

The Focused Life

By Winifred Gallagher

We're all amateur psychologists who run private experiments on how best to live. Some of us specialize in relationships and mostly explore bonding. Others concentrate on work and test ways to be more productive and creative. Still others look to philosophy or religion and investigate the big picture: the ultimate way things are. Five years ago, a common-enough crisis plunged me into a study of the nature of experience. More important, this experiment led me to a psychological version of what physicists trying to explain the universe call a "grand unified theory" or "theory of everything": Your life – who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love – is the sum of what you focus on.

That your experience depends on the material objects and mental subjects that you choose to pay attention to is not an imaginative notion, but a physiological fact. When you focus on a stop sign or a sonnet, a waft of perfume or a stock-market tip, your brain registers that "target," which enables it to affect your behavior. In contrast, the things you don't attend to in a sense don't exist, at least for you. All day long, you selectively pay attention, and more often than you might suspect, you can take charge of this process.

If you could look backward at your years thus far, you'd see that your life – what you've confidently called "reality" – has been fashioned from what you've paid attention to. You'd also be struck by the fact that if you had paid attention to other things, your reality and your life would be very different.

Attention has created the experience and the self stored in your memory; looking ahead, what you focus on will create the life and person yet to be. Psychology has mostly examined our pasts to explain and improve our lives. If you think in terms of the present and future instead, you might encounter an intuition lurking in your mind, as it was in mine: If you could just stay focused on the right things, your life would stop feeling like a reaction to stuff that happens to you and become something that you create – not a series of accidents, but a work of art.

My interest in attention goes back to childhood, when I ran the usual experiments on its effects on behavior. I saw that by focusing on one thing, you could ignore another. If you concentrated on some enjoyable activity, you could make time simultaneously race and stand still. Staying focused on a goal over time might not guarantee you'd achieve it but was a crucial step in that direction.

In midlife, an attention experiment of a different magnitude set me on the path to a deeper understanding of the subject. Walking away from the hospital after the biopsy from hell – not just cancer, but a particularly nasty, fairly advanced kind – I had an intuition of unusual blue-white clarity. This disease wanted to monopolize my attention, but as much as possible, I would focus on my life instead.

Right from the start, my experiment went well. Through many months of chemotherapy, surgery, more chemo, and daily radiation, I mostly stayed focused on the present and on the things that matter most and make me feel best: big ones like my family and friends, spiritual life, and work, and smaller ones like movies, walks, and a 6:30 p.m. martini. As a result, I spent very little time and energy on the past or future or on the suddenly very many things that seemed unimportant or negative. I began to relish corny admonitions to "Have a good day!" and my husband started referring to our house as "Harmonia."

That's not to say that cancer was the proverbial "best thing that ever happened to me," or that I'm glad I had it: It wasn't, and I'm not. Nor was my strategy 100 percent effective. There are moments in life – when someone hands you a pink slip, perhaps, or can't find your "good" chemo vein – when you just can't immediately shift your attention to what to have for dinner, much less the music of the spheres. Then too, stimuli that you don't consciously focus on, such as a scowling face in a crowd or an unpleasant noise, can sometimes sneak into your brain.

Nevertheless, throughout the ordeal, I cleaved to the principle that your life is the creation of what you focus on – and what you don't. Whenever possible, I looked toward whatever seemed meaningful, productive, or energizing and away from the destructive or dispiriting. I found that I could pretty much carry on with business

as usual and stay in pretty good spirits, too. Although that year was not my easiest, neither was it the hardest. Certainly, it was my most focused.

A psychological theory – your life consists of what you focus on – is one thing in your mind, something else again when you test-drive it over rough terrain. I began thinking seriously about attention not just personally but also professionally, as someone who writes about behavior. I learned that attention is a hot subject in both neuroscientific and behavioral research, which increasingly reveal its importance to functions from the simplest learning to humans’ distinctive search for meaning. I found that my small-scale experiment illustrates what a tremendous amount of eclectic science proves: You cannot always be happy, but you can almost always be focused, which is the next best thing.

By skillfully managing your attention, you’re able to both experience life in a balanced way and stay oriented in a positive, productive direction. John Milton might have been thinking of the power of focus when he wrote: “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n.”

Like consciousness or mind, attention is a complex neurological and behavioral business. There’s no tidy “attention center” in the brain. Instead, an ensemble of alerting, orienting, and executive networks collaborate to attune you to what’s going on in your inner or outer world in a coherent way that points you toward an appropriate response.

Neuroscience’s truly groundbreaking insight into attention is the discovery that its basic mechanism is a process of selection. This two-part neurological sorting allows you to focus by enhancing the most compelling, or “salient,” physical object or “high-value” mental subject in your ken and suppressing the rest. Outside of an elite scientific circle, however, this finding’s implications for everyday life have been stunningly unremarked.

