

One thing at a time

A short book about juggling several tasks at once and
finishing the day with all of them half done

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It would suit the argument if you read it without doing anything else at the same time, but that's up to you.

It's about one habit. You work on several things at once. You start a report, answer a message, go back to the report, remember a form, open the form, take a call, and return to find you've forgotten what the next sentence was going to be. You're busy from the moment you sit down. At the end of the day you have six things in progress and nothing finished, and you're more tired than the day's output seems to justify.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that juggling makes sense from the inside. There are many demands on you, all of them seem to want attention now, and moving between them feels like keeping up. The second is that you're not doing several things at once. You're switching between them, each switch has a cost, and the costs are larger than they seem and easy to miss. A task that's half done has delivered nothing yet, and it still takes up room in your head. And the sense of having been productive all day is a poor guide to what got done. The third is practical. You pick one thing, work on it until a stopping point you've named in advance, and leave yourself a note before you touch anything else. Chapters 16 to 19 cover how.

This book doesn't say you should ignore your colleagues, or that every interruption can be refused, or that you should never have the radio on while you cook. Chapter 2 says which kinds of

doubling-up work perfectly well.

Two cautions.

Some people find it unusually hard to stay with one task for reasons that aren't habit. The NHS describes ADHD in adults as a condition where the brain works differently, and its signs include being easily distracted, finding it hard to organise your time, and finding it hard to finish tasks. It says the symptoms usually start before the age of twelve. If that sounds like your whole life and not only your recent working habits, and it's affecting your work or relationships, the NHS advice is to see a GP. The ideas here may still help, but they're no substitute for an assessment.

And if you're juggling because your workload is truly more than one person can do, the problem is the workload, and no method will fix it. A book like this can help you work better within your hours. It shouldn't be used to squeeze more out of someone who's already overloaded, by you or by your employer.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Ten past five

It's ten past five on a Tuesday. You lean back from the screen and take stock.

The report for Thursday is open in one window. It's at the third paragraph of the second section, which is where it was at twenty to ten this morning. You've been back to it four times. Each time you reread the last paragraph to find your place, changed a word or two, and began a sentence. Then something arrived.

There's an email to a supplier, half written, in drafts. You stopped it to look up a figure and never went back.

There's a spreadsheet with the month's reconciliation done down to row forty of ninety. There's an expenses form with the first of three sections filled in. There are twenty-three tabs open in the browser. A sticky note on the monitor says "Ring Dave back??" in your own writing, and you can't remember what Dave wanted.

You haven't stopped all day. You ate lunch at the desk. You answered every message within minutes and joined two calls, and you helped a colleague with a formula. If someone had watched you, they'd have seen a person working hard for eight hours. But you can't name a single thing that's finished. Thursday's report is no closer, and you'll be taking the laptop home.

Home has its own version. On Saturday you started hanging the washing, broke off to reply to the school about the trip, remembered the shelf you'd meant to put up, got the drill out, and

then made lunch because everyone was hungry. At four o'clock there's a basket of damp clothes, a shelf leaning against the wall with two holes drilled, and an unsent reply on your phone.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **A switch** is leaving one task for another before you've reached a stopping point. **The pile** is the set of tasks you've started and not finished. **A stretch** is a run of time spent on one task without a switch. **The restart** is the time it takes to get back into a task you left. **A parking note** is a line you write when you stop, saying where you got to and what the next step is. And **the one thing** is the single task you've chosen to work on now.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

You're busy the whole time and it doesn't feel like avoidance. It feels like diligence.

Most switches happen within minutes. You rarely get twenty clear minutes on anything.

Many of the switches are your own. Nobody made you open the expenses form. You thought of it, and thinking of it was enough.

The pile grows through the day. You start more things than you finish, so by five there's more open than at nine.

And the important task suffers most. The report needs sustained thought, so it's the one that gets interrupted by everything else. The small things at least get some attention.

Try one thing before reading on. Tomorrow, keep a sheet of paper beside you. Each time you move from one task to another, make a mark. At the end of the day, count the marks. Then write down what you finished, meaning completed and sent or filed, as opposed to worked on. If the second list is long and the count is low, you may not need this book. If the count is over forty and the list is short, read on.

Why juggling seems sensible

I don't want to start by telling you the juggling is foolish. There are good reasons for it, and some kinds of it work.

The demands are real. Modern work arrives through several channels at once, and each message comes from a person who'd like an answer. Nobody sends you a day's work in a tidy queue. If you dealt with one thing at a time in the order you chose, some people would wait, and you'd hear about it.

Being responsive is valued. The colleague who replies in two minutes is thought helpful and on top of things. In many workplaces that's how commitment shows. Reports written well don't get noticed the same way.

Some doubling-up works well. You can put a wash on and cook while the machine runs. It's fine to listen to music while you paint a wall, or to chat to a passenger on a quiet road you know well. When one of the two activities needs no attention, because a machine is doing it or because it's so practised it runs by itself, there's little or no cost. Nothing in this book is aimed at that.

Tasks have natural waits. You send a question and can't go on until the answer comes. A file takes four minutes to export. It's sensible to pick up something else in the gap, so long as you come back.

And variety is pleasant. Two hours on a reconciliation is dull. A message from a colleague is a small relief, and answering it gives a tiny sense of completion that the reconciliation won't give you for another hour.

I think the juggling is trying to meet four needs, and this list is mine. You want to keep up with everything that's asked of you. You want to be seen as responsive and reliable. You want to feel productive. And you want some relief from tasks that are long, hard or dull.

All four are reasonable. My argument is that the habit serves them badly. You keep up less well, because everything takes longer. You're reliable about replies and unreliable about the things that matter more, like Thursday's report. The productive feeling is real, but it's a feeling about activity, and what got done is a separate matter. The relief from the hard task is paid for by making the hard task harder to return to.

"I'm doing several things at once"

The word multitasking came from computing, where it described a processor handling several programs. People adopted it for themselves, and it carried a false picture with it. It suggests that several streams are running through your mind side by side.

For tasks that need your attention, that isn't what happens. You can't compose a sentence for the report and a sentence for the supplier at the same moment. Try it and you'll find yourself doing one, then the other. What feels like doing two things at once is rapid alternation. You're on the report, then the email, then the report. At any instant you're doing one thing. The question is how often you change which one, and what each change costs.

