

Addicted to a Narrow Focus

Some days we flow easily through our lives, while other days we struggle to get by. We might feel loving, generous, and absorbed one moment, and critical, unfeeling, or irritable the next. A problem might feel overwhelming in the morning and seem like “no big deal” by afternoon. A pain in a leg may pound one minute and feel like it’s gone the next. What accounts for these changes? Could it be a spontaneous change in styles of paying attention? People are affected by shifts in attention all the time, but they usually don’t realize that changes in how they feel have to do with changes in the way they attend to thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations.

Shifts in styles of attention – in the way we shape and direct our awareness – play a large, unrecognized role in our lives. Certain kinds of attention can quickly dissolve physical pain and emotional stress and can cause widespread changes in physiology. Much research and clinical experience suggests that the way we attend has powerful and immediate effects on the nervous system. When we pay attention in a rigid, effortful, and thus stressed way, it is a drag on the entire mind-body system. We are more likely to overreact in ways that are fearful, angry, effortful, rigid, and resistant. When we pay attention in a flexible way we are more accepting, comfortable, energetic, aware, healthy, productive, and in the flow. Full attention leads to creativity, spontaneity, acceptance, faith, empathy, integration, productivity, flexibility, efficiency, stress reduction, endurance, persistence, accuracy, perspective and compassion.

The issue is not WHAT we attend to. Far more critical is HOW we attend, HOW we form and direct our awareness, and HOW we adhere – rigidly or flexibly—to a chosen style of attention. Whether we realize it or not, we pay attention with our whole body and mind, in ways that are measurable. Our style of attention impacts the brain’s electrical rhythms, as can be shown in an electroencephalogram, or EEG. Because the brain is the master control panel for our mind and body, when we change its electrical patterns we initiate system-wide effects, including changes in muscle tension, respiratory rate, and the flow of neurotransmitters and hormones. Our perception, memory, information processing, performance, physiology, and emotional well-being are all influenced by attention.

In our culture we do not recognize or make use of the full repertoire of attention styles. Few of us are consciously aware that there are different styles of attention, each with different qualities and each suited to different kinds of tasks. Instead, we are culturally biased to stay locked in limited modes of attention, to our great detriment. Many of my clients feel trapped or walled in, and they do not know what the walls are made of or how to dissolve them. Many know they built the walls themselves somehow, but they think they are constructed out of the content of their awareness – by the things that have happened to them in their lives – or by any number of external factors and their thoughts about them. They can’t find their way out because they are stuck in a process of continually scanning the content of their problems for a solution when the walls that trap them are largely made out of attentional biases.

Narrow-objective focus is an emergency mode of paying attention that quickly and substantially increases the frequency of the brain’s electrical activity and raises other aspects of physiological arousal, such as heart and respiratory rates, which in turn directly affect our perception, emotions and behavior. While narrow-objective focus allows us to perform some tasks very well, it is also physiologically and psychologically expensive because chronic use results in the accumulation of stress. It takes a great deal of energy to perpetually maintain this type of attention, even though we usually aren’t aware of it. In narrow focus the central nervous system is more inherently unstable and more highly reactive than other modes of attention. What’s wrong is our near-complete dependence on it and addiction to it.