

# Think Tank: Multitasking

## Speakers:

**Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor**

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Erica: Hey everybody. Welcome to the very first broadcast of our brand new podcast called Think Tank. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach, and I have two amazing co-hosts with me today, my partners in crime. Ladies, introduce yourselves.

Lynn: Hi, this is Lynn Borteck, and I am also a licensed clinical social worker and marriage and family therapist. And I'm really glad to be taking part in the Think Tank.

Angee: Hey you guys, my name is Angee Bell. I'm a communications manager, and I look forward to talking.

Erica: And we have lots to say, so get ready. So, this very first podcast, we are talking about multitasking and how basically there's no such thing. So, that might come as a shock to lots of people. Lynn, do you want to talk a little bit about why multitasking is a myth?

Lynn: Sure. Multitasking, I mean, we may think that we're able to multitask, and most people, if you stop right now while you're listening to us and look at how many things you have going on, like you may have your laptop open, you may be glancing at your email, you may be receiving some IMs, you may have your phone available so you can see who might be calling in. Most of us try, or multitasking, I should say, is a part of our lives these days, but it really, really doesn't work. And it doesn't work because it, basically, makes us more anxious because we lose focus. You really can't do more than one thing at once, and it also stops you from getting into a flow. You can't just start concentrating on something and stay with it because you've got other things that might be making little alert sounds and so forth, and when you're not in a flow, you're really not getting things done. Also, it causes more mistakes, that's what I was talking about with flow, and it keeps your productivity from being as good as it

might be, because there've been a million studies that find that when people are trying to multitask, they can have the same poor outcomes as if they're trying to do things after they've had a bad night's sleep.

Erica: I want to argue about multitasking. I'm going to be argumentative because... Okay, I get the science of it, right? That your brain can only pay attention to one thing a time, but I mean, I just feel like not multitasking may not be realistic, right? Like solo tasking, is that even a real thing, to solo task?

Angee: Well, I mean, I think it can be argued, and you're right in saying that, is it a reality? Right? In today's world, when we're expected to do so much at one time, you're talking about having all those windows open and instant messages, it's because everybody is looking to do different things at the same time. To have a conference call, to send emails, to send an instant message, and beyond just the computer in your day-to-day. Like Erica, I know you are a perfect example of managing your children and making meetings, trying to find time for yourself as well. I mean, it's incredible how much we're expected to handle these days, so it's definitely an argument-able topic for sure.

Erica: I mean, I'm not going to say that I'm doing things well. I'm doing a million things, but I'm probably not doing any of them well, right? Three kids, work, phone calls, emails, notifications, dishes, laundry, the list goes on and on. I'm probably not doing any of those things as well when I'm doing all of them.

Lynn: I was going to ask if you think that it makes you anxious to be trying to do all that once.

Angee: Yes. Yes. Yes. The short answer is yes, but I think what you were saying, though, about single tasking, there's so much to be said about that, because single tasking can get so much more accomplished. You can focus on one task at a time, your creativity is flowing, you have that flow, that state of keeping going and getting the project done, whatever you're focusing on. So, there's definitely a time for that, and you should make time for that. But I think that with everything else that we have going on, there are some things that maybe don't take quite as much focus that we could do, perhaps, at the same time. Maybe not at the same exact time, but bouncing back between a few different things.

Erica: Because what the science says is that, really, there's no such thing as multitasking. Right? That's what the science says. Your brain cannot

actually do two things at once, but in actuality, what your brain is doing is switching from one task to the other. It's just doing it so quickly that you think you're doing two things at once, so you're switching tasks, you're writing an article, and then you're switching to laundry and then you're switching to the article and back and forth, you're just having bigger gaps in between. Right?

Angee: Exactly. It's like rubbing your belly and patting your head. Why is that so hard? That's a very sub level version of multitasking, but that's a version of it.

Lynn: So, going back to a day before you guys, a long time ago, it was considered a no-no for me to do my homework in front of the television. My parents would make me turn off the TV so I could concentrate on my homework. Nowadays, that's like archaic. Of course you can do your homework in front of the TV because not only do you have the TV on, but you have all kinds of other things going on as well. And it really makes me wonder if the quality of what we're able to turn out has changed.

Erica: I mean, I don't let my kids do their homework in front of the TV because they don't get it done. They just stare at the TV and the homework is not getting touched. We've had to start moving them into a room that has fewer distractions. And my son has ADHD, an attentive type, so he's very easily distracted. So, we have to really remove other things while he is trying to do something.

