sinks, obviously you should turn off your phones or email. That may seem painful, so here are some suggestions.

- Turn off social media, messaging, and email during homework time.
- Silence your phone.
- Set a timer for regular breaks: ten minutes for every 40 minutes of focused work. Your brain will be more focused knowing that you'll have a break for texting, checking email or Snapchat, playing a video game, or doing physical activity. You won't be distracted by FOMO (fear of missing out) while working.
- Limit web browsing. Often, while scanning websites for homework assignments, you may be tempted by links far more interesting than the assignment. To reduce the brain stress from concerns that you will lose those websites, copy the hyperlinks onto a list to visit when time permits.
- Keeping a healthy snack and water nearby reduces the temptations to leave your work area.
- Write down what worked as a "go-to" resource when you need help staying on track.


## Acknowledge Progress

To help you continue using self-assessment while becoming more independent, recognize progress and positive outcomes resulting from your insights and efforts. Isn't it nice doing better on your homework in less time?!?!

It's certainly worthwhile pointing out that your parents won't nag you so much! Happier students, teachers, and parents may be the best benefit of all.

