

The Narrow Focus Addiction

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. In fact, our choice of type and direction of our attention is vital. Certain kinds of attention can quickly dissolve physical pain and emotional stress and can cause widespread changes in physiology. The way we attend has powerful and immediate effects on the nervous system.

Love is a way of paying attention. Feeling at home is a result of a way of paying attention. 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.

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 our 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.

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.

This attention style is called “narrow-objective” attention, and it is how, without realizing it, the vast majority of us pay attention most of the time, to both our internal and external worlds. Narrow-objective attention is focusing on one or a few important things as the foreground, and dismissing all other stimuli, making everything else background. As an emergency mode of paying attention, it 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 perceptions, 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.

In our material society, narrow-objective focus is the coin of the realm – and we seldom question it. We adopt it because it pays off, at least in the short run. Our culture affirms personal relationships not by common experiences of oneness or union, but by the sharing and reiteration of common objective experiences, whatever form they take, whether it’s a sporting event, a thought or feeling, or a new purchase. We are rewarded, respected, despised, criticized, loved, punished, accepted, or rejected based upon our ability to focus on, objectify, name, recall, and verbalize our thoughts and experiences.

If we can’t do it well, we are stigmatized – feeling left out, alienated, different, or worse, completely ignored. But the more we mirror the attention strategies of our parents, friends, and other companions, the more we gain their trust and acceptance. There’s a lot of pressure for us to adopt narrow-objective attention most of the time.

The number of things that require attention has grown exponentially in modern times, and trying to manage and control all this new experience and information has become an obsession. We live in an object-oriented society, awash, internally and externally, in a sea of sense objects – finite things such as thoughts, sounds, feelings, tastes, smells, and visual images – much, if not all, of the time. The information flow has become a torrent.

We use narrow-objective attention as a way of wading through this flood of information, as an attempt to evaluate it and assign priorities within it. Whatever you think of the benefits of our material and information society, it’s obvious that the brain requires a great deal of time and energy to take it all in and sort it all out. Ours is a very busy society, and our brains stay busy keeping apace with it. All too often our narrow, rigid attention to the world around us engenders a fatigue that is the source of many of our problems. And it is not where that “still, small voice within,” of deep insight is found.