

Last summer my husband, Peter, and I spent two weeks on a family farm in France—a sort of "working vacation" in which we exchanged labor for room and board. The farm was home to a menagerie of pigs, cows, dogs, cats, chickens, and pigeons, but lucky for us, we didn't have to worry about any of them. Our sole responsibility was the family's herd of goats, which we were supposed to milk twice a day. It was the easiest job on the farm. And yet one morning, halfway into our stay, we managed to almost blow it.

I should mention that goats and I don't have much in common. Beside the obvious differences (horns, a taste for hay), there is a major psychological contrast: Goats are masters of single-minded focus. I have seen with my own eyes that a goat can stand for hours in a field atop an overturned metal pail. On the other hand, I—like most people—spend my days juggling several tasks at once: reading the news online while eating breakfast, talking on the phone while getting dressed, hopping between five browser tabs, and constantly, constantly checking my e-mail.

It's what we all know as multitasking—trying to pay attention to numerous things simultaneously. We claim to do so in the name of efficiency, but some scientists now think the real attraction to multitasking has a lot to do with dopamine, a feel-good neurochemical released when we're stimulated by new things (say, an unread e-mail message). As Adam Gazzaley, MD, PhD, assistant professor of neurology, physiology, and psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, explains, "We're all novelty junkies"—and multitasking, especially the electric kind, is a great way to get a fix.

I thought the farm might provide the perfect break: There aren't many distractions in a barn, and there's nothing technological about milking goats. Well, almost nothing. With 27 of them on the farm, hand-milking had been replaced by suctioning tubes—similar in concept to breast pumps—that attach to the goats' udders and suck the milk into a large metal bucket. Each morning Peter and I connected the tubes to the buckets, wheeled them over to the milking shed, and herded the goats into a waiting pen. After leading the first group of animals into position, we'd hook up the tubes and work our way down the row.

Looking back now, I can explain the importance of each step of milking. But when the farmer first explained the process—in French—I was listening with only half an ear. My brain was busy with other things, like trying to write the beginning of an article, and figuring out how I could coordinate the deadlines with my travel schedule. Instead of allowing the goats to free me from my bad habits, I was bringing those habits to the goats.

There are times when multitasking can be valuable—say, you're a pilot monitoring the plane's instruments while talking to air traffic control. But recent evidence suggests that multitasking with unrelated activities—such as trying to write an article in your head during a milking training session—can impair short-term memory and interfere with mental processing.

Researchers hypothesize that this is partially because most of what we call multitasking doesn't actually involve doing multiple things simultaneously—it involves rapidly switching between activities, a process that saps time and energy by requiring us to constantly refocus our attention. "When a conscious decision has to be made, our brains can generally do only one thing at a time," explains Steven Yantis, PhD, professor of psychological and brain sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

That's where the trouble started. To milk the goats, we had to get them onto a long, raised platform, which was built with feeding troughs on one side so the goats could eat while being milked. The animals were usually happy to cooperate, given that food was involved. So I didn't understand why one particular morning, rather than proceeding to their usual places on the platform, the first five goats began walking in a tight circle, bleating frantically. With their udders swinging and their hooves slipping on the wooden floor, they prodded each other with their horns, becoming more and more distressed. One small black goat, known for her independent streak, thrust her head under the platform's railing, trying to escape. The others bleated angrily. The milking tubes sucked air. Panicked, I gestured toward the feeding troughs—"Remember those? Where you have eaten breakfast and dinner *every day of your lives?*" But the goats were in full-scale meltdown.

It was a moment that called for quick, creative thinking—exactly the type that multitasking has the power to impede. As researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles have found, when we learn something while multitasking, we use an area of the brain called the striatum, which is activated when we learn new habits or skills—as opposed to the hippocampus, which is associated with forming conscious memories and is active when we're focused. The problem with habit-based learning is that it tends to be inflexible; you're fine if everything goes the way you expect it to, but if a few unhappy goats throw off your routine, you'll have difficulty conjuring the knowledge needed to come up with an alternate plan.

Which was my problem exactly. But as I stood there racking my striatum, Peter did something unexpected: He leaped over to the pen where the other goats were impatiently waiting and started to let in more, including an angora named Princess. Ignoring the chaos around her, Princess walked calmly to the front of the line. And the other goats, immediately forgetting that they had ever *not* recognized a feeding trough, took their places behind her. Peter, it turned out, had been paying attention that first day on the farm and was now able to remember a crucial fact: Certain goats were leaders and others, followers. Our mistake was that we'd let in the wrong ones.

After that, my farm attitude changed. I began paying attention to the details of the milking, which made the process more enjoyable and lessened the likelihood that something else would go wrong. The goats, I'm proud to say, never rebelled again. And I settled into the satisfaction that comes from doing just one thing well. Peter and I even came up with goat-related adages to fit our new lives. One of our favorites was "Ain't no doin' while a goat's a milkin'" —inspired by the fact that when you're milking goats, you really can't do anything but milk goats.

Of course, now that I'm off the farm and back at my computer, it's tough not to revert to my old ways. With so much information and so many distractions available at all times, the challenge is not to find stimulation but to say no to it, to take control of my attention and cultivate a different kind of richness in my life—one that comes from depth instead of breadth.

I'm practicing concentrating on one thing at a time—an e-mail message, a newspaper article, my work. I'm finding that I can accomplish things faster this way; more important, I feel calm. And when I start to reach for the phone while I'm making dinner, or check my e-mail while talking with a friend, I remind myself of one of life's enduring lessons: "Stick to the goat at hand."

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## **An End to Overload**

*Four ways to break your multitasking habit.*

### **1. Simplify your environment**

Humans are biologically programmed to pay attention to new stimuli, says Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted*. At your computer, close superfluous windows, turn off Twitter, and disable automatic e-mail notification. Put unnecessary papers out of sight, and turn off your cell phone's ringer.

### **2. Build up your focus**

Chronic multitaskers may have weakened their ability to focus, says Christine Hohlbaum, author of *The Power of Slow*. Set aside a block of time—even if it's just five minutes—to deal with a mentally challenging task; once you accomplish that, extend the time further.

### **3. Embrace discomfort**

People often give up on difficult tasks in order to escape to something easier. "Any project that takes mental effort, or involves critical thinking and creativity, is going to be a little painful sometimes," says Jackson. When you hit a wall, don't point-and-click—push past it.

### **4. Take breaks**

Humans work in cycles; we can concentrate for a period of time but then need time to rest. Every hour or so, take a quick walk around the block, or just step away from your desk for a few minutes.