

# It's Not Your Fault You Can't Pay Attention. Here's Why.

Johann Hari offers a surprising theory for why it's so difficult to pay attention.

Friday, February 11th, 2022

**Ezra Klein**

I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So before we begin today, we are still looking for a managing producer, an organizational genius who's going to oversee process on our show. If you've got the experience and vision to do it, the link to the job posting is in show notes. But hurry, I'm not going to advertise this position again, and we're going to close it in about a week. All right, onto the show.

I want to try in these introductions to give a better sense of where my head is at when I go into these conversations — why I'm doing this episode and not some other. So let me begin here today. Life is the sum total of what we pay attention to. That's it.

And the strangest thing to me, in retrospect, about the education I received growing up — the education most of us receive — is how little attention they give to attention. We're told to pay attention — don't fidget, don't look around, don't let your mind wander. But that's not an education in attention, and most of it is counterproductive.

Attention rebels against rigidity. It wants curiosity — to be interested, to be surprised. And fidgeting can be great for paying attention. Moving can be great for paying attention. Why do we put this on little kids? Why shouldn't school start later? We know that helps with attention. Maybe the material should be more interesting.

But also, even the language — pay attention. We don't really control our attention. We influence it; we shape it. But then it's tugged around by other forces, forces that are inside of us and outside of us. Our attention is manipulated. It's commoditized. It's sold now.

Our attention is an industry. And under all of this pressure, it changes. And so we change how we pay attention, what we pay attention to, how much attention we have to give. This absolute core facility of

our life, the window through which we peer out at the world and we let it be bought, and sold, and scolded, and wasted. And then we blame ourselves.

I've been feeling a lot older this year — something about kids and the pandemic and how gray my hair is getting. And it's made me think not so much about time as about attention. I don't think time is the right way to measure whatever it is I have left — attention is.

I only have so much attention left to give. And it's how I use that attention that will decide what I make of that time. But it really feels, day to day, like I'm swimming upstream on that, because before I can use my attention, I have to stop all these other corporations and distractions — and to be fair, sometimes my own weaker, worse impulses — from using it first.

So this was all in my head when I saw Johann Hari's new book "Stolen Focus." Hari's work has always been interesting to me. In his previous books, he's developed, call it a little subgenre taking conditions and afflictions that we individualize and arguing for their social roots.

Chasing the Scream did this for drug addiction, "Lost Connections" did it for depression and loneliness, and "Stolen Focus" does it for attention. When I read Hari's work, I always think of a quote that gets attributed to Krishnamurti: It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

Now, I wouldn't always take it as far as Hari does. As you'll hear, I think he sometimes underplays the agency and role we have in creating and wanting parts of the society we live in. But I find his take on these issues to be a really needed push, a really useful reframe, and in this case, an opportunity to look at the most fundamental of human faculties through a new lens.

It's an opportunity to pay attention to attention, and not just to our attention but to what you might call our attentional commons, our social attention. As always, my email is [ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com](mailto:ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com), if you've got thoughts, guest suggestions, things you think I should watch or read, listen to.

Here's Johann Hari.

Johann Hari, welcome to the show.

## **Johann Hari**

Hi, Ezra. So good to be with you.

## **Ezra Klein**

So let's begin with something that seems like it should be really obvious and I don't think it is. What is attention?

## **Johann Hari**

Yeah. This is something when I started looking into the subject, I began to ask. So the kind of standard definition of attention is one that comes from William James, the kind of founding father of modern American psychology. And he said, attention is your ability to selectively attend to things in your environment. So think about the fact I'm talking to you from a hotel room in Florida, right? So just beyond my laptop, I can see out the window. There's people walking by. They're going down towards a beach. I'm in a room where I can see all sorts of things.

I can hear the buzz of the aircon. In the corner of the room over there, there's my phone, which I've deliberately hidden from view. But it might be glowing, it might be sending me text messages. I'm screening out all of that and I'm homing in on, wait, what did Ezra just ask me? He asked me a question about what attention is. So I'm selectively attending to your question. Loads of people are going to be listening to this podcast while doing other things, but they're screening out a lot of those other things in their environment to listen to us. So that's the kind of textbook definition of attention.

But I think there's a more interesting definition of attention that's been developed really in the last five years in this new attentional environment that comes from a man named James Williams — Dr. James Williams — who was at the heart of Google for many years, was horrified by what they were doing to our attention, quit, and became, I would argue, the most important philosopher of attention in the world today. And he's developed this kind of typology of attention. He argues there are three layers of attention — I would actually argue there's a fourth one as well — that I think help us to think about this question in a more interesting way.

So the first layer of attention, he argued, is what's called your spotlight. So that's when you focus on immediate actions like I'm going to walk into the kitchen and make a coffee. You want to find your glasses, you want to see what's in the fridge, you want to read a chapter of my book. And this is called

the spotlight, because it involves narrowing down your focus, right? And if your spotlight gets distracted or disrupted, you're prevented from carrying out near-term actions like that. Most of the time when we think about attention, that's the form of disruption of attention we think about — short-term distraction.

The second layer of your attention is what he calls your starlight. Your starlight is the focus you can apply to your longer term goals — your projects over time. So it's not that you want to read the chapter of a book, let's say you want to write a book, you want to set up a business, you want to be a good parent. And it's called your starlight, because when you feel lost in the desert, say, you look up to the stars and you remember the direction you're traveling in. And if you become distracted from your starlight, then what you lose is a sense of your longer term goals. You start to forget where you're headed.

And the third layer of your attention is your daylight. And that's the form of focus that makes it possible for you to know what your longer term goals even are in the first place. How do you want to write a book? How do you want to set up a business? How do you know what it means to be a good parent? Without being able to reflect and think deeply, you won't be able to figure those things out. And he gave it that name, daylight, because it's only when it's scene is flooded with daylight that you can see the things around you most clearly. And if you get so distracted that you lose your sense of your daylight, he said, in many ways, it's like you can't even figure out who you are, what you want to do, where you want to go. It's like you become lost in your own life. Does that help you to think about attention in a slightly richer, more textured way? I think when you hear about that, you can see how losing attention — and a big part, of course, of what I argue in the book is that there's this growing and strong evidence that we are in a serious crisis of attention — that affects the daily lived texture of your life in the short-term, the medium-term, the long-term, and it affects our whole society.

### **Ezra Klein**

It does. But I want to hold on the felt experience of attention, which I think the first level, spotlight, is going to be the one people are most familiar with. You're trying to focus on something and you get distracted.

You have an interesting riff in the book, though, about something that I think is underplayed when we talk about attention, which is that mind wandering, this light, associational form of thinking, can also be

a form of attention. And it can be in healthy forms, it can also be an unhealthy forms. So can you talk about the non-focused kinds of attention too?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. There's lots of them. It's so interesting you said that, because of all the things that I learned about for "Stolen Focus," I think one of the things that was most surprising to me was the evidence of my mind wandering. So at the very start of doing the research for the book, I was just tired of being wired.

I felt like with each year that passed, things that require deep focus that are so deep to my sense of self, like reading a book, were getting more and more like running up and down escalator. And I could see this happening to so many people around me. The average American office worker now focuses on only one task for only three minutes. For every one child, we're the same age, but everyone —

### **Ezra Klein**

They get a whole three minutes?

What are they doing so right?

### **Johann Hari**

How did they achieve this Buddha-like state of Zen? Exactly. And this wasn't in any way a kind of scientific experiment what I did at the start of the book, I just couldn't take it anymore. So I was quite lucky that a movie had just been made out of one of my books, so I had some money.

And I just announced to everyone I knew, I can't take this anymore. I'm going away for three months. I'm going to a place called Provincetown. I'm going to have no smartphone, and I'm going to have no laptop to get onto the internet.

And I did it. And loads of interesting things happened there. But the biggest change was about a month in, I made the shift. So when I went, I thought, right, you've left aside all these distractions. You've come to deeply focus. That's why you're here.

OK, you're going to read "War and Peace," you're going to read Dostoyevsky — and I did all that. But then one day about a month in, I realized I had been sort of fattening myself with information like a kind

of foie gras goose. And I thought, I'm going to go for long walks. Going to leave everything, I'm going to go for these long walks.

And I came back from these long walks feeling so alive and mentally fertile. And I started building in loads of space for mind-wandering. I started to see connections between things I hadn't thought about before, I started processing things in my past, I started creating visions for the future. But for a while, I felt really guilty. I thought, this isn't why you came here. You came here to pay attention. But later when I left Provincetown, I interviewed some of the leading experts on mind-wandering in the world. There's an amazing man named Professor Marcus Reichel who's in St. Louis in Missouri who made a whole series of really big breakthroughs in the neuroscience of mind wandering.

What Professor Reichel and other people discovered, many other scientists, is that mind-wandering is a crucial form of attention. Mind-wandering is when you process things that have happened in the past, it's when you anticipate the future, it's when you make connections between things you've experienced. And what we've done in our culture is we're in this awful state where we're not doing spotlight focusing. We're not deep focusing. But nor are we mind-wandering.

What we're doing is very quickly toggling between tasks. What was that on Facebook? What did Ezra just say to me? What's that on the TV? Oh my god, what just happened in the news? We're toggling, toggling, toggling. And one of the things that's really been crowded out is mind-wandering. And I started thinking about, in a way, these different forms of attention, and we're going to come to some others, I'm sure – like vigilance, which is something that's massively increased during Covid, which is a different form of attention. But I started thinking about these different forms of attention as almost like the different parts of a Symphony Orchestra.

You've got your oboes, you've got your woodwinds, you've got all of these. You need all of them to play a symphony. But at the moment, to extend this metaphor perhaps further than it should go, it's almost like one of those heavy metal bands like Slipknot have kind of stormed the stage and are just screaming at the audience. And none of the pieces of the Symphony Orchestra can play. No disrespect to Slipknot, who I quite like.

**Ezra Klein**

I can just imagine young Johann at a Slipknot concert. The reason I wanted to pull mind-wandering in here early is twofold, because I think it will help us think about some of what's to come. One reason is that I think we have cultural expectations and pressure on what attention is and what kinds of attention we value that distort the conversation.

So there's a lot of intention people bring to their attention to focus on this piece I'm writing, this thing I'm studying, my children, not looking at my phone. That's a kind of focus.

And then even if we get better at that, we fill all of that loose time that might have, at another time, been reserved for mind-wandering, when our brain can make associations and come up with new ideas, we fill it with input. We muddy the lake. So at a time when I might of mind-wandered in another age, I look at Twitter, I play a quick video game on my phone.

There's an ability to never have a true moment without mental input, wherein I think we understand that it's easy for our focus to get distracted. I think because we associate mind-wandering with distraction, we don't recognize how much distraction has actually wrecked mind-wandering. And because we don't value mind-wandering, because it doesn't look like what we think productivity looks like, I don't think we worry about that as too much of a crisis.

### **Johann Hari**

I think that's really astute. And what I learned about mind-wandering is actually a really big challenge to what I thought about productivity. Think about the fact that the worst thing a teacher can say about a kid is, oh, he just daydreams all day. No teacher says that as a compliment. Whereas, in fact, the daydreaming the child's doing maybe some of the most useful thinking they're doing.

I remember Professor Nathan Sprang, who I interviewed in Montreal, who's done a huge amount of research on mind-wandering, saying to me conscious control of your thoughts is not the most valuable form of thinking. Actually, some of the greatest discoveries are made not when people are consciously directing their spotlight but when they're letting their mind wander.

And one of the tragedies of the constant switching that we're doing is it's profoundly degraded that layer of thought — it's degraded a lot of layers of thought, but that's one of them — which really trashes creativity and causes a lot of mental pressure. So I think you're totally right.

## **Ezra Klein**

One of the tricky things about even talking to attention is that the language we use for it, I think if you take the research and, frankly, just take the lived experience of it seriously, fundamentally misapprehends the situation we're in. We speak of attention as something we control. Are you paying attention, right?

Are you, the agent in the sentence, paying, choosing to, use your attention in a particular way? But attention is, to some degree, under our control. And we are, to some degree, under its control. How do you understand the causality of what we pay attention to?

## **Johann Hari**

This is such a good question. So when I started the research, I had these very simplistic stories in my head. Basically, I had two stories. I thought my attention had got worse. The young people who I love, their attention had radically deteriorated because, A, we didn't have enough willpower.

We weren't strong enough. And B, because someone invented the smartphone. And it's funny, I had an epiphany about the willpower moment very early in the research for the book. I went to interview an absolutely brilliant scientist call Professor Roy Baumeister, who's at the University of Queensland.

And he's the leading expert in the world on willpower. He's been researching this subject for 35 years. He wrote a book called "Willpower" – brilliant man and a brilliant scientist. And I got to see him and I said, I am thinking of writing a book about why people can't pay attention, really interested in your insights.

And he said something like – the exact words are in the book – he said something like, it's interesting you say that because I just find my attention just isn't very good anymore. I just play video games on my phone a lot. But I'm sort of sitting opposite him and I'm like, wait aren't you the leading expert in the world on willpower? Didn't you write a book called "Willpower," right? If even you're sitting there saying you play "Candy Crush" all day, it reminded me at the moment if "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," where they realize everyone's been body-snatched, right? So willpower is part of the solution, but, to be frank, a very small part of the solution. What I realized is our attention is being degraded by a whole series of things that are happening in the environment.



As Professor Joel Nigg, one of the leading experts on children's attention problems, said to me in Portland in Oregon, we need to ask now if we're living in what he called an attentional pathogenic environment – an environment which we're all going to struggle to pay attention, for a big and broad range of reasons that include the fact that we're subjected to tech that is designed to invade our attention, but also a much bigger range of factors from the food we eat, from the sleep we don't get, from the hours we overwork and are called on by our employers, from stress to the air pollution we're exposed to, which is causing brain inflammation.

But I think you're right. Attention occurs in a context. And at the moment, it is occurring in a context that is militating against the possibility of forming deep focus. You can still do it, but it's getting harder and harder.

### **Ezra Klein**

I want to get into that – these contextual changes. But before we do, I actually want to talk about attention without thinking about its change. What I really like about what you do with the context and what we'll get into is I think that we have a demand side attention story. Somebody invented the smartphone, somebody created MTV, and now there are all these things demanding our attention and distracting us.

You add this big supply side story – what furnishes our supply of attention – things like sleep and low air pollution, and we'll talk about all that. But before any of that is true, it is also true to just lay what I'm trying to get at on the table here that we do not and never have fully controlled our attention. Attention is not a fully conscious resource.

If there's a thunderclap, it's not like you think to yourself, hey, thunder, I should pay attention to the thunder now. Attention is also an evolutionary construct there to help us live in the world. We are under its control, because sometimes we have to pay attention to things faster than we can think about what it is we want to pay attention to. Can you talk a bit about that just basic level of attention?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. So it's often described by scientists as two kinds of attention. There's top-down attention and there's bottom-up attention. So bottom-up attention, you just gave a great example, a thunderclap, right?

Something happens, you don't make a choice about it, you just immediately turn and look to see where the thunder is, right? And then there's top-down attention, which is when we exert control over our attention. So you and I are exerting top-down control over our attention now.

I'm listening to you, you're listening to me. So bottom-up is involuntary. You don't have any control over it. If a bomb goes off near you, you don't decide whether to pay attention or not. Top-down is voluntary. Top-down is something you control.

And this is a perennial human dilemma. There's always going to be a conflict between those two things. And clearly, we need both. One of the reasons we're such a successful species is because we can do both. We're not entirely at the mercy of bottom-up attention — we're not thrown off by everything. We can achieve longer term projects.

But bottom-up attention also helps us be vigilant to risk, to potential benefits. And again, you can see how the environment in which we currently live is loading us with way more bottom-up stimuli that challenge your top-down attention much more.

So think about, of the 12 courses I write about, one part of one of them is about filtering. And Professor Adam Gazzaley, who's a brilliant neuroscientist, gave me a good metaphor for this. He said, look, in your brain, you've got a part of your brain called the prefrontal cortex. Picture that part of your brain as the bouncer in a nightclub.

