

>>> Focus on what really matters,
get stuff done, waste less time <<<

THE UNI-TASKING REVOLUTION



SARAH FURNESS

What is uni-tasking, why is it revolutionary and what's it got to do with meditating in the middle of a war zone?

Former RAF helicopter pilot Sarah Furness discovered the secret to true productivity while under fire: if you train your brain to uni-task, you can prioritise, focus, stay calm and deliver exceptional results.

Sarah has translated the lessons she learned into a powerful set of strategies suitable for anyone who wants to gain focus and maximise their productivity. Packed with coaching exercises and mindfulness techniques backed by science and proven in combat, this book shows you how to get more done in less time – and make it all look easy.

Learn how to:

- Identify your highest-impact tasks and prioritise effectively when *everything* seems important
- Harness mindfulness techniques and train your brain to maintain focus and productivity
- Resist distractions and overcome mindset barriers that prevent you from performing at your best
- Create a uni-tasking culture for your business and increase the productivity of your teams
- Reduce stress and avoid feeling overwhelmed, even when the pressure mounts



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, international keynote speaker and human factors facilitator.

Learn more at sarahfurness.com

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Praise

‘Remarkable, insightful and inspirational in equal measure.’

— **Matt Parker**, CEO, Babble

‘As a self-professed, perpetually stressed multi-tasker, I was immediately drawn to *The Uni-Tasking Revolution* with hopes that it would help break my propensity to juggle twelve things at once while being fully aware that I’m wasting tons of time. To my great delight, the book has shown me how to break away from my deeply embedded habits and re-focus my energy on what’s most important, *when* it’s most important. Sarah Furness’s incredible talent for telling relatable stories (and who doesn’t love good fighter-pilot stories?) makes her lessons and improvement tactics instantly memorable and an absolute blast to read!’

— **Ken Schmidt**, former Communications
Director, Harley Davidson

‘In this outstandingly relatable and sincere book, Sarah Furness takes the reader on a journey of understanding and action. Having been a Commando pilot, a stressed banker and a mindfulness teacher, I wish this book had been written years ago. It should be mandatory reading for many.’

— **Tim Boughton**, Founder, Elios Partnership

‘Sarah Furness does it again in her second book, *The Uni-tasking Revolution*. In a funny, joyful way, she coaches us, showing how uni-tasking enables us to become brilliant. She gives guidance on how to maintain that brilliance and be the best version of yourself – whether managing your clients and people around you or completing daily tasks. If you want to be a top performer, read this book.’

— **Siobhan Brookman**, Executive Client
Director, Sopra Steria

‘*The Uni-tasking Revolution* made me laugh out loud. Reading Sarah’s words made me realise that, actually, I can do this. I can take things one step at a time and teach my brain to focus if I follow the simple steps in this book.’

— **Jo Ritchie**, Senior Business Manager,
Vodafone

‘*The Uni-tasking Revolution* is brilliantly structured and packed with entertaining anecdotes, useful diagrams and truly valuable takeaways that I am confident I can implement into both my work and my personal life. As always, Sarah Furness makes me feel like I can kick down doors with her words of encouragement!’

— **Emma Lund**, Events Lead, Together

‘Sarah Furness continues to challenge our preconceived ideas with great insight, evidence and humour, openly sharing her personal experiences and providing us with a step-by-step guide to building the uni-tasking habit. This book is a must-read and the nudge I needed to relinquish my

multi-tasking mindset. Who would have thought a personal development book could be such fun?’

— **Tracey Cross**, Legal and Business Adviser,
Empower Women Chair

‘Uni-tasking has been a game-changer for me. I am constantly juggling multiple tasks, struggling to focus and leaving my door open to “bubble-buts”. The tone of this book is incredibly engaging and authentic, making it feel like Sarah is right there, guiding me through the chaos.’

— **Gary Kershaw**, Country Manager,
Qatar Airways

‘We all spend our lives doing, without ever thinking about how or why we do what we do. This book gave me the space to think about how I can “do” better. Packed with practical tips and clarity of thought, *The Uni-tasking Revolution* is more than a book; it’s a movement – one which I am certainly part of now!’

— **Nick Gold**, Managing Director,
Speakers Corner

‘Easy to use and practical, *The Uni-tasking Revolution* offers superb insight into how to drive balance and focus in your pursuit of personal growth. Sarah Furness has written a book packed with useful tips, gained from her experience of teaching people the art and science of high performance.’

— **Jamil Qureshi**, Performance Psychologist

‘Sarah Furness takes readers on a captivating and transformative journey, moving from the cockpit of a helicopter to the cockpit of our own lives. The core concept is straightforward yet profound: our attention can only be focused on one thing at a time, and mastering this focus is essential for achieving exceptional performance in both our personal and professional spheres. *The Uni-tasking Revolution* serves as a practical and engaging guide, offering a powerful tool to cut through the distractions of modern life and reach your highest potential. Whether you’re grappling with everyday interruptions or seeking to elevate your performance, this book is an indispensable resource that lays out the path to a more focused, productive and fulfilling life.’

— **Natalie Maddox-Hussain**, Co-founder,
Women Empowering Defence

‘In *The Uni-tasking Revolution*, Sarah Furness has given us an invaluable guide to tackling the complexities of work and life – one which goes to the heart of dealing with the many pressures we all take on, then complain about. By introducing us to the HABITS method for rebalancing ourselves to prioritise effectively and focus on one thing at a time, Sarah gives us all the opportunity to deliver better, more consistent outcomes for ourselves and those around us. It turns out that less stress and better performance are indeed possible!’

— **Mark Gallagher**, Formula 1 Executive

‘*The Uni-tasking Revolution* resonated with me at a personal level and helped bring clarity to my thinking. As a coach and mentor to quite a large community, I know that the

learning and exercises in the book will be of great value to many – whether they are reading alone or working through activities together. Highly recommended. I, for one, will lead by example and ensure I fly the aircraft.’

— **Kim Webb**, Team Leader, banking

‘In *The Uni-tasking Revolution*, Sarah Furness brings her unique blend of mindfulness and military precision to offer practical, actionable advice to enhance productivity and wellbeing and challenge the multi-tasking mindset. Her real-life anecdotes make complex concepts easy to understand and apply. I highly recommend this book for anyone looking to optimise their performance and lead a more focused life.’

— **Christopher Digby**, Executive Director,
insurance sector

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SARAH FURNESS

R^ethink

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For Tim, for not being a bubble-but.

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Introduction

Whether you're a business owner, solopreneur or high achiever, you likely want to do more with less – and do it more quickly. Maybe you want to scale up your business, but you don't yet have the time or money to employ others. Maybe you're working as hard as you can, but you're not getting the recognition you deserve. Maybe you can see the amazing potential of the people around you, but it never quite translates to the business outcomes you're hoping for. The concept behind high performance is astonishingly simple: stop multi-tasking, start uni-tasking. That's all there is to it. Now you can close this book and go on your way.

The thing is, no matter how many times I repeat this message, good, talented, dedicated people like you are *still* multi-tasking. They may think that uni-tasking isn't realistic. I'll be honest, there have been times I've doubted myself. Should I change tack? Talk about something else? Let you continue to drive yourself towards burnout, miss the most important moments in your life and perform at 60% of your potential?

No, I bloody well shouldn't.

To understand why I'm so certain about uni-tasking you probably need to understand some of my backstory, so let's start by talking about the thing that I'm most known for and the thing I'm really, really good at: crashing helicopters.

(I sometimes wonder if I'd have anything to write about if I'd been a slightly better pilot.)

It turns out that crashing my first helicopter led me to discover the 'secret' that forever changed how I worked. It's the secret to outstanding performance and to working smarter not harder. It's the secret that underpins this book.

This 'secret' was revealed to me when I was flying a helicopter down a valley in Morocco at 140 mph just 20 metres from the ground. Low flying is hard work and bloody good fun, but the next thing that happened wasn't quite so enjoyable. The captain shouted, 'Fuck!' which was followed by an almighty bang. The canopy had shattered and air began rushing in. I was now flying a convertible with the roof down.

It transpired that we had hit wires that were strung across the valley. They were impacting in three different places: the engine intakes, the top of the canopy and squarely in the middle of the nose of the aircraft. I didn't know that then, so I was imagining these wires wrapping themselves around my tail rotor or tangling themselves up in the main rotor head. I distinctly remember thinking, 'This is how I'm doing to die,' and feeling oddly pleased that it would be a relatively quick (though satisfyingly dramatic) death. If you're going to go, you might as well do it with style.

I was roused from my self-indulgent daydream by these (now famous) words: '*Fly the aircraft!*' My attention was instantly back in the cockpit – and that was the clue to the secret. Just before I heard those words, I'd been thinking about death. How helpful do you think that was while travelling at

140 mph, when my attention actually needed to be on flying the aircraft? Not very. Why? Well, here comes the ‘secret’.

Our attention can only be in one place at a time.

I’ll repeat that (in case your attention wandered). *Our attention can only be in one place at a time.* Which means that where we focus our attention is pretty damn important. We need to make sure it’s the one thing that actually matters in that moment. Obvious when you think about it, right? This is where you might be thinking, ‘How the hell can I focus my attention on one thing when I’ve got a million different things I need to do in a day?’

This book is my answer to that problem. I’m taking you on the journey to uni-tasking nirvana. Because I believe in it. And I believe in you. Here’s how it will work (and in big handfults):

Phase One is the Understand phase. We will understand why it’s hard to uni-task and why it’s worth the bother in terms of business advantages and personal advantages.

Phase Two is where we work out how to uni-task. The job of this book is to make uni-tasking ludicrously easy, which is why I’ve put it into the mnemonic HABITS:

- **H**ealthy – preparing your brain to prioritise effectively
- **A**ttention – training your brain to focus on *one* thing
- **B**e in one place (a bit clunky but please roll with it) – working out how the hell to decide what that one thing is

- **Interferences** – working out how to deal with other people interrupting our flow
- **Train hard, fight easy** – incorporating into our routine so that it becomes a habit and therefore effortless
- **Set the conditions** – working out how to make the workplace uni-tasking friendly and how not to sabotage your best-laid plans

Phase Three is where we pull everything together and prepare you to take the lead in your own life, both for your sake and for those around you.

Don't worry, you don't need to remember all of the above. You're busy, right? Which is why, at the start of every chapter, I'll give you a 'Bottom Line Up Front' (BLUF) so that you know the point of engaging with something before you dedicate your time and attention to it. There are plenty of occasions when you need to receive a fair amount of detail to really understand something. It makes perfect sense when you've heard the entire explanation and understand why it was so important to stay engaged, but rarely is this stated upfront.

The chapter BLUF helps you determine if the chapter is relevant to you, because it tells you upfront where you are going and why you need to get there. It helps you to give your full attention to what really matters. So, I can save you time while saving you time. (If you're not fist bumping right now, then I'm doing it for you!)

P H A S E O N E

UNDERSTANDING WHY

Why bother uni-tasking? Well, let's start where it matters most: our wallets.

I know we all want to be good people; we want to make a meaningful contribution to the world and die knowing that we weren't totally loathsome. But the truth is this is all a lot easier if we can make some money. This book is going to help you make more money by teaching you how to lead high-performing teams, or, if you're on your own, how to become a kick-ass solopreneur.

1

Multi-tasking Is A Myth

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Uncomfortable truth:

Our brains, society and nature trick us into thinking multi-tasking is a great idea. It's a big fat lie.

Business gains:

Get back in the driving seat and accelerate your growth.

Personal gains:

Know thyself and forgive thyself.