Psychologists have studied this for decades under the name task switching. Stephen Monsell summed up the field in a review in 2003. In the experiments, people switch between very simple tasks, such as judging whether a number is odd or even and then whether a letter is a vowel or a consonant. The consistent finding is that responses are substantially slower, and usually more error-prone, immediately after a switch. Researchers call this the switch cost. Giving people warning of the switch reduces it but doesn't remove it. Monsell's explanation is that the mind has to reconfigure itself for the new task, and that some of the settings from the old task linger and interfere.

Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans looked at what makes the cost bigger. In four experiments people either repeated one task or alternated between two, classifying shapes or doing arithmetic. Alternating

always cost time. The cost grew as the rules of the tasks became more complex. They describe two steps in a switch. There's a shift of goal, where you decide that you're now doing the other thing. Then there's what they call rule activation, which means loading up the rules for the new task and dropping the old ones.

Those tasks took a second or two each. Yours are far more complex. The rules for the report include its argument so far, who it's for, the point you were building towards, and the three figures you had in mind. Loading those takes minutes, which is the rereading you did four times today.

The clearest demonstration that attention can't be shared comes from driving. David Strayer and colleagues put people in a driving simulator, sometimes while holding a phone conversation. When people were talking on the phone their braking reactions were slower, and they had more collisions. This held whether the phone was hand-held or hands-free.

The study also tested drivers who were drunk at the American legal limit, and on the researchers' measures the phone users were the more impaired of the two. Driving feels automatic and so does talking. Put together, each takes attention from the other. In the UK it's illegal to hold and use a phone while driving. Hands-free use is legal, but in the simulator it was no safer.

"Switching only takes a second"

Glancing at a message takes a second. Reading it takes ten. It seems absurd to say that this could do any harm to a morning's work. You look, you deal with it or don't, and you turn back.

The cost isn't in the glance. It's in what happens when you turn back.

Erik Altmann, Gregory Trafton and David Hambrick measured this with some precision. People worked through a task with several steps that had to be done in order, a bit like following a procedure. Every so often they were interrupted briefly before carrying on. The interruptions were very short. Those averaging under three seconds doubled the rate at which people lost their place and did the wrong step next. Interruptions averaging about four and a half seconds tripled it. Their other kinds of error didn't increase, so the interruptions hadn't made people careless in general. They'd knocked out the one thing the task depended on, which was knowing where you were.

Writing a report depends on the same thing. At any moment you're holding a thread. You know what you've just said, what comes next, and where the paragraph is going. None of that is on the screen. You're carrying it in your head, and it took you several minutes to build.

A three-second glance at a message about parking permits is enough to drop it. When you look back at the report, the words are there and the thread isn't, and so you reread from the top of the

section. That's the restart. On a complex task, in my estimation, it runs to several minutes each time. I've no measurement for your work, but you can time it yourself.

There's a second cost, which the organisational researcher Sophie Leroy named attention residue. Her finding, as it's generally described, is that when you move from one task to another, part of your attention stays behind with the first, especially if you left it unfinished. You're looking at the report and some of you is still composing the reply to the supplier. So for a while after each switch you're working on the new task with less attention than you'd normally have.

And the detours are longer than they seem. Gloria Mark, Victor Gonzalez and Justin Harris shadowed twenty-four office workers and logged what they did. Work was highly fragmented. More than half of the workers' stretches of activity were interrupted. Most interrupted work did get picked up again the same day, but on average more than two other activities came in between. So when you look away to deal with one thing, it's usually two or three things before you're back.

Put the pieces together for an ordinary morning. Each switch costs a restart of some minutes and a period of divided attention, and it risks a detour through two other tasks. If the sheet of paper from chapter 1 has forty marks on it, the arithmetic isn't subtle. A large share of the day went on getting back to where you'd been.

"I'm good at it"

Perhaps all that applies to other people. You've always been someone who can keep many plates spinning. You've been told so in appraisals. You may even feel you work best that way.

There's a study aimed squarely at this belief. David Sanbonmatsu, David Strayer and colleagues at the University of Utah measured three things in the same people. They measured how much the people multitasked in daily life, including using a phone while driving. They asked how good the people thought they were at it. And they tested how good they actually were, using a demanding task that requires holding information in mind while doing something else.

The results were uncomfortable. The people who multitasked most were not the most capable. Actual ability and amount of multitasking were negatively related. The heaviest multitaskers tended to be the worst at it. Most people's rating of their own ability was significantly inflated. And multitasking went with impulsiveness and with a weaker ability to block out distractions. The authors' suggestion is that many people juggle because they find it hard to stay on one thing, and they aren't doing it out of any skill.

I'd add a reason of my own why self-assessment goes wrong here. The costs are hidden from the person paying them. You don't experience the restart as a cost. It just feels like writing the report. You don't see the errors until later, if at all. What you do feel is the

juggling itself, which is lively and feels competent. So everyone has reason to believe they're good at it, and the evidence that would correct them is hard to see.

A small number of people may be real exceptions. Jason Watson and Strayer tested two hundred people driving a simulator while doing a hard memory task that they listened to. Nearly everyone got worse at both. Five people, or 2.5 per cent, showed no decline at all. The researchers called them supertaskers. It's possible you're one, but the odds are about forty to one against. The Utah study also suggests that the people who feel surest they're exceptions are, if anything, less likely to be.

You may have read that heavy multitaskers damage their ability to concentrate. That claim comes from a well-known 2009 study by Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass and Anthony Wagner, which found that heavy media multitaskers were more easily distracted on laboratory tests. I'd treat it with caution. Wisnu Wiradhany and Mark Nieuwenstein repeated the work and pooled every published study they could find. Most of their own tests didn't reproduce the effect, and across the pooled studies the link was weak and disappeared after a standard statistical correction. So I won't tell you that juggling has harmed your brain, because the evidence doesn't support it. The costs of switching are well supported, and you pay them every day you work this way.

"I've been busy all day, so I must have got a lot done"

At ten past five you were tired, and tiredness normally means work was done. You answered perhaps sixty messages and touched a dozen tasks. It seems impossible that such a day produced nothing. So you conclude that it must have produced a lot, and that the report's lack of progress is a puzzle, or bad luck, or somebody else's fault.

There are two separate things here, how busy you were and what you got done. They feel like the same thing, and they aren't.

Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith and Ulrich Klocke ran an experiment in which people did an office task, some with interruptions and some without. The interrupted people finished the task in less time, with no loss of quality. They did it by working faster. They also reported more stress, more frustration, more time pressure and more effort. People who are interrupted speed up to compensate, and the speeding up is tiring. So the tiredness at ten past five is real. A good part of it came from the switching and wouldn't have been there on a day of steady work.

A second study explains why the juggling day feels good while it's happening. Zheng Wang and John Tchernev had students report their activities, needs and satisfactions over four weeks. The students often multitasked for practical reasons, to get more done or learn more. Multitasking didn't satisfy those practical needs. What it did deliver was emotional satisfaction, which the students

hadn't been seeking. The researchers suggest this is why the habit persists. You juggle in order to get more done, you get less done, and you feel good about it anyway, so you do it again.

That matches the experience. Each small completion pays a little. You send a reply, clear a notification, or answer a colleague's question. None of them is the report. But there are sixty of them in a day, and together they produce a steady sense of getting through things. The report pays nothing until it's finished, and on a juggled day it never is.

So the feeling isn't a reliable measure, and you need a better one. At the end of each day, write down what you finished. It has to be completed and gone, sent or filed or handed over. "Worked on the report" doesn't count. "Sent section two to Priya for comment" does. A day's list might have three things on it, or none, and either way it's an honest record. Most people who try this find that the list is a shock for the first week. It's also the quickest way I know to change the habit, because it measures output, which the habit has been neglecting.

"I have to answer straight away"

A lot of switching is driven by messages, and behind the messages is a belief that a quick answer is expected of you. If you leave an email for two hours, someone will think you're slacking, or something will go wrong.

Occasionally that's true, and there are jobs where it's the whole point. Chapter 14 is about those. For most office work it's worth testing, because I think the belief is stronger than the facts.

Look at the last fifty messages you received. For each one, ask what would have happened if you'd replied ninety minutes later than you did. For most of them nothing would have happened. The sender fired it off and moved to something else, and they weren't watching the clock. Many messages don't need a reply at all. A handful were urgent, and it's usually obvious which ones, from who sent them and what they say.

Some of the expectation is of your own making. If you always reply in two minutes, people learn that you do, and begin to rely on it. Then a two-hour gap does look odd. The habit has trained your colleagues, and their trained expectation now seems to justify the habit. It can be retrained in a few weeks, and chapter 17 suggests how.

There's evidence that the alternative is easier to live with than it sounds. Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn asked 124 adults to spend one week checking email only three times a day and another week checking as often as they liked. In the week of limited

checking they reported lower daily stress. You might have expected the opposite, that leaving email unchecked would be the stressful part. In this study the constant checking was.

Dealing with messages in batches has a further advantage, which follows from chapter 3. Answering email is a task with its own rules. If you do thirty in a row, you load those rules once. If you do them singly across the day, you load them thirty times, and each time you unload whatever else you were doing.

There's a fair objection here. Your manager may really expect instant replies, and not everyone is free to set their own terms. That's true, and I wouldn't advise a silent rebellion. It's usually better to have the conversation. "I'm trying to protect a couple of hours each morning for the report. If something's urgent, ring me." Most managers, asked directly, would rather have the report on time. The ones who insist on instant replies to everything are getting worse work from their whole team because of it, and it can be worth telling them so.

"It's the notifications, not me"

There's truth in this, and it's worth a chapter, because part of the habit isn't yours.

Most of the tools you work with are built to produce switches. An email program shows a preview in the corner of the screen. A chat program puts a red dot on its icon and bounces it. Your phone lights up and buzzes. None of that was designed around the way a person writes a report. It was designed to get messages seen quickly, and the makers measure success by how fast and how often you respond. The defaults that tools ship with serve that purpose. They don't serve Thursday's deadline.

So when you switch thirty times in a morning, some of those switches were more or less engineered. A preview slides in with the first eight words of a message, and chapter 4 showed that three seconds of attention is enough to drop the thread. You didn't decide to read it. Your eyes went to the movement, which is what eyes do.

The encouraging side of this is that defaults can be changed in a few minutes, and the change keeps working without any effort from you. Turn off the email preview and the sound. Turn off the badge that counts unread messages. In the chat program, set yourself to do-not-disturb during a stretch. Most of these programs let particular people or channels break through, which keeps the urgent route open. On your phone, turn off notifications from everything except calls and perhaps messages from family.

There's a study that suggests how far to go, and it has a useful warning in it. Nicholas Fitz and colleagues assigned 237 people to receive their phone notifications as usual, or in three batches a day, or not at all. The batched group did best on the researchers' measures of wellbeing. The group with no notifications at all felt more anxious and more worried about missing something. I'd take two things from that. Going without notifications entirely can backfire, because you start wondering what's happening and check by hand. And batching, where messages arrive at times you've agreed with yourself, seems to work better for people. That's the arrangement chapter 17 suggests for all your messages.

I don't want to push this too far, though. If you changed every setting tomorrow, you'd still switch. Chapter 1 noted that many of your switches start with your own thought, with no ping involved. People who turn off their notifications often find themselves opening the inbox every few minutes unprompted, to see what they're missing. The tools set the habit going and they feed it, but it now runs without them. So fix the settings, because it's easy and it removes a good share of the interruptions. The remaining chapters deal with the rest.

"I can listen and do something else"

Meetings and calls are where many people do their most confident juggling. You're on a video call with your camera off, clearing email while someone presents. In a meeting room you have the laptop open, half following the discussion while you finish a slide. It feels efficient, since you don't need to speak for most of it, and an hour of email gets done that would otherwise have waited.

Listening to speech and reading or writing text both use language, and chapter 3 applies with full force. You can't follow a spoken argument and compose a written sentence at the same moment. You alternate. You attend to the email, and the meeting becomes a murmur. A word catches your ear, often your own name, and you surface and try to reconstruct what was just said from the last few seconds. Then you go under again.

There's a classroom study that measured the result. Faria Sana, Tina Weston and Nicholas Cepeda had students attend a lecture in a simulated classroom and take a test on it afterwards. Some were asked to do unrelated tasks on a laptop during the lecture. They scored lower on the test than those who didn't. The researchers also looked at students who weren't multitasking but could see the screen of someone who was. Those students scored lower too. The researchers' conclusion was that a laptop used this way distracts the people around it as well as its user.

