

## Attention and Psychotherapy

Attention plays a central but largely unacknowledged role in talk therapy. Narrow-objective attention is the strategy we use to repress unpleasant feelings and troublesome thoughts. While alpha refers to a relaxed brain-wave activity, it also corresponds to the type of attention in which we begin to open the door to repressed contents of the mind and to traumatic, emotionally charged memories of the past. Our typical reduction of alpha production, in other words, is a mechanism of repression. We reflexively produce more beta and less alpha brain rhythms in order to defend against noxious mental content becoming conscious.

Attention is central to the act of repression. The mind banishes unwanted emotional materials by attending away from it in the same way that the mind can ignore a distracting noise by focusing away from it and turning its attention to something else. We use attention skills all the time to execute decisions about what to include and what to exclude from awareness.

We are so good at narrowly focusing our attention away from thoughts, feelings, and memories that we wish to avoid that we can often successfully keep them out of awareness for years and even permanently. This is successful repression, which is not all bad and can help us survive difficult emotional times. When repression is imperfect, however, and the repressed memories or feelings reemerge in our consciousness, we make the mistake of narrowly focusing away from them, trying to repress them again. It rarely works as well a second time, and the point at which repression stops holding back painful material is when people usually seek out psychotherapy.

Traditional psychotherapy attempts to allow the feelings and impressions emerging from the unconscious to find a home in our conscious mind through reliving painful situations, understanding, and insight. Analysis of dreams, slips of tongue, humor, and free association are all psychodynamic tools that provide clues to the roots of noxious experiences such as anxiety. Once the sources are identified, understanding the painful experience and integrating it into conscious awareness often help the anxiety fade.

This therapeutic process, however, is also a form of attention training, for what is really happening in talk therapy is the gradual opening of attention and a melting into highly charged painful material that had been previously stored only in narrow-objective focus, keeping it at a distance. But once admitted into consciousness, the heretofore repressed memories or emotions are integrated into here-and-now experience.

Diffuse-immersed attention allows highly charged memories, which were stored during emergency events that elicited high-frequency brain activity, to surface in a state of lower arousal and be worked through. This lower-arousal state allows emotional pain to become a smaller part of one's total awareness. When emotional pain is experienced within diffuse attention, it becomes easier to experience and makes us more willing to allow deeper, unexplored material to emerge.

Talk therapies use some form of this technique, which facilitates the gradual opening of a person's awareness, allows for the free emergence of feelings, and then provides methods of integrating those feelings. Psychotherapy, when it works long-term, changes the way we attend to our memories and feelings. We slowly open ourselves to them and come to terms with their potent emotional charge.

Neurofeedback gives us a powerful tool we can use to merge with and dissolve those feelings which reside not only in our memory but in our body as well. For many of us, there's a habit of looking at content and ignoring process. We focus on the specific content of our emotional pain rather than looking at our attentional relationship to the pain itself – the way we tend to pull away and try to avoid it. A change in the way we attend to our pain is ultimately what helps us to live more contented and satisfying lives. When you start to look at process and content rather than just content alone, there's a paradigm shift and new attentional tools emerge.

Simply put, excessive fixation, rigidity, obsession, repression, depression, resistance, detachment, loneliness, addiction, inhibition, neurosis, anxiety, and other reactions to the contents of attention are undermined with the development of flexible attention.

Opening one's focus helps normalize physiology and accelerates the therapeutic process by making it easier for clients to accept the painful emotions stirred up in thoughts and memories. They find it easier to diffuse their attention and immerse themselves into painful feelings until they are dissolved. Furthermore, the whole process produces less anxiety because clients can now access a larger, more inclusive field of attention by merging with objects and with space, with no one thing occupying the whole of their attention. The anxiety becomes small stuff in a large field of awareness.

The ability to immerse ourselves in pain while maintaining a diffuse attention is something we all need to learn to do in the heat of life's daily battles, but it is particularly useful in psychotherapy, where life's most difficult experiences are laid bare. Whether these are panic attacks, phobias, dysfunctional interpersonal patterns, or repressed thoughts, memories, and feelings, flexible-focus skills are a powerful way to reduce or eliminate them. Our personal and interpersonal lives can fundamentally change when we welcome these feelings and patterns into our awareness, knowing that we have a tool with which to dissolve them. Neurotherapy is the perfect place to start, and in many cases, it is all that is necessary to bring about general well-being.