The secret

Let's recap on the 'secret' that I revealed in the introduction: our attention can only be in one place at a time. Once I learned this secret, everything changed. It revolutionised how I work. Because if you think about it, two important facts are obvious:

1. If our attention can only be in one place, then multi-tasking is a myth.
2. If our attention can only be in one place, it's pretty bloody important where we choose to focus it.

This gave rise to the uni-tasking definition: focus on *one* thing at a time. *Choose* that one thing. We can train ourselves to focus our attention exactly where we need it to be – indeed, this is the main effort of my work with my clients – and the good news is you don't have to meditate in a field of daisies all day to do this. Now I'll be honest, it took quite a while for that life-changing secret to bed in. In fact, it wasn't until I started studying to become a mindfulness coach that the penny dropped. I'd left the RAF and set up my company, Well Be It (www.wellbeitcoach.com).

CASE STUDY: Focus on one thing

One of my very first mindfulness clients was a GB boxer. During our first mindfulness session, he said, 'I want you to teach me mindfulness so I can stay calm when I get punched in the face.' And I thought, 'How the hell am I supposed to teach him that?' He explained, 'You must know how to perform under pressure. You've been to war, you've been shot at, you've crashed helicopters.'

I realised that I *did* know how to perform under pressure, I just didn't know *why* I knew how to do this. I started to look back through events in my military career and applying what I now understood about the brain and mindfulness. And that's when it hit me. The reason these techniques were so effective was because they were working *with* the brain, not against it. Our attention can only be in one place a time, which means that how we perform under pressure is mostly down to *where* we focus it.

What I eventually realised, would you bloody believe it, was that we had been practising mindfulness techniques in the cockpit of a helicopter. I don't mean that I was levitating like a yogi while flying down a valley; I mean, I was using mindfulness to keep

my focus where it needed to be under extreme pressure. You see, it's natural for our attention to wander off. In fact, it's almost guaranteed that, under pressure, our brain will wander to just about the least helpful place it can. For example, we often focus on the things we can't reasonably be expected to control (like death), which is why, when the captain said, 'Fly the aircraft,' it meant exactly that: stop thinking about death; start doing some of that magic with your hands and feet to make the aircraft do what you want it to do.

Its relevance, though, stretches far beyond crashing helicopters into wires. What 'Fly the aircraft' really means is to focus your attention in the *one* place it really needs to be right now. So, when my dear GB boxer client asked me to teach him mindfulness so he could have the competitive edge, I realised these techniques could be applied to the boxing ring too. Then I thought, 'Wait a minute, I wonder where else these techniques might help people to perform at their best?' I started looking at my business and made an exciting discovery. I was using mindfulness to help me uni-task and it turns out that uni-tasking is a really effective way of running a business efficiently. In fact, I was able to scale up and grow the business. And grow it did.

In my first year, I made a big fat loss. In my second year, I turned over £150k. In my third year, I nearly tripled that. And in my fourth year, I was turning over more than ten times what I'd earned in year one. Lots of people would say things like:

- 'Do you have an extra two hours in the day that you're not telling me about?'
- 'You are intimidatingly productive at work.'

- ‘I see you became an overnight success; what’s your secret?’

Or the best compliment of all: ‘So, how often are you doing the really high-paying strands of work – two or three times a month?’ to which I would answer, ‘Seven times a week.’ At which point they would spit their coffee out and say, ‘How the fuck do you fit all the other stuff in? You’re everywhere on LinkedIn. You’re a mother. You just got back from Santorini! What’s your secret?’ Without meaning to sound unbearably arrogant, the answer is simple: uni-tasking.

Why multi-tasking is a myth

Uni-tasking is completely transferable to your work routine, but (and there is a but), uni-tasking is easier said than done. It can be deliciously tempting to revert back to multi-tasking, but stick with me. I promise I’ll get you there.

If you’ve read *Fly Higher: Train your mind to feel as strong as you look*,¹ my previous book, you’ll already know why I think multi-tasking is a terrible idea. Yet we live in a world where multi-tasking is expected, normalised and even celebrated. For years, we’ve unwittingly subscribed to the lie that successful people are good at multi-tasking.

