

Our Battle with Time

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I could be wrong, but it seems to me the word “multi-tasking” entered our lexicon about the same time the word “downsizing” was introduced in the workplace to identify a planned reduction in the workforce in order to cut costs. As employees were being laid off, those who kept their jobs suddenly found themselves with an increased workload and additional responsibilities. In an attempt to rise to the challenge, employees found themselves working simultaneously on multiple tasks in order to try to keep their heads above water. And thus the practice of multitasking was born to help meet the ever increasing demands on their time and attention. However, what we have since learned is that multi-tasking takes more time in the long run and increases errors. An article on the American Psychological Association website suggests that the process of trying to do too many things at once and shifting between tasks can negatively impact productivity as much as 40% (<http://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask.aspx>).

For those us who work in the helping professions, I believe there are additional factors that motivate us to take on too much. And the primary culprit is also that attribute that brings us to our chosen profession in the first place, and that is our capacity for empathy. We see and feel such great need in the world, and that moves us to action in order to help relieve suffering, educate and advocate for others. We care and we want to do something about it when people are in need. Ours is powerful and meaningful work that helps make the world a better place.

However, this focus on caring for others can overshadow a recognition of our own needs. The importance of self-care within the helping professions has taken root and has become part of our conversations about job satisfaction, employee retention and over-all employee health. We help people identify things they enjoy doing outside of work, offer fitness classes, and educate about healthful diets. However, I believe the greatest area of need has to do with recognizing and knowing our limits and the ability to protect ourselves by communicating when we feel we cannot do more. We face many challenges in doing so, but one significant challenge is being able to accurately gauge when we have too much on our plates.

Many times we are the only ones who know all that we are juggling. And in addition, for each of our responsibilities we can also speak to a level of magnitude for each, identifying the complexity and emotional intensity associated with the task or responsibility. However, it's hard to hold all of this in front of us in the moment when we are asked for our assistance. We often respond reflexively and agree because we are helpers by nature. Without appropriate time to reflect, we simply pile this new responsibility on the back of our cart without conducting an inventory of all that is already there. As we then amble down the road we often find that we are dropping things from our cart, stumbling breathlessly as we try to move our gigantic load forward.

To begin with, we need to be able to ask for time to consider a request before taking on an additional responsibility, especially if we sense that we may already be overloaded or are reaching our limit. Next we need to create an assessment system that takes into account not only the number of tasks and responsibilities we have, but also the intensity level of each, being mindful of how many tasks carry an attribution of high intensity. We can start by making a list of all of our current responsibilities and assigning each an intensity level (1 being of the lowest intensity, and 10 being the highest.) Creating this list can help us get a better grip on all we have to do. The intensity rating then provides us with additional information to consider regarding the total impact and weight of all our responsibilities and tasks. Finally, we can add another designation to each item describing whether it is a permanent or temporary responsibility. Using a system such as this can help us step back and accurately assess our workload before agreeing to take on more.

This reflective, self-care approach can be used individually or with an administrative/reflective supervisor. It can help us slow down the process in order to make the best decision with an eye on keeping everything manageable. As individuals, we are also responsible for maintaining an early childhood workforce that is of the highest quality in order to provide high quality, consistent services to young children and families. We can do our part by attending to self-care so we continue to be healthy, happy, and effective in our work.

Resource:

Lipsky, L. V., & Burk, C. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: an everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler .