

SUMMARY THE WORLD BEYOND YOUR HEAD

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Summary of “The World Beyond Your Head” by Matthew B. Crawford

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Unplug to discover the benefits of introspection.

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Introduction

I often feel as though I have the attention span of a squirrel. I'm easily distracted, can lose my train of thought quickly, and-- no surprise-- that makes it pretty hard to focus on the important things in my life like work or cultivating my time management skills. But here's the thing: I know I haven't always been that way. Because if I think back to a time in my life where I was much less reliant on technology, when I rarely watched TV and read print books instead of e-readers, I remember just how easy it was to stay focused. Because I commonly switched my phone off and left it in the house while I went outside to engage with nature, I didn't feel chained to the notifications that would inevitably pop up. And the difference in my attention span was significant.

Chances are, you've had a similar experience. Maybe there was a time when you didn't feel bound to the digital distractions that ensnare us. But these days, torn between the constant pinging of emails, the rapid-fire onslaught of text messages, and our ever-growing to do lists, we sometimes find it hard to concentrate on a single episode of a thirty-minute sitcom. So, what makes the difference? How can we tune out distractions? And how can we reclaim the critical brain power we seem to be losing every day? Over the course of this summary, we're going to answer those very questions.

The Age of Digital Distraction

There are actually a host of psychological and neurological explanations for our inability to focus and we're going to explore them in this chapter. One major explanation is something of a "chicken and egg" conundrum that has to do with our need for mental stimulation. Here's how it works: because we have an overwhelming array of stimuli available through the form of books, music, movies, TV shows, and social media, our brains seldom get a chance to rest. As a result, we've developed an obsessive need for 24/7 stimulation; because we're never "off," we've adapted to viewing constant stimulation as the new normal, and now we think we need it. This in turn raises questions about our relationship with stimuli: do we inherently need it or did we evolve to need it because we have so many options?

The answer is actually a little bit of both. Human beings crave mental stimulation; we need it in order to be happy, healthy, and alert. But we also need some downtime when our attention span isn't being bombarded with new stimuli. We need this for a couple of reasons; one has to do with something called our "orienting response." Like many other facets of our human experience, our orienting response is an evolutionary defense mechanism that humans developed to help them survive in the wild. Put simply, our orienting response works by signaling us to pay attention to anything new that comes into our field of vision.

For example, if you've ever been late to class or a meeting and everyone's head turns as soon as you open the door, you might feel like your classmates are simply being judgmental and horrible. But in reality, they're simply reacting to the cues their orienting response is sending them. Because they saw the motion of the door opening and you coming in, those things tripped their orienting response which said, "Pay attention! Something new is coming!" Even though we no longer need to assess our environment for the possibility of dangerous predators, this instinctive survival mechanism has been hardwired into our brains.

If this sounds like we kind of spend our lives ping-ponging back and forth between different stimuli, then you're correct in your assumption. And you can imagine how we're affected by the onslaught of pop-ups, notifications, and incoming emails we receive all day long. If everything is triggering our orienting response constantly, is it any wonder we're perpetually distracted? With that said, you can understand why our orienting response is closely linked to the modern attention deficit and how vital it is that we correct it. But this also links to another problem: our limited attention span. This might seem overly simplistic or obvious, given that we've already acknowledged how our attention spans are stretched thin, but the problem goes a little deeper than you might think. That's because we often make the mistake of assuming that we have a limitless capacity for attention. Sure, we know we're distracted and it might feel like we have the attention span of a squirrel, but we assume we'll always be able to course-correct and pay attention when we really need to.

However, current research indicates that nothing could be farther from the truth. Instead, our attention spans-- like most other resources-- are limited commodities that are constantly in danger of being depleted. And when we feel our attention spans decreasing, we're not just being lazy and we're not just a little frazzled. Although these are the two most plausible excuses we're likely to blame our attention deficit on, that actually isn't true. Instead, we are literally losing a skill that we should have spent our entire lives cultivating. That's right-- attention is a skill. And the ability to focus is something we have to build and work on throughout the course of our lives. So, not only is not an unlimited resource, it's also not disposable. Whether we realize it or not, attention is actually the key to flourishing in life; without it, we can't focus well enough to do our jobs, complete our goals, or hold meaningful relationships! So, if you now find yourself feeling desperate to fix your attention deficit, we'll explore that process in the next few chapters.