Angee: I think the big thing with kids and distractions for homework, if we're going to talk about kids for a moment, is a lot of the times the teachers assign the homework on computers these days, so they have to get on the computer just to download their homework assignment and then, often, they have to research things. And instead of going to a library, as you would in the past, you're researching on your computer, but it's really easy to just open another tab and say, "Oh, let's see what's going on the social media website." Or maybe you have an instant message pop up while you're working on your homework. So, it's having that device and that distraction all there within that same device that you're supposed to do your homework on that can be so distracting. But I agree. I don't think having the TV on is necessarily acceptable today while you're doing homework, but the computer is definitely something that's very distracting for kids.

Lynn: That's such a good point that the teachers incorporate use of the computer. You have to use the computer. But I wonder if that's any

different than when I was doing my homework, and in the middle if I needed to look something up, I had to put the homework down, go and get the encyclopedia, if anybody remembers that, and look up something in the encyclopedia or maybe even the dictionary because I didn't have a dictionary right at my fingertips online. So, there were constant interruptions in that sense, too. Maybe it's all the same and it's just different gadgets.

Angee: It could be. It could be, but I do think that part of, if you're writing a paper and you have to look something up in an encyclopedia or a dictionary, I wouldn't call that a distraction. To me, that's part of the process, right? Of doing the homework. To me, a distraction would be, you're doing your homework and you're thinking of a song or something that you read before that's completely irrelevant to your homework and you go and look that up just to get it off your mind. That's a distraction, in my mind, not looking up something more that has something to do with the homework.

Erica: That makes sense. Looking it up IS an extension of the task. It's all still the same task.

Lynn: The only thing is that they describe that kind of change, any kind of change, as a switching cost. That when you have to switch from one thing to another, any kind of switch, that you're having to un-focus, refocus, do what it is that you're trying to do, then un-focus from that, refocus into the other task. And that's one of the things that they call switching costs.

Erica: Because it takes mental energy for your brain to change focus from one task to another. That makes sense. I'll be working on something and then I'll get an email notification or an IM, and so then I stop what I'm doing, I switch over to that, I respond to that message, and then I have that moment where I go blank and I can't remember what I was doing and I'm like, "Wait, what? What was I doing? What was I saying? What was that thing?" And it takes me mental energy to get back to where I was.

Angee: Yeah. I would say that happens to me just about every day, especially at the end of the day, because typically, I'll have a lot of meetings, emails, instant messages, but towards the end of the day, those start to taper off. And by the time I have free time, I have to almost take 15 to 20 minutes to reset myself and say, "Okay, what did I need to work on today?" And I look at my list and try to figure out what I was doing from one step to the next. Because that multitasking can almost feel like you're in a tornado, right? It can almost feel like you're twirling around in

this tornado or this hurricane is coming at you, and you're trying to manage it all. And then, by the time it's passed, you almost feel dizzy. Like, "Oh, okay." So, it's like a breath of fresh air to to say, "Okay, I'm going to do this one thing for the next 30 minutes," and it feels great to me.

Lynn: I also feel like it forces me to reprioritize all day, because if I'm working on something and then I get an email that somebody needs something looked at right away, or there's some kind of a course that we're supposed to take and it's due ASAP, that I'll say to myself, "Oh, all right. Well, whatever I'm working on can now take the backseat to looking at this person's thing that they just sent me, that they want me to look at, and then I'll just knock off that course and be done with it so they don't keep bothering me about a course. And then I'll go back to it." So, it also feels like reprioritizing all day-

Erica: I think there are some tasks though that can be complementary depending on what the task is and what it's demanding from me. Take for example, if I'm writing or if I'm talking, I can't do both of those things at the same time, or if I'm writing and I'm listening to a podcast, I can't do those things at the same time because they all involve language and they all involve words. But I feel like I can write something and have music playing in the background if it doesn't have any... like especially classical music where it's just instrumental, that I find to be the most complimentary, or I can watch TV and fold laundry at the same time because I feel like those use different parts of my brain.

Angee: Yeah. Yeah, totally. I can listen to a podcast and make dinner, but I did find that if I'm making a new recipe or if I'm doing something really creative and different in my cooking... not that I do the same thing every day at all. I like to do different things. But if it's something brand new and I've never done it before and I've got to remember all these new steps and I'm listening to a podcast, it's really distracting because I'm trying to really listen to what they're saying and the information, and then I'm trying to process my thoughts in my head of the next step I have to do to make this meal turn out right.