Apply that to your meetings. If you half attend, you come out with a partial and unreliable record of what was decided. You may then ask a question that was answered twenty minutes ago, or miss the

action that was assigned to you. If you're in the room with a laptop open, the Sana study suggests you're also degrading the meeting for the people next to you. And the email you wrote during it was written with half your attention, which tends to show.

The honest question to ask is whether you need to be in the meeting at all. If you can clear your inbox through an hour's meeting and miss nothing that matters, then you weren't needed there. That's worth acting on. Ask for the notes and skip the meeting, or attend only for the item that concerns you. Most organisations have too many meetings with too many people in them, and the most useful response is to go to fewer. Sitting through all of them half present doesn't help anyone.

If you do need to be there, be there. Close the laptop, or keep it open only for notes. Meetings where people are paying attention tend to be shorter, because things don't need saying twice. It's also noticed when someone is fully present in a meeting, and it's less common than it used to be.

The same goes for phone calls taken while typing. The person on the other end can usually hear it. They hear the pauses and the slightly late "mm", and then you ask them something they've just told you.

"When I get stuck, I move to something else"

It sounds like good management of your time. The report has hit a difficult paragraph and the words won't come. You could sit there staring at it, but it seems more sensible to knock off a few emails and come back to it fresh.

Look at when your switches happen, though. If you kept the tally sheet from chapter 1, try adding a note for a day or two about what was happening in the minute before each one. Some will be outside interruptions, such as a call or a colleague at your shoulder. I'd expect a large share to be yours. And I'd expect those to cluster at particular moments. They come when the sentence won't form, or the figures don't reconcile, or you realise you don't know what you think about section three. This is my observation and I've no study to offer for it. Mark's team did separate interruptions that came from outside from those the workers made themselves, and found both kinds.

Being stuck is unpleasant. You feel a small mental strain, and some doubt about whether you can do it. A notification, or the memory of the expenses form, offers a way out of that strain that looks like work. You leave, the strain stops, and you feel busy and virtuous. It's the same pattern as any habit that removes a bad feeling quickly, and it gets stronger for the same reason.

The trouble is that the stuck point is where the work is. The easy paragraphs of the report would have written themselves. The hard paragraph is hard because it's where you have to decide what you think, and that decision is what the reader needs from you. The

stuck point is also where the thread you're holding is most complicated, so leaving then gives you the most expensive restart. You walk away from the most valuable minute of the task, and you've made it costlier to come back. When you do return, you arrive cold at the same hard paragraph, and you're likely to leave it the same way.

There is a version of stepping away that helps, and you can tell the two apart. If you've been working hard at a problem for forty minutes and you're going round in circles, a walk to the kettle can loosen it. The break comes after a sustained effort. You do nothing much during it, and you come straight back. When you switch to escape, it's after ninety seconds of discomfort. You fill your head with another task's rules, and it's an hour before you return.

So when you hit the hard paragraph and feel the pull, stay for five more minutes. Write a bad version of the sentence. Write "what I'm trying to say here is" and finish that. Most stuck points give way within five minutes of actually staying with them, and the pull to leave is strongest just before they do.

"Half done is better than not started"

By five o'clock you had six things under way, and there's comfort in that. Nothing has been neglected, and every one of them has had some attention. It seems better than finishing two things and not touching the other four.

I don't think it is, for three reasons. The first is simple arithmetic, and you can check it.

Suppose you have three tasks, each needing two hours, and six hours to do them in. Do them one after another and the first is finished at the end of hour two, the second at hour four, the third at hour six. Now do them in rotation, half an hour at a time. The first is finished at five hours, the second at five and a half, and the third at six.

The total work is the same. But in the first case two of the three were delivered hours earlier, and someone could be using them. And I've assumed switching is free. Add the restart costs from chapter 4, a dozen or more of them, and the rotation no longer fits in six hours at all. If the day ends at hour five, the person working in order has two finished tasks and one untouched. The person rotating has three unfinished ones.

The second reason is that a half-done task has usually delivered nothing. Half a report can't be read, and nobody can use a reconciliation that stops at row forty. The shelf with two holes drilled doesn't hold books. Most tasks pay out only at the end. Until

then, the hours you've put in are an investment with no return. So the six things you had under way at five o'clock were really six investments, and none of them had paid anything yet.

The third reason is that open tasks take up room in your head. E. J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister showed this in a series of studies. They gave people a goal and left it unfinished, then had them do something unrelated. The unfinished goal kept intruding. People had stray thoughts about it while they tried to read, and they did worse on an unrelated word puzzle. Each item in the pile does this to you, which is why "Ring Dave back??" floats up while you're trying to write about budgets.

The same studies found a way out that doesn't require finishing everything, and the method in chapter 17 depends on it. When people were allowed to make a specific plan for the unfinished goal, saying when and how they'd do it, the intrusions stopped. Their minds let go of it as though it were done. So the mind seems to need to know that an open item is taken care of, and a concrete plan is enough for that.

None of this means you must finish every task in one sitting. A report takes days. It means that at any given time you want as few things open as possible, and each one properly parked.

"I can keep it all in my head"

People who juggle often pride themselves on this. You know where everything stands. The report is at section two, the reconciliation is at row forty, the supplier needs a figure, and Dave needs ringing. You don't need lists or notes. It's all in your head, and you think of that as part of being on top of the job.

The sticky note on your monitor tells a different story. "Ring Dave back??" has two question marks because by the time you wrote it you'd already lost what the call was about. Something had fallen out.

The part of memory that holds what you're working with right now is small. For a long time the accepted figure was about seven items, from a famous paper of the 1950s. The psychologist Cowan reviewed the evidence in 2001 and argued that the real limit is lower, at about three to five. That's when people are prevented from using tricks such as grouping items together or silently repeating them. He's describing laboratory tasks with simple items, and a half-written report isn't a simple item. But the general point holds, and you'll recognise it. You can keep a handful of things actively in mind and no more.

Now count what a juggled morning asks you to hold. There's the thread of the report. There's the state of the reconciliation, and the figure the supplier needs, and Dave. You've also got the form, and the thing your colleague asked about the formula, and a meeting at two that you need to prepare for. That's seven, and each of them has detail inside it.

They don't all fit. Some are being held and the rest are being dropped and picked up again. When you pick one up again you have to reconstruct it, and you sometimes get it wrong. That's how a call gets forgotten and a figure gets transposed.

