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Forgetful Much? Try This Neuroscientist's Simple Exercise to Boost Focus and Attention

Amishi Jha, author of "Peak Mind," shares how owning your attention can help you reclaim the 50 percent of your life that you're missing.

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Amishi Jha, Ph.D., (<https://amishi.com/>) a neuroscientist whose book, *Peak Mind*, (<https://www.amazon.com/Peak-Mind-Attention-Invest-Minutes-ebook/dp/Bo8THNJ978>) is getting a lot of attention these days and whose name is bandied about with the likes of Jon Kabat-Zinn in the field of mindfulness, woke up one morning and was shocked to discover that she couldn't feel her teeth. Yes, her teeth had gone numb as if knocked out by novocaine.

Jha's busy, high-stress life had plunged her into an attentional crisis, which became a wake-up call to pay even closer attention to the "attention system" she was researching in her brain science lab.

"Attention is your super power," Jha says. "Attention regulates how you perceive your life, think your thoughts, feel your feelings, enjoy your memories, and daydream about the future." Jha explains that each of us has a highly tuned, three-part "attention system" that acts like a master conductor in our brains and coordinates with our working memory system to stash ideas and experiences where we can find them later.

See also: [What is Mindfulness, Really? \(https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/what-is-mindfulness/\)](https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/what-is-mindfulness/)

What zaps attention?

Turns out, that our attention system can get shockingly depleted when you're burning the candle at both ends—which is exactly what Jha was doing. Jha is a high-functioning, master conductor overseeing her own very busy life: professor, researcher working with extreme-stress professionals, TED-talker, mother, and now, new author. She felt like she was busy, yes, but mostly doing fine. Her attention system begged to differ.

Another shock about her (lack of) attention: one night after dinner, snuggling and relaxing on the couch, Jha's young son asked her "What is a wump?" Jha didn't have a clue, despite having read Dr. Seuss's *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*—stocked with creatures called wumps—hundreds of times.

Ever the researcher, Jha soon discovered she had plenty of company: Most of us are missing 50 percent of our lives because we're not paying attention.

Fortunately, as Jha has been researching—in her lab, in military barracks, and with frontline workers like firefighters—bouts of mindfulness (along with activities like [practicing yoga \(https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/\)](https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/)) can help bring your attention system back online.

Understanding your attention system

Your "attention system" is made up of three subsystems that work together, allowing you to successfully function in your own complex, Wump-filled life.

1. The Flashlight

That's when your attention is focused and wherever you point it, that becomes brighter, highlighted, more salient in your mind. For example, let's say you need your yoga mat for class. You walk around your apartment, looking for your mat's familiar color, shape, texture and voila, there it is. Thank you, Flashlight.

2. The Floodlight

Where the Flashlight is narrow and focused, the Floodlight is broad and open. Now that you've found your mat, you drive to your yoga class. Your Floodlight is watching the road, looking out for stop signs, keeping an eye on your speed, watching out for pedestrians and cyclists. You're not looking for anything in particular but you're ready to whip out your Flashlight if you need to respond to something that needs your focused attention.

3. The Juggler

The Juggler directs, oversees, and manages what you're doing minute to minute. As Jha says, the Juggler "ensures that our actions are aligned with what we're aiming to do." That is, the Juggler keeps your goals in mind so your behavior stays on track and delivers (when you pull into the parking lot and check your text messages, the Juggler nudges you to stop scrolling and get to class).

See also: [3 Mindfulness Meditations to Help You Tap Into the Present \(https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/mindfulness-meditations/\)](https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/mindfulness-meditations/)

Pay attention to your attention

Your working memory enables these three subsystems to coordinate their roles inside your brain. “Your working memory is like a scratch pad. It is a kind of temporary “workspace” in the brain where you can manipulate the Flashlight, Floodlight, and Juggler information over very short periods of time, from a few seconds to a minute, max,” says Jha.

Anytime you pay attention (Flashlight, Floodlight, or Juggler), the information that’s being processed is temporarily stored in your working memory. Together, the attention and working memory systems form the contents of your conscious experience, and they enable you to use that information as you go through life.

“Your attention is powerful, but it’s not invincible,” says Jha.

The brain is primed to shimmy between these three subsystems on the working memory scratchpad as fast as you can hunt for a gazelle on the savannah with your Flashlight, be alert to dangers with your Floodlight, and bring home dinner to satisfy the Juggler. While this ability was essential on the savanna, it makes you vulnerable prey to the intense “attention market economy” (think dings, alerts, and “Breaking News” flashes).