Angee: It's very distracting. But if I'm cooking something that's one of my regular go-tos and I know what I'm doing and I'm in the zone, I can listen to a podcast all day and do that. It's definitely, it's that cognitive thinking. When you're trying to really process things in your mind and you have other language, other words coming at you, it can be so distracting. Like you said with the music, I can listen to classical music while I'm working or writing or drawing, but if I'm listening to music with words, that even

can be almost too distracting to me because I like to sing. I won't sing for you right now, but-

Erica: Sing. Sing a song.

Angee: No singing. But I will try to sing along with the music, and if I'm trying to type an email, it's completely distracting to me, so I totally agree.

Erica: I wonder if also part of it just comes down to how much attention the task needs because it makes me think of, like driving in the car, I can listen to music, I can listen to podcasts, I can do all those things, but if I am going somewhere I've never been before, even with the GPS, if I'm really trying to pay attention to where I'm going, I have to turn off the radio. I need it quiet so I can really pay attention.

Lynn: I read something about selective attention that depending upon the kind of attention that it needs, it can affect whether you can do something else. It's like it depends upon what type of interference. I'm going to talk about my newest passion, which is walking while listening to a book on Audible. Not only do I find it doable, but I find it really, really pleasurable in that I feel like I'm getting a book, I'm going through a book, and I'm getting my exercise. I think that that's about selective attention and what type of interference you're dealing with, right?

Erica: Because you don't have to think about how to walk. Your body knows how to do that.

Angee: My only thing about that is... and that scares me about doing that kind of thing is like are you walking on a circle track or something? You're not crossing the street. It's not like [inaudible 00:15:52] traffic because I feel like those outside noises sometimes need to come in, like if someone's honking at the horn because you're walking into the middle of the street and you're not looking both ways or something, it might be something we want to hear.

Erica: They make new special ear buds like those. I have some.

Angee: Really?

Erica: Yeah. They don't go in your ears. They go on top of your ears, like kind of like... I don't know. I can't explain it, but they communicate sound by bone conductivity, and so you can still hear the things around you.

Angee: Interesting. That's cool. Wow.

Erica: Yeah.

Lynn: That just made me realize that when I do that, when I walk and listen to my Audible, or even if I walk and talk on the phone, I only wear one of my two ear plugs, and so I'm always able to hear the sounds around me-

Angee: Oh.

Lynn: ... in addition to the sound of whether what I'm listening to or who I'm talking to, but that's probably just another form of multitasking.

Erica: Here's the question: Are some people better at multitasking than others?

Angee: People being children, adults, older adults?

Erica: I don't know, like are some people just wired differently so that they are just really good at multitasking?

Lynn: According to the stuff that I looked into, nobody should really be able to do it. But I wonder if the point you've made is that some people can train themselves, and maybe they're not giving the same kind of in depth attention that they would if they were mono-tasking, but maybe they are able to jump from one thing to another and do whatever it is that they need to do without losing... without the switching costs being so high.

Angee: I think if there was one type of person that jumps out at me as possibly being higher multitasker, to me, I would think it could be mothers because they are constantly juggling a lot of things between the children... or an active father as well between children and between... A lot of times, mothers these days are working, so between your job, your children, taking care of the house, it can be a very busy lifestyle. I would think maybe mothers would be one of those ones that are possibly better at multitasking since, over the years, it's sort of been their role to take care of the children in the house, and now work has added to all of that.

Erica: Yeah, I mean, I'll just say, having three kids and working full time, I just don't know that I could not multitask. I have to get dinner in the oven, and then I need to do homework, and then I need to handle text messages from another parent because my kid's on a play date. There are a lot of things that are going sometimes all at the same time, but if I

were like, "I can't answer your text message until dinner is out of the oven," like nothing would happen. It just... You know. Yeah.

Lynn: So-

Erica: I mean-

Lynn: ... but you work at home. You work at home, so, well, what about when your kids are all in school and if you are not working at home, you'd actually be leaving the premises, and so you wouldn't have to attend to all those things?

Erica: Yeah, I think definitely working at home, it's amazing. It provides amazing flexibility, but it offers some unique challenges. My kids, their school day starts late, so I usually start work while I'm still getting them ready for school, and so I am definitely doing a lot of task switching back and forth and back and forth between IMs and emails and trying to get other things checked off my to do list, meanwhile telling them to brush their teeth and eat their breakfast and get their backpacks ready. Usually, I have to say those things like a million times, so... and this morning like my seven-year-old locked my nine-year-old out of the house. I look out the window, and my nine-year-old was trying to climb a fence. It was real life.