It also explains some of the tiredness. Chapter 11 described how open tasks intrude on whatever you're doing. Part of what's happening is that you're spending effort all day on keeping things from falling out. It's effort you could be spending on the task in front of you.

I think pride in holding it all is misplaced, and I say so with sympathy, because it usually belongs to conscientious people. A head is for thinking, and it's a poor place to store things. Paper is cheap, it doesn't forget, and it doesn't interrupt you. The people you may have noticed who seem calm under heavy workloads generally don't have bigger memories than you. In my observation they're people who write everything down and then stop thinking about it.

So the practical step is to move the inventory out of your head. Chapter 16 asks you to list the pile each morning, and chapter 17 adds a capture sheet for stray thoughts and a parking note for every task you leave. Each of those takes something you were holding and puts it somewhere safer. I'd expect the relief to come quickly. I'd also expect the one thing you're working on to get your full attention for the first time in a long while.

"I'd get bored doing one thing"

Two hours on a reconciliation is a bleak prospect. Part of the appeal of juggling is that it breaks the monotony. A bit of this, a bit of that, and the day passes quickly. The fear is that working on one thing at a time means long grey stretches of tedium.

There's an interesting set of experiments on this, though they're about video and not office work. Tam and Inzlicht ran seven studies with more than twelve hundred people. They let people switch freely between videos, or skip around within one, and compared them with people who watched without switching. People switched because they expected it to relieve boredom. It did the opposite. Switching made them more bored and less satisfied, and they paid less attention.

The effect was weaker in some conditions than others, and a video isn't a spreadsheet. But the mechanism they suggest is relevant. Absorption takes time to build, and each switch resets it.

That fits what people describe when they do get a long run at something. The first ten minutes of a task are often the duller. You're loading it up, nothing is flowing yet, and the pull towards your inbox is strong. Somewhere after that, if you stay, the task starts to carry you. Time passes without your noticing. People who juggle rarely reach that state, because they leave during the dull ten minutes every time. So their experience of single tasks really is boring. They only ever see the dull opening.

I'd separate two kinds of variety. One is variety between stretches. You spend an hour on the report, then half an hour on email, then forty minutes on the reconciliation. That's a varied day, and nothing in this book is against it. The other is variety within a stretch, where you hop between all three every few minutes. The first kind keeps you fresh, and it's the second kind that leaves you with a pile.

Some tasks are dull all the way through, and no amount of staying makes expenses forms absorbing. For those, the case for one at a time is simply that it gets them over with. A dull task done in one twenty-minute stretch is twenty dull minutes. If you spread it across a day in six visits, you start it six times and it's on your mind all day.

"My job is nothing but interruptions"

For some people this is true. A receptionist can't ask callers to wait until she's finished the filing. It's the same for a nurse when a patient's alarm goes off, or for a parent alone with a toddler. A manager's job consists largely of being available to a team, and for someone on a support desk the interruptions are the work.

If that's your job, the first thing to say is that the difficulty is real and isn't a failing of yours. Work that's broken up like this is harder and more tiring than it looks, for all the reasons in chapter 4. People in these roles often think they're disorganised, when the work is fragmented by its nature.

But even in these jobs, there are usually two kinds of work mixed together. There's the reactive part, which is answering, responding and being available. And there's some amount of project work, such as the rota, the monthly report, or the letter that needs thought. The project work is where the damage falls. It can't be done in ninety-second fragments between calls, and it still has to be done. What follows are suggestions of mine, and none has been tested as a set.

Separate the two kinds in time if you possibly can. Even forty-five minutes a day with the door shut, the phone covered by a colleague, or the children with someone else, will move project work further than a whole fragmented day. Trade cover with a colleague, so that you take their calls from two to three and they take yours from three to four.

Make the reactive work its own single task. When you're on the desk, be on the desk. Don't try to write the report between callers, and don't resent the interruptions either, because for that hour they're the job. Done this way, a lot of the strain goes out of it. It comes back when you try to do project work in the gaps and get pulled away from it again and again.

Set hours when people can come to you. A manager who's available to everyone all day can often become available from ten to twelve and two to four with no loss to the team, and with real gain to their own work.

Use parking notes more than anyone. If you know you'll be interrupted, the ten seconds it takes to write "Next, check March figure against invoice 118" is the best investment you have. Leroy's later research, described in chapter 17, found that a short plan of this kind made the interruption less costly.

And be realistic about what such a job allows. If the role gives you no protected time at all and also expects thoughtful project work, that's a contradiction built into the job. It's worth raising with whoever designed it.

What the juggling costs

You may think of the habit as costing a bit of efficiency. Most of this chapter is my own reckoning, and I'll say where a study comes in.

Time. Every restart takes minutes, and you pay for dozens of them a day. I can't give you a percentage for your job, and I distrust the round figures that circulate. Your tally sheet and a stopwatch will give you your own.

Mistakes. Altmann's three-second interruptions doubled the rate of lost-place errors. In your work those turn up as a figure copied into the wrong row, an attachment you forgot, or an email sent to the wrong Sarah. They tend to be found later, by someone else.

The important work. Anything needing sustained thought gets done badly or late, because it's the most vulnerable to interruption. Over years, this shapes a career. Someone can be known as wonderfully responsive and never quite deliver the big pieces.

Your evenings. The work that didn't get finished between nine and five goes home in the laptop bag. Many people who think they have too much work have, in part, a working day that produces too little.

Tiredness and stress. Mark's experiment found that interrupted people felt more stress, frustration, time pressure and effort for the same output. A good deal of your tiredness at ten past five came from working this way, over and above the work itself.

The pile in your head. Masicampo and Baumeister's unfinished goals intrude on whatever else you're doing. With six things open, you're carrying all six through every meeting and half the evening. It's part of why you can't switch off at home.

Other people. Someone is waiting for each half-done thing. The supplier is waiting for the email. Priya can't start her part until she has section two. At home, nobody can put books on the shelf yet.

The people in front of you. When you half-listen to a colleague while reading a message, they can tell. It's more obvious still to a child who's telling you about their day while you look at your phone. Attention is one of the main ways we show people they matter, and if it's divided they get less of it.

Satisfaction. Finishing something is one of the most dependable pleasures of work. A juggled day contains almost none of it. Sixty small replies don't add up to the feeling of sending off a finished report, and you go home with nothing you could point to.

