



Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



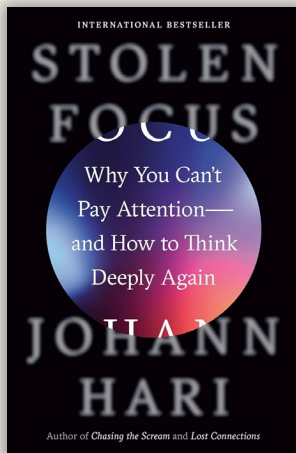
October 2024

Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention

And How to Think Deeply Again

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Published 2022



The increasing and overwhelming inability to focus is not a lack of self-discipline, rather it is a result of the “attentional pathogenic culture” we live in today. Forces beyond our control are working to heighten distraction and “steal” our ability to focus deeply. British-Swiss writer, Johann Hari, interviewed numerous thought leaders, experts, and scientists in the technology and neuroscience field to explore the effects and possible solutions to our stolen focus.

Key Quote

“Many of us have built our identities around working to the point of exhaustion. We call this success. In a culture built on ever-increasing speed, slowing down is hard, and most of us will feel guilty about doing it. That’s one reason why it’s important we all do it together – as a societal, structural change” (p. 192).

KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

The Universal Inability to Focus

“Gloria Mark, professor of infomatics at the University of California, Irvine ... observed how long on average an adult working in an office stays on one task. It was three minutes” (p. 10).

“A study by Professor Michael Posner at the University of Oregon found that if you are focusing on something and you get interrupted, on average it will take twenty-three minutes for you to get back to the same state of focus” (p. 13).

It is common that human beings blame themselves for their lack of focus. We can be self-critical, calling ourselves lazy, undisciplined, etc. Hari argues that “something much deeper than personal failure, or a single new invention, is happening” (p. 11).

In fact, losing the ability to focus is being done by “very powerful forces. Those forces include Big Tech, but they also go way beyond them. This is a systemic problem” (p. 12).

Increased Speed, Switching, and Filtering

Something as simple as how fast we move through life is threatening our abilities to deeply focus. “If you go too fast, you overload your abilities, and they degrade. But when you practice moving at a speed that is compatible with human nature – and you build that into your daily life – you begin to train your attention and focus. Slowness, he explained, nurtures attention, and speed shatters it” (p. 36).

We sacrifice depth for speed. “Depth takes time. And depth takes reflection. If you have to keep up with everything and send emails all the time, there’s no time to reach depth. Depth connected to your work relationships also takes time. It takes energy. It takes long time spans. And it takes commitment” (p. 33).

In nature, our single-mindedness results in our inability to focus or think about multiple topics at the same time. “The myth is that we can actually think about three, five, ten things at the same time” (p. 37).


There is a cost we pay when we switch between multiple tasks too quickly called the “switch cost effect.” “Your brain has to reconfigure, when it goes from one task to another. You have to remember what you were doing before, and you have to remember what you thought about it. When this happens, the evidence shows that your performance drops. You’re slower. All as a result of the switching” (p. 38).

Another myth is the ability to filter distractions and noise and still remain focused on the task at hand. “Yet many of us are surrounded by high levels of noise, working in open-plan offices, and sleeping in crowded cities. We live surrounded by shrieking distractions calling for our attention, and the attention of others” (p. 44).


Flow States

Flow is achieved when you mono-task or set everything aside and solely focus on one single task. “Flow requires all of your brainpower, deployed toward one mission. To find flow, you need to choose one single goal; make sure your goal is meaningful to you; and try to push yourself to the edge of your abilities” (p. 56).

Choose flow. “We all have a choice now between two profound forces – fragmentation, or flow. Fragmentation makes you smaller, shallower, angrier. Flow makes you bigger, deeper, calmer. Flow expands us” (p. 62).



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The Rise of Physical and Mental Exhaustion

Scientific investigation shows that attention suffers with lack of sleep; physical exhaustion leads to mental exhaustion (p. 66).

Today 40 percent of Americans are chronically sleep-deprived, getting less than the necessary minimum of seven hours a night. Only 15 percent of us wake up from our sleep feeling refreshed” (p. 66).

We are so accustomed to sleep deprivation that we have normalized the use of stimulants such as coffee, sleeping pills, etc. to medicate the effects of the loss of sleep. Relying on stimulants to mediate the loss of sleep is not a healthy way of living (p. 68).

The Collapse of Sustained Reading and the Rise of Technology

“In 2017, the average American spent 17 minutes a day reading books, and 5.4 hours on their phone” (p. 80).

Research has discovered that one of the easiest ways to reach flow state is through reading a book. “For many of us, reading a book is the deepest form of focus we experience – you dedicate many hours of your life, coolly, calmly, to one topic, and allow it to marinate in your mind” (p. 80).

The shift from reading to using technology and social media platforms has hindered our attention. “The collapse in reading books is in some ways a symptom of our atrophying attention, and in some ways a cause of it. It’s a spiral – as we began to move from books to screens, we started to lose some of the capacity for the deeper reading that comes from books, and that, in turn, made us less likely to read books” (p. 82).

While we have concluded that the lack of reading is detrimental to the ability to pay attention and focus, it also affects basic emotional skills, such as empathy. “When you read fiction, in particular, you imagine what it is like to be another person” (p. 88).

When humans expose themselves to hours a day of fragmented and disconnected thought patterns on social media, we adopt these thoughts accordingly.

Exposing yourself to more complex stories about the lives of others for long periods of time creates a more open and empathetic perspective (p. 88).

The medium is the message. Each medium (books, TV, social media) consists of new ways for humans to communicate. While reading books call for flow states and to slow down and absorb the message slowly, TV teaches humans speed and that everything in the world happens simultaneously. Be wise in choosing the medium (p. 83).

It is time to consider that the technological world works by design. Current sites and apps are designed to train humans to crave the reinforcements and immediate rewards. “It’s not your fault you can’t focus. It’s by design. Your distraction is their fuel” (p. 114).



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Tech organizations are devising ways to keep us more engaged, more focused on their technology, and less focused on anything else. “The reason we have to be so careful about the way that we design technology, is that they squeeze, they squish, the entire world into that medium – and out the other end comes a different world” (p. 114).

“But there is evidence that these sites are now severely harming our ability to come together as a society to identify our problems and to find solutions in ways like this. They are damaging not just our attention as individuals, but our collective attention” (p. 135).

While the lack of focus is a systemic issue, individuals must take the first step to make the changes needed. “We should all try adopting a 10-minute rule – if you feel the urge to check your phone, wait ten minutes. Change the notification settings on your phone, so that your apps can’t interrupt you and kill your focus throughout the day” (p. 146).

“We are in a race. To one side there is the rapidly escalating power of invasive technologies, which are figuring out how we work and fracturing our attention. On the other side there needs to be a movement demanding technologies that work for us, not against us; technologies that feed our ability to focus, instead of fracturing it” (p. 170).

Surge of Stress and How to Mitigate It

“Even mild levels of stress can significantly alter attentional processes. The science is so clear on this that a relevant summary explained: it is now obvious that stress can cause structural changes in the brain with long-term effects” (p. 180).

A study of over 30,000 people in over 100 workplaces produced detailed findings, showing that as work hours get longer and longer, people get more distracted and less productive. A key take-away from this research was: “these workloads are not sustainable” (p. 184).

“Giving people more time to rest and enjoy life might mean they worked more productively when they were in the office” (p. 187).

The author discusses more research conducted by an organization implementing 4-day work weeks to assess if this would drive higher productivity. There were hopes that this would force employees to slow down and take the rest as needed. Results showed the assumptions to be true. “Many of us have built our identities around working to the point of exhaustion. We call this success. In a culture built on ever-increasing speed, slowing down is hard, and most of us will feel guilty about doing it. That’s one reason why it’s important we all do it together – as a societal, structural change” (p. 192).

It is essential that people take the time to disconnect from their work obligations. “The constantly-on-call way of working is disastrous for people’s health and their ability to do their jobs. He proposed a significant reform: everyone should have a right to disconnect” (p. 194).

Research shows giving yourself the time to unplug, step away, and clearly define your work hours plays a significant role in overall health and the ability to focus within working hours (p. 194).



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Deteriorating Diets and Rising Pollution

Sustained focus requires taking care of your mental and physical health. “Achieving sustained attention, he said, is a physical process that requires your body to be able to do certain things. So if you disrupt your body – by depriving it of nutrients it needs, or by pumping it full of pollutants – your ability to pay attention will also be disrupted” (p. 198).

We may believe we have full control of our diet, but the research says otherwise. “As we became accustomed to food that was radically different from what had gone before, the food industry began to find more and more sophisticated ways to directly target our primitive pleasure centers. They pump our foods full of sugars in quantities that never occur in nature, and trans fats, and various unprecedented new inventions” (p. 199).

Additionally, research conducted by Barba Maher, a professor of environmental science, shows that environmental pollution also plays a role. “She has found that the worse the pollution, the worse the damage to your brain” (p. 205).

The amount of attention-damaging chemicals is rapidly increasing on the market. “Our attention and focus have been raided, pillaged, and poisoned by huge external forces – and we have been told to do the equivalent of dusting our homes and washing our hands more, when we should have been doing the equivalent of banning lead paint and petrol all along” (p. 209).

ADHD and the Confinement of Children


“Between 2003 and 2011 alone, diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) soared in the United States by 43 percent overall, and by 55 percent among girls. 13 percent of adolescents in the United States have been given this diagnosis” (p. 213).

Research shows that parenting has a huge impact on children and their likelihood of being diagnosed with ADHD. “Parenting takes place in an environment – and if that environment floods parents with stress, it will inevitably affect their children” (p. 225).


Alan Sroufe, a professor of child psychology, believes “a clear majority of the kids who were diagnosed were not born to be ADHD. They developed these problems in reaction to their circumstances” (p. 226).

Lack of outdoor activity among children goes hand in hand with the rise of ADHD. “By 2003, in the U.S. only 10 percent of children spent any time playing freely outdoors on a regular basis” (p. 239).

The lives of children have drastically changed in recent years. They’re exposed to screens and electronics earlier than ever. They are fed food that neglects the nutrients they need and causes their energy to crash. The flaw is not among the children that they are struggling to focus and pay attention, rather it’s the flaw in the world around them (p. 246).



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Attention Rebellion

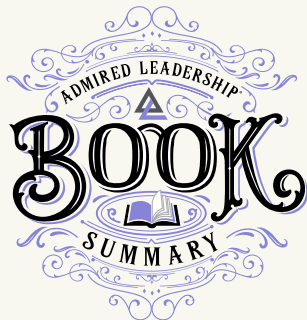
To start gaining our attention and focus back, we must understand **the four layers of attention** (pp. 265-267):

- **Spotlight** – focus on immediate actions
- **Starlight** – focus you apply to your “longer-term goals”
- **Daylight** – focus that makes it possible for you to remain grounded in longer-term goals
- **Stadium lights** – our ability to see, to hear, and to work with each other towards collective goals

If we continue the path we are on, under-slept and overworked, poor diets, constantly switching tasks, technologies designed to target our weaknesses, we will continue to be a society with serious attention issues (p. 270).

“I believe that we must focus together – or face the fires alone” (p. 283).

Hari, J. (2022). **Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention – And How to Think Deeply Again**. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London.



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