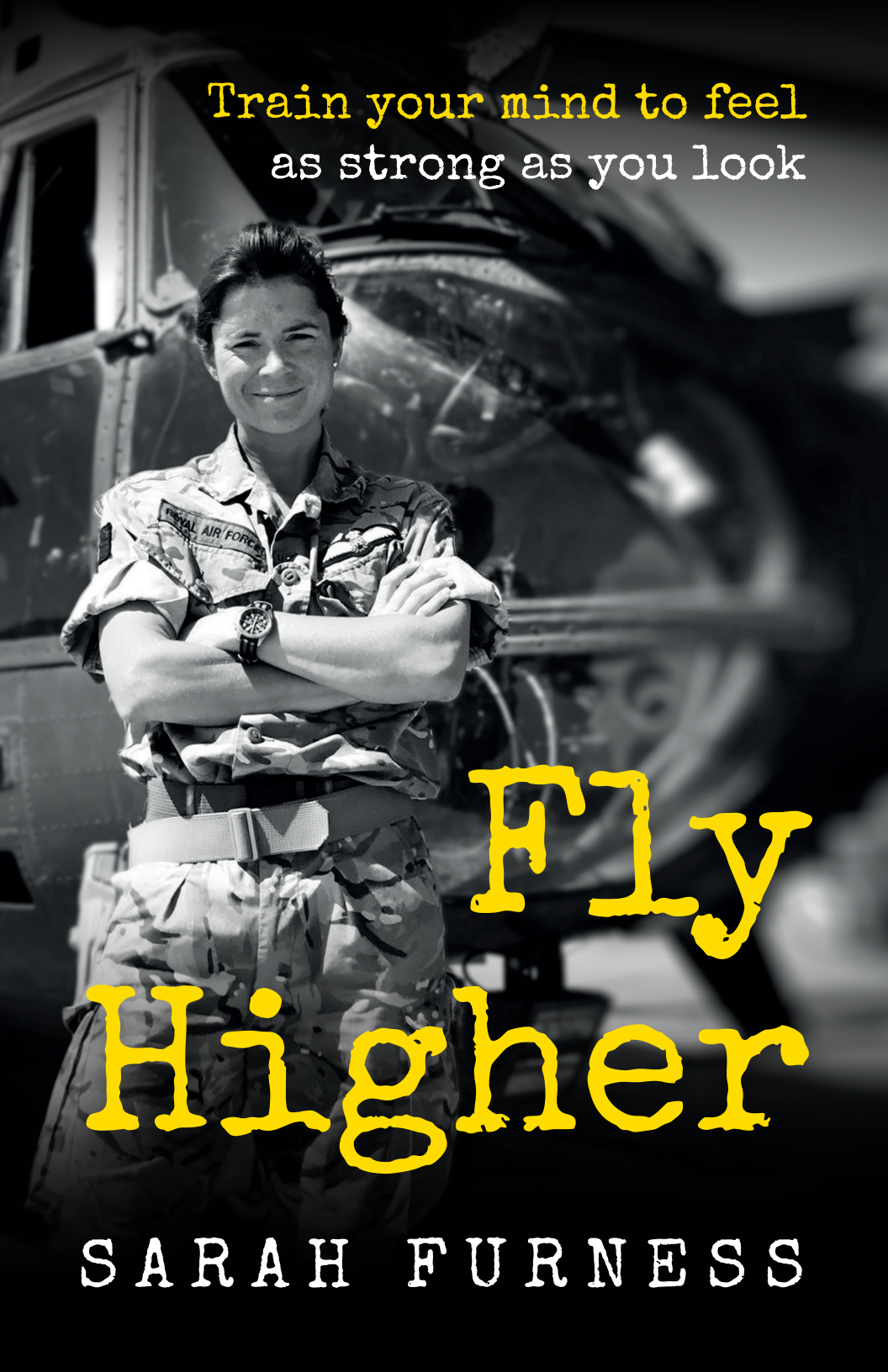




Train your mind to feel
as strong as you look

Fly Higher

SARAH FURNESS

'A must-read for "extraordinary everyday" women and men!'

Harriet Green OBE, global business chair, founder and philanthropist

Do people describe you as strong?
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but inwardly plagued by self-doubt,
self-pity or even self-loathing?**

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Sarah Furness served twenty-one years in the RAF as a Squadron Leader and helicopter pilot. She led on combat operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and taught at the world-class Defence Academy of the UK. She is a qualified mindfulness coach, cognitive behavioural therapist and human factors facilitator.

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'Gripping, real, honest and fun.'

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Praise

‘Fly Higher is the best book I’ve read for a long time.

