

Attention: How do You Pay Attention?

Many people tell me they spend their days rushing about, and that even when they stop, they can't wind down. They complain of not being able to fall asleep or of feeling edgy, irritable, anxious, depressed, restless, impatient, dissatisfied, or bored – or all of the above. They can't relax unless they have a drink or two. During the day they have trouble mustering the energy to focus and pay attention, and so they power up with double espressos. They have headaches, backaches, and a long list of other chronic physical problems. Thoughts race through their heads. And many people say they feel they are merely skimming the surface of what goes on around them, missing out on the deeper feelings of life's experiences.

These kinds of problems are epidemic. But in most cases there is nothing wrong with the people who suffer them; nor is anything necessarily wrong with their lives. Instead it is a matter of “operator-error.” Everyone has the ability to rebalance and heal their nervous systems to end these problems, to dissolve their pain, to slow down and yet accomplish more, to experience life more deeply, to optimize the function of their bodies and minds, to dramatically change their lives for the better. They just don't know how.

As a student of how human beings attend both to the world around them and to their internal world of emotions and thoughts, I follow the thread of a fundamental phenomenon that has intrigued holy men, psychologists, military researchers, and advertising executives for ever. And for good reason: *attention* is the central mechanism through which we guide our awareness and experience our world.

The term “paying attention” is an apt one, for too often it is more costly than we realize. Failing to deploy our attention appropriately can cost us dearly by contributing to host of physiological and emotional problems and keeping us from reaching our full potential. The truth is that most of us go through life paying attention the wrong way.

Without drugs or other medical interventions, people from all walks of life learn to reduce stress; dissolve chronic pain, stop anxiety, alleviate depression; ease fears, shame, envy, anger, and loneliness; and overcome ADD and ADHD, and other cognitive problems. The world class executives, athletes, artists, and performers have learned to dramatically improve their performance.

A major factor in how much pain we experience is related to how we pay attention to it. Instead of focusing intently on the pain and fighting it, or focusing away and distracting ourselves, the trick is to pay attention in a way that will put the pain squarely at the center of attention while remaining relaxed and broadly immersed in it with other senses present in the periphery of attention. Then the pain can become a small part of our total awareness, rather than most or all of it, which allows us to immerse this awareness – ourselves—in the pain and let it diffuse and dissolve.

When we change the way we pay attention, we gain the power to profoundly change the way we relate to our world on every level – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The power of attention is no secret to the world of Eastern spiritual disciplines and martial arts; they understood long ago that bringing attention under conscious control is a powerful way of mastering our internal and external realities. But our culture does not appreciate the role of attention in healing. We don't understand the role of attention in allowing us to experience true union. The most critical element of human experience is relationship, ranging from deep, loving connections with other people to feelings of oneness and union with the world. Learning to bring our attention under conscious control is how we optimize those relationships.

Virtually everyone can learn to improve their attention skills and in turn their physiology. But we need to abandon the biased view of the human central nervous system as somehow genetically and chemically flawed and the belief that a growing number of powerful drugs, whose mechanisms and long-term effects remain disturbingly unknown, will fix us. Instead, we need to ask what is *right* with the nervous system and how we can enhance it by reducing operator errors. The misuses and rigidity of attention get most of us into the chronic problems of anxiety, depression, and pain, and the effective use of attention skills can get us out.

Neurofeedback is like a sophisticated mirror that lets your brain see what its' doing when you are producing specific brainwaves that are the hallmark of specific forms of attention. The central nervous system responds automatically to this special form of feedback. Habituated to stress, we often don't realize how bad it is until we begin to release it. We are a species and a culture that, through our attention habits, carry past wounds that cause anger, fear, longing, and sorrow. These affect our lives far more deeply than we realize. We see the world through an imperfect lens, which deeply colors our perceptions, making us more angry, fearful, sorrowful, and overwhelmed than we need to be. Our attention habits, and the emotions they repress, keep us separate from the world, from feeling part of it; they prevent us from fully sensing what is around us and participating in it. As a result, we are unable to fully engage the here and now. The cruel irony is that because we have no other frame of reference, because we do not pay attention to how we pay attention, we think we are seeing the world as it is.

But we have the power to change. With flexible attention we can open our hearts, experience the fullness of our senses, and reconnect with forgotten parts of ourselves. We can experience moments of unity and transcendence and find the world has been reenchanting. It will be a watershed moment in human evolution when we are able to pay attention to how we pay attention, control our attention, and take personal responsibility for the creation of our own realities. This is a truly profound realization, a revelation. It's time to learn to use the way we pay attention to create a more vibrant reality.