

Johann Hari: Stolen Focus

A clarion call to get at the root cause of virtually all of our struggles — our inability to focus

① But it's by DESIGN — we've been blaming ourselves
This is being done to us all. It's being done by very powerful forces. "I need better boundaries, more discipline, ADHD, something's wrong with me!"
Those forces include Big Tech but they actually go way beyond them.

Science
Facts
Data

This is a systemic problem. The truth is that you are living in a system that is poisoning your attention every day, and then you are being told to blame yourself.

We have profoundly misunderstood what is actually happening to our attention.

This is a real crisis — and an urgent one.

↓ ↓ ↓

②

There is something much deeper than personal failure happening

compare rising obesity rates:

50 yrs ago there was little.

Today it is an epidemic.

This is not because we suddenly became greedy or self-indulgent.

It's not a medical epidemic —

It's a social one.

- ✓ We have bad food
- ✓ The way we lived changed — our food supply changed.
- ✓ We built cities that are hard to walk or bike around — and those changes in our environment led to changes in our bodies.

Something similar is happening with the changes in our attention and focus ③

↓↓↓
we are now developing "an attentional pathogenic culture" — an environment in which sustained + deep focus is extremely hard for all of us, and you have to swim upstream to achieve it.

3 CRUCIAL REASONS we need to address this:

① A life full of distractions is, at an individual level, diminished. When you are unable to pay sustained attention, you can't achieve the things you want to achieve. There never seems to be enough stillness — cool, clear space — to stop + think. You become lost in your own life.

② This fracturing of attention is causing crisis in our whole society. As a species, we are facing a slew of unprecedented tripwires + trapdoors — like climate crisis — and unlike previous generations, we are mostly NOT using to solve our biggest challenges. Solving BIG PROBLEMS requires SUSTAINED FOCUS of many people over many years.

When attention breaks down
problem-solving breaks down

③ If we understand what's ④ happening, we can begin to change it. This crisis is human made, and it can be unmade by us, too. That is where there is hope. But for the systems — capitalism, white supremacy — that is where there is danger → FOCUS = CLARITY

James Williams, former Google Strategist—believes attention takes 3 different forms: ⑤

1. YOUR SPOTLIGHT—first layer of your attention where you focus on immediate actions—It involves narrowing your focus

2* YOUR STARLIGHT—the second layer of your focus that you apply to your longer term goals over time. When you feel lost, you look up at the stars to get the direction you are traveling in.

3* YOUR DAYLIGHT—the third layer of your attention that makes it possible to know what your longer term goals are in the first place. It allows you to reflect and think clearly because you can see the things around you—this is the most important because it allows you to know who you are, what you want & where to go.

+4 OUR STADIUM LIGHTS

← Johann added this one

the fourth form of attention that is our ability to see each other and to work together to formulate and fight for collective goals.

Our attention crisis is depriving us of all 3 of these forms of focus.

we are LOSING
OUR LIGHT

⑥

*You can only find your starlight and daylight if you have sustained periods of reflection, mind-wandering and deep thought.

We're like a server getting hacked by a "denial of service attack"—our minds are being intentionally overwhelmed—It undermines our capacity to respond—^{we} crush

COVID - there was 300% increase
in people googling "how to get your
brain to focus"

↳ your individual efforts to
improve your attention can be
dwarfed by an environment of
things that wreck it.

STRESS SHATTERS ATTENTION

(7)

Naomi Klein: "We
were on a gradual
slide into a world
in which every one
of our relationships
was mediated by
platforms + screens,
and because of COVID,
that gradual process
went into hyper-speed"

↳ Side note:

Read Tricia
Hersey's book

Rest is

Resistance:

A Manifesto



Re: the grind being
violent + rest
being the vehicle

The silver-lining =
"The Crash Course"

to disrupt it -
and the systems

we are in touch with how much we
dislike this vision of the future that
we have, just trial run - we weren't
going to have a trial run. we were
going to have a gradual rollout...

[COVID] showed us the road we
were headed down with such clarity
More screens. More stress. More collapse.



♡ It's not good for our ♡ (8)
well-being.
we desperately missed each other

instead - we slammed head first
into a vision of the future - and we
realized we hate it

we didn't slowly acclimatize to
it, and get hooked on its increasing
pattern of reinforcements



The plan was not for it to leap
in this way but it's an opportunity
really, because when you do
something quickly it's a shock
to the system

But there is an alternative. It's to organize and fight back—to take on the forces that are setting fire to our attention, and replace them with forces that will help us heal.

What ^{is} movement to reclaim our attention might look like—3 big bold goals,

1. Ban Surveillance Capitalism— (9)

People who are being deliberately hacked + hooked can't focus.

2. Introduce a 4-day week—because people who are chronically exhausted can't pay attention.

3. Rebuild childhood around letting kids play freely—in their neighborhoods + at school—because children who are imprisoned won't be able to develop a healthy ability to pay attention.

AN ATTENTION REBELLION

We are the free citizens of democracies, and we own our own minds and our own society, and together, we are going to take them back.

Often when a person argues for social change, they are called naive. The exact opposite is the truth. It's naive to think we as citizens can do nothing, and leave the powerful to do whatever they want, and somehow our attention will survive.

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v v v

There is nothing naive about believing that concerted democratic campaigning can change the world.