Erica: I will say my husband, who is in that other group, he goes into an office, so he is Dad in the morning. Then he leaves, and then he is worker bee man during the day for his 9:00 to 5:00. Then he gets home around 6:00 at night, and then he's Dad again. But I am jealous of him because he gets to just wear one hat at a time, I feel like, whereas I'm wearing all the hats all of them.

Angee: You got the crazy hat.

Erica: I got a crazy hat. Yes, I get like the Mad Hatter hat. I don't get to just be like, "I'm only going to wear one hat at a time." I don't get that luxury.

Lynn: But during the times that I am able to leave one thing and go to another and really apply myself, I find myself making lists of the other things that I need to do, so I'm not actually doing them, but I am still multitasking in my subconscious about all the things I could or should or will be getting done, and I am always making lists of those things, whereas if I was working at home, I could knock off a bunch of things at once, although I'd be multitasking.



Angee: Oh, goodness. I think I'm multitasking in my sleep then because I'm sitting there making lists as I'm going to bed in my head, and then I dream about my job, and I'm multitasking in my dream.

Erica: Let's talk about how people can maybe... like are we in agreement that eliminating multitasking just probably is not, like that just probably isn't feasible. You probably aren't going to eliminate it.

Lynn: Yes.

Erica: Are we on the same page there? Okay. How do people navigate this? How do they get more done, recognizing that maybe multitasking isn't always that helpful?

Angee: Yeah, I mean, I think there's a few tips that people can take. There's a couple of little simple things that they can do to help work it into their schedule. I don't think, like you said, eliminating multitasking is reality, but I think to start, creating a daily schedule and really having dedicated time to focus on those things that need that additional attention. Like in what I do, part of my job is to create videos, and when I'm creating videos, it takes so much more attention. I have to edit the audio, edit the video, mix it together, find stock to mix in as well. It's so much more focused work, so I usually block off a good couple of hours on my schedule to ensure that I'm going to have that time alone on focus on that.

Angee: Not only will I block the time, but a lot of times, I'll even exit my email or exit other distracting applications that I might have open so I can really focus on that work. But then there's other times in the day where I might have multiple things going on at once, and I'm managing those, but I have to make sure that I stick to my schedule. When that time comes for my focus work that I zone in, I really focus on that.

Lynn: Those are great ideas.

Erica: Lynn, what's your favorite tip?

Lynn: Well, one thing that I do is I try not to clutter up my workspace with all of the other things, like my bills and mail that I haven't gotten to yet and-

Lynn: And mail that I haven't gotten to yet and unreturned phone messages on little sticky things. I try to remove them from my workplace when I have scheduled, like Angee suggested, when I've scheduled, okay, I'm going to

sit and do whatever it is. Knock out this article in an hour. I try to get rid of things that are going to grab my attention.

Angee: That's great. So you're saying even having a clean desk, having things a little bit more... I'm looking at my desk and it's a mess. I've got three or four notepads of different lists and things scribbled out and a bunch of toys everywhere. The toys are good, they help my creativity. But if so, are you saying to have an actual clean desk and because that could even distract your mind to see all of that stuff there?

Lynn: Yeah. For me, I think that that's the case and in fact it's probably why every single day I make my bed and straighten up my bedroom because I know that when I come back to it later in the day, I'm going to feel really great about it being clutter-free and stuff like that. And it's just a sense of organization and I think when I apply it to my work, I think that it helps that way to just kind of not having distractions really visible and calling out my name.

Angee: Oh my gosh, I'm so glad you mentioned the make your bed thing because that's totally me. If I don't make my bed, I just feel like the day hasn't really started until that bed is made.

Erica: Me too, absolutely

Lynn: Me too.

Angee: ... it's the first thing I did. I get out of my bed and I immediately make the bed and if I don't then I'm just like, I feel broken inside. I'm like, "The beds not made, I can't do anything yet."

Lynn: I just feel messy all day. It's as if I haven't brushed my teeth or something. It's part of my ritual to make my bed.

Angee: Yes. I'm so glad you said that. I'm not the only one.

Erica: You're not the only one. And I think Charles Duhigg in his book on habits, he talks about making your bed being, what does he call it? Like a foundational habit or something. And so it's linked to all these other productivity things if you make your bed.

