Multitasking vs. Mindfulness

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My thanks to Karen Dineen Wagner, MD, for guest editing this very useful series on the treatment of mood disorders in adolescents for this April issue of Psychiatric Annals. The articles in this series should be useful for practicing clinicians.

These studies remind us that with adolescents, as well as adults, the efficacy of our medications, as well as psychotherapies, is modest. We frequently need to combine, augment, or switch therapies to reach our goal of remission for the patient.

The articles in this series address depression and its comorbidities; their various treatments; and the goal to avoid what might end up as suicide. Reading this series about adolescents reminded me of a question: When do we develop the capacity to multitask, and how do we balance the efficiency of multitasking with the benefits of living in the moment that mindfulness confers?

Watching a teenager texting while driving quite dramatically supplies an approximate answer to the age of development of multitasking. Nicely bracketing this developmental age at a time before multitasking develops is a memory of driving my three children, 6 through 8 years, through the seemingly endless South Dakota badlands to view Mt. Rushmore — only to have them gleefully and mindfully focusing on chasing a playful chipmunk, while ignoring the awesome representations of Washington, Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Lincoln — despite my futile attempts to direct their attention to the magnificent view.

If we multitask too much, do we spend enough time living in the present? Efficient as multitasking might be, do we lose the capacity to live in the moment? How much of our conscious life do we spend multitasking the business of living or anticipating future problems, and how much do we spend in the moment?

Here’s to the full life. I’m off to do my “zenning.”

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