

Shifting focus a lot at work could wreck your diet

May 6 2011, By Nanci Hellmich

People who continually change gears to do different tasks may find it reduces their concentration and self-control in other areas of their lives.

Findings from a new study show that frequently switching your mind-set or focus uses a lot of self-control. This may leave you with less ability to control your temper, to resist cheating on your diet or to continue your exercise routine, says Ryan Hamilton, assistant professor of marketing at Emory University.

If staff cutbacks at work make it necessary for employees to do more different kinds of tasks, that could have an impact, he says. And it could apply to people at home, too.

"If you are checking your BlackBerry while helping your kids do their homework, you are switching tasks that require different perspectives. That can be taxing on the executive function of your brain and reduce your ability to use self-control in other areas of your life."

Hamilton and colleagues at two other universities conducted five experiments involving 300 people in which the participants were required to do tasks that required either switching their mind-set or maintaining a consistent mind-set.

Afterward, the researchers measured participants' ability to do other tasks that required self-control, discipline and endurance.

In one experiment, the participants played a simple geometric-shape evaluation game. One group was rewarded with points for being right. Another group was penalized for answering incorrectly. A third group had to switch numerous times between the two scoring systems.

Then all attempted to complete a mathematical puzzle that had no solution. Participants who had to use different scoring systems, thus changing their mind-set, gave up on the puzzle in an average of five minutes. Those in the other groups worked on it for an average of 10 minutes before they gave up.

"The group that switched mind-sets wasn't as persistent. That shows a failure of [concentration](#), which requires self-control," Hamilton says.

In another experiment, bilingual people were asked to answer a questionnaire in either a single language or in two different languages. Afterward, they held a hand grip as long as they could. The group that answered in a single language held the grip 19 seconds longer than those in the group that switched languages.

"Physical [endurance](#) is another thing that requires [self-control](#)," Hamilton says. This is especially important for exercise, he says.

Kathleen Vohs, another author of the study and a marketing professor at the University of Minnesota, says this research helps explain why "people who approach tasks with a persistent way of operating ... may actually be really smart, because they are conserving their mental energy to do the tough stuff."

The findings are reported in the May issue of "Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes."

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