

ATTENTION—the mind's most valuable resource!

By Richard Fowler

We live in a world of sensory overload! Our attention is competed for minute by minute. Whether it is that slightly annoying YouTube advert we have all become used to or that familiar 'ping' on your phone alerting you to another message.

In fact, by the end of this day instant messaging services would have globally sent 50 billion messages. In an age of technology and advertisements our attention comes at a premium.

And even this article is asking for your mind's most valuable resource—attention. Yet you may never have considered the effect of attention on your life. After all what possibly could it change? Well, actually more than you think!

Let me explain.

You were once a newly born bouncing baby who underwent quite a special process. By the time you were eight months old the connections that linked your brain cells, called neurons, had reached their most numerous and dense—at no other time in your life will you have as many connections as you did then. So what happened to them?

Well, ever since then those connections that were stimulated and used through interaction and stimulation by the environment—being touched, looked at, talked to, played with—were strengthened and kept. But on the other hand, those connections that were not stimulated were lost or pruned—the brain

decided that they were no longer needed. What that meant was that your brain developed functions and brain cell networks best suited to the environment you grew up in. Your brain was shaped by where its attention was directed!

Now before you start blaming Mum and Dad because you might not be able to dance like Justin Timberlake or play the piano like Chopin, the story doesn't end there. Because your brain continues to be shaped throughout life. It's called Neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to be shaped by what you pay attention to.

This is true of our good friend Einstein, whose parietal lobes—which are integral for mathematical, visual, and spatial cognition—were 15% wider than normal parietal lobes. And something similar is also true of our London cabbies: their efforts to learn 320 routes which cover a mind-boggling 25,000 streets and 20,000

landmarks and places of interest has meant their hippocampus is sizably bigger than most people's.

It's kind of like what Buddha said once, 'We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think'.

In fact I had my very own experience once that demonstrated how influential attention can be, which led to a slightly embarrassing event to say the least. Many years ago I was watching that good old Australian TV series that was the home-time comfort for so many of us, 'Neighbours'. The scene that I was about to witness had been developing over some episodes but finally came the time that this girl was going to say to a certain boy these most powerful words: 'I love you!' I was on the edge of my seat. I had seen this moment coming for so long and now the time had come...and then, my home phone rang! Suddenly I was torn between the urgency of picking up the phone (my parents had always told me to answer, just in case



it was an emergency) and this most captivating scene. I held off answering the phone long enough—the words were on the tip of her tongue, she was about to say it! I got to the phone. I could not hold off any longer. I picked up the phone. And then I said something that mortified me: ‘I love you!’ For a moment I could not quite believe what I had just said. The word ‘hello’ had seemed to escape me, and because I had so much attention on this intense scene, I came out with the very words the girl was about to say to this boy. Who was on the other end of the phone? My brother! You can imagine it was an embarrassing conversation from then on.

You’ve heard the saying ‘monkey see, monkey do’, well there is a neurological truth in this.

Studies have found that a system in your brain contains mirror neurons or brain cells which fire up both when we perform an action and when we observe it. Dr Daniel Glaser of UCL’s Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience says: ‘When we watch a sport, our brain performs an internal simulation of the actions, as if it were sending the same movement instructions to our own body’.

Now that’s pretty cool and may explain why as children (and sometimes as

adults) after watching a martial arts or dance film, we will make space in our bedroom and have a go ourselves — often with disastrous consequences!

But what does this mean for you and for me? *That we should pay attention to what we are paying attention to!*

Attention shapes our brain and therefore influences our thinking. The mind is something we should protect, nurture, and look after—your mind needs feeding with the right ‘food’. Which means letting things into your brain that inspire you.

On the other hand, limit the consumption of bad news and limit time around negative people—they will only suck you into their negativity. Consider the programmes, videos, and movies you watch. Is pornography or illicit sexual material going to help you think positive thoughts towards the opposite sex? Have you watched so much bad news that you have become immune to feeling compassion?

Let’s seek out things that are good and positive. Spend time around people who do good things, people with the qualities you would like to possess. Read books about people who have done amazing things. And ask yourself this question: is what I’m watching or paying attention to what I

would like to become? If the answer is no, then maybe you should consider paying attention to something else. What you pay attention to really does matter.

A final request for your cognitive attention...

In recent research on compassion researchers found that seeing someone give away money activated neurons in the brain which make us happy. A brain-imaging study headed by neuroscientist Jordan Grafman from the National Institute of Health showed that the ‘pleasure centres’ in the brain, the parts of our brains that are active when we experience pleasure (like dessert, money, sex), are equally active when we observe someone giving money to charity as when we receive money ourselves!

So where does all this leave us? It makes me think of a Bible verse I heard once in church. It is taken from a letter of the apostle Paul: ‘Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things’ (Philippians 4:8).

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