The balance of humour, personal reflection and self-help is spot on. Not only is it hard to put down, but the techniques can easily be implemented in your daily life from the word go. Outstanding!’

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‘A Masterclass in writing a book that is well crafted, honest, thought provoking and highly addictive!’

— **Natalie Maddox-Hussain, Commercial Lead, Defence Digital,
and Events Lead, Defence Women’s Network**

‘I love the humility and humour in this book. Sarah helps us move from feeling that we’re not enough to implementing practical top tips around the power of practice, the importance of sleep and, ultimately, flying higher! A must-read for extraordinary everyday women and men.’

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founder and philanthropist**

‘Gripping, real, honest and fun, this is personal development for people who don’t like personal development. Utterly Brilliant.’

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‘*Fly Higher* gives the reader a fascinating opportunity to consider how much more easily we could deal with life’s challenge by making better choices, focusing on what’s important and understanding our mindset. Sarah Furness’s excellent book helps the reader combat the difficulties and enjoy the highlights of the human condition.’

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— **Natalie Barton, Digital Communities and Marketing Officer, Propertymark**

‘*Fly Higher* is a penetrating, funny and inspiring book whose alchemy is combat, compassion and choice.’

— **Andrew Turner, Air Marshal and Deputy Commander, RAF**

‘Presented in an engaging, no-nonsense style, *Fly Higher* is essential reading for those of us who wish to better manage our inner critic. Packed full of practical and science-based advice, this book will help you retrain your brain to navigate the full maelstrom of life.’

— **Russell Poynter-Brown, Management Consultant
and Performance coach**

‘Since reading this book, I have actually changed one of my terrible habits of flitting between about sixty different jobs thinking I am being dead clever and getting shit done by multitasking. This morning I have set the goal of concentrating on what *needs* to get done in the now, and ‘ping’ – a bulb has just been lit!’

— **Richard Wade, Director, Risk and Safety Compliances Ltd**

‘A practical and entertaining life hack book born from Sarah’s own amazing journey – this is not guesswork! An infectious read.’

— **Kay Kennedy, Director, Kennedy Executive Recruitment**

‘As a former combat helicopter pilot, Sarah has certainly taken the right-hand seat in her approach to a career as a life coach. This book, based on Sarah’s experiences, and backed by academic research, is very much a companion manual for mindful living.’

— **Nigel Whittaker, Air Safety Manager, MOD**

‘We cannot all be superhuman, but we can all be super humans. In this book Sarah has captured the true meaning of being mindful and what it takes to perform under pressure. She smashes some business myths, is brutally honest about her own thought processes and failings, and guides the reader through simple but highly effective tools to help ordinary people be extraordinary. This isn’t a story about helicopters or combat missions, but a story about how everyone can fly high, remain focused and complete their own personal missions.’

— **Dr Lee Williams MBA, [Coach/Speaker], [JOWSA Consulting Ltd]**

‘Mindfulness and military service are two things you would not imagine being together in the same book. However, Sarah successfully combines mindfulness techniques with her experience as an RAF helicopter pilot to produce a practical guide on how to deal with the stresses and strains of modern life – along with some pretty darn cool stories as well.’

— **Andrew Speirs, founder, Lens Digital**

Train your mind to feel
as strong as you look

Fly Higher

SARAH FURNESS

R^ethink

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Rethink Press
(www.rethinkpress.com)

978-1-78133-706-6

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*For my mother, Helen,
who taught me to be brave.
And for my son, Arthur,
who taught me everything else.*

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2

Stop Multitasking

I remember the first time in my RAF career that I thought I was going to die. We were flying in a formation of helicopters at a low level through a steep-sided, winding valley. When you fly at low level (about treetop height), there are quite a few things you need to avoid hitting:

- The ground
- Other aircraft
- Birds
- Cable and wires

Believe it or not, electricity wires are pretty much invisible to the naked eye when you're flying at 120 knots. You need to look for pylons to spot wires and avoid them. When you are down in the valley, the pylons are often above you on the ridgeline, meaning you have to keep an eye on the map, so you know where to look for them. This is why we need to practise low-level flying so often. It's high risk and there's a lot to think about, so it requires high levels of competence. It's also terrific fun.

On this day, I was flying through a valley in Morocco. There was a small mountain road that wound itself around the valley sides and I remember saying (perhaps a little arrogantly), ‘If a car can get round it, so can a helicopter.’ My instructor chuckled and replied, ‘I think I might tighten my harness for this one.’ What happened next, happened incredibly quickly.

