

BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICESM

The Multitasking Medical Marriage

Moving Toward Deeper Focus

by Virginia Roberts

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We have become a world of multitaskers, doing more than one activity at a time or layering one conversation on top of another. The office of the typical physician is a place where multitasking is a day-to-day occurrence: While two patients are waiting to see you, a nurse hands you prescriptions to be signed and a call comes in from the consultant you've been trying to reach for three days. And the multitasking phenomenon isn't confined to the workplace.

As a marriage and family therapist, I've learned that multitasking is the norm in many physician households. A parent preparing dinner keeps an eye on Johnny, who is doing his homework on the computer. The evening news may be on in the background and the phone regularly rings. Does this sound like a model of efficiency — or is it utter chaos?

Hal, a busy surgeon, and his wife, Sara, were divided on that question. The couple were considering divorce based on Sara's inability to tolerate what she viewed as total confusion in their personal lives. She wanted their home to be a refuge, a safe and quiet haven from the rest of the world. Hal was living at a pace that comes naturally to many physicians: doing more than

one task at a time, while doing few of them in depth. He was used to maximizing his high energy level, just like he did every day in his office and in the OR, which were crisp and efficient. Hal was well known for the number of patients he saw each day, and the hospital was thrilled to also have him on two of its boards.

When he was at home, Hal could take calls while helping his oldest with her homework. He could attend teachers' conferences, leaving to answer pages two or three times during the half-hour meetings. Amazingly, most of the time he could keep track of what had been said and done while he was on the phone.

Although he was an adept task juggler, time constraints kept Hal from giving in-depth attention to any one subject. Multitasking had taken a heavy toll on Hal and Sara's marriage — the very reason they were in my office.

Recognizing differences

"Sara, do you think you are an introvert or an extrovert or a combination of both?" I asked Sara this because the ability to flourish in a multitasking situation is often dependent on personality

type. Introverts are usually, but not always, linear people; they tend to do tasks in order. Extroverts are more global, taking on many projects at once. "I must be mostly an introvert," she answered. "I'm an only child of two teachers, and I remember our house as being quiet and fairly orderly when I was growing up." She said that she longs for the intimacy she believes her parents had. "They spent a lot of one-on-one time together."

As I helped Hal and Sara get to the problem in their marriage, it struck me how very different they were in this area. True, they shared many traits; both were committed Christians, both were in the medical field. On this issue, however, they had come to a definite parting of ways. Sara's anxiety would escalate in the evenings to the point where she was having migraines. She longed for an intimate family d

Next, I turned to Hal, who was busy checking his watch to see how close we were to wrapping up the session. "Can you appreciate Sara's desire for a quiet haven after a long day?"

"I sure can," Hal said. "But she doesn't understand that for me, this sort of energy level is normal; it's how I live my life. My whole day is

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spent fielding several experiences at a time, so for me to slow down and connect with her like she wants me to is next to impossible. I don't think she gets that."

"Oh, I get it," Sara snapped. "I get that the kids and I are just a continuation of your busy day; it's like you come home dragging your office with you."

As is often the case with marital issues, both husband and wife believed they were right. Hal and Sara had polarized and lost the ability to see the partner's point of view. As I asked them what had attracted them to each other when they were dating, I found that the very qualities that were currently dividing them were magnets when they first met. Sara was attracted to Hal's energy level, his constant movement. Hal was attracted to Sara's serenity, what he called her "deep and quiet river."

Neither partner was right or wrong. They were just doing what came naturally to each of them. Both partners were just attempting (and feeling thwarted by the other) to use their individual gifts to enrich each other and their children.

A proper perspective

In working with physician families, I have the opportunity of hearing what spouses and children say about multitasking. One

physician spouse told me that she'd been trying to have an argument with her husband for several weeks, but it was hard to hit a moving target. And this is one of the reasons people multitask — to deal with what is superficial as opposed to what is potentially difficult. Couples avoid the deep discussion, which might take them where they don't want to go. So the argument is avoided, the intimacy is sacrificed, and the gulf widens.

