

## Are We Losing Our Focus? by Jill Suttie

In a new book, Daniel Goleman argues that focus leads to greater happiness, better relationships, and increased productivity.

My teenage son does homework while watching sports games on his computer and Facebooking his friends. Of course, I understand the draw—homework can be boring and tedious. But, I wonder what kind of impact this multi-focused attention is having on his learning and social life, not to mention his future success.

According to Daniel Goleman's new book, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, I should wonder.

Goleman, renowned psychologist and author of the bestselling books, *Social Intelligence* and *Emotional Intelligence*, writes that attention—or the ability to focus on one task to the exclusion of others—is a lost art among today's teens, not to mention many adults. Yet focus is an important skill to have in life, and is connected to greater happiness, better relationships, and increased productivity.

The most successful people, he writes, excel at balancing three types of focus: inner, other, and outer. Inner focus demands paying attention to our values, intuition, and ways of responding; other focus involves knowing how to be present and develop empathic connections with other people; and outer focus means being aware of larger systems and trends in society.

To find that balance, we first need to understand how our minds and hearts work. Goleman explains that our brains are designed for two types of thinking—fast and slow—that interact with one another and compete for our attention. Voluntary attention, willpower, and choice are examples of slow thinking—what you might need to study for a science test, for example. Reflexive attention, impulse, and habit are part of fast thinking, which you might need when sizing up a potential date. Knowing how each type of thinking is stimulated and how they work together can help us master our focus to better effect and make wiser choices.

Peak performance—or “flow”—involves both types of thinking, because with effort (slow) we can become so skilled at something that it becomes almost automatic (fast), leaving us open to responding quickly and creatively to new information.

Flow is the ultimate balance of fast and slow brain function—think of the elite athlete running a race or throwing a touchdown pass—and it's pleasurable as well as productive. Yet, according to Goleman, flow is rare—only about 15% of people enter a flow state during any given day, probably because modern living is full of distractions that captivate our impulsive (fast) mind to the detriment of our goal-directed (slow) efforts.

For example, most of us are easily hijacked by intense emotions, like anger or worry—a tendency put to good use by advertisers, by the way. If we feel threatened, the fast brain takes over completely to allow us to respond quickly to threat until our slow brain gives the signal that the threat has passed. If we develop our slow brain circuits to more quickly calm our emotional reactivity to imagined threats, we lessen the chances of making bad decisions based on reactivity.

Learning mindfulness—how to pay attention to one’s present thoughts, emotions, and surroundings without judgment—can help with this. Mindfulness lessens emotional reactivity, and improves both selective attention (focus without distraction) and open awareness to our surroundings (focus without restriction). These skills are useful for handling emotional upheaval, practicing self-restraint, developing cognitive strengths, and staying open to new ideas and creative solutions.

But present engagement is not enough for true success—we must also foster concern for others, argues Goleman. Empathic concern involves both a cognitive understanding of what another might be feeling (the slow brain) and compassionate caring (the fast brain’s domain). Since our compassionate caring is fostered by direct contact with people, Goleman writes, it’s important that we encourage more physical contact and less virtual contact with one another.

“In face-to-face interactions our social circuitry picks up a multitude of cues and signals that help us connect well, and wire together the neurons involved,” he writes. “But during thousands of hours spent online, the wiring of the social brain gets virtually no exercise.”

The importance of engaging with our world emotionally as well as cognitively becomes even clearer when we consider “outer” focus issues involving complex systems, like global warming. According to Goleman, it’s hard to engage people to focus on abstract problems, because our fast brains demand immediacy for caring, but we loath experiencing the helplessness or anger that facing world problems can spark.

He suggests we learn to focus on what we’re doing right when it comes to addressing system problems, because it will lessen our emotional hijacking, leaving us positioned to find better solutions. And, the more people that are able and willing to engage, he writes, the better chance we have of addressing problems like global warming.

Luckily, all of these types of focus can be developed through effort, even with kids. Many mindfulness programs and other programs in schools have helped children become more aware of how their minds work, allowing them to focus better at school. “The antidote for mind wandering is meta-awareness, attention to attention itself, as in the ability to notice that you are not noticing what you should, and correcting your focus,” writes Goleman. “Mindfulness makes this crucial attention muscle stronger.”

So, what does this mean for my screen-loving son? Even if the barrage of screens doesn’t negatively impact his GPA, it may be distracting him from developing other sources of growth—like empathy-building, emotional equanimity, and willpower—that could be put to good use in his career and life. Goleman’s book makes me think I should encourage my son to turn off those distracting screens and work on developing his focus.

Otherwise, he—and potentially the whole world—loses.