

## Lifestyle

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## Spring Clean Your Mind

By Patti Verbanas



I will not multitask. I will not multitask. I will not ... Wait, as I'm writing this I'm listening to satellite radio, there's a magazine under my arms, I'm drinking coffee, aaaaand my cell phone just rang. Although my attention is — for the most part — on this column, my ears are picking up the low sounds of the radio and my forearms keep sliding across the magazine, forcing me to reposition my hands. Then there's that ever-present how-did-we-ever-do-without-it cell. And darn it, this all was going on as I was trying to singularly focus.

Let's face it: Multitasking is an inescapable element of our lives. And it can be more subtle than the painting-nails-while-driving cliché. Stop reading this for a moment and take stock. What are you doing — even passively — as you're reading these words? Ah, enlightening, isn't it?

Last month, my yoga instructor spoke about de-cluttering the mind. "We talk a lot about de-cluttering our homes, organizing our personal possessions, and getting rid of things that are not important — but how often do we de-clutter our *minds*?" she posed. "Consider your brain as a room. When you fill it with many thoughts, they become like things in a room, which make it difficult to move around — difficult to think. Really *think*."

Weaning yourself from multitasking means making moment-by-moment decisions to retrain your attention into focused, clear thinking. Taking my instructor's words to heart, I set about trying to find ways to stop doing so many things at once and really center on the matter at hand. I can tell you, it ain't easy. To give myself a kickstart, I decided to go cold turkey and do something I had never done before: Go camping. Out in the woods, with the singular objective of gathering wood, starting a fire, setting up camp, cooking food, staying warm and — when it started raining — staying dry, I found myself concentrating on tasks in ways I never do in my daily life. My mind was sharp and I found myself working efficiently and with complete satisfaction as each goal was reached.

The challenge then became incorporating this mindset into my regular routine.

Following are some tactics I have taken since that camping trip to start to break my multi-tasking habits — to surprising results. I have discovered that not only am I getting everything done, but that I'm accomplishing more, in less time and with less stress.

**Engage your senses — one by one.** Let's say the job is cooking dinner. Before I start, I take note of the sensations around me and think of descriptions in my mind — or better yet, I say those descriptions aloud: The tickle of the celery stalk as I wash it; the pungent smell of chopped garlic; the Crayola-red color of the tomato; the sizzle of the freshly washed mushrooms hitting warm olive oil in the skillet; the taste of herbs as I lick them off my fingers. By zeroing in on one sense at a time as it corresponds to the respective step, I not only increase the pleasure of the endeavor but I also exercise my concentration — and get better at tuning out.

**Unplug, Disconnect, Shut it Off!** Although I do not listen to an iPod at the gym, I am regularly plugged in to my cell phone on my daily walking breaks. It's not absolute, but I have started to take some walks where I am not listening to anything other than the natural sounds around me. The benefits include fuller sensory engagement, and I find myself more refreshed when the walk is over.

**Three's a Charm.** Each day, my To-Do list entails three projects: One I must do, one that I could possibly get to if the first is completely done, and one that is a nice-but-not-necessary chore that can be put off if the first two are not finished. This targeted list helps me prioritize and gives me a sense of accomplishment. It also allows the flexibility to tackle unexpected important tasks that enter my routine. Having only one thing that I definitely want to accomplish — today it is this blog — allows me the flexibility to catch those fly balls without feeling frustrated or stressed about not getting the bulk of an ambitious To-Do list done.

**De-Google Thyself.** When I'm working on a computer project, I've started to turn off my internet connection to decrease the temptation to check e-mail (and answer them, which means setting off on new, tangential projects). I give myself a certain set time to check my work e-mail, answer anything critical, and then shut it down again for a thorough read after the primary task is complete. By compartmentalizing my e-mail sessions, I can focus on a job and not have to refresh myself as to where I had left off each time I took a moment to check e-mail "real quick."

**Pencils Down!** When I was in elementary school, teachers would give us a respectable time to finish our work — and when that time was up, they would say, "Pencils down!" Remember that? I use that philosophy now. When I have a large project, I schedule a time for breaks to keep me from burning out. These are mental vacations (a walk, a chat, a snack) and do not entail work. Before I stop, however, I write down where I left off and where I want to pick up, which allows me to return refreshed without missing a beat.

**Design a Pull-Back.** When trying to keep your mind on a single project, self-awareness is key. Recognize when you are losing focus or are tempted to start another project while the first project is still in play. I use a motto to remind me of my mission and pull my concentration back to the task: "Finish and be done with it."

Good advice. File this blog under "Done."