We were all having a great time and then my instructor, who was in the seat next to me, suddenly shouted, ‘Fuck!’ The canopy shattered and then everything got noisy in the cockpit. I immediately realised we had hit wires and was certain that these wires would now be wrapping themselves around my tail rotor. I’d seen the videos of what happens to helicopters when their tail rotors fail, and I knew that spinning into the ground at 100 G was imminent. I remember dreamily thinking, ‘So this is how I’m going to die,’ and feeling quite pleased it would all be over quickly. Then came four words I will never forget.

‘Fly the aircraft, Sarah,’ my instructor shouted. And just like that, my attention was back in the cockpit.



The view from the jump seat seconds after we hit high-tension electricity cables in Morocco

Why am I telling you this story? Well, because I want you to be impressed by my bravery of course (I joke), but seriously, this story is the perfect vehicle to demonstrate why multitasking is literally the worst idea the twenty-first century has ever had. If you remember nothing else from this chapter, please let these words sink in: your attention cannot be in two places at once.

The reality of multitasking

We cannot multitask. That's right, just when you thought multitasking was the thing that was allowing you to keep smashing those work tasks out of the park, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you. Multitasking actually decreases our productivity, takes more time out of our day, impacts our decision-making, makes us more stupid and increases our stress levels.⁵ Seriously, I am not making this shit up. This is all backed by science, and to demonstrate it, I'm going to ask you to do a little exercise. You'll need a pen, a notebook or piece of paper, and a stopwatch.

Exercise: Where is my focus?

I'd like you to write 'Where is my focus?' in your notebook on two lines like the example below. Time yourself doing this.

Where is
my focus?

5 K Cherry, 'How multitasking affects productivity and brain health', *verywellmind* (July 2021), www.verywellmind.com/multitasking-2795003, accessed 26 May 2022

Now do the same exercise again, but this time, I want you to switch from the top line to the bottom line after each letter. Write *W* and then go down to the bottom line and write *m*, then up to the top line and write *h*, and then down to the bottom and write *y*, and then up to the top... You get the idea. Time yourself doing this and reflect on the following:

- What differences did you notice?
- How long did each exercise take?
- What was the standard of writing on each?
- How did it feel to complete the task the second time?

These are the typical results of the second part of the exercise:

- It takes longer.
- You have to really think about it.
- You space out the lettering or use capitals to make the task easier.
- Your standard of writing decreases.
- It can feel stressful, though some people find it quite enjoyable.

Why? Well, here's the science bit.

The science bit

MRI scans have shown that when we try to do two things at once, the brain tries to split itself into two (the logical, problem-solving cortex and the more primitive and jumpier

survival ‘chimp’ brain) and delegate one of the tasks to the ‘automatic’ part of the brain. For this to be possible, one of those tasks needs to be something we can do without thinking about it. For most of us, writing is a task we don’t have to think about too much, but if I make the task harder, so that both tasks require input from the cognitive part of the brain, we must do something called ‘task switching’.⁶ We modelled this when we switched from the top line to the bottom line in the last exercise. When the brain has to switch from task to task, it is having to use cognitive functions to activate task switching and ‘rule activation processes’. For example:

- **Task switching:** ‘I’m now switching from writing an email to reading a notification that’s popped up.’
- **Rule activation processes:** ‘The rule for writing an email is that I use a QWERTY keyboard so that I know where to position my fingers to type, and the rule for reading a notification is that I look at the top right of the screen and read from left to right’.

The brain will do all of this in the background, but the penalty of using some of its cognitive bandwidth is around a 40% decrease in performance. (This can be illustrated by the reduction in the standard of your writing in the little exercise.) Now relate that to other tasks. If that’s an email to your boss asking for a raise, you may have misjudged the tone, or the 40% decrease in performance could lead to an increase in errors. You’ve now got typos in your email. Is that something you can afford?

6 KP Madore and AD Wagner, ‘Multicosts of multitasking’, *Cerebrum* (2019), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7075496, accessed 26 May 2022

It also takes a finite amount of time for your brain to carry out these background tasks. We are talking microseconds here, but studies show that this adds up to a whopping 2.1 hours each day.⁷ To put that into context, every time you are distracted from writing an email by, say, a notification popping up, it takes your brain about a minute to get back to where it was when it was distracted. You know the ‘Now where was I?’ routine – if you add all those minutes up, you get to over two hours. Imagine if you could find a way to get those two hours back? What would you do with an extra two hours in the day? (Keep it clean people. Actually, don’t. Be as naughty as you like.)

