

The brain on overload: Myth of multitasking, significance of memory

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You're not as good at multitasking as you think you are.

"We try to juggle a bunch of things at once, but multitasking is a myth," said Daniel J. Levitin, dean of arts and humanities at Minerva Schools at Keck Graduate Institute. "The brain is really shifting from one activity to the next. You're fracturing your attention into a bunch of little bits." He said that leads to decision fatigue and cloudy thinking.

Levitin made his remarks Sunday during a sold-out Chicago Ideas Week discussion called "The Brain: This Is Your Brain On ..." at Chicago's Cadillac Palace Theatre. The program, presented by Blue Sky Innovation, included featured speakers such as physician/author Deepak Chopra and actress/author Marilu Henner on topics from meditation to drugs.

Levitin said our brains are on overload. In 2011, he said, the average American took in five times more information than in 1986.

Levitin cited studies that show workers do less work at the end of the day and that as the day progresses, creativity and quality drop. He thereby recommended that workers make their most important decisions early in the day. He also suggested cutting down on trivial decisions.

Henner, author of "Total Memory Makeover: Uncover Your Past, Take Charge of Your Future," emphasized the significance of memory.

"Your memory is your story," she said. "It's so important that you remember all of it."

Because memory is tied to adrenaline, she said, people typically remember high and low points of their lives. But linking memories to particular interests — sports, for example — can help inspire memories of other events.

"There are guys who forget their wife's birthday or anniversary, but remember a game from 30 years ago and what they were wearing," she said.

To promote recall, she said, it helps to link any experience to a personal interest and a sense such as taste or smell, she said.

“You can take information from your past, bring it to your present and better inform your future,” Henner said.

Chopra, author of dozens of books focused on New Age spirituality and other topics, discussed dark matter, consciousness, meditation and more. He said meditation changes gene expression and that changes in the way we eat, think, feel and interact socially can affect body expression, including how it ages.

Chopra posed the question: What is the biological basis of consciousness?

"We do not have a clue of what is consciousness," he said. "Imagine a sunset on the ocean. Where is that picture (in our minds coming from)? We have no idea."

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