We're so Connected to Social Media That We Disconnect From Real Life

As we've seen in the previous chapter, it's no secret that our connection with social media and technology can prevent us from engaging with our real lives. But let's take a closer look at what that really looks like in practice. What does it mean to be "too connected?" And how does it impact our attention spans? Let's start by considering the impact of labor saving devices. After all, who doesn't love the ease and simplicity of their dishwasher, washing machine, or smartphone? We love these things because they're designed with our comfort in mind; their literal aim is to make our lives faster, simpler, and more integrated with the advanced tech systems we now have at our disposal.

But we often don't stop to consider how interconnected our lives and devices are. For example, how many of us have our banking apps on our phones, along with our work email accounts, info about our families, our schedules, and our travel plans? How many of us have our passwords saved to our phones or linked with other sites like our Facebook? With just one push of a button, we can transfer our information from one site to another, send money from our PayPal directly to our banking app, or utilize a contactless payment option by simply tapping our phones against a screen. Similarly, one push of a button is all it takes for our clothes or dishes to be washed and dried.

As a result, we like to think that technology has evolved to help us, to free up our time and leave us with more opportunities to pursue the things we enjoy. But has it really? Or has it actually created new opportunities for us to disengage with the world? Now, with that said, it should be made clear that the author is hardly suggesting that we should return to the days of yesteryear and recreate a lifestyle which requires us to kill and hand pluck the chicken we intend to cook for dinner. But he is suggesting that perhaps we're missing out on some of the physical experiences that strengthen our attention spans. After all, if attention is indeed a skill-- and one we need to

actively cultivate-- then it stands to reason that we don't benefit from everything being done for us. So, if we don't benefit as much as we thought, what's happening instead?

What we Can Learn From Craftspeople

To answer the question we asked at the conclusion of the previous chapter, let's consider what we know of human behavior in the modern age. Today, things are faster than ever and how have we responded? We've become ruder than ever. We're more impatient. We can't be bothered to follow through with something if a web page takes longer than 2.5 seconds to load. If a microwavable ready meal takes longer than 10 minutes to cook, we usually have no patience for it. And most of us certainly can't be bothered to cook a meal from scratch! We might regard those things as symptoms of impatience-- and to a degree, they are-- but they're actually great examples of our diminishing attention spans. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, it's easy to blame our faults on negative character traits like being lazy or impatient, but it often goes a little deeper than that. Instead, we might be unwilling to do something because we genuinely lack the ability to focus for that long. And because we've gotten so used to our labor-saving devices, we'd rather just press a button and go so we can return to scrolling social media or idly watching Netflix (or doing both at the same time).

That's not to say that technology is inherently bad for us or that we shouldn't appreciate the free time given to us by advances in technology. But it is meant to illustrate the ways in which our daily lives condition us to lower our attention spans. It's also why we find it harder to build up our capacity for intense focus; because our daily lives don't require us to focus for very long, re-training our attention span feels like unnecessarily grueling work. So, how can we fight it? How can we push past the barriers our lifestyles have erected in our minds? The author posits that evaluating skilled laborers and craftspeople is a great place to start. For example, let's think about repairmen, embroiderers, or bakers. Each of these professions are predicated on a great deal of talent and skill. But even though people might be gifted with a natural aptitude in a certain area, talent can only take you so far. Skills like embroidery, baking, or repairs can only be honed through careful practice and dedication and that requires hours of intense focus.

To truly excel at their crafts, these skilled workers must spend hours learning the ins and outs of tiny pieces of machinery and their functions or the delicate balance that's necessary to create beautiful pieces of embroidery. Similarly, baking requires hours of reading, crafting, practice, and a knowledge of gastronomy. You hone your craft through trial and error, through analyzing your finished product and taking careful note of what you can improve. And once you've identified that, the next step is to practice over and over until you get it right. As you can see from these examples, the common denominator in any type of skilled labor is intense focus. And you can only achieve that if you've strengthened and cultivated your ability to pay attention.