It's a strong bouncer. It's ripped. It can keep out lots of people who are trying to barge their way into the nightclub. It can fight off five people, it can fight off seven people. It can't fight off 12 people. And we know there's lots of evidence there are aspects of the environment that are currently overloading our top-down capacities.

Think about really basic stuff like there's research that shows children in noisy classrooms do significantly less well than children in quiet classrooms, because your bouncer has to work harder. Your bouncer has to keep out all that noise. And at the moment, we're being so overloaded with stimuli — it's one of the reasons my attention got so much better in Provincetown. For the first time in many years, I wasn't being overwhelmed. It was like going from drinking from a fire hose to drinking sips of water at a pace that I wanted, to shift metaphor slightly.

**Ezra Klein**

I think that bouncer metaphor is actually really, really helpful for then getting into the supply and demand question here. Because, OK, if we take the bouncer, what's interesting about attentional supply is some days you have a very ripped bouncer, some days you have a lot of bouncers, and some days you don't.

I'm a parent of young kids. And it is a remarkable experiment in your personal attentional resources to see what happens to your attention when you don't get much sleep. It's not just that it is hard to read a book; it's also, in a very strange way, I notice for me, anyway, that I begin to crave distraction.

Distraction is stimulating. It wakes you up a little bit. So I begin to crave what I think of actually as a less healthy attentional state. And this is going to be a big thing. I want to talk to you about, the paradoxes of what we want attentionally.

But talk me through some of the supply side factors that you discuss in your book as creating our attentional resources before you ever get to the demand side. What helps shape how much attentional strength — how many bouncers and how good those bouncers are — that we have to bring to our environment?

**Johann Hari**

I think you've just framed that really well. And I think there's lots of them. So let's hone in on one of the ones you mentioned, and we can discuss lots of the others. So let's think about sleep. We sleep 20 percent less than we did a century ago.

**Ezra Klein**

Can I ask if you're sure about this? Because I just heard an episode of the podcast "Maintenance Phase" about the so-called sleep loss epidemic, and their argument is that the sleep debt is really tricky. What makes you sure that we sleep less and we're in a sleep crisis?

**Johann Hari**

We had pretty good research a century ago about how people slept. People kept time diaries. People wrote about sleep 100 years ago. People studied sleep 100 years ago. So it's absolutely true, there are some people who dispute that.

They're a minority in the field — doesn't necessarily mean they're wrong, but there's a pretty broad consensus that we sleep significantly less than we used to, for all sorts of reasons — partly because of that historical data and partly because we know there are all sorts of things we are now exposed to that damage sleep that people were not exposed to hundreds years ago.

To give an obvious example, as Doctor Charles Czeisler put it to me, humans are as sensitive to light as algae. And one of the things that's happened to our sleep is we are exposed to enormous amounts of artificial light — much more than people in the past. 90 percent of Americans stare at a glowing screen within an hour of going to sleep. Obviously, 100 years ago, no one was staring at an electric light bulb for hours before they went to sleep. Why would they?

And we know the evidence is just overwhelming that undermines sleep. So I think it is very reasonable to conclude, both from the historical data and from the more local experimental data about things that people are exposed to now that they weren't in the past, that this is a very real issue. And the evidence of where this has brought us is pretty remarkable.

So when I interviewed all these leading experts on sleep, let's think about one in particular who I just mentioned, Dr. Charles Czeisler, who's the leading expert at Harvard Medical School — he's advised everyone from the Boston Red Sox to the U.S. Secret Service on this question — he did one study that really chilled me. There's a technology that can scan your eyes to see what you're looking at. And there's a technology that we all know about that scans your brain.

So what he does is he puts people into this technology — tired people, people who are not that tired. And what he discovered is can appear to be awake — you can be looking around, you appear to be as awake as you and I are now, but whole parts of your brain have gone to sleep. This is called local sleep because it's local to one part of the brain.

When we say we're half asleep, it turns out that's not a metaphor. A lot of us are literally living half asleep. And I can talk about why sleep is so important for focus and attention — essentially, there's many reasons, but when you're sleeping, your brain is repairing. Your brain is cleaning itself. And if you don't give it the time to do that, your brain is literally clogged up with metabolic waste.

But this goes to a deeper thing that I think you're getting at, Ezra, which is, to me, so important. That thing you're saying about when you're tired, you want the things that are bad for your attention. I think is true about so many of the factors that I learned about with "Stolen Focus." The way I began to think of it is you think about the debate at the moment is overwhelmingly dominated by tech, right?

Think about that tech, for the purposes of this metaphor, as a virus that is designed to hack and invade our attention. And it is designed to hack and invade our attention in its current iteration, as the people who designed it admit. OK, so that would have been powerful at any point in human history if it had arrived.

But it arrived at a moment when our immune systems, our attentional immune systems, were already down. Dr. Czeisler said to me even if the only thing that had happened in the last 100 years is that we sleep 20 percent less, that alone would be causing a very serious attention crisis.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

What are the key environmental, ecological level changes that have happened to create this intentionally pathogenic culture? So we've talked about sleep. Societally or individually, if we're getting less sleep, that's obviously going to be terrible for attention. What else did you find in working on this book that really drives attention and that has gotten worse or is, for many people, at a level of crisis?

### **Johann Hari**

Let's focus on two. I go through many in the book, but let's focus on two — one that I think will be completely intuitive to people and the one that most surprised me. So I'll start with the one that most surprised me. The way we eat is profoundly harming our ability to focus and pay attention. There's this fascinating new movement called nutritional psychiatry of people who study how the ways we eat affect our mental capacities. So imagine that every morning you eat the standard American or British breakfast.

You have sugary cereal, you have white bread with butter. What that does is it releases a huge amount of energy really quickly into your brain. It releases a lot of glucose and you just wake up. You suddenly feel like, OK, I'm in it. The day has begun.

But what happens is you'll get to your desk or your child will get to their school desk a few hours later and you'll experience a severe energy crash. And you'll get what's called brain fog. Brain fog is when you really struggle to focus until you have another sugary, carby treat or something or some caffeine or something like it.

The way we eat at the moment puts us on a roller coaster of energy spikes and energy crashes, which cause patches of brain fog throughout the day. If you eat food that releases energy at a steadier level, which most humans have in the past, you will not experience so much brain fog.

So Dale Pennock, one of the leading nutritionists in Britain, said to me at the moment, it's like we put rocket fuel into a Mini. It goes really fast for a little while and then it just stops. What we need to do is put in the fuel that our bodies were designed to absorb. There's two other just quick ways.

The second way is for your brain to function fully, you need to have all sorts of nutrients in your diet. And our diets lack lots of those nutrients. Turns out supplements don't cut it, because your body just doesn't absorb nutrients from supplements in the way it does from food.

The third way is, to me, the most disturbing, which is not just that our food lacks the nutrients we need, it often contains chemicals that act on us like drugs and harm our attention. So you can see how these three factors are really harming our ability to focus and pay attention.

### **Ezra Klein**

OK, so one of the factors that drives our attention that creates a supply of attention is nutrition. What's another one?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. So let's look at, for example, one that I think will be playing out in the lives of everyone listening today. You can only consciously think about one or two things at a time. That's it.

This is just a fundamental limitation of the human brain. The human brain has not significantly changed in 40,000 years. It's not going to change on any time scale any of us are going to see. You can only think about one or two things at a time.

But what's happened is we've fallen for a mass delusion. The average teenager, according to Professor Larry Rosen's research, now believes they can follow six or seven forms of media at the same time. So what happens when scientists get people into labs is they get them to think they're doing more than one thing at a time.

And what they discover is you're not. What you're doing is you're very rapidly juggling between your tasks. You're going from, what did it say on WhatsApp, what's this on Netflix, what's that notification I just got? You're switching, switching, switching.

Of course, your consciousness papers over this. It feels like you're doing them at the same time. And it turns out that comes with a really big cost. The technical term for that is the switch cost effect. When you try and do more than one thing at a time, you will do all the things you're trying to do much less competently.