The truth is closer to this: successful people are falling short of their enormous potential because they are multi-tasking. Which means, if we can overcome the obvious challenges that our tech-driven world presents and commit to uni-tasking, we will be one step ahead of our competition (and so will the people in our teams).

There is plenty of science to prove that we are simply not designed to multi-task, but I'm going to recap the basic facts here about multi-tasking (check out the references included in the book for more detail).

The important thing to remember is that our attention can only be in one place at a time. Think about when we are having a conversation with someone or facilitating a training session. When we are listening to someone talking, we need to give them our full attention. We cannot listen *and* think about our response at the same time. We have to switch our attention between those two tasks, which is why we inevitably miss bits in almost every conversation we have. We divert our attention away from listening to start formulating a response in our head. When we multi-task, the brain has to switch rapidly between these tasks and fulfil additional background roles of what Meyer, Evans and Rubinstein refer to in their research as 'goal shifting' (I want to do this now instead of that) and 'rule activation' (I'm turning off the rules for that and turning on the rules for this).² These drain our cognitive capacity. Think about when your laptop starts to whirr at you because you've got too many programmes open at once. This is what's going on in your brain when you're multi-tasking.

Evidence shows that multi-tasking reduces our output standard by 40% (or increases our error rate by 40%), accounts for around two hours of wasted time every day and increases our stress levels.³ Not only does that mean we feel frazzled when we multi-task, but it also has an impact on our performance, because the brain, rather unhelpfully, puts itself into fight or flight mode. When that happens, it prioritises information from the survival part of our brain, so we lose the ability to think rationally, prioritise effectively, problem-solve, access long-term memory and regulate our emotions.

You can probably see now why multi-tasking has a compound negative effect on us: if the 40% reduction in performance wasn't enough of a kick in the face, losing our shit in the middle of a board meeting or prioritising *everything* as urgent important and ending up with an astronomical to-do list is only going to make things exponentially worse.

Bottom line: no one is designed to multi-task. Not even women.⁴ If I were a conspiracy theorist who hated men, I might suggest that the myth women are better at multi-tasking was invented by the patriarchy to keep us from outperforming our male colleagues. But I'm not a conspiracy theorist. And I'm rather fond of men. The truth is closer to this: society has accepted the idea that women are better at multi-tasking, and because the brain looks for evidence to support beliefs (even if they're false), as women, we've become resistant to the idea of ditching multi-tasking. I get it. Nobody likes having something they are 'good at' taken away from them. The truth is that we are doing ourselves a disservice by trying to spread ourselves thinly across multiple focus points. Multi-tasking is not helping us. It's holding us back.

What, then, is the answer? Simple. Stop multi-tasking. Start uni-tasking. How do we do this?

- We focus on *one* thing at a time.
- We *choose* that one thing.

As I said previously, uni-tasking is hard, so let's work through some of the challenges. Come on, it'll be fun.

Why is it so hard to uni-task?

Heads up – there’s going to be a lot of uncomfortable truth bombs ahead. Partly because I like to think of myself as courageously honest and a little bit edgy, but mostly because it’s necessary. Here’s the truth: simply put, we are brilliant at getting in our own way.

Remember, the purpose of pointing this out is not to depress you. It’s to free you. The starting point is to understand our barriers and then take steps to reduce their impact. Understanding our own barriers can give us a lot of insight into why others might also be resisting uni-tasking, so it can help us gain an intuitive sense of what the people in our team might need from us. Equally, as solopreneurs and business owners, it can help us to understand why those around us are not able to buy into our uni-tasking time. Whichever way you look at it, uni-tasking is emotionally intelligent leadership and entrepreneurial skills at their best – that’s why the Understand phase is so important.