Against all that, juggling gives you a feeling of keeping up and a reputation for quick replies. It also lets you leave whenever a task gets hard.

Choosing the one thing

If you're going to work on one thing at a time, you have to choose which. For many people this is where the method stalls. There are eleven things, all of them seem urgent, and picking one feels like neglecting ten. Juggling lets you avoid the choice, since you can tell yourself you're attending to everything. This chapter is my own set of suggestions.

Write the pile down. Get every open task out of your head and onto one sheet. Include the half-written email and the form, and include "Ring Dave back". It usually comes to between eight and twenty items. Seeing them listed is already a relief. Chapter 11 explained why, since an item on a trusted list stops knocking.

Ask two questions of each. What happens if this isn't done today? And who is waiting for it? Most items turn out to have an honest answer of "nothing much" and "nobody yet". Two or three have real answers.

Pick by consequence. The item that makes the most noise isn't always the important one. A colleague's third reminder is loud, and Thursday's report is silent until Thursday. For the first stretch of the day, choose the item where not doing it costs most. That's very often the one that needs sustained thought, which is also the one that suffers most from being juggled.

Do the big thing first. Your first ninety minutes are usually your best, and the day hasn't yet filled up with other people's requests. If the report gets those ninety minutes before you open your inbox, it

moves. If the inbox gets them, the report gets what's left over, in fragments.

Limit what's open. Decide on a number of tasks you'll allow to be in progress at once. I'd suggest three. When three things are open, you don't start a fourth until one is finished or deliberately dropped. People who manage workflow in factories and software teams use limits like this. They found the same thing as chapter 11's arithmetic, which is that fewer items in progress means each one gets through faster.

Shrink what can be shrunk. Some pile items are two-minute jobs that have been open for a week. Ringing Dave is probably one of them. Give those a single batch of their own. Half an hour of clearing small things, done as one deliberate stretch, removes a lot of background noise.

Drop what can be dropped. Some items have been in the pile so long that they're never going to be done. Cross them off on purpose, and tell whoever needs telling. If you decide to drop a task, it's finished, and you're no longer carrying it.

Write down the one thing. When you've chosen, put it on a piece of paper in front of you. "Report, section two, to the end of the costs paragraph." It sounds childish, but it works. When you look up from a message twenty minutes later and wonder what you were doing, the paper tells you.

You might object that choosing takes time you don't have. It takes five minutes at the start of the day. I think those are the most valuable five minutes you'll spend, because everything else in the

method depends on them.

Working in stretches

This chapter is about how to stay on the one thing once you've chosen it. It's built from the research in earlier chapters and from common practice. Nobody has tested it as a whole.

Name the stopping point before you start. A stretch needs an end you've chosen in advance. It can be a point in the task, such as the end of the costs paragraph. It can be a length of time, and somewhere between twenty-five and fifty minutes suits most people. Knowing there's an end makes it much easier to refuse the pull to switch. The email can wait until the stopping point, and you know when that is.

Clear the decks. Close the inbox. It isn't enough to minimise it. Silence the phone and turn it face down, or put it in a drawer. Close the tabs that belong to other tasks. Each of them is an invitation to switch, and refusing invitations all morning is tiring.

Keep a capture sheet. Thoughts about other tasks will arrive, and some will be useful. Don't act on them and don't try to hold them in your head. Write three words on a sheet beside you and return to the task. "Chase supplier re March." You can deal with it at the stopping point. This matters more than it sounds, because many self-made switches begin with a perfectly good thought that you were afraid of losing.

When you stop, write a parking note. Before you leave a task, write one line saying where you are and what the next action is. "Costs para done. Next, pull Q2 figure from Sam's sheet, then start

risks." It takes fifteen seconds. Sophie Leroy and Theresa Glomb tested something like this in four studies. When people were interrupted and expected to be short of time when they got back, their attention stayed stuck on the interrupted task and they did worse on whatever they'd been pulled onto. A brief plan for returning, which the researchers called a ready-to-resume plan, removed the problem. The note does two jobs. It lets your mind let go of the task, as Masicampo and Baumeister's plans did, and it cuts the restart when you come back, because the thread is written down.

Handle human interruptions with a sentence. When a colleague appears, you have options beyond dropping everything. "Can I come and find you in twenty minutes?" is nearly always acceptable. If it can't wait, say "Give me ten seconds", write your parking note, and then give them your full attention. They'll get a better answer from you that way as well.

Batch the reactive work. Pick two to four times a day for messages, and deal with them as a task of their own. Tell people how to reach you if something is truly urgent, which for most workplaces means ringing. In the first week you may want to check more often than that. Even once an hour on the hour is a great improvement on continuously.

Use the waits properly. When a task really does pause, because you're waiting for an export or an answer, write the parking note and then pick a small item from the capture sheet. Don't pick the next big thing, or the export will finish while you're deep in it.

Take real breaks. Between stretches, get up and walk about, and look out of a window. Scrolling on your phone doesn't count as a break. It's another task, with its own residue.

Expect the first few stretches to be uncomfortable. The pull to check will come every few minutes at first. It weakens noticeably within a week or two if you don't feed it.

At home

The habit doesn't stay at work. Saturday's damp washing and half-hung shelf come from the same place, and the costs at home can be higher, because some of the things being half attended to are people.

Household jobs follow chapter 11's arithmetic. Four jobs done in rotation leave the house in a state all day. There are tools out, a basket in the hall, and the ingredients for lunch spread across the worktop. Done one at a time, each job gets finished and cleared away before the next begins, so at any moment there's only one mess. The total effort is smaller too. You get the drill out once and put it away once.

Home is also where the good kind of doubling-up belongs, and it's worth using on purpose. The washing machine, the oven and the dishwasher are doing tasks that need none of your attention. Start those first, then do your one thing while they run. That's how a machine is meant to be used, and it isn't juggling.

Cooking is a special case. A meal with three components is one task with several parts, and managing the parts is the skill of it. The trouble comes when you add a different task, such as answering messages or helping with homework at the hob. That's usually when the rice burns.

With children, it's harder, and I don't want to pretend otherwise. Small children interrupt constantly and legitimately, and a parent at home with them is in the same position as the receptionist in

chapter 14. The same suggestions apply. When you're with them, be with them, and don't attempt tasks that need sustained thought. Save those for nap time, the evening, or an hour when someone else has the children. A lot of the frustration parents feel at being interrupted comes from trying to do attention-heavy tasks at a time when interruption is certain.