I think most people hearing that will intuitively know it's true, and the scientific evidence is overwhelming. But it feels like a small effect. When I looked at the evidence, I was actually amazed by how big an effect it is. If you're interrupted, it takes you on average 23 minutes to get back to the level of focus you had before you were interrupted. But most of us never get 23 minutes to spare, so we're constantly operating at this diminished level of brainpower. If you receive text messages, it diminishes your brainpower for the main thing you're trying to focus on by 30 percent. That's a staggering amount of brainpower and attention that most of us are hemorrhaging most of the time at the moment.

### **Ezra Klein**

So there's a way in which this feels very intuitive to me. I don't think I am smarter anywhere in the world than I am on an airplane, because I don't buy internet there. There's nothing to do. And I just achieve levels of almost fugue statelike focus, particularly when reading. I'm just astonished at how much more creative I am on airplanes than anywhere else in my life.

And whenever I get off an airplane, I get off with the exact same resolution — I'm going to pursue this kind of focus more often in my life. I'm going to be in my room, and shut off the internet, and get back into these creative, open, associational states. And then I don't.

And this gets to, I think, an important paradox or at least tension in this conversation, which is we, human beings, also crave distraction. It isn't just being done unto us. Some of it is being done on to us, and I'm not here to defend the way algorithmic social media is constructed or quick cuts of music videos, which I remember being a panic when I was young. But still, I'm one of these people who will sit there watching a movie with my partner at night, and I will notice that I've picked up my phone to look at something else because my brain wanted to be distracted while I was watching the movie.

And this craving for distraction, even when it comes with all of these costs you're talking about, is very real. And it's what all these companies who profit off of our attention are exploiting. So how do you think about that craving for distraction? And how do you think about the legitimacy, the worth, the validity of that desire?

Because implicit in this whole conversation is we should rebuild society to not do this. But also, people kind of want to be distracted. They like being able to send GIFs to their co-workers on Slack or whatever it might be. And sometimes, I worry about a kind of patronizing dimension of this conversation where it's, you should have constant academic attention. And your desire to just jump around from thing to thing is unworthy, even though you like it and maybe it's not hurting anybody.

### **Johann Hari**

So you're absolutely right that this is a perennial human dilemma to some degree. You can read letters from monks 1,000 years ago where they say, oh, I'm really struggling with my attention. But the fact that something is a perennial human problem doesn't mean that it can't get acutely worse in some contexts, right?

Queen Victoria was quite fat, that doesn't mean there isn't an obesity crisis now. There was some obesity in the past, there's an enormous amount of obesity now as a result of social changes. So I would say a degree of distraction of switching between tasks is healthy and positive. And I do it myself. I wish it on other people. It's great.

But I think most people would agree, in the balance between some switching, distractions, speed and some deep thought, deep focus, we're hugely imbalanced. That seesaw is not at a healthy equilibrium, right? And I would say that we crave distraction in some contexts more than others.



So there are big, structural factors that drive a lot of this distraction that we can deal with. And if we deal with them, people will be able to make healthier choices — in fact, the choices they already want to make. I'll give you an example — in France they were having a huge crisis with what they called Le Burnout, which I don't think I need to translate.

And the French government, under pressure from labor unions, commissioned a guy called Bruno Mettling to just figure out what was going on. So he did loads of research. He discovered one of the key factors, which is that 35 percent of French workers felt they could never stop checking their email or their phones because their boss could message them at any time of the day or night, and if they didn't answer, they'd be in trouble. People could never unwind. They could never truly unplug. They could never really get into a sense of just rest. And I don't think most people want to be enslaved to their boss. I don't think most people want to be checking their work email constantly.

There are some people like you and me who absolutely love our work. We want to be on it most of the time. Actually, a lot of people just want what our parents had, our grandparents had, which is you finish your work day and you get to go home and have another life.

And so the French government introduced a legal reform — I went to Paris to interview people about this. It's very simple. It's called the right to disconnect. And it just says two things: Every worker has a legal right to have their work hours stipulated in their contract, and every worker has a legal right to not have to check their email or phone once they've left, unless they're paid overtime, right? Of course, employers can pay them overtime if they want to.

That's a societal change which we can all fight for. Of course, I talk about lots of individual things we can do as well in the book. But that's a societal change that frees people up to make the individual change that they want to make. I don't think you could say those workers in France were choosing to be constantly checking their email.

### **Ezra Klein**

So I agree on things like right to disconnect policies. But I want to hold this on something we had gotten at earlier, which is perhaps an evolutionary mismatch around how our attention works and what it looks like in the modern age. Because I don't agree — strongly, I don't agree — that if you pass something like the French policy, you would fix even a particularly large portion of this problem.

I think you'd make people's lives better, but I think you would open up just room for other kinds of distraction. And so we were discussing what the evolutionary nature of attention is. And some part of attention, you brought up vigilance, and probably the evolutionarily deeper forms of attention than the kind of attention that lets us read a long book, is about scanning — scanning for new information, for food, for threat.

We're very scanning-oriented creatures. And as technology makes it possible for there always to be new information, new threat, new whatever in our environment, it's just very hard to turn that off. I really struggle with even the language here. Crave always strikes me as the right word rather than like or choose, because we often crave things that aren't good for us.

But the difficulty of this, it does seem to me, is that we crave it. It's all good to say we should pass a law where the New York Times can't make me be on email after 6 p.m. And great. If we do that and it works, I'm all for it. But I don't think we're going to pass a law that says you can't have a smartphone.

I don't think we're going to pass a law that says YouTube can't have autoplay. And we're definitely not going to pass a law that says you can't have electric light at night for sleeping. And so this, to me, is the really tough question or set of questions we get into, which is there is this mismatch between our attention and our world, particularly our technology now.

And I don't always when thinking about the scale of intervention you would need to radically change our attentional commons how to think about the weird mix of choosing, instinct, preference, exhaustion, liking it, hating it that goes into what we end up attending to. And I'm curious about how you think of that mix of factors there. Because I think it's kind of easy to say the corporations are bad. But what do we do about what's in us, recognizing that we can't just change it all individually because it's part of a context and an environment?

### **Johann Hari**

So as you know, and I know we agree on this bit, I argue, although there are loads of things we can do as individuals — and I talk about lots of things I've done in the book and particularly things we can do with our kids and for our kids — but this is a systemic problem and ultimately requires systemic solutions. And we crave things in context.

So to give an obvious example, the United States has a much higher level of obesity than the Netherlands. Now, that is not because of some evolutionary difference between Americans and Dutch people. That's because the Netherlands had social movements that very early in the obesity crisis made a whole series of big social decisions.

They decided to subsidize healthy food, not unhealthy food. The United States made the opposite decision. They decided to build cities that it's possible to bike and walk around. Obviously, we didn't make that decision here in the U.S. So you can see how cravings happen in contexts.

To act like they're sort of apolitical urges that occur outside this context, I think, is to miss what's really happening, which is not to say there wouldn't always be some desire for these things. Yeah, there was some obesity 50 years ago – not very much, but there was some. And then the United States changed in all sorts of ways that made people crave things they did not crave in the past.

But to go to a deeper thing you're getting at, Ezra, because I've heard you say, and lots of people say it, and I understand why – this phrase that there's an evolutionary mismatch. There's an evolutionary mismatch between the technology we have and our instincts. And that's why we're in this state.

But the metaphor I would use is it's not like there's an evolutionary mismatch between us and the tech or us and these other factors, it's more like we're wearing shoes that don't fit our feet properly. If I gave you shoes that were the wrong size for you, you would feel uncomfortable. And I think metaphor puts the onus on the environment to be designed to match us, our needs, our wants. Does that ring true to you? Tell me why not if you don't, because I'm interested in your thoughts.

### **Ezra Klein**

It doesn't. But let me try to build the case, because I think this is really interesting. The reason the term, evolutionary mismatch, is in my head is I recently read a book called "The Hungry Brain." And you've used the analogy of obesity here a couple of times. And this is a book about the way the brain controls appetite and as such, the way you have to understand changes in society-level body weight as coming from the brain, not the gut.

To some degree, it's an attack on the things like saying, well, we should just have a low carb diet or we should just have a high carb diet or a low-fat diet. But the point the author is making – I think his name

is Stefan Gianni — is our brain evolved for a certain kind of nutritional environment. And when you found something that was really salty, really fatty, really sweet, and even more than that, when you found things that had a lot of variety, that was just great.