When you focus, you’re spending limited cognitive currency that should be wisely invested, because the stakes are high. At any one moment, your world contains too much information, whether it is objects, subjects, or both, for your brain to depict clearly for you. Your attentional system selects a chunk of what’s there, which gets valuable cerebral real estate and, therefore, the chance to affect your behavior. This thin slice of life becomes part of your reality, and the rest is consigned to the shadows.

Attention’s selective nature confers tremendous benefits, chief of which is enabling you to comprehend what would otherwise be chaos. You couldn’t take in the totality of your own experience, even for a moment. Whether it’s noise on the street, ideas at the office, or feelings in a relationship, you’re potentially bombarded with stimuli vying for your attention. New electronic information and communications technology continually add to the overload. By helping you to focus on some things and filter out others, attention distills the universe into your universe.

Along with performing the Apollonian task of organizing your world, attention enables you to have the kind of Dionysian experience beautifully described by the old-fashioned term rapt – completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even “carried away” – that underlies life’s deepest pleasures, from the scholar’s study to the carpenter’s craft to the lover’s obsession. Some individuals slip into it more readily, but research shows that with some reflection, experimentation, and practice, all of us can cultivate this profoundly attentive state and experience it more often.

Considering attention’s importance, it’s surprising that until recently, science has come up with few strategies to improve it. Most new strategies have a “back to the future” quality derived from their origin in meditation, secularized and made amenable to scientific study. These cognitive regimens can strengthen attention and are both free and safe, all of which must appeal to the 78 million baby boomers and their aging children, who are equally concerned about maintaining their mental and physical health.

The focused life, however, requires a capacity not just for paying attention but also for the discerning choice of targets that will invite the best possible experience. Much is made of the fact that human beings are the only creatures to know we must die, but we’re also the only ones to know we must find something engaging to focus on in order to pass the time. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “To fill the hour – that is happiness.”

Deciding what to pay attention to for this hour, day, week, or year, much less a lifetime, is a peculiarly human predicament, and your quality of life largely depends on how you handle it. Moses got his focus from God; Picasso from his nearly supernatural creativity. We have other motivations and gifts, and most of us have to go through a more complicated process to find the right things to focus on. We must resist the temptation to drift along, reacting to whatever happens to us next, and deliberately select targets, from activities to relationships, that are worthy of our finite supplies of time and attention.

Some decisions, such as which profession to pursue or person to live with, automatically receive serious attention. Other choices may be less obvious but are just as important to the tenor of your daily experience: deciding to concentrate on your hopes rather than your fears; to attend to the present instead of the past; to appreciate that just because something upsetting happens, you don't have to fixate on it. Still other targets may seem inconsequential: focusing on a guitar instead of a rerun; a chat instead of an e-mail; an apple instead of a doughnut. Yet the difference between "passing the time" and "time well spent" depends on making smart decisions about what to attend to.

Abundant research shows that most of the rich and famous, brainy and beautiful are little or no happier than individuals of ordinary means and gifts, because no matter who you are, your joie de vivre mostly derives from paying attention to someone or something that interests you. Even in the hell of the Nazi death camps, many people avoided depression because they concentrated on the one thing that was left to them: their inner experience. The rates of psychological problems among people in extreme situations such as plane crashes in remote areas are surprisingly low – often lower than in normal settings. Vicissitudes notwithstanding, these people are not sitting around brooding about the past or killing time by channel surfing but are living the focused life.

It's all too easy to spend much of your life in an unfocused, mixed-up condition, rushing toward the chimera of a better time and place to tune in and, well, be alive. It's the fashion to blame computers, cell phones, and cable TV for this diffused, fragmented state of mind, but our seductive machines are not at fault.

The real problem is that we don't appreciate our own ability to use attention to select and create truly satisfying experience. Instead of exercising this potential, we too often take the lazy way out, settle for less, and squander our mental money on whatever captures our awareness willy-nilly, no matter how disappointing the consequences.

Where the quality of your life is concerned, focus is not everything, but it is a great deal. The question is: If all the world's a stage, as Shakespeare puts it, where do you shine the spotlight of your attention?

Perhaps the most important thing I've learned is that it shouldn't take a crisis to show you that your life is the sum total of what you focus on or to make you question that your well-being depends on what happens to happen to you. After running that tough experiment, however, I have a plan for the rest of my life. I'll choose my targets with care – writing a book or making a stew, visiting a friend or looking out a window – then give them my rapt attention. In short, I'll live the focused life, because it's the best kind there is.

Excerpted from the book Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life (2009) by Winifred Gallagher.