If you’re still not convinced and are consoling yourself that your brain is getting an extra workout when you multitask, I’m afraid there is more bad news. Extremely clever people (who presumably don’t multitask) have undertaken studies to prove that the repeated practice of spreading your attention among competing tasks degrades the brain’s resilience and can eventually lead to brain freeze – much like when your computer freezes if you overload it. In fact, studies have shown that task switching while completing cognitive tasks lowers IQ performance by up to fifteen points. This is roughly equivalent to the degradation your cognitive function experiences if you pull an all-nighter. If that isn’t scary enough, studies carried out on habitual multitaskers showed that they were poorer at filtering relevant information from irrelevant information.⁸

7 C Steinhorst, ‘How to reclaim the huge losses that multitasking forces on your company’, *Forbes* (Feb 2020), www.forbes.com/sites/curtsteinhorst/2020/02/28/how-to-reclaim-the-huge-losses-that-multitasking-forces-on-your-company/?sh=6d569deec024, accessed 25 May 2022

8 A Hoyt, ‘How multitasking works’, *HowStuffWorks.com* (February 2017), <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/multitasking.htm>, accessed 26 May 2022

Not only will you have wasted two hours to produce an inferior product, which you'll probably need to spend time correcting, you'll have reduced your ability to prioritise effectively – which probably means you've wasted even more time by focusing your efforts on the least important task.

The final kick in the gut is that multitasking activates the stress response. When your brain is dashing from one object of focus to the other this simulates a 'multiple threat' environment and the fight, flight or freeze system kicks in. When this happens, the brain prioritises information from its survival cells and effectively shuts off the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain responsible for regulating emotion, problem-solving, creativity and storing long-term memory. With this effectively 'de-activated', you cannot access these functions when your stress response kicks in. This is why you find it hard to 'think' under stress, why you forget simple things ('What's the word again, it's just flown out my brain?!') and why you can't think laterally or field challenging questions – until ten minutes later when your brain reveals the perfect solution to you, and you kick yourself for standing there frozen to the spot. It's not your fault. Your brain is simply doing what it is designed to do by activating the freeze response in the presence of a threat. Tell me, do you really need that extra stress in your life? You don't.

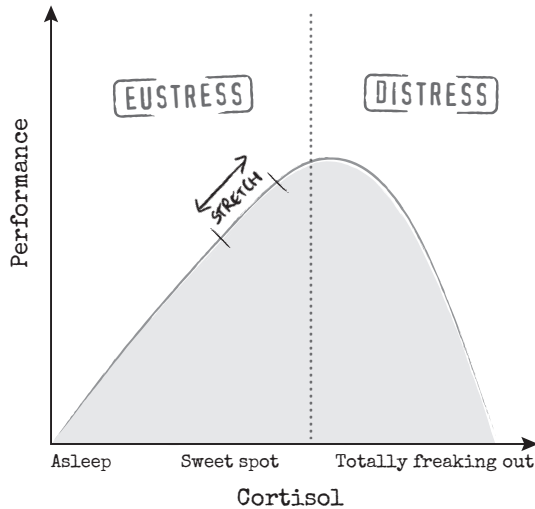
In case you think you do, I've got an answer for that too. For people that found this exercise fun or believe that stress is helpful – this paragraph is just for you. The common objection I often get at this point is that some people genuinely believe they thrive under stress. They think that stress can be positive. This is not their fault. The language is confusing.

We commonly talk about stress when what we really mean is distress. When we talk about positive stress, we are really talking about eustress – positive feelings of excitement and satisfaction.

The best way to explain this is by looking at how our performance peaks and troughs relative to the cortisol levels in our body. The chief purpose of cortisol is to put us into a state of arousal. Snigger all you want (I did), but seriously, cortisol is what allows us to wake up in the morning. It's what's responsible for the wide-eyed, heart-thumping, wake-up jolt we get when we start to feel drowsy at the wheel. It's what switches on our fight or flight reaction and makes us super-alert in the presence of danger. Without cortisol, we'd probably be dead, which shows that it's *not* the meanie we make it out to be. If there are low cortisol levels in our system, we will get bored, switch off, underperform or even fall asleep. Many studies have been done on this but the simplest one (and my favourite), is the Yerkes-Dodson curve.⁹

You'll see from this curve that there is a peak in our performance when cortisol rises, but just a little bit more cortisol and our performance nose-dives. If we want to maintain optimum performance, we need to sit just under the apex. This sweet spot is commonly referred to as 'stretch', and those of us who profess to liking a bit of stress are really referring to this stretch zone. This is when we are in *eustress*. This is when the magic happens. Make no mistake, though, when we hit the distress zone, it's all downhill. Literally and figuratively.

