Unable To Focus? Here’s How To Retrain Your Overtaxed Brain

by Virginia Duan | November 11, 2021
If you’re like me and cannot go without picking up your phone every other minute (last average of 244 pickups a day) and then getting distracted because you can’t remember why you picked it up in the first place (the digital equivalent of walking into a room only to forget why you’re there), you’re in good company. I’d blame it on the pandemic, but if I’m honest, I was like this before.

In fact, who wants to bet that in the process of writing this very article, I will be distracted approximately 6,132,013 times (actual number)? Between my children constantly interrupting me and me aiding and abetting their nonsense by switching from one social media app to another, checking in on various group and individual chats, researching data and — wow, somewhere in there, I have to write some words. This is the worst.

Factors affecting focus
I may be belaboring the obvious, but there are a lot of really good reasons why you may be having a difficult time concentrating. You could just be one of those people who have a tougher time filtering out distractions. You could be not getting enough sleep. You could be aging, neurodivergent, or dealing with hormonal shifts like menopause or pregnancy. In addition, health issues like concussions, traumatic brain injuries, anxiety and other mental illnesses, and stress can all affect your ability to focus.

Also — the pandemic. No, seriously. It’s really been fucking with people.

According to Dr. Amishi Jha, professor of cognitive and behavioral neuroscience at the University of Miami, you’re totally normal (at least in this.) “There is nothing wrong with your attention, even if you feel more distracted right now. That is a healthy response to your current situation. To think otherwise is just false,” she told The Guardian. The expert in the science of attention continued, “We’re in a crisis because our attention works so well. It’s doing exactly what it was designed to do: respond powerfully to certain stimuli.”

You can’t just decide to have focus
Dr. Jha also has terrible news: you cannot just resolve to have perfect attention. You must practice. “The notion of an unwavering mind is a fantasy,” she said. (I can already tell you that if this is the case, I guess I’m not going to be able to focus.)
On top of all that, there just are so many excellent sources of distraction (like the amazing and sexy talents of K-pop band BTS). Not only are we inundated with a ton of content, we want it all! How is a person supposed to withstand the calculated onslaught of adaptive algorithms concocted by psychologists and software engineers?

That’s right. You cannot. Now slang me that TikTok video.

**Exercising your brain**

Quite frankly, they already lost me at exercise, but I’m — if nothing else — a thorough writer. For those who are so inclined, there are ways you can train your mind to not only be more agile, but to also help with mindfulness and attention span. (Again, this all sounds horrible.)

In Dr. Jha’s book, “Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day,” she teaches a 4-week training program based on her research that shows how some simple mindfulness exercises done by folks with high-demand jobs can improve emotional and cognitive health — including bolstering your attention span.

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**Here are some of Dr. Jha’s recommendations:**

**Pay attention to your breath**

For one week, pay attention to where you feel in your body your breath the most (e.g.: your diaphragm or chest) for 3 minutes a day. Direct your focus like a flashlight shining on the area. Try and catch when your attention snags somewhere else and refocus your attention back to where you feel your breath. Work your way up eventually to 12 minutes a day.

**Pay attention to your body**

Starting the second week, scan your body from your head to your toes and focus that attention to really feel what body sensation you’re feeling in that part of your body. Is it itchy? Is it making a sound? If you find your attention wandering, just move back to the body part you were focusing on prior.

**Integrate this focus into daily life**

Transfer that focused attention to whatever you’re doing in daily life. For instance, when you’re brushing your teeth, focus intently on the actual brushing of your teeth. What does the toothpaste taste like? What is your hand doing? What sensations are you feeling in your mouth? As always, if you find your attention shifting, just move your focus back.

**Co-exist with your mind**

It’s completely natural for your mind to wander or reorient its attention on something else. That’s what your brain is supposed to do in the event of stimuli. (Otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to notice imminent danger.) Your job isn’t to force your mind to empty or ignore everything around you. Your job is to place your attention back to where you want it.

**Ignore “mindfulness myths”**
How many of you have been told during mindfulness apps or guided meditation series to clear your mind and empty yourself? And how impossible is that? You are actively working your brain and mental state. Refocusing requires paying attention to your attention — and redirecting it when your mind inevitably wanders.

You’re not trying to get blissed out

A lot of us are under the impression that we’re practicing mindfulness to get to some sort of zen moment of perfect calm and relaxation. Nope. The entire point is to actually be mindful — in other words, be truly present in the moment.

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