And so it kicks appetite into overdrive. And we now live in a nutritional or even non-nutritional environment that is designed to grab at these pleasure and variety centers in the brain which just gets us to eat a lot more food. And he's got all these great studies about how if you make people eat the same food — the same people, if you give them food that is boring to them, they just eat a lot less of it than if the food is interesting to them.

But the difficulty here — and this is the bridge I'm drawing — the difficulty here is that people like the variety of food. It's not like this was simply done unto us. You talked about different policies you have about subsidizing healthy and unhealthy food in, say, Scandinavia — and I agree. I'm 100 percent with you on those policies.

But as somebody who has looked at these kinds of policies a lot, I don't think they are what really make the difference. And I can tell you that if you try to pass a soda tax, it is going to be very hard going in politics. If you try to, as Michael Bloomberg did, ban the bucket-sized sodas, you don't get greeted with a parade for that. And that's because we like it.

And I think this we like it is where your analogy of the shoes falls apart. Wearing shoes that are on the wrong feet, it is uncomfortable. We don't like it. So we try to put the shoes on the right feet. The reason I bring up "The Hungry Brain" is I read it and I thought, this is a great book about social media. This is such a good book about social media, because we're basically in a hyper-stimulating attentional environment in the same way we're in a hyper-stimulating food environment. And it's why I think the politics of it are hard.

### **Johann Hari**

I think there's so many things in what you just said, Ezra. And part of what you're saying, I think, if I understand correctly, and it's absolutely true and important, which is this is a perennial human dilemma. We're always going to have it and there's always going to be some pleasures in surrendering your attention. That's true.

But let's get the environment right so people can make those choices. Because at the moment, the environment is wholly loaded against them. Let's look at an example that I think everyone who's been through what we've been through in the last two years, ie all humans, will totally get, right?

You mentioned before, vigilance. So I remember at the start of Covid, loads of people who were not doing the heroic work of being emergency workers and so on saying to me, oh, we're going to be locked in. I'm going to finally read Tolstoy. I'm going to learn French on Duolingo.

**Ezra Klein**

Remember the whole thing about how Newton invented calculus during quarantine?

**Johann Hari**

Yeah, Shakespeare wrote King Lear during a plague —

**Ezra Klein**

We didn't invent a whole lot of new math.

**Johann Hari**

Exactly. Sadly, I did not write King Lear. Everyone will have noticed no one read Tolstoy and no one learned French, right? People googling, how do I get my brain to work, went up by more than 300 percent.

**Ezra Klein**

You're going to drive by fact checker crazy, who's now going to have to figure out if any human being learned French during this whole period.

**Johann Hari**

Presumably, there's one. So I think I was unusually well prepared for understanding why people were not going to do that. Because prior to this, I'd spent a lot of time looking at the science that you alluded to earlier, Ezra, of stress and what it does to attention.

One of the people who really opened this up for me is an amazing woman called Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, who's the Surgeon General of California now. And she said to me one day when we were sitting

together in San Francisco, look, imagine one day you were attacked by a bear out of the blue and you survived. In the weeks and months that followed, something completely involuntary would happen to you – you would find it harder to focus on something like, say, reading a book, doing your homework, because your brain would be involuntarily scanning for risks. Because something came out of the blue to attack you, so your brain is thinking, what else might come out of the blue and attack us, right? OK, now imagine that you were attacked by a bear again. You would likely go into a state called hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is where you really struggle to focus on what we think of as deep focus, spotlight focus, because so much of your brain is scanning for risk. Now, that is a form – you mentioned before the different forms of attention – hypervigilance is a form of attention. It's an attention to profound risk. Most traumatized children, for example – survivors of sexual abuse and so on – go through long periods of hypervigilance because they are just looking out for the danger.

A wonderful child psychiatrist in Adelaide in Australia called Doctor Jon Jureidini said to me one day, look, deep focus is a really good strategy when you're safe. Read a book, you'll grow, you'll learn. Deep focus is a really dumb strategy when you're in danger. You'd be a fool to sit at the Battle of the Somme and read a novel, right? You're going to be shot.

So we evolved to be able to pay these deeper forms of focus and attention when we feel safe. And there's all sorts of social factors that are playing out that are making us vigilant. Going into the pandemic, 60 percent of Americans had less than \$500 in savings. Through no fault of their own, that money has been hugely transferred upwards to the rich.

Anyone who's ever been broke, as I have some points in my life, that causes a tremendous amount of vigilance. If your kid loses one of their shoes, you're screwed. If your washing machine breaks, you're screwed. If one of your teeth gets injured, you're screwed.

And this is why there was a really interesting little study – and this fits with something I know you and your wife are really interested in, Ezra – in Finland, as you know, they did a big experiment where they gave a significant number of people a guaranteed basic income. I think it was \$700 a month, if I remember rightly. And this was studied very well by the social scientists there.

And one of them, Olave Kangas, said to me, one of the most striking results and unexpected ones was people's ability to pay attention got a lot better, because they were less stressed. They were less

vigilant. Now, that improvement in their attention when they've been given a universal basic income illustrates they weren't choosing that stress before — 60 percent of the American public didn't choose to have \$500 in savings; that's something that's been done to them. That doesn't negate your wider point, which is there is a wider dilemma among human beings. And we will always struggle with this to some degree.

But just to go back to what you said before about the book you were talking about in relation to obesity — it didn't come from the brain, it came from the gut, I think you said. I would argue the obesity crisis came from neither the brain nor the gut, it came from a series of enormous social changes that took place. We know that, because the kind of food you're talking about can be bought anywhere in the world. And only here in the United States and a handful of other countries is there anything like the obesity epidemic you have. That's because these social changes were taken further here in the United States.

### **Ezra Klein**

So I'm going to keep us from going too deep into food, because that's another podcast. But I do think we're switching a little bit as we talk, I realize, between what you might call the demand side solutions and the supply side solutions. So I'm talking a bit about the demand side problems here.

But where you moved on a bunch of those questions, and I think correctly so, is to the supply side problems. Whether or not it would solve what you might think of as the distraction or attentional problems we have, it's a good thing for people to not breathe in such polluted air. Whether you think they would have much more attention, it's better for people to be able to sleep the amount they need to sleep. You were talking about Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, who's been on the show — it's a great episode and people should look it up from last year — whether or not it would lead to children having better grades in school because they pay closer attention — it is better for them to have fewer traumatic experiences. It's not that the only reason to not have people's stepfathers sexually abuse them is so that they can do better on standardized testing. And so this is something that I think is true across your books — across the book on drugs, you brought this up in the way you think of addiction. It's also your book about mental health and then your book about attention. One of the things you're getting at, it seems to me, is that there are a lot of ways in which our society is just bad for human flourishing. And if

you create a context in which people don't flourish across all kinds of levels — they don't sleep enough, they have a lot of childhood trauma — then all kinds of bad things are going to happen to them.

The people with really, really, really pathologically bad attention are also more likely to become addicted to heroin or more likely to become depressed and anxious. And so we talked about the demand side. But in a funny way, the supply side, it's both truer and less true about attention, because almost all of these things are good things to do because they're good things to do.

It's good for people to have enough money to live and not worry about their kids losing their shoes, because that's just good. And that would also help attention, but that's almost a side benefit.

### **Johann Hari**

I think you're right, and I get what you're getting at. It reminds me of a New Yorker cartoon from years ago — I'm going to be misremembering it — but I think the premise of it was that it turned out we did everything that we needed to do to deal with the climate crisis, and it turned out global warming was fake. And they said, oh no, we were tricked into building a cleaner, greener world, right?

And in a similar way, yeah you're absolutely right that all the things that I advocate, the big changes that I think we need to make — and a quarter of the book is about what we're doing with our children and a big part of what we need to do is change the school system. If you wanted to design a school system that would ruin kids' attention, you would design the one we have and restore childhood so kids can play outside because it turns out playing freely is absolutely essential to the development of attention.

