Compartmentalize

When I was a college freshman, a simple reading assignment could take hours. I would read a little, chat a little, read a little, eat a little, and so on. But my sophomore year, when I had added in a paid position, additional volunteering, and more credits, I was much more focused. For the most part, when I was working on schoolwork, I was working on schoolwork. When I was having fun, I was having fun. I had started to learn to compartmentalize, so one activity wasn't spilling into another.

That focus disappeared when I entered the business world. I became a multi-tasker, juggling lots of tasks and projects all at once. I wore that label like a badge of honor for years at work and at home, until I started reading about how multi-tasking is a myth and how switch-tasking is terrible for your brain.

So I've been working on compartmentalizing, to keep worries and stresses from infringing on fun times and to keep distractions from threatening projects that need my full focus. When I feel overwhelmed by real life, I will write a list of worries and designate a specific time to think about them. Often when I go back to them, many of the worries have taken care of themselves, and I'm in a better position to handle the others.

When I need to really focus on something in one compartment, I almost put a border around it. Before I start the task, I select a certain play list or focused music station. I write a note, "It's 10:07 and I'm working on payroll analysis." When feasible, I let others know what I'm working on or tell them I really need to concentrate. And I often plan what I'm going to do exactly after it, as a reward or as a break. Setting these conditions, which takes only a minute or two, can set up the next 30, 45 or 60 minutes - or even longer - of flow.

It's not only that it's better for your brain. Working on one thing at a time or thinking about one thing at a time is very satisfying.

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