

Harnessing the Power of Attention to Heal

Many clients tell me they rush through the day – dropping the kids off at school, zipping off to work on increasingly-packed roads, frantically playing out in their heads the things they need to do, obsessing over the details of work or school, juggling cell-phone calls as they drive – anxious to cram as much as they can into their lives lest they miss something. But many people also tell me that even when they stop rushing about, they can't wind down. They complain of not being able to fall asleep or of feeling edgy, irritable, anxious, depressed, restless, impatient, dissatisfied, or bored – or all of the above. Thoughts race through their heads. And many people say they feel they are merely skimming the surface of what goes on around them, missing out on the deeper feelings of life's experiences.

These kinds of problems are epidemic. But in most cases there is nothing wrong with the people who suffer them, nor is anything necessarily wrong with their lives. Instead it is a matter of "operator error." Everyone has the ability to rebalance and heal their nervous systems to end these problems, to dissolve their pain, to slow down and yet accomplish more, to experience life more deeply, to optimize the function of their bodies and minds, to dramatically change their lives for the better. They just don't know how.

Having been a student for more than 20 years of how human beings attend both to the world around them and to their internal world of emotions and thoughts, I've found that attention is key. Pry beneath the surface of the subject, and there is a fascinating and fundamental phenomenon that has intrigued holy men, psychologists, military researchers, and advertising executives for many years. Attention is the central mechanism through which we guide our awareness and experience of the world. The truth is that most of us go through life paying attention incorrectly. Without drugs or other medical interventions, people from all walks of life learn to reduce stress; dissolve chronic pain; stop anxiety; alleviate depression; ease fears, shame, envy, anger, and loneliness; and overcome attention deficit disorders (ADD, ADHD), and other cognitive problems. The world-class executives, athletes, artists, and performers have learned to dramatically improve their performance.

With pain, for example, a major factor in how much pain I experience is related to how I pay attention to it. Instead of focusing intently on the pain and fighting it, or focusing away and distracting myself, the trick is to pay attention in a way that puts the pain squarely at the center of attention while I remain relaxed and broadly immersed in it with other senses present in the periphery of attention. When we change the way we pay attention, we gain the power to profoundly change the way we relate to our world on every level – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

The power of attention is no secret to the world of Eastern spiritual disciplines and martial arts; they understood long ago that bringing attention under conscious control is a powerful way of mastering our internal and external realities. But our culture does not appreciate the role of attention in healing everything from depression to anxiety to ADD and ADHD, to myriad kinds of chronic pain and distress, sleep problems, fatigue, sadness, isolation, and irritability. We don't understand the role of attention in allowing us to experience true union. The most critical element of human experience is relationship, ranging from deep, loving connections with other people to feelings of oneness and union with the world. Learning to bring our attention under conscious control is how we optimize those relationships.

Neurofeedback is important because virtually everyone can learn to improve their attention skills and in turn their physiology. Learning to master our central nervous systems and with it our personal reality, through the use of optional attention skills, is the ultimate control and freedom. We need to abandon the biased view of the human central nervous system as somehow genetically and chemically flawed and the belief that a growing number of powerful drugs, whose mechanism and long-term effects remain disturbingly unknown, will fix us. Instead we need to ask what is *right* with the nervous system and how we can enhance it by reducing operator errors. The best treatment tool for many is attention training. The misuse and rigidity of attention get most of us into the chronic problems of anxiety, depression, and pain, and the effective use of attention skills can get us out.

With attention training through neurofeedback at work, school, or home, we can open our hearts, experience the fullness of our senses, and reconnect with forgotten parts of ourselves. We can experience moments of unity and transcendence and find the world has been reenchanting. It will be a watershed moment in human evolution when we are able to pay attention to how we pay attention, control our attention, and take personal responsibility for the creation of our own realities. This is a truly profound realization, a revelation. It's time to learn to use the way we pay attention to create a more vibrant reality.