

A Simple Strategy for Worrying Less and Practicing More Productively

Description

One of my enduring memories of my grandfather is of him sitting on the living room floor reading the sports section in the local paper, whilst watching one game on TV and listening to another on his portable radio.

At the time, I thought it was an amusing and impressive feat of multi-tasking. But this would barely be considered multi-tasking by today's standards. With email, texting, TV, kids, work, side projects, social relationships, and more, we probably juggle more inputs and outputs before breakfast than our grandparents did in a year (ok, maybe I'm exaggerating a wee bit).

Nevertheless, multi-tasking has become a prized skill, with many job postings specifically mentioning multi-tasking ability as a key requirement of the position.

So, how would you rate your multi-tasking skills?

Ready to put your abilities to a simple test?

The David Copperfield multi-tasking test

Take a moment to watch this 1-minute video and follow the instructions.

How'd you do? Pretty crappy, right?

That's ok. This was a bit of a trick. The reality is that we all suck at multi-tasking.

We're simply not wired to pay attention to and process multiple inputs simultaneously. For more, check out an excerpt from [John Medina's Brain Rules \(more Brain Rules here\)](#). In fact, there is [troubling evidence](#) which suggests that our habit of trying to process multiple inputs simultaneously is actually making us worse at single-tasking.

Divided attention in the practice room

Sometimes we go into the practice room, and quickly settle into a groove where we are very efficient, effective, and surprised at how quickly time flies by.

At other times, we find ourselves being constantly interrupted by random thoughts, worries, things we

have to remember, emails we have to send, bills we need to pay, ideas for blog posts, and nagging questions about our friend's cryptic Facebook status update.

We end up spending our practice time feeling scattered and unfocused, like trying to practice in a room with mosquitos that sporadically fly by our head making that seriously annoying buzzing sound.

We all know that trying to process all these extraneous inputs and outputs in the practice room is hugely unproductive. But how can we quiet our inner mosquitos and be better single-taskers in the practice room?

Parking your worries

A common psychology strategy called “parking your worries” can help.

The idea is that we tend to worry about, or have recurring thoughts about the same things during the course of a day at times *when we are not in a position to do anything about them*.

For instance, you may be worrying about an argument you had with your spouse, and trying to figure out how to smooth things over. As important as this may be, are you in the best position to make decisions about this or plan next actions when you're in the middle of working out a new fingering?

Or you may remember that you have to pick up eggs, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and Elmer's glue before returning home at night. But are you in a position to do anything about that at 1pm when you're trying to do some score study before a 3pm rehearsal?

Open loops

These are called “open loops” or things that we are committed to doing, but haven't put into a reliable tracking system.

The problem with open loops, is that they tend to keep circulating about in our heads, which is distracting and gets to be really stressful after a while.

It's like double parking in NYC, and rushing in to grab something from the store. We may only be gone a few minutes, but it's super stressful to worry constantly about being ticketed or towed. Contrast that with going to the mall, parking your car in the garage, and having the peace of mind to shop at your leisure, knowing that your car isn't going anywhere, and you know exactly where to find it when you need it.

Close the loops

What we have to do is close these open loops, so we can put them out of mind and get to a more quiet, focused state where we can practice in peace.

Note that we don't necessarily have to *reso*lve these open loops, we just have to *close* them. How, you

ask?

Keep a small notebook or sheet of paper handy while practicing, write down any thoughts, worries, or open loops as they occur to you, and then schedule a time to think about and resolve those loops when you are in a better position to do so with the time/energy/resources you need.

Important: for this to actually work, it's not enough to simply write the thought down. You must also (a) schedule a time to return to the thought and (b) actually follow through. Otherwise, your brain is going to figure out pretty quickly that your system isn't to be trusted, and will just keep any future loops open.

So that argument with your spouse? Maybe the best time to think about that is at lunchtime, when you have 30 minutes to eat your sandwich and brainstorm a few ways to make it up to your significant other.

Eggs, cereal, glue? Set a reminder to go off around the time you will be driving home, or better yet, a location-based reminder that will be triggered when you leave your work place.

The one-sentence summary

"Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength." ~[Corrie ten Boom](#)

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