And I particularly talk about one of the heroes of the book who's shown us how we can do that practically. But where I don't agree is I don't think it's an incidental benefit. I think your ability to pay attention is absolutely foundational to the texture of your life. What is your life like if, through no choice of your own — this is the environmental change — your life is dissolved into a hailstorm of three-minute fragments? There may be moments when you want to switch between things for three minutes — I'm all in favor that. There are periods when I do that. But if that's your typical working life, that profoundly degrades the texture of your life. And I would just say to anyone listening, think about anything you've ever achieved in your life that you're proud of — setting up a business, being a good parent, learning to play the guitar.



That thing that you're proud of required a huge amount of sustained focus and attention. And when attention and focus break down, I think there's good evidence that tension of focus down, your ability to achieve your goals and your ability to solve your problems also breaks down.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

Before we wrap up here, I do want to ask about some of the solutions you put forward in the book. What are two or three of the biggest things that you think if we did them would lead to a healthier technological commons?

### **Johann Hari**

I think there's a historical analogy that really helped me to think about this. So you'll remember, Ezra, from when we were kids — I remember it — leaded gasoline used to be the standard form of gasoline in the United States. And it was discovered exposure to lead really damages children's brains, and particularly their ability to focus and pay attention.

They didn't say, let's ban all gasoline. They said let's ban the specific element in the gasoline that is harming our focus and attention. And I think there's an analogy that really helps us to think about this in terms of social media.

So I spent a lot of time interviewing key figures in Silicon Valley who designed some aspects of how the internet works. And I think there's an analogy to the lead in the lead paint. Because you said before, we're not going to ban smartphones. You're absolutely right, nor should we.

What we want to do is deal with the specific aspects that are harming our attention. And the equivalent of the lead in the lead paint is the current business model for social media. At the moment, every time you open any social media app, the longer you scroll, the more money they make.

So all of that engineering power, all of their algorithmic genius is geared towards one thing: thinking, how do we get Ezra to pick up his phone as often as possible and scroll as long as possible? How do we get Ezra's kids to pick up his phone as often as possible and scroll as long as possible? That's it. That's their business model, right — what Professor Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.

Look at what Sean Parker said, one of the earliest investors in Facebook. He said that right from the start, they had designed Facebook to ask, how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible? He said that we knew what we were doing, and we did it anyway. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.

But social media doesn't have to work that way. Just like we have gasoline that doesn't have lead in it, we don't have to allow social media to have a business model that is dominated by discovering the weaknesses in your attention, hacking them, and extracting your attention maximally. So there are lots of other business models we can move to. I would say that at the heart of it is that we have to ban that business model and force them to move to another business model.

And there are lots of other business models that exist within capitalism that are perfectly practical that everyone listening has experience of. So that would be my argument. I would argue we need an attention movement to reclaim our minds. And it requires a shift in consciousness.

We need to stop blaming ourselves. We are not medieval peasants begging at the court of King Zuckerberg for a few little crumbs of attention from his table. We are the free citizens of democracies. We can deal with these things if we want to, but we're going to have to come together and demand it.

### **Ezra Klein**

Let's talk, then, a little bit about childhood, though. Because something you said earlier I thought was quite profound, which is the world in which tech enters people's lives is a world in which they've already been shaped. What they want has been shaped, their attentional resources have already been shaped.

And childhood is a place where we actually have a lot more ability to be paternalistic, a lot more ability to make values choices. Things that I would not be comfortable telling another adult I am comfortable saying to my kid. School is a place we were explicitly shaping people and saying, we prefer this and not that. You should do this and not that.

So you said something interesting, which is that if you wanted to design an education system to wreck people's attention, you would design this one. How so? And as my final question before books to you, what would the alternative look like?

## **Johann Hari**

So your ability to pay attention is intimately tied to the meaning you find in the thing you're looking at. If you don't find something meaningful, your attention will slip and slide off of a bit. As Professor Roy Baumeister said to me, a frog evolved to pay more attention to a fly than it does to a stone, because the fly is meaningful to the frog and the stone is not.

And what we've done is we've rebuilt our school system, we have stripped learning of meaning. There was never a golden age, but we've made it even more about rote learning and completely meaningless tests. So I think we could really redesign the education system to infuse it with meaning. And I've seen places that did it.

Give you an example — there's a place called the Evangelische Schule Zentrum in Berlin, a wonderful place I went to. What they do is at the start of each term, every class of kids chooses something they want to understand. So when I went there, the class I went into said they wanted to learn, could humans live on the moon?

And almost all of their lessons are then built around exploring different aspects of this question. The history class is about, OK, what's the history of people going to the moon? The geography is like, well, what could grow on the moon? The math is, OK, how would we design a rocket?

You can see how that infuses education with meaning. And you could see how much better the kids' attention was. So the school thing is huge. I think there's an even bigger element in relation to childhood. There's a transformation in childhood — I almost think if you and I could go back in time and bring our great-grandparents into the present, I think this is probably the change that would be most bizarre and alienating to them of all the changes that have occurred that are affecting our attention.

So I tell this story in the book through one of the great heroes that I met, a woman called Lenore Skenazy. Lenore grew up in a suburb of Chicago in the 1960s. And from when she was five years old, Lenore would walk out of her house and walk to school on her own. It was about 15 minutes away. When school ended, Lenore would leave and just wander around the neighborhood freely on her own. She'd play games with the other kids that the kids would spontaneously organize, they'd run around, and she would go home when she was hungry.

That was how all childhood was, essentially, in the world at that point with very few exceptions. Children played freely with other children without adult supervision for most of the time. This was crucial for them. By the time Lenore was the parent in the 1990s, that had ended. She was expected to walk her kids to school, wait and watch them go through the door — even when they got pretty old — and to be there waiting at the gate to collect them at the end of the day. By 2003, only 10 percent of any American children ever played outdoors. So it essentially ended.

Childhood became something that happened either behind closed doors under tight adult supervision. And it turns out there are loads of things in this enormous and unprecedented transformation in childhood that are important for attention. Let's give you a real no shit, Sherlock one: exercise.

Kids who run around can pay attention much better. The evidence for this is overwhelming. One of the single best things you can do for kids who can't pay attention is let them go and run around. We have stopped that, right? Even before Covid, we stopped that.

We imprisoned our children. In fact, the only place where our kids get to feel they're roaming around at the moment is on Fortnite and on World of Warcraft. We can hardly be surprised that they've become so obsessed with them. There are lots of other changes. Children learn when they play freely what's called intrinsic motivation.

They discover meaning. This is absolutely essential for attention. Children learn through play how to deploy attention. And it has to be free play. Just like processed food isn't like food, supervised play where adults are telling kids what to do doesn't give them the benefits of free play.

So the reason Lenore is the hero, not one of the heroes of *Stolen Focus*, is not because she had this experience, but because of what she did with it. So Lenore was horrified by this change. She could see that it was really harmful.

And at first, she tried to just persuade individual parents to let their kids play outside. She would often say to them, what's something you did when you were a kid that you really loved that you don't allow your own children to do? And people's eyes would light up. They'd talk about going into the woods, playing marbles, whatever it might be. But she realized, look, if you just try and persuade individuals, it

doesn't work. If you're the only parent who sends your child out, they get frightened, you look crazy. In fact, often, people call the police. So it just doesn't work.

So what Lenore did, Lenore now runs a group called Let Grow. And I really urge every parent, grandparent listening to go to [letgrow.org](http://letgrow.org). And what they do is they go to whole schools and whole communities and persuade them to restore childhood together, to let kids go out together on their own.

And I think of all the conversations I had for the book, I had so many moving conversations, I think the most moving was with a 14-year-old boy on Long Island. So I went to one of their Let Grow projects in Long Island, and there was a 14-year-old boy – to give a sense of him, he was a big, strapping 14-year-old. He was bigger than me. His parents wouldn't even let him go jogging around the block.

I asked him why and he said, my parents are frightened of all these kidnappings. To give you a sense of this town, it's a place where the French bakery is across the street from the olive oil store. His parents and him had a level of fear that would be appropriate if he lived in Medellin at the height of Pablo Escobar's terror.

Then Let Grow came along, and he started to play outside his house. And he started to meet up with his friends. And what they'd done just before I met him was they'd gone into the woods and they built a fort. As he talked, it was like watching a child come to life – the joy of realizing he could do things, that he didn't have to be constantly staring at screens, that he could go out into the world and explore it.

