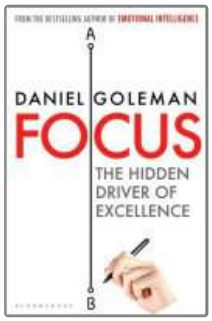

Focus

Daniel Goleman
Bloomsbury, 2013
Buy the book

Paying attention pays dividends, but most people have to reclaim the ability to focus.

Recommendation

Daniel Goleman, author of the groundbreaking, mid-'90s classic *Emotional Intelligence*, turns his attention to the subject of attention – and explains why focus is essential for navigating life, performing at your best, leading others and, ultimately, improving the world for future generations. His illuminating explanations of brain functions will be useful to businesspeople and educators. Ironically, Goleman digresses often, and his efforts to incorporate issues that matter to him – such as climate change and economic inequality – prove confusing. Still, he's superb at thoughtfully explaining how people think and feel. *getAbstract* finds that his simple explanations of the workings of the human brain, and his depiction of focus as a triad of attention paid to "inner, other and outer" targets make reading his work more than worthwhile. Goleman compares attention to a muscle you can flex and strengthen. For a buff psyche and enhanced mental tone, try this attention workout.

In this summary, you will learn

- How your brain exerts attention
- How to use three kinds of focus
- How to build your focus to enhance your learning, performance and leadership

Take-Aways

- Applying three categories of focus – "inner, other and outer" – is essential for a highly functioning life.
- "Selective attention" is the ability to focus on one task in spite of "sensory and emotional" distractions.
- Staying on target suppresses any emotional interference and helps you to remain cool under pressure.
- Emotions intrude on focus; completing a task is more difficult when you're upset.
- Attention grows stronger and sharper with use, exercise and practice.
- In a "wandering" state of mind, you pause for self-reflection, contemplate future scenarios, hatch ideas or question assumptions.

- Self-awareness comes from recognizing internal cues and interpreting them accurately.
- Focused empathy takes three forms: "cognitive, emotional and empathic concern."
- Today's youth, members of the first digital generation, are growing up more attuned to devices than to people.
- Every leader must focus a firm's attention where it's most needed and most productive.

Summary

Paying Attention

How well you pay attention affects every aspect of your life. Effective focusing skills enhance mental processes, including understanding, learning, listening, being creative and reading other people's signals. Most people underestimate focus or overlook its importance.

"Focus is not just selecting the right thing, but also saying no to the wrong ones."

You need to exercise all three categories of focus – "inner, other and outer" – to function well in life. Inner focus refers to heeding your gut feelings, values and decision-making abilities. Other focus pertains to how you relate to and connect with other people. Outer focus allows you to get by in the larger world.

"Selective Attention"

Someone writing poetry on a laptop in a busy coffeehouse is demonstrating selective attention – focusing on one task and ignoring external stimuli. Such distractions are either "sensory" or "emotional." Sensory distractions like shapes, colors and sounds stimulate your senses. Emotional lures cut through the clutter to draw your attention, like hearing your name called in a crowded restaurant. Emotions intrude on focus; completing a task is more difficult when you're upset.

"Though it matters enormously for how we navigate life, attention in all its varieties represents a little-noticed and underrated mental asset."

The brain's prefrontal region is responsible for selective attention. The more you focus on one thing, the better your performance. Staying on target suppresses emotional interference and helps you remain cool under pressure. Controlling your attention by focusing on one thing, then moving on to the next, indicates sound mental health. Jumping from one thing to the next multiplies any feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

You focus more easily when you're doing something you enjoy. Feeling in the zone or the "flow" results from immersion in an activity you find rewarding, inspiring, stimulating or intellectually challenging. In contrast, repetitive, unfulfilling tasks cause disengagement, boredom and apathy.

Two semi-independent systems make up the human brain. The lower brain's massive computing power operates just below consciousness, coming into the forefront only when jarred by something unexpected. At such moments, the bottom brain, active in the subcortical circuitry, communicates with the top brain, or neocortex.

"While the mind sometimes wanders to pleasant thoughts or fantasy, it more often seems to gravitate to rumination and worry."