However, we often devalue these skills, despite the incredible life lessons we can learn from them. For example, when it comes to the professions we consider most valuable or most skilled, we tend not to privilege repairmen. Instead, we tend to assume theirs is a low-paying job that pretty much anybody could do. But of course, most of us don't know the first thing about repairing our iPhones or dishwashers; repairmen are the very first people we call when one of our gadgets malfunctions. And we often overlook the fact that their entire skill set-- learning how something works, diagnosing the problem, and restoring it to optimum performance-- is in direct contrast to the way our brains function in our daily lives. Most of the time, we don't bother to learn how something works or stick with a task long enough to get to the root of the problem. We'd rather push a button and let it fix itself.

But the author argues that, by holding this opinion, we've missed the point entirely. That's because skilled laborers like bakers, embroiderers, and repairmen have the very thing most of us lack: a strong capacity for focus. By honing their crafts, they've cultivated their attention spans. They know how to minimize distractions and focus on the task at hand. And in so doing, they've actually created happier lives for themselves. How? Well, for starters, they're doing something meaningful. That's not to say that all other professions are worthless-- far from it!

But most people who go into those fields do so because they have a personal connection with that skill. When they practice their craft, it brings them joy and mental stimulation. This in turn minimizes their need for the digital mental stimulation the rest of us crave. And because they've disconnected from these distractions, they've cultivated a healthier relationship with life, technology, and their own minds. Because they're constantly learning, growing, and strengthening their minds, they feel more alive and less as though they're ping-ponging between distractions. Sounds pretty great, right? So, how can we cultivate this concentration and happiness in our own lives?

The author posits that education is the answer-- or rather, a fundamental change to our education system. Our current model of education is predicated on the need to cram students' heads full of information so they can memorize and regurgitate facts to answer the questions on a test. But that doesn't actually teach students to engage with the world outside their heads. Instead, this approach often results in students who are scared, bored, or unmotivated, and it drives them to seek an escape through mindless consumerism or television shows. These things interest them, at least, so students gravitate toward those interests and away from education. But that shouldn't be the function of education at all! Instead of treating students like dumping grounds for meaningless facts and formulas, our approach to learning should invite them to think critically, grow, and pursue skills that will enhance their lives.

Students should be presented with skills like baking, crafting, or repairing things and shown how they can apply their minds to the cultivation of a craft. The question of, "When will I ever use this in real life?" should be demonstrated rather than dismissed. And students should be taught that the value of academic disciplines isn't confined to the bubble of the classroom. Instead, they should be exposed to the life-changing power of the humanities, shown the beauty of art, poetry, and music, and taught that they have the power to create. They should be shown that mathematical formulas don't exist to torture them, but to make the world go round. And

perhaps most importantly, they should be taught that technology can be a valuable tool for enhancing our learning experience and pioneering new advances-- but it all depends on how we use it. Because the crucial take-away to remember here is that we should use technology rather than allowing it to use us.

Final Summary

The most powerful supercomputer in the world is the human mind. But because we live in an era of pervasive digital distractions, we often struggle to focus and feel as though we're ping-ponging between a vast array of competing stimuli. As a result, we have severely damaged our attention spans and our ability to engage with the world outside our heads. We struggle to read through a document without frequent breaks to check our phones or at least to wonder about the notifications that are constantly pouring in. That's why the author posits that living in the age of digital distraction has impaired our ability to focus, think critically, or concentrate on our personal development.

Therefore, in an effort to remedy this, the author recommends that we follow the example of skilled craftspeople and learn a manual skill that invites us to disconnect from our tech and invest in physical experiences. In so doing, we can learn to become less reliant on labor-saving devices or our habit of thinking on auto-pilot. And if we perpetuate the value of crafts, critical thinking, and concentration in our schools, we can encourage students to use their brains and connect with the world beyond their heads.



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