Then there are conversations. If your partner is telling you about their day and you're glancing at your phone, you're juggling, and chapter 3 applies to you as much as to the driver. You're not listening and reading. You're alternating between them, and you're missing parts of both. The other person can tell.

So for a conversation that matters, the phone goes in another room. The same goes for a child who wants to show you something, or a friend across a table. It takes about ten minutes. You can almost always spare ten minutes for someone in front of you, and it matters more to them than the message you'd have read.

Rest is the last thing at home that needs this treatment. If you watch a film while scrolling, you haven't really watched the film and you haven't rested. If the film isn't holding you, turn it off and do something else. If it is, put the phone out of reach. You can only rest by doing one restful thing at a time.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like being told to concentrate, which you've heard since school. By now you've seen that you were never doing several things at once, only switching. You've seen that each switch costs a restart and a period of divided attention, and that the feeling of a busy day says little about what got done. You've also seen that a half-done task pays nothing and still takes up room in your head, and that a good share of the switches are yours, made at the moment a task gets hard.

Here's the rule I'd suggest. Put it in your own words if you like.

I pick one thing, I work on it until a stopping point I've named, and I write a parking note before I touch anything else.

It has five parts, and each answers a chapter.

I choose on purpose. Each morning I write down what's open, pick by consequence, and give the first stretch to the task that needs the most thought.

I keep no more than three things open. A fourth waits until one is finished or dropped.

I work in stretches with a named end. The inbox is closed and the phone is away. Stray thoughts go on the capture sheet.

Messages get their own stretches. I deal with them in batches at set times. People know to ring if it's urgent.

Nothing gets left without a note. Whenever I stop, I write where I am and what's next. At the end of the day I write down what I finished.

It helps to plan for the moments when the habit will try to restart. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled ninety-four tests of plans in the form "when X happens, I'll do Y" and found that they make people more likely to follow through. A plan like this works because you've decided what to do before the difficult moment comes. Three are worth writing down.

When I think of another task in the middle of a stretch, I'll write three words on the capture sheet and carry on.

When I get stuck and feel the pull to check something, I'll stay five more minutes and write a bad version of the next sentence.

When someone interrupts me, I'll write my parking note before I turn to them.

I'll be honest about what to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first week will feel slow and slightly irresponsible. You'll be sure that disasters are piling up in your closed inbox, and when you open it you'll find they mostly weren't. One or two people may remark that you took an hour to reply. Your finished list will start short and get longer. The pull to switch will be strong for some days and then fade, though it won't disappear. You'll still have fragmented days, because some days are like that. What should change is that the important thing moves forward

every day. You should leave with fewer things open than you arrived with, and the tiredness at ten past five should be the kind that comes with having finished something.

Open-plan offices, small children and days it goes wrong

When you work in an open-plan office. Headphones are widely understood to mean that someone doesn't want to be disturbed, even with nothing playing. Book a meeting room for your first stretch if you can. Agree a signal with the people near you. Some teams set aside quiet hours in the morning, and it's worth proposing that. If your workplace allows days at home, put the thinking work on those days and the meetings on the others.

When your manager expects instant replies. Chapter 7 suggested the conversation. If it fails, make the stretches shorter. Twenty-five minutes of protected time, followed by five minutes of replies, keeps you within any reasonable definition of responsive. You'd still be switching far less than you do now.

When you have several bosses. Each of them thinks their work is your one thing. The list you make in the morning is your evidence. "I have these five things from three people. Which would you like first?" That hands the ordering back to the people with the authority to do it, and it generally produces a sensible answer.

When everything really is urgent. Occasionally it is. There's a deadline day, a system down, or a family emergency. On those days you'll juggle, and that's fine. It's still faster to do urgent things one after another than all at once, even if each gets only ten minutes. Write the order down and work through it.

When you're at home with small children. Chapter 18 covered this. Lower your expectations for attention-heavy tasks to match the time you really have. Be kind to yourself about the state of the house.

When the task is too big to finish. Most important tasks are. The stopping point doesn't have to be the end of the task. It can be a meaningful piece, like a section or a draft, or a decision. Finishing pieces gives you most of the benefits of finishing. A piece can be handed over, and it stops taking up room in your head.

When you slip. You'll have a day when you look up at four o'clock and find nine things open. Don't treat it as proof that the method doesn't suit you. Stop, write down the pile and pick one. Do a single stretch before you go home, so that the day ends with one thing finished. Then look at what set it off. It's usually a bad night's sleep, or a task you were dreading, or a morning that started in the inbox.

When it's always been like this. Go back to the caution at the start. Some people have found it very hard since childhood to stay with tasks, organise their time and finish things, across school, work and home, and it has cost them. If that's you, the NHS advice is to see a GP about an assessment for ADHD. Waiting times can be long. In the meantime the external supports in this book are the kind often recommended. That means written lists, one visible task, parking notes and a cleared desk. They help because they take over some of the work that attention finds hard.

When the real problem is too much work. If you've worked in stretches for a month, your finished lists are long, and you're still drowning, the workload is the problem. The finished lists will be

useful evidence when you have that conversation with your manager.

Ten past five again

It's ten past five on a Tuesday, some weeks later. You lean back from the screen.

On a sheet of paper beside the keyboard is this morning's list. It has nine items. Four are crossed through. One has a line through it and the word "dropped" beside it, after a conversation with your manager at eleven. Three have parking notes. One hasn't been touched, and its turn is tomorrow.

The quarterly report went to Priya at ten to twelve. You started it at nine, before opening your inbox, and had two stretches of fifty minutes on it with a coffee in between. At twenty to ten you hit the paragraph on staffing costs and didn't know what you thought. The pull to check your messages was strong. You wrote, "What I'm trying to say here is that the saving depends on not replacing Tom," and that turned out to be the paragraph.

You opened your inbox for the first time at ten. There were thirty-one messages. One was mildly urgent, and the sender had also rung, as you'd asked people to. You answered the lot in thirty-five minutes. Nobody commented on the delay. In the first week two people did. Since then nobody has.

The afternoon wasn't as tidy. A colleague needed help with something that took an hour, and then there was a call you hadn't expected. You wrote a parking note each time. "Recon at row 62. Next, query the two unmatched credits." When you came back, it took about a minute to pick up.

