



Ask Amy! Do you have questions about how to be happier or more productive in 2021? Send Amy your questions at amywood@amywoodpsyd.com, and she'll address them in a future column.

Maine-based psychologist AMY WOOD, Psy.D., created Law and the Good Life, a research-based attorney wellness coaching and training system designed to address the challenges of lawyering. She frequently offers CLE opportunities through the MSBA. To learn about upcoming events, visit www.mainebar.org. For more information about Dr. Wood, go to www.amywoodpsyd.com.



Sensible Multitasking: The Smart Way to Get More Done in Less Time

Imagine there's no pandemic and you're sitting in a restaurant booth enjoying lunch and catching up with a close friend you haven't seen in a while. You lean in closer as your friend begins to update you on a pressing personal problem, and just then you hear someone in the booth behind you mention the name of a colleague.

You naturally want to keep listening to your friend, but you are now also invested in being alert to any intriguing details that might come from the conversation behind you. You try to split your attention evenly so as not to miss out on anything, but within a minute you feel too distracted to pay sufficient attention to either situation. You decide to let go of the conversation behind you in favor of being there for your friend, and your focus on the person across the table is quickly restored.

What this common situation illustrates is that it's not feasible to simultaneously give your full attention to two separate activities.

Most of us have experienced such a moment or some variation on it: talking to someone at a party while also trying to make out the lyrics of a song playing in the background or taking in the audio and the visual of two separate movies on adjacent televisions on a store shelf.

Most of us also know full well that when we dilute our focus like that, we pick up only fractured bits and pieces and don't integrate the whole of anything. That's why intelligent attorneys seek quiet spaces to review complex documents, turn off their phones when meeting with clients, and minimize interfering noise when they really want to hear what someone has to say.

So why is it that – despite having learned the undeniable limits of the delicate human attention span many times over at our age – we persist in dividing our awareness between two or more activities requiring complete concentration? Why would a seemingly levelheaded adult routinely read and send text messages while driving, engage in serious cell phone conversation while walking down a busy city street, or work on a significant project via laptop while participating in a critical conference call?

Widely and repeatedly publicized hard evidence, such as increased emergency room visits caused by texting behind the wheel of a fast-moving car and having a cell phone conversation while negotiating crowded urban streets on foot, shows us that this kind of senseless multitasking doesn't work.

Otherwise sensible people act in irrational ways because they want to believe, despite their better judgment, in the false promise of misguided yet popular cultural myths. Though we know better, it's easy to convince ourselves of what we wish were true, that technology saves time by making it possible to wholly engage in two exacting endeavors at once. We don't want to face the truth that technology isn't powerful enough to expand the limited capacity of the human attention span.

Smart phones, lap tops, iPads and other technological devices are wonderful tools for making work and life more efficient, enjoyable, flexible, and manageable, but only if we use them judiciously. Judicious use means recognizing that if you use technology in ways that force you to put your attention in two places at once, you aren't saving time. To the contrary, you're wasting it.



Brewer Middle School maple sugaring. Photo Thalassa Raasch—MaineCF

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Combining two activities requiring your total attention means doing neither activity well. Many activities, of course, can be blended for greater efficiency without compromising performance. As long as you are applying technology in ways that don't distract you from situations that require your full focus, you're engaging in what I call sensible multitasking.

6 WAYS TO SENSIBLY MULTITASK

1. Carry your laptop with you so you can read and respond to emails, work on projects, read your favorite blogs, and download music and books while you're waiting to board a flight, filling time left by a client who doesn't show up, or enduring other delays.
2. Listen to music or a book while you're driving, exercising, or cleaning the house.
3. Participate in a conference call via cell phone while taking a walk somewhere peaceful and away from traffic.
4. Enjoy casual phone conversation while you're doing the dishes.
5. Fold laundry while you're watching TV.
6. Read and respond to text messages while you're getting your hair cut or standing in the grocery store check-out line.

The main thing to consider in all this is that dividing your attention and then pulling it back and redirecting it is a stressful process that can actually make your head hurt. Pushing your brain beyond what it is meant to do will only wear you out, erode your concentration, reduce the quality of your work, and steal enjoyment from your life. You will be in a much better position to excel as an attorney thrive in a world of constant distractions if you do your best to treat your brain well.

