

## Just One Thing: Pay Attention! by Rick Hanson

Moment to moment, the flows of thoughts and feelings, sensations and desires, and conscious and unconscious processes sculpt your nervous system like water gradually carving furrows and eventually gullies on a hillside. Your brain is continually changing its structure. The only question is: Is it for better or worse?

In particular, because of what's called "experience-dependent neuroplasticity," whatever you hold in attention has a special power to change your brain. Attention is like a combination spotlight and vacuum cleaner: it illuminates what it rests upon and then sucks it into your brain—and your self.

Therefore, controlling your attention - becoming more able to place it where you want it and keep it there, and more able to pull it away from what's bothersome or pointless (such as looping again and again through anxious preoccupations, mental grumbling, or self-criticism)—is the foundation of changing your brain, and thus your life, for the better. As the great psychologist, William James, wrote over a century ago: "The education of attention would be the education par excellence."

But to gain better control of attention—to become more mindful and more able to concentrate - we need to overcome a few challenges. In order to survive, our ancestors evolved to be stimulation-hungry and easily distracted, continually scanning their interior and their environment for opportunities and threats, carrots and sticks. There is also a natural range of temperament, from focused and cautious "turtles" to distractible and adventuresome "jackrabbits." Upsetting experiences—especially traumatic ones—train the brain to be vigilant, with attention skittering from one thing to another. And modern culture makes us accustomed to an intense incoming fire hose of stimuli, so anything less—like the sensations of simply breathing—can feel unrewarding, boring, or frustrating.

To overcome these challenges, it's useful to cultivate some neural factors of attention - in effect, getting your brain on your side to help you get a better grip on this spotlight/vacuum cleaner.

How?

We're pleased to bring you another installment of Rick Hanson's Just One Thing (JOT) newsletter, which each week offers a simple practice designed to bring you

more joy and more fulfilling relationships.

You can use one or more of the seven factors below at the start of any deliberate focusing of attention—from keeping your head in a dull business meeting to contemplative practices such as meditation or prayer—and then let them move to the background as you shift into whatever the activity is.

You can also draw upon one or more during the activity if your attention is flagging. They are listed in an order that makes sense to me, but you can vary the sequence. (There's more information about attention, mindfulness, concentration, and contemplative absorption in my book, *Buddha's Brain*.) Here we go!

1. Set the intention to sustain your attention, to be mindful. You can do this both top-down, by giving yourself a gentle instruction to be attentive, and bottom-up, by opening to the sense in your body of what mindfulness feels like.
2. Relax. For example, take several exhalations that are twice as long as your inhalations. This stimulates the calming, centering parasympathetic nervous system and settles down the fight-or-flight stress-response sympathetic nervous system that jiggles the spotlight of attention this way and that, looking for carrots and sticks.
3. Without straining at it, think of things that help you feel cared about—that you matter to someone, belong in a relationship or group, are seen and appreciated, or are even cherished and loved. It's OK if the relationship isn't perfect, or that you bring to mind people from the past, or pets, or spiritual beings. You could also get a sense of your own goodwill for others, your own compassion, kindness, and love. Warming up the heart in this way helps you feel protected, and it brings a rewarding juiciness to the moment—which support #4 and #5 below.
4. Think of things that help you feel safer, and thus more able to rest attention on your activities, rather than vigilantly scanning. Notice that you are likely in a relatively safe setting, with resources inside you to cope with whatever life brings. Let go of any unreasonable anxiety, any unnecessary guarding or bracing.
5. Gently encourage some positive feelings, even mild or subtle ones. For example, think of something you feel glad about or grateful for; go-to's for me include my kids, Yosemite, and just being alive. Open as you can to an underlying sense of well-being that may nonetheless contain some struggles or pain. The sense of pleasure or reward in positive emotions increases the neurotransmitter, dopamine, which closes a kind of gate in the neural substrates of working memory, thus keeping out any "barbarians," any invasive distractions.
6. Get a sense of the body as a whole, its many sensations appearing together each moment in the boundless space of awareness. This sense of things as a unified gestalt, perceived within a large and panoramic perspective, activates networks on the sides of the brain (especially the right—for right-handed people) that support sustained mindfulness. And it de-activates the networks along the midline of the brain that we use when we're lost in thought.
7. Stay with whatever positive experiences you're having or lessons you're learning, for 10-20-30 seconds in a row. Since "neurons that fire together, wire together," this savoring and registering helps weave the fruits of your attentive efforts into the fabric of your brain and your self.