The tally sheet has fourteen marks on it. On the first day you kept one, it had fifty-three.

The capture sheet has seven scribbles. One says "Dave??" and you ring him now, as the last thing you do today. It takes four minutes. He wanted to know about parking permits.

You're tired. You also know what you did today, which used not to be the case. The laptop stays in the office.

At home the washing machine is running while you cook. After dinner your daughter wants to show you something she's made. Your phone is on the hall shelf, and you go and look.

If you've read this far and changed nothing yet, try it tomorrow morning. Before you open your inbox, write down the one thing, name the stopping point, and work on it for twenty-five minutes. Then write down where you got to.

Notes

This book gives general information about working habits. It isn't medical or employment advice. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026. One has a published correction, mentioned below. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 10, 15 and 21. The person in the examples is invented, along with the report, the reconciliation, Dave, Priya, and every count on the tally sheet.

Before you start. The description of ADHD in adults, the signs I list, the age of onset and the advice to see a GP are from the NHS page "ADHD in adults".

Chapter 3. That the word multitasking came from computing is general knowledge. Monsell, "Task switching", Trends in Cognitive Sciences 7, 2003, pages 134 to 140. The example of odd and even numbers, vowels and consonants is a standard one from this literature and isn't taken from his summary. Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans, "Executive control of cognitive processes in task switching", Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance 27, 2001, pages 763 to 797. The step from their one-second tasks to a report is my extrapolation. Strayer, Drews and Crouch, "A comparison of the cell phone driver

and the drunk driver", Human Factors 48, 2006, pages 381 to 391. It was a simulator study. The drunk drivers had a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08 per cent. They drove differently from the phone users, following more closely and braking harder, so "more impaired" depends on the measures chosen. The law on phones is from the GOV.UK page "Using a phone, sat nav or other device when driving".

Chapter 4. Altmann, Trafton and Hambrick, "Momentary interruptions can derail the train of thought", Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 143, 2014, pages 215 to 226. Interruptions averaged 2.8 and 4.4 seconds. Leroy, "Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks", Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 109, 2009, pages 168 to 181. I couldn't obtain a summary of this paper and have described it as it's generally reported, which the chapter says. Mark, Gonzalez and Harris, "No task left behind? Examining the nature of fragmented work", Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2005, pages 321 to 330. They observed 24 information workers, and 57 per cent of working spheres were interrupted. You may have seen a claim that it takes twenty-three minutes to return to a task after an interruption. I haven't been able to trace it to a published finding and haven't used it. My estimate that a restart takes several minutes is only an estimate.

Chapter 5. Sanbonmatsu, Strayer, Medeiros-Ward and Watson, "Who multi-tasks and why? Multi-tasking ability, perceived multi-tasking ability, impulsivity, and sensation seeking", PLoS One 8, 2013, e54402. The participants were university students, and ability

was measured with one task, the Operation Span. Watson and Strayer, "Supertaskers: profiles in extraordinary multitasking ability", *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 17, 2010, pages 479 to 485. Ophir, Nass and Wagner, "Cognitive control in media multitaskers", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106, 2009, pages 15583 to 15587. Wiradhany and Nieuwenstein, "Cognitive control in media multitaskers: two replication studies and a meta-analysis", *Attention, Perception, and Psychophysics* 79, 2017, pages 2620 to 2641. Five of their fourteen tests reproduced the effect, and only two survived a stricter analysis. The journal later published a correction to this paper, which I haven't read. My explanation of why people misjudge their own ability is reasoning.

Chapter 6. Mark, Gudith and Klocke, "The cost of interrupted work: more speed and stress", *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2008, pages 107 to 110. Wang and Tchernev, "The 'myth' of media multitasking: reciprocal dynamics of media multitasking, personal needs, and gratifications", *Journal of Communication* 62, 2012, pages 493 to 513. Their participants were students and the multitasking was mostly with media, so applying it to office work is my extension. The finished list is my suggestion.

Chapter 7. Kushlev and Dunn, "Checking email less frequently reduces stress", *Computers in Human Behavior* 43, 2015, pages 220 to 228. I've relied on a description of this study and haven't read the paper or its summary. The exercise with fifty messages is mine.

Chapter 8. Fitz, Kushlev, Jagannathan, Lewis, Paliwal and Ariely, "Batching smartphone notifications can improve well-being", *Computers in Human Behavior* 101, 2019, pages 84 to 94. One of the

authors has had other papers retracted. I found no notice against this one when I checked. What I say about how software is designed is my opinion.

Chapter 9. Sana, Weston and Cepeda, "Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers", Computers and Education 62, 2013, pages 24 to 31. It was a simulated classroom. Applying it to meetings is my extension. That listening and writing compete because both use language is a common account which I haven't sourced.

Chapter 11. Masicampo and Baumeister, "Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 101, 2011, pages 667 to 683. The arithmetic of three tasks is mine and can be checked on paper.

Chapter 12. Cowan, "The magical number 4 in short-term memory: a reconsideration of mental storage capacity", Behavioral and Brain Sciences 24, 2001, pages 87 to 114. The 1950s paper is George Miller's, which I cite from general knowledge. Cowan's limit applies under particular laboratory conditions, and the chapter says so.

Chapter 13. Tam and Inzlicht, "Fast-forward to boredom: how switching behavior on digital media makes people more bored", Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 153, 2024, pages 2409 to 2426. There were seven experiments with 1,223 participants. The results for online articles and for people who weren't students were less clear. What I say about the dull first ten minutes of a task is my observation.

Chapter 14. Leroy and Glomb as below. Everything else is mine.

Chapter 16. Limits on work in progress come from manufacturing and software practice, often under the name kanban. I describe them from general knowledge.

Chapter 17. Leroy and Glomb, "Tasks interrupted: how anticipating time pressure on resumption of an interrupted task causes attention residue and low performance on interrupting tasks and how a 'ready-to-resume' plan mitigates the effects", Organization Science 29, 2018, pages 380 to 397. Their plan was a brief reflection on how one would return to the task. My one-line parking note is a simpler version, and it hasn't been tested. The stretch lengths I suggest are common practice, with no particular study behind them.

Chapter 18. The point about conversation follows from chapter 3. I haven't cited research on phones and family life here.

Chapter 19. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 20. The NHS page named above. It notes that waiting times for assessment vary and can be months or years. That external supports such as lists are often recommended for ADHD is general knowledge, and I haven't sourced it.