9 A Pietrangelo, 'What the Yerkes-Dodson law says about stress and performance', *Healthline* (Oct 2020), www.healthline.com/health/yerkes-dodson-law#how-the-law-works, accessed 26 May 2022



The Yerkes-Dodson curve

Bottom line: We can get away with multitasking when the tasks are ‘natural’, don’t drain the prefrontal cortex and can be done reasonably automatically, eg washing the dishes and listening to the radio. Unfortunately, in our current culture of doing everything ‘right now’ and an underlying sense of urgency and immediacy, there is the increasing potential for ‘mission creep’. A benign secondary task might now be substituted for something more critical, eg emailing your boss, texting a grieving friend or driving down a wintry road at night. Multitasking is not just over-rated – it’s positively dangerous.

Multitasking in practice

Let’s go back to Morocco. Hopefully by now it’s obvious why my instructor wanted me to focus on flying the aircraft. If my attention could only be in one place, then it needed to

be in the one place that mattered. It needed to be on flying a badly damaged aircraft, not my eulogy. When I reflect, I realise this is exactly what our training was designed to do. It was designed to equip us with a well-practised ability to focus on *one* thing and to be damn sure that the one thing was the most important thing.

You might think on first inspection (as I did) that flying training is about honing our ability to multitask. Indeed, flying training often involved instructors throwing multiple injects (objects/challenges) at us. During one of my test flights in the Hawk (the jet that the Red Arrows fly), I was once asked to perform my aerobatic sequence while telling jokes – I think the best I could come up with was, ‘What’s the equivalent of half an orange? The other half.’ This style of training does feel a lot like multitasking, except we had this mantra: ‘Fly the aircraft.’ We were taught that no matter what else was going on, we were to always make sure the aircraft was flying in a straight line first, and then, when it’s all trimmed out (which is a bit like hitting cruise control in your car), we would have the capacity to turn our attention to the next most important considerations, such as, ‘Where am I going and how do I get there?’ Then, when those questions were answered we could turn our attention to the next most important thing, eg ‘Who do I need to talk to on the radio? What am I going to say?’ And so on. We called it a ‘work cycle’ – it was a way of prioritising where to focus our attention and allowing ourselves to focus on one thing at a time, one after the other.

All that training. All that being messed around by our instructors. It wasn’t just because they were sadists (not all of them, anyway). It’s because they were training us to prioritise which task to focus our full attention on. We were training to

have our attention in one place. You can't train yourself to multitask. Career mums can't do this. Jet pilots can't do this. Movie directors can't do this. I should know – I've tried all three.

You can train yourself to prioritise, though.

The reasons you will nod, but change nothing

Hopefully you are now on the edge of your seat with excitement, thinking of all the things you can achieve when you ditch multitasking, and yet, no matter how much we know something is a good idea, doing it is a different matter. Why? Well, there are a few reasons. Let's have a look at them.

Your brain will resist you

The first problem is, we have become so accustomed to constant distractions that it has become *neurally* ingrained. Distraction has become our new normal. Did you know that the average person touches their mobile device 2,617 times per day?¹⁰ Are we aware that we're doing that? Not 2,617 times a day, we're not. This is not our fault. Remember that the brain is brilliant but lazy, so being distracted by the shiny lights of our mobile phones is perfectly natural. Being distracted is simply an indicator that our brain is on autopilot and doing what it's designed to do. Think about what multitasking is: it's the repeated practice of darting

10 J Naftulin, 'Here's how many times we touch our phones every day', *Insider* (July 2016), www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7, accessed 9 June 2022

from one object of focus to the next. It's literally the opposite of mindfulness. It's a combat indicator of your brain being on autopilot.

I've already explained why being on autopilot can lead us to giving away our power, or of living in conflict with ourselves, but hopefully you can see that autopilot also sets the conditions for multitasking. Yet again, our brain is doing exactly what it is designed to do, but in this case, it's leading us down the garden path.

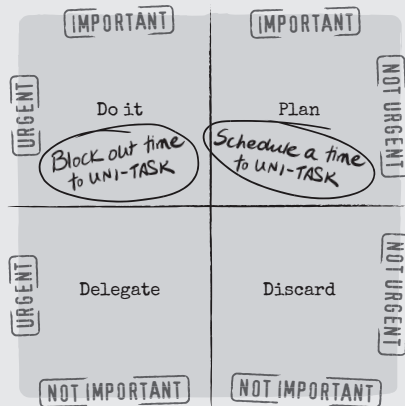
The good news is, no matter how neurally ingrained something is, we can always train our brain. We start by training our minds to focus where we choose to. In one place. It doesn't really matter what that object of focus is. The important thing is that we are deciding where to focus our attention. When you notice you've become distracted, which is the gateway to multitasking, bring your attention back to where you choose. You already did this exercise in Chapter One, so I'm not really teaching you anything new here, I'm just giving you another reason to practise it. Go ahead, start by renewing your intention to take seven mindful breaths each morning. You are teaching your brain that just because it gets distracted, that doesn't mean it has to stay distracted.

