Training Your Brain’s Capacity To Pay Attention Will Optimize Your Success

Kathy Caprino  Senior Contributor  Careers
I cover career, executive and personal growth, leadership and women’s issues.

Part of Kathy Caprino’s series “Living and Working Better Today”

Your attention is powerful, vulnerable and trainable, and the tools to harness it are right within ...
As millions of us are experiencing directly today, humans are engrossed more than ever in texting, scrolling, tweeting, DMing, and emailing, and we’re drowning in a deluge of distractions.

One study shows that instead of becoming more attentive and focused, we’re going in the opposite direction and the information age has changed the power of distraction to lure us away from the task-at-hand. According to Philipp Lorenz-Spreen of Max Planck Institute for Human Development that participated in this study, “Content is increasing in volume, which exhausts our attention and our urge for ‘newness’ causes us to collectively switch between topics more rapidly.” It was found several years ago that people every day are inundated with the equivalent amount of 34 Gb (gigabytes) of information, a “sufficient quantity to overload a laptop within a week.”

What can we do to stop the negative impact on our attention and ability to focus, and why is it vitally important that we do?

To learn more, I caught up this month with Dr. Amishi Jha, professor of psychology at the University of Miami. She serves as the Director of Contemplative Neuroscience for the Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative, which she co-founded in 2010. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California–Davis and postdoctoral training at the Brain Imaging and Analysis Center at Duke University. Jha’s work has been featured at NATO, the World Economic Forum, and The Pentagon. She has received coverage in The New York Times, NPR, TIME, Forbes and more.

Her new book, Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day, explores what makes attention so powerful, what makes it vulnerable to distractibility and how to train your brain to pay attention differently. Jha also reveals why it’s essential that we do, if we wish to achieve the success we want in our lives, work and organizations.
Through her work with those in high stress, high consequence positions (CEOs, soldiers, athletes, and more), she reveals where presence, purpose, and mental fitness really come from. In her book, Jha unveils how she has trained business executives to use mindfulness techniques to transform their performance, remain present during high-stakes meetings and negotiations, observe their thoughts and feelings without emotional reactivity or judgment, and incorporate mindfulness to become better leaders.

**More For You**

- **Empathy Is The Most Important Leadership Skill According To Research**
- **Why U.S. Talent Shortages Are At A 10-Year High**
- **You Probably Need More Friends—Here’s How To Make Them**

**Here’s what Jha shares on how to hone our own peak mind:**

**Kathy Caprino:** Amishi, why did you write *Peak Mind* now?

**Amishi Jha:** For over 20 years, my lab has been researching the brain’s attention system. We’ve made discoveries about the power of our attention to change perception, memory, and performance, and developed solutions to protect and strengthen it. We’ve offered and tested these tools everywhere...
from classrooms to boardrooms and sports fields to battlefields, finding again and again that they work.

I was inspired to write this book now to share what we have learned with a broader audience, to expand the circle of individuals who may benefit from the knowledge we’ve gained and the tools we’ve developed.

**Caprino:** What is a ‘peak mind’ and how can we attain it?

**Jha:** In my view, a peak mind is one that can access its full attentional capacities to meet the challenges and joys of our lives, stave off chronic distractibility, and be present for what matters most.

Unlike the now commonplace view that we can train our bodies to optimize our physical wellness, the idea that we can train our brain’s capacity to pay attention to optimize our performance and leadership has not fully entered business and leadership culture.
But our research suggests that indeed our attention is trainable and doing so will allow us to achieve a peak mind. In my book, I describe a suite of daily mindfulness-based exercises for attention in the service of cultivating a peak mind.

**Caprino:** How does attention act as fuel for leadership and performance success?

**Jha:** Attention is a core cognitive capacity that allows us to prioritize and privilege a subset of information. What we select to privilege can be tied its content (e.g., pay attention to your child, wearing the yellow shirt while she is on the playground), its timing (e.g., what is occurring in front of me right now), or our goals.

This core capacity allows us to think, feel, and connect. With full access to our attention, we can think clearly, ensuring that our decision making is rational. We can ensure that our emotions, both how they are felt and expressed, are appropriate for a given situation. And we can connect with others in a manner that is empathetic and allows us to take others’ perspectives for better understanding and cohesion.

This is why it fuels success. It allows prioritization and processing of information and action in a manner that is functional vs. dysfunctional. Leaders with depleted attention are those who do not show these qualities. They tend to be disorganized, impulsive, or engage in illogical decision making. They tend to be more volatile in their expression of emotion, and they lack the capacity to extend empathy toward others.