Margaret Mead: "Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." (10)

Economic Growth is based on

- New Markets
- Consuming more

(11)

this is how most corporations achieve growth

growth is at the HEART of how we are trained to see the world, "success" — It's the central organizing principle of our society

↓ ... so ... ↓

we are living in an economic machine that requires greater speed to keep going — and that inevitably degrades our attention over time.

it would be an EARTHQUAKE for our economic system b/c it's dependent on SLEEP-deprived people.

Dr. @ Harvard Medical school: "if we all went back to sleeping as much as our brains + bodies need."

COVID-19 crisis — a terrible tragedy that forced us to truly slow down — and for some, there was this hint of relief (many)

↓ it was the first time in centuries that the world chose, together, to stop racing, and pause.

(12)

we decided as a society to value something other than speed and growth.

If an Attention Rebellion begins, we will sooner or later have to take of this very deep issue:

THE GROWTH MACHINE ITSELF

The growth machine has pushed humans beyond the limits of our minds — but it's also pushing the planet beyond its ecological limits — and these two crisis are intertwined.

Human beings have never needed our ability to focus—our superpower as a species—more than we do at this moment

(13)

It's stark

The biggest worry about the destruction of our attention is that it will prevent us from dealing with global warming.

The climate crisis can be solved

But to do that we will need to be able to focus, to have same conversations with each other, and to think clearly

!!! ↓ !!!
If our attention continues to shatter, the ecosystem won't wait patiently for us to regain our focus.

We can only solve the climate crisis if we solve our ATTENTION CRISIS

The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time. Its success is the prerequisite for the success of virtually all other struggles. (14)

Massive wildfires ripping across our world:

- 1 of every 30 Acres in CA
- Sydney - 2019 "The Black Summer" in Australia
- Sao Paulo

Watch:

David Attenborough's "A life on our Planet" - 2020 - His "witness statement"

I believe that now we must focus together—or face the fires alone.

→ ... it will fall and it will burn. W.H. Auden warned: "We must love one another or die."

12 causes of our stolen focus

1. Increase in speed, switching, and filtering - fixing gaze on temporary jobs + pokes at ego, & retention

2. The crippling of our flow states

The choice between 2 profound forces - fragmentation or flow.

Fragmentation shrinks us (15)
Flow expands us

3. The rise of physical & mental exhaustion - in a society dominated by the values of consumer capitalism, sleep is a big problem. Rested people buy.

4. The collapse of sustained reading

The medium is the message - each new medium gives us a new set of goggles to see. Reading creates a unique consciousness.

5. The disruption of mind-wandering

Thinking is like a symphony. You need mind-wandering to activate the other instruments to make sweetest music.

6. The rise of technology that can track and manipulate (at)

How do we change the machinery that is stealing our attention?

7. The Rise of Cruel Optimism

Deflecting attention away from the social causes of stress - they turn it into a form of victim blaming. The surge in stress, and how it's

8. Triggering vigilance Focus needs safety

When human beings are in a terrifying environment - like a war zone - we often flip to a different state.

9. Our deteriorating diets

If you put shampoo into a car engine, you not going to scratch your head when the thing conks out. (16)

10. Rising Pollution

Just by living in a polluted city, you are experiencing "repeated chronic insult to your brain" - it will react by becoming inflamed.

11. The rise of ADHD and how we are responding to it.

ADHD is not a diagnosis - it's a description of certain behaviors - it doesn't tell you anything about the WHY question.

The confinement of our children - physically & physically

In the US, only 73% of elementary schools now have ANY form of recess. Free play and free inquiry have fallen off a cliff.

"For so long I had been fixing my gaze on things that were very fast and temporary... All day, every day, I tried to intake more information... manically skipping between topics, like a record that had been scratched from overuse, and I was finding it hard to retain anything." (17)

When you fix your gaze on the speedy, you feel pervasive, amped-up, liable to be washed away if you don't move, walk or shout

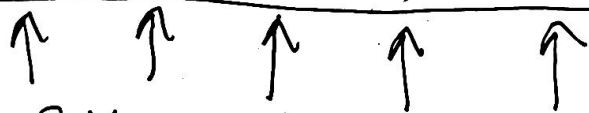
STARING at THE OCEAN

There was something shocking to me about being so still.

Now I found myself staring at something very old and very permanent

my normal mode of consuming [information], I realized induced panic... this new style induced perspective.

DEPTH TAKES TIME *
DEPTH TAKES REFLECTION *



All of these things that require depth are suffering. It's pulling vs more + more up the the surface. (18)

More speed means less comprehension

SLOWNESS nurtures attention
SPEED shatters it. * *

Strange things started to bubble up into my consciousness. What is this? Ah yes... this is calm.

Q: How do you SLOW DOWN in a world that's speeding up?

↓ Just do it **PRACTICE**

The brain is like a muscle. The more you use certain things, the stronger the connections get—and the better things work. (19)

To achieve this, you have to separate yourself for increasing periods of time—from the sources of distraction.

* Flow can ONLY come when 3 components are met.

- 1. Monotasking [Flow requires all your brainpower]
- 2. Meaningful [It matters to you]
- 3. The Edge [of your abilities, not beyond them]

* The more flow you experience—the better you will feel

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi "we have within us a force that makes it possible to focus for long stretches of time and enjoy it—and it will make us happier and healthier"

Problem:

we now live in a world dominated by technologies based on B.F. Skinner's version of how the human mind works

"You can be reprogrammed (20) in any way that a clever designer wants..."

we all have a choice between two profound choices—fragmentation or flow. Fragmentation makes you smaller, shallower, angrier. Flow makes you bigger, deeper, calmer.

Fragmentation Shrinks vs Flow expands vs. ♥