Fear of saying no

It's all very well being the enlightened one, but that's not much help when everyone else around you is still convinced that multitasking is the best thing ever. Open door policies, open plan offices, inclusive cultures – all well-meaning and quite possibly indispensable – are a natural enemy of uni-taskers. Remember that everyone else has got their shit going on too

Exercise: Prioritising your focus on what really matters

The Eisenhower Matrix¹¹ is useful for this. Draw a matrix like the one below and use it to decide what tasks you will uni-task. These will be the tasks that fit into the top two blocks of the matrix.



The Eisenhower Matrix

Now determine how to make it feasible for you to uni-task. Write a list of the things you can do to increase your ability to uni-task. Be prepared to be brutal with this. The reality is that a lot of us spend great chunks of time doing things we don't really need to do. Remove as many distractions as you reasonably can. Close the office door, turn your phone and notifications off. Pick the time of day when you are most engaged (for most people, it's first thing). Scheduling breaks will reduce your natural tendency to procrastinate (which is often a covert way to multitask).

¹¹ 'Eisenhower Matrix' (CFI, no date), <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/uncategorized/eisenhower-matrix>, accessed 26 May 2022

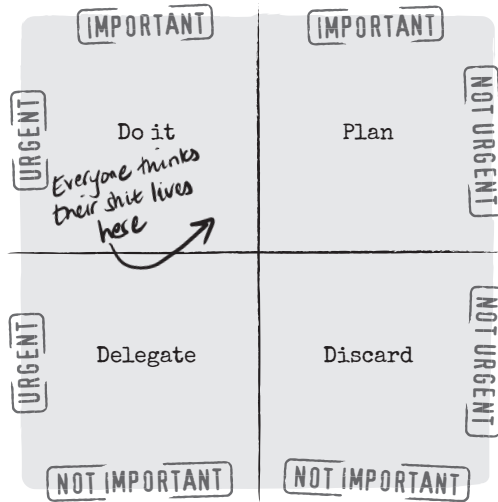
(and everyone else thinks that their shit is the most important thing in the world), so they are going to expect you to put down whatever you are focusing on and focus on them.

And whether you want to or not, most likely you will. This is not surprising, because at some point you evolved to be tribal, which meant your survival relied on you being accepted by the tribe, which led to you becoming hardwired to please others. Saying no or disappointing others is intensely uncomfortable for most people. But here's a secret that will change your life. Feeling uncomfortable won't kill you. You can say no, and you will survive. The world also won't end if you disappoint some people.

Here is something you can try that will help you to say no politely. If you are interrupted by someone, try having an assertive but respectful conversation. For example: 'I can see this is important to you. I'd like to be able to give this the full attention it deserves. Can we find a time to sit down and go through this together? I have a window between... How does that fit with your schedule?' By using this technique, you are acknowledging what is important according to that person's Eisenhower Matrix, but you are also preserving your own.

Fear of being dispensable

Feel like you're spinning so many plates and yet there's no earthly way you could contemplate dropping one? You tell yourself, 'I have to go on. I simply don't have another option. If I drop a plate, there is no one there to catch it.' I get it. I've told myself the same lie. When I decided to start up a business, I was a home-schooling, single mother and



How important is your shit?

still serving in the RAF running a human performance and air-safety school. I was overloaded and I knew it. The RAF kept asking more of me and I kept saying yes. Convinced I couldn't change anything about my work demands, I briefly considered asking my ex-husband to take on more of the childcare. Briefly. But I didn't. (I certainly bitched about it behind his back though.) I remember that familiar thrill of self-importance as I whinged to the fellow home-schooling mums. 'Men just don't get it, do they?'

This is one of the oldest tricks in the book. We convince ourselves we have no other choice, that no one else can do what we do, that we are indispensable. Indeed, there is an odd comfort in this, because then we don't feel foolish for running around after everyone like a headless chicken. But the truth is, the people around you are often extraordinarily capable

of working their own shit out... Provided you let them. Provided you can give yourself permission to be dispensable. Think about the ‘assertive conversation’ technique we’ve just covered. A work colleague may come to you convinced you need to help them right now. If you politely but firmly explain you can see them in a couple of hours, guess what usually happens? They work their shit out. Not only have you now relieved yourself of an unnecessary task; you’ve helped them to grow and become more self-reliant. It’s a win-win. (We’ll visit this again in Chapter Seven.)

