Well@Work Podcast
Season 2, Episode 8:
Too Much to Do? Is Multitasking the Answer?

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith discusses the dangers of multitasking and gives some tips on how to be more productive. And now, Emily Smith.

Hello, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. We live in a fast-paced culture, the way we do our work reflects that. We are expected to accomplish many tasks in quick succession often doing multiple tasks simultaneously. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely changed the way you work, but many have been asked to maintain their workload and productivity levels to accomplish this. We expect to knock lots of tasks off of our to-do list some of which we attempt to do at one time, also known as multitasking. In the brain, executive function manages what tasks we do and in which order we do them. When we multitask, we shift our focus between tasks and must stop whatever thought process is in motion before beginning a new task. Our brains set goals for the new task, recall information needed to complete the task, then focus on that new task. Many human brains are capable of making these changes in just a few tenths of a second, but even the fastest transitions can keep us from effectively doing a task as well as we would have if we gave it our full attention. This may be why we aren't as good at multitasking as we think we are. Studies have shown that multitasking makes people 40% less productive and researchers have found that just 2.5% of us who consider ourselves to be multitaskers are actually multitasking, the remaining 97.5% of us are distractedly doing one task at a time. We think multitasking is efficient, but the reality is that it divides our focus, putting us at risk for making errors. Studies show that doing any other task while driving can lead to poor driving performance resulting in more car accidents. In healthcare, where multitasking can result in catastrophic or life-threatening errors, researchers have found that working memory capacity is limited by interruptions and multitasking causes medical errors.

Multitasking can also contribute to stress. In the 2014 article the Multitasking Framework: The Effects of Increasing Workload on Acute Psychobiological Stress Reactivity," researchers assessed the impact of increasing workload intensity on study participants. They found that doing several tasks simultaneously led participants to have increased blood pressure and heart rates and decreased feelings of calm. Those who check email while watching tv, media multitaskers, deplete their cognitive resources by attempting to process multiple streams of information at one time. A 2016 study by Uncapher and colleagues showed that media multitasking is associated with poor executive functioning and what the authors call reduced growth mindset, meaning that the challenges encountered didn't result in increased skills or intelligence.

Consider Tonya's dilemma. To ensure the patients in her care at the assisted living facility are comfortable and have their needs met, Tanya provides more than just bedside care. As an RN, she supervises a nursing team who monitor and maintain quality of life for patients with complex medical needs, answers to the attending physicians, and reports on care to patient families. Tanya also answers staffing concerns, works with team members who have conflicts with one another or the attending, and council's anxious family members who worry about their loved ones. As the charge nurse, Tanya schedules employee breaks and last-minute shift covers. The facility where Tanya works implemented complex paperwork that needs to be completed before shift end and COVID protocols have added challenges. Tanya has a lot on her plate. If you are like Tanya, here are some tips to make you more productive and less stressed.

Tip one: mono task when you can and use aids to assist. Increase your productivity by focusing on a single task at a time, limit distractions as much as possible, and concentrate on that single task until it is complete. If you cannot control the interruptions, use a marker or post-it note to remind you where you left off so you can easily resume your activity.

Tip 2: prioritize tasks and do the most difficult thing first. In a time crunch with many items to complete in a short amount of time, pick the most difficult item first and get it out of the way. Our interruptions tend to increase with the hectic pace of the day, if you do the most difficult thing first when energy is high, it reduces the cognitive strain of tackling that task during the busiest time and you don't carry the stress and pressure of completing that activity with you all day.

Tip 3: dedicate uninterrupted time to complex problems. Deep thinking is required to solve problems, especially complex ones. When we allow our brains to follow associated thoughts and ideas, it can lead to innovative and creative solutions, this is most easily done when we dedicate ourselves to deep focus and thought. Many calendars now have a focus option that will allow you to schedule times for focus work throughout your day, putting these times on the calendar will give you some space for reflection and focused concentration.

Tip 4: mindfulness can help increase focus. Mindfulness has been shown to improve self-regulation, the act of controlling emotions and thoughts. And in order to achieve goals in situations where multitasking is required or in cases where the workload seems overwhelming, mindfulness activities can help calm and refocus intentions. To maintain productivity, look for mindfulness activities at sites like positivepsychology.com, find a link in the episode notes.

Multitasking may seem like the key to your productivity but you may find yourself exhausted at the end of the day despite feeling that you haven't accomplished all that you set out to do. Consider these actions to effectively manage multitasking and to increase productivity and reduce stress. And remember to stay Well@Work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.