



Optimizing Activity Pairings

The goal of pairing a primary and a secondary activity together is not to maximize stimulation, productivity, or enjoyment independently but rather to create the combination that best supports the primary activity while meeting your needs. For more information on this framework, visit autonomousmindstherapy.com/post/rethinking-multitasking.

Step 1: Profile the primary activity

Rate the Activity you're trying to do.

1. *Is this activity pairable?*

- ☐ No: this activity needs my full attention
- ☐ Sometimes: only with a very carefully chosen secondary activity
- ☐ Yes: a secondary activity generally helps

2. *Cognitive demand*

How mentally demanding is this activity?

Low ←————→ High

3. *Attentional flexibility*

If my attention briefly drifts, can I easily pick back up where I left off?

Low ←————→ High

E.g. Reading may be low if you have to go re-read the last few paragraphs to get back into a groove, while a puzzle may be high because there is no backtracking required for something purely visual.

4. *Enjoyability*

How rewarding is this activity on its own?

Low ←————→ High

5. *Stimulation*

How stimulating is this activity by itself?

Under-stimulating ←————→ Optimal —————→ Over-stimulating

6. *Resource Profile*

Which systems does the activity primarily use? Check those that are most heavily engaged.

- ☐ Language
- ☐ Visual
- ☐ Auditory
- ☐ Motor
- ☐ Executive planning
- ☐ Problem-solving
- ☐ Social
- ☐ Emotional
- ☐ Other: _____

7. *Stakes*

If I miss something, does it matter in a lasting, impactful way, either to myself, to others, or both?

Low ←————→ High

8. *Leftover Capacity*

When doing this activity...

- ☐ It already uses all my attention
- ☐ It leaves some mental capacity unused
- ☐ It leaves a lot of mental capacity unused

Step 2: Define the job of the secondary activity

Check all that apply to what you need to get out of the secondary activity, given what you've learned about your primary activity?

- ☐ Increase stimulation
- ☐ Increase enjoyment
- ☐ Occupy leftover cognitive capacity
- ☐ Increase the overall value of the time I'm already spending (efficiency)
- ☐ None: I don't need a secondary (skip to reflection)

Step 3: Characteristics of an ideal secondary activity

Instead of choosing an activity immediately, first describe what you're looking for to complement your primary (often the opposite):

- ☐ Use different cognitive resources
- ☐ Be active (requires *doing*)
- ☐ Be passive (requires *watching* or *absorbing*)
- ☐ Have low stakes (e.g. it doesn't matter whether you complete it or not)
- ☐ Be okay to miss parts or make mistakes
- ☐ Require minimal decision-making
- ☐ Be highly enjoyable
- ☐ Be moderately stimulating
- ☐ Be easy to pause or re-engage with
- ☐ Preserve the primary rather than compete with it
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Step 4: Candidate activities

Below are some examples to work with. For the sake of space, those that use similar skillsets and sensory systems are combined, so circle the one you have in mind. Test your understanding of what makes a good match by choosing a primary, and then add your own secondary activity candidates to personalize.

Primary: _____

<u>Secondary</u>	<u>Good Match?</u>	<u>Why?</u>
Podcast/Music/Audiobook		
Puzzle/Lego		
Painting/Drawing/Coloring		
Crocheting/Knitting		
TikTok/TV/Movie		
Walking/Running/Biking		

Reflection

Use these questions to assess how a given pairing of primary and secondary activities (or primary on its own) worked out for you:

Primary _____ + Secondary _____

- Getting started felt...

Very difficult ←————→ Very easy

- Remaining engaged felt...

Very difficult ←————→ Very easy

- How often did you seek or wish you had additional stimulation?

Never ←————→ Constantly

- To what extent did the secondary activity interfere with the primary activity?

Not at all ←————→ Constantly

- Rate the overall effectiveness of the pairing on a scale of 1-10 (1 = I got nothing out of it; 10 = extremely effective): _____

- Would you use this pairing again?

☐ Yes

☐ Yes, but with this change: _____

☐ No because _____