

# Multitasking and Automatic Behaviors (Autopilot)

Many of us go through our days multitasking without giving any one thing our full attention. We eat while we check our email; we think about problems in the middle of a conversation; we talk on the phone while driving. The result is divided, partial attention, which contributes to stress, distractibility, and feeling disconnected from our lives. Part of living more mindfully is noticing your tendency to multitask and then making a choice to do one thing at a time with your full attention.

We have been misled to believe that multitasking is a strength and a skill to be cultivated. In reality, we can only multitask when behaviors are over-learned and automatic. In these cases, we are not engaged mindfully but are instead going through the motions on autopilot. When we try to multitask, we are not actually doing more than one activity at once; we are actually shifting our attention back and forth, often rapidly. This approach requires much more mental energy, sets us up to make mistakes, is inefficient, takes more time, and ultimately is training our brains to be more distracted—the opposite of becoming more mindful.

To experience this, try this multitasking experiment: time yourself while you count from 1 to 26 as quickly as possible. Next, time yourself while you say the ABCs as quickly as possible. Then, add up the times of these two tasks done independently, one at a time. Now, time yourself as you multitask by alternating counting to 26 and reciting the ABCs—for example, “1, A, 2, B, 3, C,” and so on. Notice the difference in time, energy, and accuracy and the quality of your overall experience. How was that for you? What did you discover?

Automatic behaviors—aka being on autopilot—include anything you can do unconsciously or without thought. While not recommended, most of us can drive, carry on basic conversations, and do many activities with virtually no attention or connection to what we're doing. Although automatic behaviors can be useful at times, like when you swerve to avoid an automobile accident, automatic behaviors contribute to us feeling more disconnected from ourselves and our lives, depriving us of experiencing life in a more connected and meaningful way. As Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction, says, “*Mindfulness is about living your life as if it really matters, which means you have to be here for it.*” If you are sincere about living your life as if it really matters, this requires becoming more mindful of when you are on autopilot or multitasking and then choosing to do these tasks one thing at a time with your full attention.