

# Managing Multiple Priorities

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According to [Dictionary.com](#), the definition of **multitasking** we are most likely familiar with is “*the carrying out of two or more tasks at the same time by one person*”. What’s of note, however, is that the definition listed first is specific to computers. Do you ever feel like a computer, going to short-circuit, because of a sensory overload of responsibilities to be achieved every single day from literally the moment you wake up? Recent studies show that we humans may not be as good at multitasking as we believe we are.

Skill in this department, however, gives us an edge both in our professional and personal lives, especially in regards to creating free time, and dictates our ability to juggle several priorities at once- all while staying stress-free as possible. Reducing stress in our everyday lives is important because too much stress can cause fatigue, exhaustion, social withdrawal, loss of imagination, creativity, drive, enthusiasm, and memory. Also, when we get too “burnt out”, we tend to take it out on others that don’t deserve it.

So whether you’re the soccer-mom driving back and forth between appointments, games, dry-cleaning, and shopping, all the while texting about dinner plans that night in the middle of rush hour, or the short-order cook at the local restaurant who has to juggle what to cook first when alone behind the grill and multiple tables are seated at once, it can be enough stress for any one of us to feel like we are in an insane asylum at times.

In this day and age of electronic-media induced ADHD, we can shift our focus with astonishing speed. However, by doing so, we tend to forget some things, or wrap up other objectives with little thought or attention to detail. When you focus on multiple tasks at one time, the brain is actually struggling to keep up, causing that “insane” feeling you sometimes get.

Multitasking is an art form, and although you may feel you have it figured out, here are useful tips that you can use to keep your focus, even in the midst of the most taxing of situations (when multiple deadlines, tasks, and objectives are tossed your way, each of course more important than the other, and worse, crossing professional into personal arenas).

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## Key Points in Managing Multiple Priorities

### 1. Use the SMART formula for setting goals

Do you jump into tasks just to get them over as soon as possible, or rush in blindly without considering if there is a more important use of your currently available time-slot? There are five characteristics of high-quality **S.M.A.R.T.** goals: *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-Specific*. This ensures a form of “quality-control” on your tasks, and helps you to prioritize importance and best times to complete projects.

*NOTE: Remember, the idea here is not to overly analyze things, wasting away valuable time, but simply serves as a reminder that with tasks changing so much from moment-to-moment and day-to-day, definitively answering these 5 questions can help you view the bigger, overall picture you have, and where exactly your smaller task “puzzle-pieces” fit into that vision.*

## 2. Use creative and effective delegation

In these fast-paced times, the greatest time-saver for most people is creative and effective delegation to other team-members, if possible. Consider strengths and weaknesses of others before delegating the task, and be flexible. Give as much background information as possible on the task, being open to honest, useful criticism if given. Follow-up with your co-worker when needed, offering training and assistance with the project. Having different passes through the work often leads to multiple solutions you may have not seen before.

## 3. Avoid procrastination at all costs

We all have our Monday morning blahs, Friday afternoon spacing-out (because we deserve it, right?), and everything in-between, but it IS CRUCIAL we avoid wasting away valuable time because basic research studies have shown that even a small task completed helps us to feel better. It's natural inclination to get so stressed out about so much to be done that you just shut down, because the brain begins not being able to process the overload. Remember the computer reference? Good, because you are a computer in essence, and you must process the overload in order of importance, so to speak. My favorite saying when I want to put something off? The old Nike motto: *Just Do It*.

*NOTE: To prevent procrastination: plan and schedule deadlines, establish a standard starting format, create "micro-goals" for bigger projects, delegate and work together, break down the project (outline, start with the easiest portion), and of course, plan a reward for yourself when the goal is reached.*

## 4. Find your "sweet-time"

This is your sweet-spot, time wise. Put simply, while Monday mornings and Friday afternoons may be times we like to procrastinate, there are also regular times when you function at your highest level, and those are the times you need to figure out and capitalize on. Building a high-impact work week starts with prioritizing your responsibilities, and then by breaking those jobs into your power time-slots, or times you function best (early mornings, mid-afternoon after lunch, etc.). When you identify that particular time of the day when you have the most energy and are most creative, you will have identified your "prime-time" for tackling those especially large projects.

*NOTE: Not sure when your "prime-time" is? Analyze your work style for one week, and look for common times each day when you are most productive. Also, determine your optimal work area, or setting where you do your most intense creative work.*

## 5. Use the "Four Quadrants of Time-Management" theory

This is a simple theory that shows how different tasks can be broken down by a need-basis. Simply put, when the going gets tough and multiple objectives need to be accomplished, place each of the individual responsibilities into one of these 4 categories: *Urgent*, *Not Urgent*, *Deception*, and *Waste*. *Urgent* relates to crises that may arise, such as irate customers. These are most important, and obviously should be handled immediately. *Not Urgent* refers more to effective use of your time when handling other important goals. They may not be crises, but are almost as important (planned projects and events, regular chores, etc.).

Where it gets tricky is differentiating what's important versus *Deception*, or needless interruptions, office politicking, people's minor issues, and other unnecessary time sappers. Use a filter to decide what's most

important. *Waste* refers to just that. It consists of busywork, gossip, unnecessary meetings, irrelevant e-mail, watching too much YouTube, you name it. This causes one to get even more backed up and thus stressed out, but also can be detrimental to the office environment as well. While using this theory may sound like added work, it's really very fast and easy to use, and will help you get all of your ducks in a row. Wisdom lies in eliminating the non-essentials.

## 6. Stay organized

The only way to stay sane is to get organized. Cluttered files on the desk, misplaced or lost items, and a variety of to-do lists all add up to chaos and "priority anxiety". Most likely, everything that's on your desk right now represents a decision that has not yet been made. Clutter results from putting off these decisions for later. (Procrastination anyone?) Your ability to get and stay organized is directly related to your ability to make decisions! In addition, give everything a parking spot or specific home where it belongs. Virtually everything can be found quickly and easily if you give it its own place.

To-do lists are nice because you can get all those ideas you're struggling to remember out of your head and instead down on paper for reference. It allows you to concentrate your focus on other more important objectives, and research shows that goals written down are 4 times as likely to actually be achieved. As well, you can combine multiple lists into one comprehensive "to-do" list to really clean house and organize your efforts.

This month's blog offers several methods to help you gain more control over your time, tasks, and priorities. Use these tips to manage stress caused by the multiple demands on your time. Learn to run your life, instead of your life running you! Handling difficult situations, planning for the unexpected, and even managing difficult people, is all made easier when you have more time on your hands to take a deep breath and relax. Feel free to use these techniques for handling pressure and stress and staying calm and in control in the face of chaos.

*NOTE: There are eight easy steps for day-to-day stress reduction: (1) Schedule leisure time and commit to it; (2) [Find ways to laugh](#); (3) Consciously slow down when you're not working; (4) Change negative self-talk to positive; (5) Continually search for a change of scenery; (6) Rethink what you eat; (7) Exercise; and (8) Consistently focus on what you can control.*

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