Bottom brain activity is involuntary, reflexive and fast. It functions constantly, handling rote behaviors and filtering information and stimuli. As it continually learns, it adjusts your perceptions. Emotion sways the bottom brain. The top brain, which is under your conscious control, is the locus of voluntary focus, active when you choose to watch a sunset, plan your day or learn a new task. Sometimes the bottom and top systems share mental activities to optimize your results with a minimum of exertion. For example, as you master a task like driving, the top brain learns and then the bottom brain takes over. Performing the task becomes almost instinctive.

Midbrain circuitry notices things on a neural level, such as a baby's cry or a spider on the floor, and signals to the top brain. The brain's amygdala checks your surroundings for threats and sends alarms when it spots danger. When your amygdala senses a threat, it commandeers your emotions until the top brain analyzes the danger; then it defends you or sends calming signals.

"People who are tuned out not only stumble socially, but are surprised when someone tells them they have acted inappropriately."

Never Mind

Your "wandering mind" – where your thoughts travel when not engaged in a mental task – is the brain's default setting. In this state, people pause for self-reflection, contemplate future scenarios, hatch ideas, dwell on memories or question their assumptions. Brain scans show that the area for focus – the "executive system in the prefrontal cortex" – activates during downtime.

While your mind wanders, your sensory systems dim. Doing activities that do not require a laser focus frees your mind to ramble. Focusing sharply on one activity quells outside stimuli, such as buzzing phones. Sustaining deep attention can be draining. To replenish, take breaks, meditate, exercise or do something fun.

"While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish."

Self-Awareness and Self-Control

Self-awareness comes from recognizing internal cues and interpreting them accurately. "Gut feelings" are messages from the insula, the area in the brain's frontal lobes that acts as a nerve center for your internal organs. People in sync with their emotions have high-functioning insulae and a strong inner voice. The insula's signals help you intuitively form a value system, which becomes more concrete as you articulate it to yourself and practice it.

Self-awareness is a focus that works as an internal compass. It governs your actions and aligns them with your values. Willpower and self-regulation are functions of "executive attention." Focusing on achieving a goal requires exercising self-control to subdue your impulses and ignore intrusive emotions. An iconic study by the psychologist Walter Mischel in the 1970s measured the willpower of young children. In the "marshmallow test," researchers told four-year-olds they could eat a marshmallow right away or they could wait a few minutes and get two marshmallows. Left alone with one marshmallow, the children who successfully waited for the extra treat succeeded by distracting their focus from the marshmallow by using fantasy play or singing songs. The continuing study eventually showed that the children who could delay gratification at age four performed better in all aspects of their adult lives.

"Setting aside some regular reflective time in the daily or weekly schedule might help us get beyond the firefight-of-the-day mentality, to take stock and look ahead."

I Feel for You

"Cognitive empathy" is a top-down brain function that enables you to look at things from another person's point of view, understand what that person is thinking and feeling, and manage your emotional response. When your emotions align with someone else's, you experience the bottom-up response of "emotional empathy." A top-down/bottom-up response, called "empathic concern," leads to taking helpful action.

You have to focus to tune in to other people's nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and to perceive their emotions. You feel another person's suffering – a hardwired physiological response – in your amygdala. Attention centers inside the brain connect with its areas for social sensitivity, giving humans the ability to feel compassion and manage their emotional reactions. Compassion and concern grow naturally from empathy, the feeling people want and expect from doctors, bosses and family members. For example, patients are more likely to sue for malpractice when their physicians share fewer signs of empathy and consideration, even if their rate of error matches that of more outwardly empathetic doctors.

"Video games focus attention and get us to repeat moves over and over, and so are powerful tutorials."

Everyone's social acuity falls on a continuum from socially oblivious to highly intuitive. People who fail to notice social cues often act inappropriately, missing nonverbal messages or misreading context. They're often unaware when they make social gaffes, such as being rude or speaking too long or too loudly. Where you fall on the social hierarchy affects your ability and desire to read others. Columbia University research reveals a direct correlation between power and attention: The higher your rank, the less heed you pay to other people's thoughts and feelings.

"Kids who can ignore impulse, filter out what's irrelevant, and stay focused on a goal fare better in life."