Lenore was with me that day, and I remember when he left she said, think about all of human history. Young people throughout our history had to go out and explore. They had to map the territory. They had to hunt. They had to find things. And then in one generation, we took all that away. And it's had all sorts of stunting and warping effects on them, from their attention to their bodies. And that boy, given a little bit of freedom, what did he do? He went into the woods and he built a fort. This is so deep in us. This is such a deep human need.

So the last quarter of the book is about children, because if we don't deal with kids' attention, if they don't form it when they're young, they're going to really struggle to develop it as they're older. And this

deadening school system and this home imprisonment makes them much easier prey for the invasive tech that we've alluded to and that I talk about in the book.

**Ezra Klein**

I think that is a lovely place to come to an end.

**Johann Hari**

Hurray.

**Ezra Klein**

Finally, what are three books everybody should read?

**Johann Hari**

There's three books I would recommend in particular that everyone read. One is called "The Anatomy of a Moment" by Javier Cercas, who is my favorite writer in the world at the moment. He's a Spanish writer. And The Anatomy of a Moment is a novel about a particular moment that is going to sound eerily familiar to everyone listening. In 1981, so not long after Spain had made a transition to democracy, they were about to swear in the new prime minister.

And a group of gunmen loyal to the dead fascist dictator Franco stormed the Spanish Senate, and fired into the air, and they ordered all the senators to get down onto the ground. And three senators that day refused to get down onto the ground and in their different ways, confronted the gunmen.

And they were three of the most unlikely people. And the book is about the story of who those three men were, the insane story of how they were linked before — they were mortal enemies in many ways — and I think it really is a masterpiece. We're all thinking at the moment about how do we defend democracy, and it has some really unlikely and fascinating lessons about how you defend democracy, and who defends democracy, and why. I really recommend it to everyone.

Another book I would recommend, a novel, is called Visitors. It's by Anita Brookner, who is my favorite novelist, I think. She writes stories about what seem like small lives that are so infused with close observation. It's funny, if you give a summary of one of her books — "Visitors" is basically a young gay man goes to stay with an old woman and nothing much happens, right?

So I summarized it, it does not sound very good. It is transformative and incredible. And I think she was a great genius. And if anything makes the case for deep focus, reading Anita Brookner is one of them. And the third I would recommend is a book called “The Apology” by V, who’s known by her former name Eve Ensler, who, of course, wrote the Vagina Monologues.

And V is a completely incredible person. If she was a man, she would be regarded as one of the great engage, intellectuals and artists of the last 50 years. Her activism is staggering. Her work is staggering. But Eve’s book, “The Apology” – V was sexually abused by her dad from when she was, I think, seven for many years.

And her father died and he never apologized for what he’d done to her. And maybe four years ago, V suddenly was almost possessed by it. She wrote the apology she wished her father had written to her. And it’s such an act of humanity and empathy, it’s so challenging.

But there’s so many reasons to read it – apart from everything else, it’s staggeringly well written, as everything V does is – but whatever the spirit we need now in the United States, it is the spirit that drove V to write “The Apology.” And I really think if everyone in the United States can read the book “The Apology,” it would enable our spirits and we will begin to find some way to listen to each other.

### **Ezra Klein**

Johann Hari, your new book is “Stolen Focus,” thank you very much.

### **Johann Hari**

Thanks so much, Ezra.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

That’s the show. If you enjoyed it, there are a few ways you can help us out or shape the next episode. You can rate the podcast on whatever player you’re listening on now, or send this episode to a friend, family member, if you didn’t like it, an enemy who you think deserves it. Or you can tell us who you think we should have on the show next by emailing me at [ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com](mailto:ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com).

We really do get suggestions for guests we have on from the email. And though we can't respond to every message, we really do read every single one.

"The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of the New York Times. It is produced by Rogé Karma, Annie Galvin, and Jeff Geld. It is fact checked by Michelle Harris, original music by Isaac Jones mixing by Jeff Geld. Our executive producer is Irene Noguchi. Special Thanks to Shannon Busta and Kristin Lin.



[The Ezra Klein Show](#)

Feb. 11, 2022

## It's Not Your Fault You Can't Pay Attention. Here's Why.

**Johann Hari offers a surprising theory for why it's so difficult to pay attention.**

Transcript

TRANSCRIPT

0:00/1:08:06

**It's Not Your Fault You Can't Pay Attention. Here's Why.**



**Johann Hari offers a surprising theory for why it's so difficult to pay attention.**

Friday, February 11th, 2022

**Ezra Klein**

I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So before we begin today, we are still looking for a managing producer, an organizational genius who's going to oversee process on our show. If you've got the experience and vision to do it, the link to the job posting is in show notes. But hurry, I'm not going to advertise this position again, and we're going to close it in about a week. All right, onto the show.

I want to try in these introductions to give a better sense of where my head is at when I go into these conversations — why I'm doing this episode and not some other. So let me begin here today. Life is the sum total of what we pay attention to. That's it.

And the strangest thing to me, in retrospect, about the education I received growing up — the educations most of us receive — is how little attention they give to attention. We're told to pay attention — don't fidget, don't look around, don't let your mind wander. But that's not an education in attention, and most of it is counterproductive.

Attention rebels against rigidity. It wants curiosity — to be interested, to be surprised. And fidgeting can be great for paying attention. Moving can be great for paying attention. Why do we put this on little kids? Why shouldn't school start later? We know that helps with attention. Maybe the material should be more interesting.

But also, even the language — pay attention. We don't really control our attention. We influence it; we shape it. But then it's tugged around by other forces, forces that are inside of us and outside of us. Our attention is manipulated. It's commoditized. It's sold now.

Our attention is an industry. And under all of this pressure, it changes. And so we change how we pay attention, what we pay attention to, how much attention we have to give. This absolute core facility of

our life, the window through which we peer out at the world and we let it be bought, and sold, and scolded, and wasted. And then we blame ourselves.

I've been feeling a lot older this year — something about kids and the pandemic and how gray my hair is getting. And it's made me think not so much about time as about attention. I don't think time is the right way to measure whatever it is I have left — attention is.

I only have so much attention left to give. And it's how I use that attention that will decide what I make of that time. But it really feels, day to day, like I'm swimming upstream on that, because before I can use my attention, I have to stop all these other corporations and distractions — and to be fair, sometimes my own weaker, worse impulses — from using it first.

So this was all in my head when I saw Johann Hari's new book "Stolen Focus." Hari's work has always been interesting to me. In his previous books, he's developed, call it a little subgenre taking conditions and afflictions that we individualize and arguing for their social roots.

Chasing the Scream did this for drug addiction, "Lost Connections" did it for depression and loneliness, and "Stolen Focus" does it for attention. When I read Hari's work, I always think of a quote that gets attributed to Krishnamurti: It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

Now, I wouldn't always take it as far as Hari does. As you'll hear, I think he sometimes underplays the agency and role we have in creating and wanting parts of the society we live in. But I find his take on these issues to be a really needed push, a really useful reframe, and in this case, an opportunity to look at the most fundamental of human faculties through a new lens.

It's an opportunity to pay attention to attention, and not just to our attention but to what you might call our attentional commons, our social attention. As always, my email is [ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com](mailto:ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com), if you've got thoughts, guest suggestions, things you think I should watch or read, listen to.

Here's Johann Hari.

Johann Hari, welcome to the show.

## **Johann Hari**

Hi, Ezra. So good to be with you.

## **Ezra Klein**

So let's begin with something that seems like it should be really obvious and I don't think it is. What is attention?

## **Johann Hari**

Yeah. This is something when I started looking into the subject, I began to ask. So the kind of standard definition of attention is one that comes from William James, the kind of founding father of modern American psychology. And he said, attention is your ability to selectively attend to things in your environment. So think about the fact I'm talking to you from a hotel room in Florida, right? So just beyond my laptop, I can see out the window. There's people walking by. They're going down towards a beach. I'm in a room where I can see all sorts of things.

