

Fear and Attention

Stress is not just a problem of too much going on. How we attend to our emotions is the critical element of our addiction to narrow-objective focus. Narrow focus occurs when our well-being is threatened – a reflexive response to fearful situations. Among other things, abuse and neglect at an early age affect a child's cognitive abilities. Victims of abuse often suffer from extreme narrow focus, a condition triggered by life in a home that was chaotic and hostile. Children respond to this lack of safety by instinctively becoming hyper-vigilant in narrow-objective focus, constantly scanning their environment for danger, always apprehensive and fearing attack. People who experience chronic stress develop a chronically narrowed visual field, which over the long term impacts their eyesight. Our visual system is hardwired to our emotions. Just as the resting lion reflexively prepares for the hunt when he spies gazelles, human beings respond to external problems, threats, or perceived threats by heightening their arousal and narrowing their gaze.

Much stress originates in childhood, when we are too inexperienced to understand the world. Taking tests when we don't know the material, being threatened by a bully, or (especially) feeling that our parents don't love us – whether or not this is true – are a few of the things that condition us to narrow focus. Chronic narrow-objective focus creates a behavioral loop: exacerbating fearful circumstances, and then when circumstances have changed and we are no longer in "danger", we tend to stay in narrow focus as a way of avoiding our residual feelings of fear and anxiety. In this sense, narrow focus is used as a strategy to escape. As feelings of anxiety rise and we unconsciously look for effective distractions to keep us from feeling them. We rivet attention on an engrossing novel or fast-paced television show or thrilling video game in part to escape emotional chaos, anxiousness, or unpleasantness from within. The more interested we are in something "out there," the more effective it is as an anxiety-management technique.

In fact, without realizing it, many of us use our attention to manage our physical and emotional pain. The more successfully our attention is diverted, the less pain we feel. If attention diversion works, we'll keep using it until it stops being effective or becomes too expensive. When it stops working we'll find something more potent. Diversionary strategies are often overused to the point of addiction; compulsive use of television, food, sex, gambling, travel, video games, loud music, alcohol, drugs, and especially work can all serve as strategic distractions to keep us away from – or help us manage – our pain. The effort it takes to chronically divert the mind from these feelings causes the accumulation of tension and leads to fatigue and burnout, and depression can be the end result.

However, at the same time, because we live in a culture that rewards it, narrow-objective attention can serve us well much of the time: We get good grades, drive carefully, feel accepted, learn to operate safely and productively in a busy, demanding world. We don't recognize paying attention effortfully and chronically as a problem. Some people may never notice the problems it causes. Chronic narrow-objective attention requires a great deal of energy and, in my view, keeps us from knowing our true selves. We've become habituated to it. But maintaining a tense, emergency mode of attention tires us out: and so we need another cup of coffee to muster the energy to keep paying attention, or a cigarette or a glass of wine to relieve the tension of narrow focus.

Chronic narrow-objective attention ultimately prevents the diffusion of stress. Even in a life that is relatively carefree by current standards, stress can and does accumulate to levels that produce symptoms of disorder and disease (though we often don't recognize them as being caused by stress). Preventing the diffusion of stress and causing its accumulation, narrow-objective focus actually makes us less productive over the long haul. People who complain of an inability to concentrate, listlessness, low productivity, diminished sexual activity, and depression often find these problems resolved when they learn to shift out of narrow-objective patterns.

On a psychological level, when we remain in narrow-objective focus, fear and anxiety play an exaggerated role in our minds and adversely color our perceptions of the world around us. Though we may not realize it, narrow-objective focus and the resultant stress that we bottle up inside keep us emotionally numb, blocking many feelings from our awareness. We miss out on rich experiences of smell and taste, pleasant physical sensations, and deep feelings of joy and sadness. Objectifying things or people in emergency mode reduces empathy and distances us from experience, creating feelings of separation.

That's why people so often feel isolated or thwarted in their relationships, or feel that their experiences are not deep or meaningful. They often seek out the stimulation of new relationships and experiences instead. There is nothing wrong with them, but there is something wrong with how rigidly they attend. Satisfying unions, whether with other people or with our own internal experiences, are much easier when attention is flexible, when narrow and objective forms of attention give way easily to other, more relaxed, diffuse, and immersed styles of attention. And although some of us already may have caring relationships in narrow-objective attention, these can be enhanced by learning the attentional flexibility that comes with opening our focus through neurofeedback training.