Being the type of person who can accomplish many tasks at once offers huge benefits. In this era of managed care, the more patients one can see in a day, the more activities one can squeeze into a day, the better. Society demands that we learn to layer our activities one upon the other. I've had doctors tell me that they get a "high" from moving at such a frenetic pace; they experience a sense of accomplishment at the end of a busy day. Such an adrenaline rush is seductive. Who wants to give up that sense of control and power? Certainly Hal didn't, and neither do many of my other physician clients, both male and female. The problem comes with the lost deeper connections with spouses and loved ones. Often we sacrifice intimacy for efficiency, as the urgent crowds out the important.

Focus is a quality some of us miss. The person who doesn't keep three or four balls in the air at once gets left behind. Occasionally,

the biggest value of the therapy I do with couples is that it enables them to focus on each other during their time with me. I respectfully ask them to turn off their beepers and cell phones for one hour of freedom.

Medical families learn multitasking from each other; it is contagious from one generation to the next. Even the conversation is layered. Next time you are at a gathering of physicians, watch how many conversations are going on at once. Everyone is talking, and no one is listening. Children who grow up with parents who multitask in turn learn to multitask themselves. And so it goes.

When working with medical marriages, I try to convince couples not to take each other's lack of focused attention personally. Many spouses, especially if they are focusers, tend to think that their spouses are trying to avoid them. Kids sometimes assume that if they just got better grades or were more popular they would get the undivided attention they so crave. As I tell the children, you could stand on your head and turn purple and still not get the attention and connection you need, because it isn't your problem.

The person who is moving too fast won't focus just because his or her spouse or children change something. The multitasker will learn to focus when he or she does

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so intentionally, purposely changing the way he or she interacts with others.

Based on what we already know about Hal and Sara's relationship, we can figure out how their kids got focused attention. We often talk about the kids who try to be super good to get what they need from their parents. Hal and Sara's kids, both boys, did the opposite. Both ended up getting arrested on two separate occasions — one for shoplifting and one for possession of a controlled substance. That got their parents' attention!

The solution

So what is the answer? You need to know how to turn off multitasking. When a teen is depressed or needs a listening ear. When a youngster doesn't make the baseball team. When your spouse tries to get your attention about what is important to him or her. When you become more intentional about how you relate to others, you can teach yourself to be more available for in-depth connections.

It helps to have a sense of humor about multitasking. We have had some hilarious happenings due to my husband's tendency to multitask. One morning, late for

the OR, he charged out the door, jumped in his car, already talking on his cell phone. He backed out of the garage and drove over the newspaper, while his cup of coffee perched precariously on the roof of his Jeep!

Anyway, try the same advice your mother gave you about crossing the street. Stop. Stop moving, talking, running around. Stop. Don't communicate on the run. Don't expect someone who is talking to your back to feel heard. Sit down with the person trying to connect with you. When Jesus met the woman at the well, He sat down while He talked to her.

Next, look. Make eye contact. Even if it's uncomfortable, look at someone as you communicate with him or her. So much of communication is nonverbal and includes your body language and eye contact. Take your hand off the doorknob or drop that remote control, and look.

Finally, listen. Before you diagnose the problem or prescribe a solution, just listen. I call focused listening "cinematic listening." Pretend you are watching a fascinating movie and you want to be sure to catch the ending. Avoid cutting the person off; just hear her out.

I also add touch to stop, look and listen, because Jesus often touched those with whom He connected, especially when He was healing someone.

These three simple steps will help those around you feel valuable. As you slow down and take smaller, more focused bites of life, you will notice changes. Because multitaskers need the balance that focusers have, and focusers need the energy of multitaskers to forge a deeper connection, you will become more whole when you learn both.

Hal and Sara did stop, look, listen and touch — to each other and their children. They balanced multitasking with focusing, and the entire family benefited from more intimacy and depth.

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