The biggest drain on your attention

But before you bring your outrage to Apple, know this: Your phone is only part of the problem. Monks have been trying to get away from all distractions since 400 and finding it tough sledding.

Truthfully, your biggest attention brain-drain is inside your own head: your thoughts, emotions, regrets, worries, desires, plans—that bubbling cauldron of busyness. “Your attention is constantly being yanked away from where you want it to be and onto something else, something that your mind has decided is more “relevant” and “urgent” even if that’s the furthest thing from true,” Jha says. Add to that stress, poor mood, and threat and we’ve got “degraded attention”—neurospeak for *Oops, I totally forgot about that*.

Jha’s research—and her own teeth-numbing experience—shows that an experience doesn’t have to be stressful to affect your attention. “You might just be feeling like your plate is extremely full, and start to notice some challenges in mental clarity and focus.” The result: entire pages of Wumps sneak by, mental grocery lists vanish, and you have what-was-I-talking-about senior moments well before your AARP card arrives in the mail.

One way to care your super power is to stop trying to multitask (think mono-tasking instead). But, of course, many stressors are unavoidable: your jobs, parenting, and what’s for dinner are hitting us all at once.

Not willing to give up any of her own stressors, Jha directed her high-powered Flashlight-beaming brain at understanding the attention system. She found that a daily practice of mindfulness meditation—“anchoring your attention in the present moment and experiencing it without editorializing making up a story about what’s happening or will happen”—can clear mental fog, declutter the mind, and strengthen mental focus so you can experience more of your life.

See also: [5 Ways Yoga Boosts Brain Health \(https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/5-ways-yoga-boosts-brain-health/\)](https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/5-ways-yoga-boosts-brain-health/)

Staying mindful under pressure

Working up to practicing mindfulness 20 minutes a day, Jha not only regained sensation in her teeth, she felt more present, more effective, more anchored in her body. “I felt capable and in control, confident that I could face challenges and work to overcome them,” says Jha.

“As someone who had always thought of myself as an action-oriented, results-focused, competitive go-getter with high ambitions and a driven edge, what I learned surprised me. For the first time, I experienced a way of engaging with my mind that was not about striving harder, thinking better and faster, and doing more. It was about *being*—being receptive, being curious, being present for the

moments of my life.”

Jha believes that we are collectively and chronically addicted to thinking and doing. Shifting into a being mode doesn't come easily to most of us. But her research suggests that mindfulness meditation can help us think and do more effectively.

“A peak mind is a mind that doesn't privilege thinking and doing over being. It masters both modes of attention. It is focused and receptive, and with this balance we can overcome and rise above our attentional challenges.”

The STOP practice

In *Peak Mind*, Jha has developed a highly targeted 12-minute a day program to train your brain to take back control of your attention through daily focusing practices and tapping your attention system for peak performance.

If you're new to mindfulness or not yet ready to commit to a dozen minutes a day of daily brain-training, Jha recommends introducing the STOP practice into your life a few times a day to simply raise your awareness about where your attention is at any given moment.

S = stop what you're doing for a moment

T = take a breath

O = observe what's happening in your mind (thoughts, emotions, body sensations) and around you (your environment, your circumstances) and notice without becoming drawn into what's going on. Just observe, allow, and accept.

P = proceed with greater focus and clarity

Jha admits that when she began practicing mindfulness by tuning into her attention throughout the day, she noticed that her mind was like a grasshopper, constantly jumping all over the place, rarely staying on-task. “I was shocked by how much I was mind-wandering throughout my day!” After having a daily mindfulness practice for a couple of months, Jha felt dramatically different: powerfully alive.

Now, thanks to her *Peak Mind* daily program and two decades of brain research, Jha has not only been able to thrive in her own life, she's on a mission to grab hold of *your* attention so you can invest a few minutes a day in brain training, reclaim your precious focus, and get back the half of your life that's vanishing like those mysterious Wumps.

See also: [Crunched for Time? These 5-Minute Meditations Will Refocus Your Day](https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/meditation-classes/5-minute-meditations/)
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About our contributor

Anne Alexander is a two-time NYT bestselling author, and podcaster (<https://www.soulcandy.com/>) who is applying her attention system to yoga, meditation, and becoming an interfaith minister.

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