Fear of being alone with our thoughts

Living in a frantic world has become perversely addictive. Not only do we revel in how busy we are – which hopefully you can now see is just a reflection of poor prioritisation or a fear of saying no – it also gives us a convenient excuse not to sit alone with our thoughts for too long. People often comment on their inability to meditate because they ‘just can’t empty their minds.’ We seem to think we must either be running around full throttle juggling a million balls or living in a cognitive vacuum. Neither are feasible. There is only one way to empty that mind and the good news it’s coming for all of us. Death. Until that point, thoughts will keep on coming. That’s what brains do.

The benefits of uni-tasking

If the thought of focusing on only one thing is freaking you out and you’re thinking, ‘How will I get all my shit done?’ then I’ve got some good news for you. Let’s go back to flying training. To

start with, if my instructors asked me to make a radio call *and* fly straight and level, the result would be me and the aircraft upside down somewhere on the approach path for Newcastle, while swearing over the airwaves. But over time I got better. Why? (No, it's not because I got better at multitasking. Sorry, not budging on that one.) It's because after hours and hours of training, certain actions become automatic. Recall what I said earlier: We get away with multitasking when they are 'natural' tasks that don't drain the prefrontal cortex and can be done reasonably automatically, eg washing the dishes and listening to the radio. (Yes, I did just quote myself.)

It's said that a monkey can be taught how to fly – and I'm the proof of that. Over time, I developed the ability to operate the radio *and* keep the aircraft in a straight line. Sometimes I even managed to navigate to the correct airport (go, me) because I didn't have to think about flying the aircraft. You see, given enough practice, even flying a multimillion-pound aircraft will become muscle memory, which effectively means the brain doesn't have to think. Technically, therefore, you're not multitasking. But you are achieving two things at once.



**Write a list of things you could do concurrently
which do not require you to multitask.**

Here are some of mine to get you started:

- Walking meetings
- Listening to a podcast on my commute

- Taking my son to his favourite cafe to play while I write this book
- Combining the school run with my daily exercise

Alternatively, you can also do just one thing and achieve multiple benefits. Here are two of my favourites.

Sleep

I could write a whole book on the wonderful outcomes of sleep, along with the disasters that await when we decide to forgo it. I don't have to, because Matthew Walker has already written *Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams*.¹² If you have a particular interest in sleep, I highly recommend you add this to your reading list. According to Walker, here are just some of the benefits that a decent night's rest affords us:

- Deep sleep is essential for us to transfer short-term to long-term memory, so sleep is crucial for learning and assimilating new information. This is why cramming the morning of an exam can actually be a bad idea, because it sort of scrambles our memory.
- Sleep allows us to process traumatic events. There is something kind of magic when we sleep. We can relive an event, but the 'emotion' is taken out of it. The expression, 'Time is a great healer,' should probably be corrected (in my humble opinion) to, 'Sleep is a great healer.'

12 M Walker, *Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams* (Penguin, 2018)

- This is further illustrated by the discovery that the hormone responsible for dumbing down this emotion overnight wasn't present in those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Hence why those affected keep having flashbacks. Their brains are desperately trying to process the trauma, but they don't have the necessary hormones to facilitate it. It's also why bad dreams are not an indicator that we are all fucked up beyond repair. Bad dreams are our brain's way of healing from unpleasant experiences, so sleep is basically free, overnight therapy.
- Sleep also improves our ability to 'read' facial expressions. When we are tired, we are more likely to read facial expressions as threatening and think that the world is out to get us when that is most likely not the case.
- Sleep improves our ability to use 'System 2 thinking' (ie the prefrontal cortex), which means we are better at creative thinking and problem-solving. It is said that Edison used to deliberately wake himself just after he'd entered REM sleep to access the 'lightbulb' moments of creative thinking.

Sleep is a wonderful example of *one* thing we can do with our time that has multiple benefits. If you are already sold on the benefits of sleep but find it elusive, you are in good company. Post-Covid, I have noticed many of my clients reporting poorer sleep. This leads them to think that something is wrong, yet the opposite is true. This is yet another indicator that our brains are doing exactly what they were designed to do in a world that is obsessed with the 'busy' narrative. That is to say, the chief reason why we don't sleep is an overactive amygdala, because we have too much cortisol coursing through our

bodies. If we are hijacked by an overactive amygdala, the simplest thing we can do is soothe the threat system through some mindful breathing.

There are several books and courses dedicated to getting a better night's sleep, but you can start by looking after the basics: exercise, fresh air, having a wind-down routine, sleeping in a cool dark room – all of these can help us to get a good sleep. If you couple some of these techniques with the mindful breathing we have already discussed, you might surprise yourself at how quickly you drift back to sleep. Try this meditation as you start your wind-down routine.