Angee: That's so interesting. Yeah.

Erica: But I do think it's important to take that time to just optimize your work environment and just really try and get rid of distractions. I mean, if I'm going into a conversation or a task or even this podcast where I know I need to give my full attention, I will turn off my phone, I will turn off the sounds on the notifications for my computer. I will have to, ideally I spend some time clearing off my desk working at home again with kids. My kids like to come and play office in my desk and so you never know what you're going to find, like Legos on my desk.

Erica: So removing those distractions I think can, it pays off to spend that extra time turning things off and when there's something you really need to pay attention to and give your focus to.

Lynn: I think something else that's really helpful is, I have a Fitbit and my Fitbit vibrates every so often to remind me to take 250 steps and I think that similar to the Fitbit, I think it's really good to, when you talk about scheduling your day, to schedule in some breaks so that you know that you have specific, a 15 minutes slot set aside to go for a walk or play with the dog or play with the kids or just sit outside on the deck or do whatever. So that I think scheduling in breaks is another good way to cut down a little bit on multitasking.

Angee: That's a great point and I think it also helps us switch better, right? Because that switching is because as we already said, technically you cannot do two things at the same time. You're just switching them really fast. But sometimes switching from one thing to a way more difficult thing or to a way more complex thing can be really confusing and challenging to just jump into it. So having those little breaks can help us refocus and have a smoother transition to the next thing that we're going to do.

Lynn: I just thought of a really important reason not to multitask and I learned a lesson the hard way last week because I came home from something that I rushed out to do. I was in a total state of rushing and making phone calls from my car and doing my errands and I rushed back into the house because I had a meeting and I was still on the telephone and I had something in the car that I needed to take in with me. And I hate to tell you this, I am almost embarrassed to tell you this, but I left my car running and didn't realize it for two hours. Yeah, there's multitasking at its most dangerous.

Lynn: I didn't realize it until a repair man came to my house two hours later and went into my garage and almost got knocked over by all the gas

smells and everything in there and came upstairs to me and said, "Oh my God, do you know that your car is on?" And I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. I was so distracted when I pulled into the garage." And I'm closing the garage door opener. I'm grabbing some things that I need to take inside. I'm on the phone with a friend and I have one of those keyless cars that you don't have to turn a key. So it's just remembering to press a button. And that really woke me up to some of the dangers of multitasking.

Angee: God, that's so scary. Oh my goodness. And that's such a good point because we think about multitasking and the first thing that you kind of think of is productivity, I'm getting two things done at once. I'm getting a lot of things done and it's productive, it's efficient, it's a great thing to do, but there's so many things about it that can be really dangerous. We even talked about before, walking with your headphones on and not paying attention to the world around you. You could, I've seen people walk into walls before.

Erica: Oh yeah. Texting and driving, texting and driving is a big one.

Angee: Yes, that's a huge one. And it's against the law in a lot of states now. I mean, that's crazy, Lynn. That's scary.

Lynn: It was really scary. I now have a big sign hanging in my garage when I pull in that says turn it off. I'm going to have to take it down when my kids come over because they'll have me, I don't know, they'll be worried about me if they see it. They'll ask me what it is. I'll have to make up something.

Erica: So what's the takeaway from today? Multitasking, first of all, it isn't really a thing. Your brain can't do two things at once. So you're actually switching between tasks and also you might leave your car on in the garage and have to put up a very confusing sign.

Angee: I mean, takeaway for me I think is that multitasking is part of life. It is part of what we do. But if we're aware of the dangers of multitasking, of the loss of productivity, of multitasking, then I think we can manage it better, right? We can at least start to try new things to find that focus time, remove distractions so that some work, and some things that we're trying to do, we can put more focus and more creativity into. But I do think it's a reality and that we're going to continue to do it. It can't be controlled from that level, but I think at least being aware is a start.

Lynn: Well, I so agree with Angee and I think even just having this discussion about it will make, I hope, will make people just think about how much

they multitask and the fact that you can't do 15 things at once and maybe use some selectivity in terms of what you leave on and what and what you turn off when you're trying to get something done. And definitely to turn off your car in the garage for sure.

Angee: Very true. So that concludes our first podcast think tank. Thank you ladies for being here and to all of our listeners, stay tuned and check in next month when we're going to talk about teens and parenting. Yikes. We're going to give you some awesome tips though.

Erica: Bye y'all.

Angee: Bye.

Lynn: Buh-bye.