

Excerpt #1

Over the last twenty years, Meyer and a host of other researchers have proved again and again that multitasking, at least as our culture has come to know and love and institutionalize it, is a myth. When you think you're doing two things at once, you're almost always just switching rapidly between them, leaking a little mental efficiency with every switch. Meyer says that this is because, to put it simply, the brain processes different kinds of information on a variety of separate “channels” — a language channel, a visual channel, an auditory channel, and so on — each of which can process only one stream of information at a time. If you overburden a channel, the brain becomes inefficient and mistake-prone. The classic example is driving while talking on a cell phone, two tasks that conflict across a range of obvious channels: Steering and dialing are both manual tasks, looking out the windshield and reading a phone screen are both visual, etc. Even talking on a hands-free phone can be dangerous, Meyer says. If the person on the other end of the phone is describing a visual scene—say, the layout of a room full of furniture — that conversation can actually occupy your visual channel enough to impair your ability to see what's around you on the road.

The only time multitasking does work efficiently, Meyer says, is when multiple simple tasks operate on entirely separate channels — for example, folding laundry (a visual-manual task) while listening to a stock report (a verbal task). But real-world scenarios that fit those specifications are very rare.

This is troubling news, obviously, for a culture of BlackBerrys and news crawls and Firefox tabs — tools that, critics argue, force us all into a kind of elective ADHD. The tech theorist Linda Stone famously coined the phrase “continuous partial attention” to describe our newly frazzled state of mind. American office workers don't stick with any single task for more than a few minutes at a time; if left uninterrupted, they will most likely interrupt themselves. Since every interruption costs around 25 minutes of productivity, we spend nearly a third of our day recovering from them. We keep an average of eight windows open on our computer screens at one time and skip between them every twenty seconds. When we read online, we hardly even read at all — our eyes run down the page in an F pattern, scanning for keywords. When you add up all the leaks from these constant little switches, soon you're hemorrhaging a dangerous amount of mental power. People who frequently check their e-mail have tested as less intelligent than people who are actually high on marijuana. Meyer guesses that the damage will take decades to understand, let alone fix. If Einstein were alive today, he says, he'd probably be forced to multitask so relentlessly in the Swiss patent office that he'd never get a chance to work out the theory of relativity.

Excerpt #2

A quintessentially Western solution to the attention problem—one that neatly circumvents the issue of willpower — is to simply dope our brains into focus. We’ve done so, over the centuries, with substances ranging from tea to tobacco to NoDoz to Benzedrine, and these days the tradition seems to be approaching some kind of zenith with the rise of neuroenhancers: drugs designed to treat ADHD (Ritalin, Adderall), Alzheimer’s (Aricept), and narcolepsy (Provigil) that can produce, in healthy people, superhuman states of attention...

Although neuroenhancers are currently illegal to use without a prescription, they’re popular among college students (on some campuses, up to 25 percent of students admitted to taking them) and — if endless anecdotes can be believed — among a wide spectrum of other professional focusers: journalists on deadline, doctors performing high-stakes surgeries, competitors in poker tournaments, researchers suffering through the grind of grant-writing. There has been controversy in the chess world recently about drug testing at tournaments.

In December, a group of scientists published a paper in *Nature* that argued for the legalization and mainstream acceptance of neuroenhancers, suggesting that the drugs are really no different from more traditional “cognitive enhancers” such as laptops, exercise, nutrition, private tutoring, reading, and sleep. It’s not quite that simple, of course. Adderall users frequently complain that the drug stifles their creativity — that it’s best for doing ultrarational, structured tasks. (As Foer put it, “I had a nagging suspicion that I was thinking with blinders on.”) One risk the scientists do acknowledge is the fascinating, horrifying prospect of “raising cognitive abilities beyond their species-typical upper bound.” Ultimately, one might argue, neuroenhancers spring from the same source as the problem they’re designed to correct: our lust for achievement in defiance of natural constraints. It’s easy to imagine an endless attentional arms race in which new technologies colonize ever-bigger zones of our attention, new drugs expand the limits of that attention, and so on.

One of the most exciting — and confounding — solutions to the problem of attention lies right at the intersection of our willpower and our willpower-sapping technologies: the grassroots Internet movement known as “lifestacking.” It began in 2003 when the British tech writer Danny O’Brien, frustrated by his own lack of focus, polled 70 of his most productive friends to see how they managed to get so much done; he found that they’d invented all kinds of clever little tricks—some high-tech, some very low-tech—to help shepherd their attention from moment to moment: ingenious script codes for to-do lists, software hacks for managing e-mail, rituals to avoid sinister time-wasting traps such as “yak shaving,” the tendency to lose yourself in endless trivial tasks tangentially related to the one you really need to do. (O’Brien wrote a program that prompts him every ten minutes, when he’s online, to ask if he’s procrastinating.) Since then, lifestacking has snowballed into a massive self-help program, written and revised constantly by the online global hive mind, that seeks to help you allocate your attention efficiently. Tips range from time-management habits (the 90-second shower) to note-taking techniques (mind mapping) to software shortcuts (how to turn your Gmail into a to-do list) to delightfully retro tech solutions (turning an index card into a portable dry-erase board by covering it with packing tape).