Meditation: Winding down

Read through the following instructions several times or follow along with the guided meditation on Soundcloud at <https://soundcloud.com/user-978445649> – 'Wind down'.

- First, take a moment to check in with any thoughts, just noticing their quality and any judgements. Give yourself permission to let all that go for now.
- Focus your attention on your breathing, gradually increasing your exhale and slowing your breathing rate down.
- Breathe in for four counts and then out for six counts. Take a few moments to practise your longer exhale, just slowing down your breathing rate.
- If you get distracted by thoughts, that's totally normal. Just bring your attention back to breathing in for four, and out for six.
- Now turn your attention to your body.

- Scan down from your head to your toes, starting off at the crown your head.
- Scan down your forehead and then your nose and your cheeks.
- There is nothing special to do here, just observe as you scan down through your neck and your shoulders.
- If you notice that you're holding any tension, imagine breathing into that area and then letting go of any tension as you breathe out.
- Continue scanning down through your spine, your chest and your hips.
- Now down the thigh bones, through the shins and into your toes.
- Imagine your body and breath fusing together, breathing into your whole body.
- Keep your breathing relaxed. Take deep breaths and then gently allow your body to relax and release any tension as you exhale.
- Have a lovely big breath in, feeling the warmth as your whole body expands.
- Now release a final, relaxed breath as you let go off the last bit of tension and ready yourself to relax and wind down at the end of a busy day.

Mindful listening

Let me tell you why this is one of my favourite exercises. When we listen mindfully, we hear the *whole* conversation. Think about when you are trying to tune into two conversations. You can't do it, can you? You have to switch from one to the other, which

means you'll be missing bits from each. The same is happening when you're tuning into your own thoughts. You are missing nuances, expressions, intonations or even words that are being expressed. We've got used to this, in fact, sometimes we even celebrate it – couples will remark that they 'finish each other's sentences.' This is seen as an indicator of how well they know each other, but it's probably more accurate to say they are focusing their attention on making assumptions about what the other will say and not listening as fully as they could. And then we wonder why we feel misunderstood, or that people just don't 'get it'. The upshot of distracted listening is we miss things which can cause confusion, or perhaps worse, the need for repetition, which can bring stress to the relationship.

The counter to distracted listening is to give your full attention. Here are the multiple benefits that can be enjoyed from this one activity:

- You get a much fuller and better understanding of what the other is saying.
- You save time having to correct faulty assumptions.
- The other person feels truly heard.
- The relationship flourishes.
- You are focusing your attention in one place, so you are training your mind to focus and uni-task.
- You are learning to acknowledge and sit with a busy mind. (This is a ninja skill that we will return to in Chapter Five.)

Practising mindfulness is *not* about clearing the mind, it's about seeing the mind clearly and not fighting with it. There is nothing wrong with us having unsettling or difficult thoughts, and as we will see in Chapter Five, sometimes they can be rather useful. When we can sit with something, it no longer holds as much power over us, so being able to accept these unsettling or difficult thoughts is a valuable skill to have. In the meantime, it's enough to understand that it's perfectly natural to resist sitting quietly with our thoughts. The next time you have a conversation with a colleague or loved one, set your intention to listen with your full attention. (It might be useful to tell them you are going to try this exercise.) Here's an exercise you can try which will introduce the skill of mindful listening.

Exercise: Mindful listening

- Now that you are fully focused, notice the words they are using, notice the pitch of their voice and its volume. Also notice their body language.
- If, after a while, you become distracted by your own thoughts, understand that this is quite normal. You will often stop listening so that you can think about what you are going to say (or do) next.
- Similarly, you might find yourself making assumptions about what the other person is saying, and again, this is just what busy minds do. Whenever you notice this happening and your thoughts become distracted, simply bring your attention back to what the other person is saying, how they are saying it, and focus on their facial expressions.

- When they have finished speaking, you may need to take some time to gather your thoughts, so there may be a silence. It is quite normal if this feels a little uncomfortable.
- Allow yourself to sit with that silence before you speak.

Key takeaways from Chapter Two

- Multitasking reduces our performance and increases our stress.
- We can train our brains to uni-task to achieve better results and save time.
- The biggest barrier to uni-tasking is fear of saying no and fear of being dispensable.
- Having respectful and assertive conversations with work colleagues about the importance of uni-tasking can help to address these fears.
- We can achieve multiple benefits from doing one task, for example, mindful listening because we are training our brains to uni-task, communicating better and improving relationships.