

This morning I logged on to my computer to do my Ocado shop. But first, of course, I opened my email, where I found a smattering of Facebook friend requests. I also signed in to Twitter, browsed an online shoe store, did a spot of internet banking, checked bids on a dress I'm selling, got the latest celeb goss and uploaded some photos. A busy morning of multi-tasking? Yes. A productive one? Er, no. Nearly three hours later, I hadn't ordered so much as a bag of apples. Though I had acquired a gorgeous pair of wedges I didn't really need.

I'm part of the multi-tasking generation. With our laptops, Kindles, iPads and BlackBerries, we've never been so available – to our bosses, friends, family and even complete cyber strangers. We're multi-taskers and proud. I can't walk to the bus stop without tweeting, can't stand in the supermarket queue without texting. I feel positively guilty if I just do one thing and practically have a panic attack when parted from my smartphone. But the evidence is that far from making us happier and more productive, multi-tasking is leaving us inefficient and stressed. So why are we doing it?

Life coach Simone Ryder (swibonline.co.uk) describes it as a modern epidemic. 'People often tell me, "I don't know where the time goes" or "I never get to the bottom of my to-do list". Even worse, women are so busy multi-tasking they feel guilty because they're spending less time

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with the people who really matter – their partner, friends and family.'

This feeling of disconnection is something many of us are familiar with – recently my husband snapped at me when, on a rare night out, I checked my Twitter feed at the table. It looks and sounds like an addiction and that, according to Keith Laws, professor of cognitive neuropsychology at the University of Hertfordshire, is because it is. 'Each text or email contains the possibility of something life-altering, so creates excitement,' he says. 'It's the random nature that keeps us hooked. The ping of a text or an email arriving on your phone is what psychologists call a variable

schedule, which creates a constant drip of the pleasure hormone dopamine.'

But why are we so dependent? Several studies blame the media for our ever-shortening attention spans; TV programmes remind you every 15 minutes or less of what just happened, while news soundbites from politicians now average just eight seconds, compared with 43 seconds 40 years ago. And – of course – we have more gadgets vying for our attention than ever before. A study by Ofcom found that we spend more than seven hours a day listening to the radio, watching TV, surfing the net and texting, and a fifth of that time we're doing at least two things at the same time. The impact? 'We don't do anything as well as we

would do if we concentrated on one thing at a time,' says Professor Laws. A recent study at the Institute of Psychiatry revealed that checking your email while performing another task temporarily decreases your IQ by ten points. In fact,

“TRYING TO DO TWO THINGS AT ONCE DECREASES IQ BY TEN POINTS”

unless we're doing very simple tasks – say, talking while we walk – there's actually no such thing as multi-tasking. 'We think we're doing two things at the same time, but in reality we're just swapping between them rapidly,' says Professor Laws.

And what about the psychological impact? 'We call it multi-tasking, but all →

## UNI-TASK AND GET THINGS DONE

### 1 START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON

'You may think you're not a morning person but studies prove high alertness occurs in the two to three hours after you wake,' says Harriet Griffey, author of *The Art of Concentration* (Rodale, £9.99). 'So start your day with your most important tasks. You should be able to concentrate for 90 minutes before taking a break.'

### 2 LIVE IN THE NOW

Most of our worries are about the past or future, so staying in the moment, rather than trying to distract ourselves from those anxieties, is vital. 'Instead of reaching for your phone, focus on taking in your surroundings,' says life coach Beth Follini (ticktockcoaching.co.uk). 'Notice the people around you, how your body feels (are you warm or cold?), or the colours in the room to stay present.'

### 3 GIVE YOUR BRAIN A BREAK

'If you need a distraction or time to think, don't hit the internet – go for a brisk 20-minute walk, without your phone,' suggests Emma Kenny, Zest's resident psychologist. 'This will stimulate your brain, reduce stress and help you to refocus.' Think about it: when was the last time you came up with a winning idea mid text? But when you take yourself away – walking to the bus stop, say – you often have a light-bulb moment.

### 4 DISMISS DISTRACTIONS

'The ping of emails and texts is addictive, so when you have a really important task to complete, put your phone on silent, turn off your email alert and close down internet pages you're not using,' says Harriet. 'If you're at work in an open-plan office, sit with your back to as much activity as you can. Also, remember you don't have to react instantly to every demand. Prioritising isn't only useful at work – doing the same with your social life should stop you feeling overwhelmed or guilty.'

### 5 DITCH THE TO-DO LIST

'To-do lists don't work,' says Julie Hurst, psychotherapist and time management expert (worklifebalancecentre.org). 'They just become a gathering place for unfinished tasks, and you end up prioritising your least important jobs because they're the easiest to tick off. Ditch the list and get a diary. Work out how much time each task will take, then schedule it. Break big tasks into manageable chunks, and leave ten-minute gaps every 90 minutes. That way you'll have time to refocus your brain and be less tempted to multi-task as a distraction.'