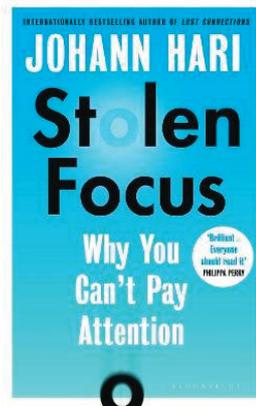




STOLEN FOCUS
BY JOHANN HARI



THE BOOK


Stolen Focus
by Johann Hari


INTRODUCTION

Johann Hari has noticed that the struggle to focus is becoming an increasing problem in the world. After recognising his own struggle to stick with a task, he set out to discover why he and the rest of the world are losing the ability to concentrate.

The book *Stolen Focus* outlines the deep-rooted societal and institutional issues that Hari found along the way.

Follow this New York Times best-selling author on his journey to reclaim focus and discover what lies at the root of this new epidemic. Hari explores the trouble with digital technology, modern work practices, and 21st-century parenting with an open mind and an even hand. You may be surprised at the answers that are uncovered along the way.

Stolen Focus is not a self-help book filled with easy solutions but rather a rallying cry. Join the fight to reclaim focus by understanding what's behind the issue.



4 BEST QUOTES

“The more people stared at their phones, the more money these companies made. Period. The people in Silicon Valley did not want to design gadgets and websites that would dissolve people’s attention spans. They’re not the Joker, trying to sow chaos and make us dumb. They spend a lot of their own time meditating and doing yoga. They often ban their own kids from using the sites and gadgets they design, and send them instead to tech-free Montessori schools. But their business model can only succeed if they take steps to dominate the attention spans of the wider society. It’s not their goal, any more than ExxonMobil deliberately wants to melt the Arctic. But it’s an inescapable effect of their current business model.”

“Democracy requires the ability of a population to pay attention long enough to identify real problems, distinguish them from fantasies, come up with solutions, and hold their leaders accountable if they fail to deliver them.”

“If you see the world through fragments, your empathy often doesn’t kick in, in the way that it does when you engage with something in a sustained, focused way.”

“It’s always tempting to mistake your personal decline for the decline of the human species”



10 BIG IDEAS

1. THE FOCUS CRISIS

It isn't simply anecdotal; scientific research shows that people's attention spans have been dwindling since the 1870s. Humanity's ability to focus has been sipping away for over a century. People are more distractible and find it harder to concentrate every year.

Regaining focus is vital, not only for your quality of life but also for the health of humanity as a whole. As Hari points out, how can humanity fight climate change if we can't even focus on the issue?

2. FLOW

Flow is a state of complete concentration when you are focused entirely on the task you are engaged in. When you're in flow, time seems to slow down, external issues dwindle and your mind is attuned only to what is relevant to what you are doing. Flow is a highly satisfying experience and is vital to living a fulfilling life.

Unfortunately, the focus crisis is drastically impacting the flow experience of many people. Task switching, constant interruptions and a general lack of attention all lead to a fall in flow state experiences. You can't maintain flow if you attempt to multitask or if your phone is buzzing with notifications every few seconds. What you have instead is fragmentation.

As Hari explains, "Fragmentation makes you smaller, shallower, angrier. Flow makes you bigger, deeper, calmer. Fragmentation shrinks us. Flow expands us."

3. EXHAUSTION

If you have ever tried to read a wordy paragraph when you are overtired, you will know that sleep is vital to focus. Sleep seems to be a dwindling commodity these days, and exhaustion is rife. Long work hours, screens, and medication seem to be destroying sleep.

Workers pride themselves on working hours. Blue lights from screens disrupt your natural sleep cycles. Sleeping pills and medications do not provide the same quality of rest as natural sleep cycles. Put all these together, and you have an exhausted population.

How can anyone who is perpetually tired maintain focus?

4. READING

Recent times have seen a dramatic fall in sustained reading around the globe. This is almost certainly down to a loss of the ability to focus. While a loss of reading may seem unimportant at face value, sustained reading, especially fiction, actually plays a significant role in developing empathy.



10 BIG IDEAS

When you read fiction (and Hari concedes, watch longer television shows with lengthy and sustained plots), you find yourself experiencing another person's life. Naturally, seeing the world through someone else's eyes is to experience empathy. The more you read fiction, the more you learn to understand how other people work.

5. TECHNOLOGY

You may or may not have heard the term 'surveillance capitalism'. If you aren't familiar with the term, you have undoubtedly experienced it without realising it. Whenever you shop for something online, say, new shoes, and then all your social media is inundated with shoe advertisements, that is surveillance capitalism. Social media platforms monitor your activity online and manipulate the advertising you receive to match.

Not only do these algorithms monitor what you shop for, they also trace what holds your attention longest and deliberately feed you similar content. The purpose is to get you to buy more and keep your eyes on the screen longer.

This leads to social media becoming more and more addictive because you are constantly fed content specifically chosen to appeal directly to you personally. Even worse, human nature tends to linger longer over negative content. In the end, not only are you being fed content to keep you scrolling, you are seeing negative content that keeps you angry.

6. CRUEL OPTIMISM

Another relevant modern term is 'cruel optimism'. Whenever you are told, "If you feel overwhelmed and tired, just meditate for 30 minutes a day, and you'll feel better," this is cruel optimism.

While meditation can help, it does not combat the root causes of your problems. You can meditate all you want but if you are under constant threat of redundancy at work, it won't make much difference.

Cruel optimism is insidious because it lays the blame for stress and unhappiness at the feet of the individual and exempts society. It's called cruel optimism because it is positive and helpful at face value, but it lacks actual results. Individual treatment will do nothing to alleviate the very real stress that most people have no control over. It is the root causes that need to be dealt with.

7. STRESS

Stress is a huge contributor to the focus crisis. Being in perpetual stress raises a chemical in your brain called cortisol. Cortisol then tells your brain to be alert and vigilant at all times. In deep history, this mechanism was to keep human ancestors alert for possible predators. These days though, it has people on constant lookout for 'tigers' that aren't there.



10 BIG IDEAS

There are things to be done to reduce your stress levels but the only thing that will make a real difference is the eradication of the source of your stress. As with cruel optimism, the solution needs to be systemic.

8. CHILDHOOD

Modern children spend much of their time indoors, in front of screens. Throughout the vast majority of human culture, children from around the age of three would spend their time in groups exploring and playing and learning vital skills. Now, kids are separated from each other and all too often stripped of the opportunity to play.

Playtime is when children learn what they are passionate about. They also learn to problem solve among themselves and to interact socially. Most importantly, play gives kids the opportunity to learn intrinsically.

Intrinsic learning, learning done by your own initiative and through your own passion, is the most effective. Extrinsic learning, like much of the rote learning done in schools, is vastly less successful. While some extrinsic learning is always necessary, allowing intrinsic opportunities is what helps children to develop focus. In short, it's so much easier to focus on something you are interested in.

9. THE BIG PICTURE

You may have noticed at the beginning that the focus crisis has been ongoing since the 1870s. "If this is the case," you might ask, "how is modern technology to blame?" Hari had the same question.

The answer lies in economic expansion. Since the industrial revolution, the only acceptable business model has been growth. If a company is not showing growth, it is failing. This pressure to grow and expand has led to the constant drain on human attention. Companies want people awake and consuming at all hours. Until big business can accept that stability is as plausible as growth, the constant and ever-expanding bombardment of products and content will never end.

9. ATTENTION REBELLION

According to Hari, the solution to the focus crisis lies not with the individual. Human focus is being stolen from without, not from within. Therefore, the solution is to join the attention rebellion.

There are many tips and tricks that can be employed at a personal level to improve focus but deeper problems remain. The author's final rallying cry: It is up to everyone as a society to stand up and say, "We have had enough. Ban surveillance capitalism, shorten the work week, and let kids play."

**3 ACTION STEPS**

Because Hari's conclusions state that broader society is the problem and not the individual, *Stolen Focus'* action steps are more sweeping than most psychology books.

1. BAN SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Surveillance capitalism is deliberately and maliciously stealing focus. As long as it continues to thrive, people will struggle to focus.

According to Hari, the banning or, at the very least, heavier regulation of surveillance capitalism is necessary for people to be able to make their own decisions. On an individual level, maintain awareness of surveillance capitalism and don't let it control how you think.

2. PUT BOUNDARIES AROUND YOUR WORKING HOURS

The five day work week strips people of the ability to find time for themselves and their families. Worse, email and mobile phones mean many workers are expected to be on call at all times. Exhausted people can't focus.

People need to have time in their lives outside of work. At the very least, employees should be left to themselves after work hours and overworking should no longer be glorified.

3. REBUILD CHILDHOOD AROUND LETTING KIDS PLAY FREELY

Children are being robbed of their ability to play and socialise. Playtime has always been crucial to childhood development. Children imprisoned in homes and classrooms have no chance of developing the ability to pay attention.

Allowing free play lets children discover what they are passionate about and develop vital social skills with their peers. Children cannot thrive while their every move is dictated and monitored.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key takeaway of *Stolen Focus* is that humanity's loss of focus is a societal and systemic problem. While the individual can take steps to improve their personal focus, it is only a band-aid solution.

Focus will be reclaimed when everyday people fight back against the greater issues. It is up to us to become attention warriors and fight for change.

Finally, a change in focus is vital because, as a whole, humanity cannot fight against its most diabolical problems if it cannot focus on them. Everyone is in this together. Save focus and save the world? Think about it...



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