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Where is Your Attention?

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We usually don't think about the act of paying attention until we can't. But the ability to focus one's attention is the singular power of the conscious mind. Everything we do - our ability to understand and learn, our memory, the ability to pick out critical points in a mass of data - in fact, just about everything that has to do with performance, safety and personal development depends on attention.

Performance is one issue, but our ability to pay attention is even more critical in safety issues. Being distracted around machinery is the major cause of industrial accidents. Lack of attention while driving is the single greatest cause of highway accidents. We suffered the loss of two space shuttles because a critical detail went unattended to.

While the real power of the mind lies in what we call the unconscious mind, the vast storehouse of knowledge and experience, our conscious mind serves as the gatekeeper to this powerful storehouse of knowledge. And it does so through the faculty of attention. What we pay attention to gets stored in the unconscious. What we don't pay attention to has little impact on the mind, and is not stored in the unconscious.

Wouldn't it be interesting (or maybe frightening) if we could meter our mind and measure the time we spend on non-productive thoughts?

The act of focusing attention is a curious process with a very peculiar consequence. The more we pay attention to something, the more important it becomes. On the other

hand, whatever we ignore tends to become less and less important. And while there are times that what we ignore comes back to haunt us, for the most part what we ignore tends to become small and unimportant to us.

A Conscious Act

Focusing attention is decidedly a conscious act. Yet, we are seldom intentional or conscientious about what we pay attention to. In fact, we often seem to have very little control over this important process. When we really focus on the task at hand, we seldom question our ability to pay attention. It seems to flow naturally. But more often than not, we are easily distracted, and thoughts, people and all sorts of things seem to intrude and interfere with our focus. Where does our attention go?

We normally don't pay much attention to what we are thinking about - we only think. It is humbling to see how much time, effort and energy we waste on non-productive thoughts.

I am not speaking of creative musing, playing with thoughts to see where they will take us. Contemplation is a very creative and productive exercise for the mind. When we settle back, throw some logs on the fireplace and let our mind travel to unexpected places, we feed the creative matrix, discover new perspectives, re-define our priorities. All of this is extremely productive and healthy.

Wasting Resources and Spinning Wheels

Unfortunately, we are rarely so intentional. Distracted by our own thoughts, we waste both time and energy by not really focusing on the task at hand, or by attending to the wrong things. Not being focused we create self-defeating behaviors that interfere with the clarity of thinking, inhibit performance, and lead to unnecessary emotional problems. All of which interferes with performance, makes life more difficult and much more unpleasant, and even puts us in danger.

Probably the greatest waste of mental time and energy is our inability to pay attention when we really need to.

Wouldn't it be interesting (or maybe discouraging, or even frightening) if we could meter our mind and measure the time we spend on non-productive thoughts? For most of us, worry accounts for the single largest chunk of wasted time and effort. When really anxious, we are well aware of the problem. But we don't realize just how much time we spend on run-of-the-mill worries. It consumes time and energy in small, unnoticed chunks, but adds up to a lot of wasted time and energy by the end of the day.

Look at what happens when you worry. How often does what you worry about really happen? How much of the problem do you resolve when you worry? What is the payoff for the time spent worrying? We like to think that we are really problem solving, but we never solve a problem by worrying about it.

There is a payoff to all of our worry, but it's not something we would consciously choose for ourselves. Instead of being more effective, we increase stress levels, suffer emotional upset, and decrease the quality of life. In other words, we become less effective and less productive. By worrying, we literally program our mind to fail. We become concerned with, and focused on, negative outcomes. We program our mind to create these outcomes. Along with having to solve the original problem, we also have to overcome the negative condition of our mind. We end up working twice as hard to solve the problem.

When we are too much involved with a problem, it creates an interference pattern for the unconscious mind, and we don't gain the insights we need to solve the problem.

Still another great mind waster are emotional reactions - anger, envy, resentment, frustration, jealousy, - the list is very long indeed. How often do you react to some remark, some situation, some behavior that leaves you emotionally impacted? These range from small, irritating events to the extreme, such as driving rage, the source of a safety problem of national proportions. An increasing number of fatal accidents are caused for no other reason than an emotional reaction to what is often nothing more than a minor provocation.

We may gain some small self-satisfaction from our emotional reactions, but they rarely solve problems or bring benefits. It poisons our attitude and creates bad feelings that invariably affect others around us.

Probably the most serious problem is our inability to pay attention when we really need to. How many times do you find yourself unable to really concentrate on the task in front of you? We find ourselves waiting for someone to come by, or for something to happen, or we simply can't keep our focus and we shift from one thing to the other. Interruptions, phone calls, competing demands - all have a way of distracting us from the task at hand.

Fatigue, stress, anticipation, too much to do, too many things to think about - these are common and relentless distractions. Regardless of the reason, these distractions reduce both the quality and the quantity of our work.

Getting Refocused

With a little effort, we can gain control of the mind's faculty of attention. First, we must take control of stress. Too much pressure and we become dysfunctional. Hard work is healthy for both the mind and body, but too much of a good thing is unhealthy. If we are going to work hard, we need time for rest and rejuvenation. An addiction to action is both unhealthy and unwise. Stress management skills are a necessary part of any successful life. When we don't manage our stress, there is no way to manage the mind.

Along with managing stress, you must give your unconscious mind time and opportunity to do the organizational work necessary to provide answers for you. One simple way is to take a mental break by doing something physical - going for a walk, playing handball, swimming - the options are limited only by your creativity. Physical activity reduces stress and provides an opportunity for the unconscious part of the mind to do its organizing. When we are too much involved with a problem, it creates an interference pattern for the unconscious mind, and we don't gain the insights we need to solve the problem.

The more interested we become in our work, the easier it is to focus our attention.

We experience the power of our unconscious mind when we go to sleep at night and wake up with the answer to a vexing problem. By backing off the problem, we allow the greater part of our mind to function more effectively. There is a time when we need to consciously and intentionally focus on the problem, but there is also a time when we need to let it go and let our unconscious mind do its work.

But the most effective way is to train the mind utilizing sophisticated concentration and focusing skills. There are traditions that provide a complete inner technology of the mind through training in concentration, meditation and contemplation skills. They include a variety of techniques, but you can't learn them from reading a book. It is not information that is important in training the mind, but actual skills training in these sophisticated inner technologies.

When we aren't challenged, we don't have the interest to keep from being easily distracted. The more interested we are in our work, the easier it is to focus our attention. By finding ways to be interested in what we do, we enhance both the quality as well as the ease of doing the task. The more we wish we were doing something else, the more difficult the task becomes, the longer it takes, and the lower the quality.

Whenever you do something, do it as whole-heartedly as possible. The more you invest of yourself in the task, the more you gain, and the higher the quality of work.

A simple way to enhance attention is to set aside time when you cannot be disturbed. Close your office door, delay any phone calls, and let everyone know that at this time you cannot be reached. After the initial resistance, others will allow you this time to work. It takes both insistence and persistence, particularly in dealing with yourself. But the dividends are great. Once you establish this time, you do more high quality work in this time than at any other time of the day.

We can do a great deal to enhance our powers of attention and concentration. The more skilled we are with the powerful faculty of attention, the more effective we become, and the more enjoyment we gain.

"While a tree with strong roots can withstand a harsh storm, it can hardly hope to grow them once the storm is on the horizon."
Chassidic Saying

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