System Navigation

No single area of the brain deals exclusively with system recognition and comprehension, but the mind uses the brain's parietal cortex to recognize patterns. The ability to read and navigate systems is a learned process, separate from self-mastery and empathy. System navigation is an essential life skill. People understand systems indirectly, by developing mental models during firsthand experiences and by absorbing distributed knowledge.

Pandemics and climate change are systemic problems that people learn about by gathering data, identifying patterns, and noticing peaks and disturbances. For example, "big data" collected by Google and analyzed with sophisticated software identified areas of flu outbreaks within 24 hours. The brain readily perceives immediate threats, but your perceptual system is blind to long-term dangers, such as the thinning of the ozone layer.

"Self-awareness... represents an essential focus, one that attunes us to the subtle murmurs within that can help guide our way through life."

Practice Makes Perfect, Sometimes

Psychologist Anders Ericsson's research about expertise laid the foundation for the "10,000-hour rule," which holds that achieving the highest possible level of performance takes at least 10,000 hours of practice. Unfortunately, the rule is only partly true. Practice makes close-to-perfect only if it's conducted in a "smart" way – that is, if the person who is practicing uses that time to make adjustments and improvements. How much attention you pay during practice is crucial. Productive practice includes feedback, which is why dancers practice in front of a mirror.

Professional athletes, experts and other high performers counteract the brain's natural inclination to make routines automatic and to transfer them to the bottom mind. They use focus, skill development, refinement and positivity to strengthen their brain circuitry. Feeling upbeat is a crucial requirement for productive practice. Positive emotions ignite the brain's left prefrontal area, making people feel motivated, aware and energized.

"While we are equipped with razor-sharp focus on smiles and frowns, growls and babies, as we've seen, we have zero neural radar for the threats to the global systems that support human life."

Mindfulness refers to the practice of paying "attention to attention." Meditation focuses on your inner state and develops your capacity to observe yourself in the moment without judgment. It strengthens focus by improving your ability to sustain attention. The meditation cycle rotates through the following four steps: "The mind wanders, you notice it's wandering, you shift your attention to your breath and you keep it there," until your mind wanders again.

Games and Cognitive Skills

Playing video games generally diminishes brainpower. Certain games do improve some cognitive abilities, including "visual acuity and spatial perception, attention switching, decision making and the ability to track objects." "Smart games" that improve focus and boost cognitive function may become educational tools. Such games provide:

"Directing attention toward where it needs to go is a primal task of leadership."

- Specific goals for different levels of play.
- Feedback and pacing geared toward each user.
- Challenges that progress in accordance with players' skills.
- Different contexts for applying a particular set of skills.

In the Classroom

Some schools are adding "social and emotional learning" (SEL) practices to their curriculum in order to help children self-regulate. For example, the "stoplight" exercise instructs kids to think of a traffic signal when they become upset or overstimulated. The red light means: Take deep breaths and try to calm down. A yellow light cautions kids to pause first, then reflect and come up with alternative behavior. A green light encourages them to try a solution.

"The power to disengage our attention from one thing and move it to another is essential for well-being."

The constant lure of technology waylays young people's attention and compromises their interactions with other people. Today's youth, the first digital generation, grow up more attuned to devices than to people. They may develop cognitive skills for navigating the virtual world at the cost of the kind of person-to-person attentive skills needed to build rapport, empathy and social dexterity. Adults are not immune. They may find it hard to read more than a couple of pages, listen to a speech longer than five minutes or stop constantly checking their smartphones. However, the ability to pay attention grows stronger with use, exercise and practice.

Attention in Organizations

"Attention works much like a muscle – use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows."

Every effective leader must focus a firm's attention where it's most needed and productive. Triple focus provides direction. First comes inner focus: Heed your behaviors and the effects of your actions. Leadership requires knowing your values and communicating your vision to inspire and motivate others. Other focus means developing an organizational strategy to provide a road map of issues and goals that require attention. Great managers develop interpersonal skills and can effectively listen, respond and collaborate. Using outer focus, leaders absorb the big picture, visualize complicated systems and foresee how their decisions will play out in the future.

About the Author

Science journalist and two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee **Daniel Goleman** wrote *The New York Times* bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*.