**Caprino:** Leaders often pride themselves on being excellent multi-taskers. Why do you say that multi-tasking drains our attention?

**Jha:** To begin, multi-tasking is a myth. What we actually do, when we think we are engaging in multiple attentionally demanding circumstances simultaneously, is task-switching.
We engage attention in one task, and then we need to disengage from that task to switch and engage in the other task, back and forth. This switching and updating of attention is energetically costly. It results in more errors in both of the tasks, a lag time when we switch between them, and is often accompanied by a dip in mood.

**Caprino:** What are the costs of high demand intervals on leaders? Why is keeping this in mind helpful, and what can they do about it?

**Jha:** As I mentioned above, attention is a core capacity that gets utilized for cognitive, emotional, and social functions. Its availability determines our success at engaging in most aspects of our behavior.

Our success is more likely when we are attentionally fueled-up vs. depleted. Yet high stress intervals, like those in which leaders are often called upon to make difficult decisions or deliberate tricky problems, will deplete attention. So, for leaders, its particularly important that they train their attention, to ensure that they have full access to their minds when they need them most, and when many others rely on their leadership to maneuver through difficult circumstances.

**Caprino:** You’ve shared in your book that reflecting on past experiences and planning are powerful ways our minds wander away from the present moment, but you say that mind-wandering is a problem. Why? And how can leaders protect themselves from doing it if it really is?

**Jha:** Mental time travel to the past or future is one of the most powerful capacities of the human mind. And beyond time travel, our brains can mind travel into the perspectives of others. These processes are not only useful but essential for our success.

The challenge is that under high stress circumstances, when action is required in the here and now, this type of mental traveling hijacks attention
away from the present moment. And, under high stress, we tend to be less aware when our minds have wandered away.

Instead of simply reflecting on the past, we may ruminate and get stuck in it. Instead of productively planning for the future, we may catastrophize and become paralyzed by worry. When this occurs, our attention is hijacked away from the present moment.

To protect our minds from this, we need to be able to notice when our attention has wandered away so we can redirect it back to the present moment demands, where it is needed. But the default tendency of the mind is to wander, which is why we must train attention to remain in the present moment. And this is where mindfulness training exercises, which are about paying attention to present moment experience without elaboration or reactivity, are so key.

They allow us to train for better awareness of our mind wandering and greater control over where we want to direct our attention to best advantage our performance.

**Caprino:** How can business professionals do “push-ups for their mind?”

**Jha:** This is where mindfulness practices come in. They provide a cognitive training platform. These exercises involve paying attention to breath and body sensations, noticing our minds wandering and then returning our attention back to the breath. They involve focusing, noticing, and redirecting attention over and over again as a way to bolster our attention.

**Caprino:** What is the “minimum required dose” of mindfulness to transform and strengthen attention?

**Jha:** Our research finds that for high demand groups, especially those under stressful circumstances, 12 minutes of mindfulness exercises for 5 days a week protects and strengthens attention. Just like physical exercise, you have to do it to benefit. And the more you do, the more you benefit.
**Caprino:** When you’re working with leaders and professionals who are “beginners” at the process of honing their peak minds, what are two key exercises or strategies you give them?

**Jha:** Two I’d recommend are:

1. **Just STOP**

To find your focus in any given moment, when you are lost on social media or lost in thought during a meeting, is to look for it.

This in-the-moment practice can be done multiple times a day as a way to check in with your attention.

S=Stop what you are doing  
T=Take a breath  
O=Observe what is happening within you and around you  
P=Proceed

Stopping the momentum of distractibility allows you to return to the present with your focus with you, so you can direct it where you need to.

2. **Don’t multi-task, monotask instead**

Multi-tasking is a myth. What we actually do is task-switching. When all of your focus is needed, turn off notifications, and engage in serial monotasking for better results. If you really need to do more than one attentionally demanding task at the same time, remember that there will be a lag in your performance. Think of it as the cost of re-entry from one task to the next. Do not add to that lag by further berating yourself for not being able to do two things at once. Just shift back and begin again.
Caprino: Any other words of advice on what a peak mind can do for us and how to start?

Jha: A key take away is that your attention is powerful, vulnerable and trainable, and the tools to harness it are right here in your hands.

For more information, visit amishi.com.

Kathy Caprino, M.A. is a career and leadership coach, speaker, and author of The Most Powerful You. She helps professionals build more rewarding careers through her Career & Leadership Breakthrough programs, Finding Brave podcast, and new newsletter Your Path to Career Bliss.

Follow me on Twitter or LinkedIn. Check out my website or some of my other work here.