

Love is a Way of Paying Attention

Our patterns of experiential avoidance are laid down early in life, based on genetics and environmental conditioning. Just as infants and toddlers exploring the world learn to avoid a hot stove or sharp objects, we learn later in childhood to avoid painful emotional experience by deploying a narrow-objective style of attention. Unfortunately, narrow-objective attention is an emergency mode that magnifies our perception of pain, which we then attempt to tamp down by reflexively tensing our muscles and turning our narrow beam of attention away from the pain.

Time passes, the painful memories accumulate, and we become addicted to narrow-objective focus, through which we can seemingly avert and distance ourselves from pain. It seems to be the only way to keep noxious experience from surfacing. But because the tension of narrow-objective focus is chronic and general, we not only avoid – temporarily – unpleasant experiences but, in the process, also prevent pleasant ones as well. Chronic use of a narrow-objective beam of awareness divorces us from experience by separating us from the world, instead of allowing us to merge with it. We perceive rigid boundaries between ourselves and everything else; between our heart and our controlling mind. Carrying stress and past emotional wounds in our mind and body warps our perceptions; we see the world “through the glass, darkly” making the world seem more fearsome and unfriendly than it is. We feel like victims. We make poor decisions on every level. Anger, jealousy, hate, mistrust, fear, loneliness and paranoia are largely the result of the emotional baggage we carry. This paradox is at the heart of our attention processes: by seeking to avoid these unpleasant feelings we exacerbate them.

We live in our mind, inside our heads, attending narrowly almost exclusively to thinking, seeing, and hearing, at the expense of feeling. Intellectual understanding is a pale replica of reality. The real action lies in fully experiencing love and the other pleasures being human has to offer. We crave union. We long for deep relationships with other people and the world around us.

If we wish to move toward experiences of deeper and more satisfying union, we need to tone down the exclusionary forms of attention and enhance the inclusionary and unifying forms. Love is about opening our attention and losing ourselves in our experience. Open focus training in neurofeedback is about releasing, expressing, giving, accepting, and engaging in union. Sound familiar? Our quest is to promote greater brain-wave synchrony, which corresponds with opening and merging self with other. Diffuse immersed styles of attention can dissolve the separateness, loneliness, and isolation that result from overuse of narrow-objective attention. Love wakes up the right side of our brain and allows it to share center stage with the usually dominant left hemisphere, bringing the emotional, empathetic, and spiritual side of our nature online. This side of ourselves is evident – specifically as compassion – when we are empathic and deeply understand someone else’s heartache or joy because we resonate with what it feels like, because we are on the same wave length. Neurofeedback brain-training to open our focus helps to realize love and compassion.

Happy endings are a potent reminder that the first order of business in healing interpersonal relationships is to teach each person in the relationship to pay attention in a way that increases acceptance and decreases his or her own emotional reactivity. For a relationship that is stressed, learning to open their focus reduces the emotional reactivity of both parties. It becomes the therapist's job to help the partners want to communicate, so that empathy can replace separateness. Grievances between two people often fall away after one or both people have stabilized their physiology with neurofeedback training.

As a troubled relationship becomes more stressed, each person becomes increasingly preoccupied with their own pain and stuck in narrow-objective focus, which in turn makes them hypersensitive and prone to overreact. They become unwilling or unable to reach out to the other for consolation, to see the other's point of view, to behave fairly or with care, or to identify with the other person. But when both partners learn the fundamental skills of letting go and of diffusing and merging attention, they find that compassion and reconnection arise naturally. Synchrony training and opening focus guide, speed, and enhance the process. In this relaxed attention, it becomes possible for them to listen more empathetically and with less reactivity.

Attention biases and attentional rigidity are the principal causes of human misery and suffering. Changing the way we attend changes much more than our relationship with other people—it changes the way we perceive and inhabit our inner and outer worlds. Love is more than just romantic feelings between two people. It is our relationship to all of our experience and to the whole world. But many cultures, and many in our culture regard the world as a place “out there,” a dangerous or sinister place to be feared or exploited. We objectify the world rather than merge with it. If we learn to change the way we attend, our relationship with everything, including our planet, changes. We become part of the natural environment instead of apart from it, and develop a deeply rooted, heartfelt union with it.

Can you imagine a world where we are all living in open focus, dissolving our pain, anxiety, restlessness, boredom, uncertainty, and ennui? How are you paying attention?