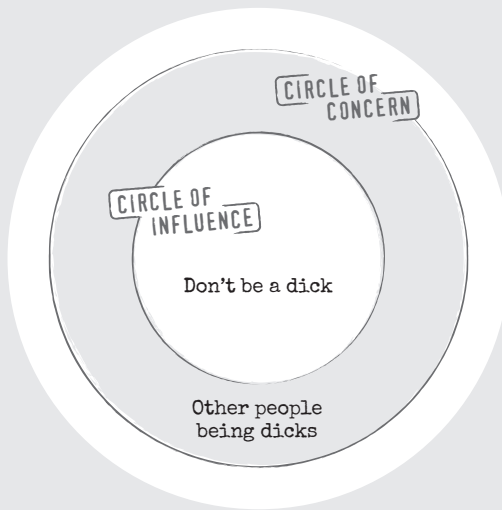
Here’s an exercise you can do to find out how you are currently getting in your own way. Don’t worry, as I said, it’s fun, kind of. Enlightening, definitely. And it’ll save you loads of time down the line.

EXERCISE: The five whys

To extract the maximum value from this exercise, find a time when you are least likely to be disturbed, and/or minimise the distractions (start by turning your phone face down) and give yourself 20–30 minutes of full attention.

Start by writing down: *'I find it hard to uni-task because...'*

Look at the statement you've written and see where you have placed yourself in Covey's Circle of Influence (things you have some control over) or Covey's Circle of Concern (things you cannot control)?⁵



The Circles of Influence and Concern

If you write about *other* people's behaviours, you're putting yourself in a poor position to take positive action. For example, you might have written, 'I find it hard to uni-task because other people interrupt me.' You can't rely on people to magically stop interrupting you, so if that's the problem you want to solve, you need to work out what *you* can do about it.

Try and rewrite the statement using 'I' language. For example, *'I find it hard to uni-task because... I get distracted by other people.'*

Now it's time to dig deep. Developed by Japanese inventor and industrialist Sakichi Toyoda, the Five Whys exercise helps us to really drill down to the root cause of the problem.⁶

To do this, channel your inner toddler and repeatedly ask yourself 'Why?' five times. This works best if you add 'why' to the previous answer, as follows:

1. Why do you get distracted by other people?
(Remember to write the next answer in 'I' language.)
'Because I have an open-door policy.'
2. Why do you have an open-door policy?
'I need to be immediately available to my team.'
3. Why do you need to be immediately available to your team?
'Because I don't think they can do it without me.'
4. Why don't you think they can do it without you?
'Because I haven't given them enough training.'
5. Why haven't you given them enough training?
'Because I am secretly scared of becoming redundant.'

Go ahead, try it yourself. *I find it hard to uni-task because...*

By understanding your barriers identified by the Five Whys exercise, you gain a few advantages. You may have identified an area in your business where you need to channel your effort. For example, you might realise you need to upskill your team or give more time to training so that they don't rely on you as a single point of failure. Or perhaps you need to upskill yourself to take your solopreneurship to the next level. If understanding your barriers helps you to discover a need for training then you will ultimately benefit from being able to steer your business more strategically.

If you've been really brave and dug deep, you might have discovered a mindset barrier. These are the barriers we put in our own way. This is actually great news, because it means we can also take them out of our own way. For example, a lot of people don't like relinquishing control or are worried if they choose *one* thing to focus on that, they'll choose the wrong thing and the world will end. If this sounds like you, don't worry; you're not alone. In fact, that leads me on to the next point.

You can also use your barriers to understand what other people's barriers might be. This can help you work together to overcome some of the most common barriers. Let me share the most common barriers I encounter when I deliver workshops on uni-tasking. In the next chapter, we're going to start with one of the biggest barriers we put in our way: our mischievous wandering minds.

Key takeaways

- The biggest barriers to our success are actually the ones we put up *ourselves*, not the ones that are created by others or our environment.
- If you're able to get in your own way, you're able to get out of it, too.

Commitment to action

Complete the Five Whys exercise above so you can understand what's getting in your way. Then get excited about getting out of your own way.