I can hear the buzz of the aircon. In the corner of the room over there, there's my phone, which I've deliberately hidden from view. But it might be glowing, it might be sending me text messages. I'm screening out all of that and I'm homing in on, wait, what did Ezra just ask me? He asked me a question about what attention is. So I'm selectively attending to your question. Loads of people are going to be listening to this podcast while doing other things, but they're screening out a lot of those other things in their environment to listen to us. So that's the kind of textbook definition of attention.

But I think there's a more interesting definition of attention that's been developed really in the last five years in this new attentional environment that comes from a man named James Williams — Dr. James Williams — who was at the heart of Google for many years, was horrified by what they were doing to our attention, quit, and became, I would argue, the most important philosopher of attention in the world today. And he's developed this kind of typology of attention. He argues there are three layers of attention — I would actually argue there's a fourth one as well — that I think help us to think about this question in a more interesting way.

So the first layer of attention, he argued, is what's called your spotlight. So that's when you focus on immediate actions like I'm going to walk into the kitchen and make a coffee. You want to find your glasses, you want to see what's in the fridge, you want to read a chapter of my book. And this is called

the spotlight, because it involves narrowing down your focus, right? And if your spotlight gets distracted or disrupted, you're prevented from carrying out near-term actions like that. Most of the time when we think about attention, that's the form of disruption of attention we think about — short-term distraction.

The second layer of your attention is what he calls your starlight. Your starlight is the focus you can apply to your longer term goals — your projects over time. So it's not that you want to read the chapter of a book, let's say you want to write a book, you want to set up a business, you want to be a good parent. And it's called your starlight, because when you feel lost in the desert, say, you look up to the stars and you remember the direction you're traveling in. And if you become distracted from your starlight, then what you lose is a sense of your longer term goals. You start to forget where you're headed.

And the third layer of your attention is your daylight. And that's the form of focus that makes it possible for you to know what your longer term goals even are in the first place. How do you want to write a book? How do you want to set up a business? How do you know what it means to be a good parent? Without being able to reflect and think deeply, you won't be able to figure those things out. And he gave it that name, daylight, because it's only when it's scene is flooded with daylight that you can see the things around you most clearly. And if you get so distracted that you lose your sense of your daylight, he said, in many ways, it's like you can't even figure out who you are, what you want to do, where you want to go. It's like you become lost in your own life. Does that help you to think about attention in a slightly richer, more textured way? I think when you hear about that, you can see how losing attention — and a big part, of course, of what I argue in the book is that there's this growing and strong evidence that we are in a serious crisis of attention — that affects the daily lived texture of your life in the short-term, the medium-term, the long-term, and it affects our whole society.

### **Ezra Klein**

It does. But I want to hold on the felt experience of attention, which I think the first level, spotlight, is going to be the one people are most familiar with. You're trying to focus on something and you get distracted.

You have an interesting riff in the book, though, about something that I think is underplayed when we talk about attention, which is that mind wandering, this light, associational form of thinking, can also be

a form of attention. And it can be in healthy forms, it can also be an unhealthy forms. So can you talk about the non-focused kinds of attention too?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. There's lots of them. It's so interesting you said that, because of all the things that I learned about for "Stolen Focus," I think one of the things that was most surprising to me was the evidence of my mind wandering. So at the very start of doing the research for the book, I was just tired of being wired.

I felt like with each year that passed, things that require deep focus that are so deep to my sense of self, like reading a book, were getting more and more like running up and down escalator. And I could see this happening to so many people around me. The average American office worker now focuses on only one task for only three minutes. For every one child, we're the same age, but everyone —

### **Ezra Klein**

They get a whole three minutes?

What are they doing so right?

### **Johann Hari**

How did they achieve this Buddha-like state of Zen? Exactly. And this wasn't in any way a kind of scientific experiment what I did at the start of the book, I just couldn't take it anymore. So I was quite lucky that a movie had just been made out of one of my books, so I had some money.

And I just announced to everyone I knew, I can't take this anymore. I'm going away for three months. I'm going to a place called Provincetown. I'm going to have no smartphone, and I'm going to have no laptop to get onto the internet.

And I did it. And loads of interesting things happened there. But the biggest change was about a month in, I made the shift. So when I went, I thought, right, you've left aside all these distractions. You've come to deeply focus. That's why you're here.

OK, you're going to read "War and Peace," you're going to read Dostoyevsky — and I did all that. But then one day about a month in, I realized I had been sort of fattening myself with information like a kind

of foie gras goose. And I thought, I'm going to go for long walks. Going to leave everything, I'm going to go for these long walks.

And I came back from these long walks feeling so alive and mentally fertile. And I started building in loads of space for mind-wandering. I started to see connections between things I hadn't thought about before, I started processing things in my past, I started creating visions for the future. But for a while, I felt really guilty. I thought, this isn't why you came here. You came here to pay attention. But later when I left Provincetown, I interviewed some of the leading experts on mind-wandering in the world. There's an amazing man named Professor Marcus Reichel who's in St. Louis in Missouri who made a whole series of really big breakthroughs in the neuroscience of mind wandering.

What Professor Reichel and other people discovered, many other scientists, is that mind-wandering is a crucial form of attention. Mind-wandering is when you process things that have happened in the past, it's when you anticipate the future, it's when you make connections between things you've experienced. And what we've done in our culture is we're in this awful state where we're not doing spotlight focusing. We're not deep focusing. But nor are we mind-wandering.

What we're doing is very quickly toggling between tasks. What was that on Facebook? What did Ezra just say to me? What's that on the TV? Oh my god, what just happened in the news? We're toggling, toggling, toggling. And one of the things that's really been crowded out is mind-wandering. And I started thinking about, in a way, these different forms of attention, and we're going to come to some others, I'm sure – like vigilance, which is something that's massively increased during Covid, which is a different form of attention. But I started thinking about these different forms of attention as almost like the different parts of a Symphony Orchestra.

You've got your oboes, you've got your woodwinds, you've got all of these. You need all of them to play a symphony. But at the moment, to extend this metaphor perhaps further than it should go, it's almost like one of those heavy metal bands like Slipknot have kind of stormed the stage and are just screaming at the audience. And none of the pieces of the Symphony Orchestra can play. No disrespect to Slipknot, who I quite like.

**Ezra Klein**

I can just imagine young Johann at a Slipknot concert. The reason I wanted to pull mind-wandering in here early is twofold, because I think it will help us think about some of what's to come. One reason is that I think we have cultural expectations and pressure on what attention is and what kinds of attention we value that distort the conversation.

So there's a lot of intention people bring to their attention to focus on this piece I'm writing, this thing I'm studying, my children, not looking at my phone. That's a kind of focus.

And then even if we get better at that, we fill all of that loose time that might have, at another time, been reserved for mind-wandering, when our brain can make associations and come up with new ideas, we fill it with input. We muddy the lake. So at a time when I might of mind-wandered in another age, I look at Twitter, I play a quick video game on my phone.

There's an ability to never have a true moment without mental input, wherein I think we understand that it's easy for our focus to get distracted. I think because we associate mind-wandering with distraction, we don't recognize how much distraction has actually wrecked mind-wandering. And because we don't value mind-wandering, because it doesn't look like what we think productivity looks like, I don't think we worry about that as too much of a crisis.

### **Johann Hari**

I think that's really astute. And what I learned about mind-wandering is actually a really big challenge to what I thought about productivity. Think about the fact that the worst thing a teacher can say about a kid is, oh, he just daydreams all day. No teacher says that as a compliment. Whereas, in fact, the daydreaming the child's doing maybe some of the most useful thinking they're doing.

I remember Professor Nathan Sprang, who I interviewed in Montreal, who's done a huge amount of research on mind-wandering, saying to me conscious control of your thoughts is not the most valuable form of thinking. Actually, some of the greatest discoveries are made not when people are consciously directing their spotlight but when they're letting their mind wander.

And one of the tragedies of the constant switching that we're doing is it's profoundly degraded that layer of thought — it's degraded a lot of layers of thought, but that's one of them — which really trashes creativity and causes a lot of mental pressure. So I think you're totally right.

## **Ezra Klein**

One of the tricky things about even talking to attention is that the language we use for it, I think if you take the research and, frankly, just take the lived experience of it seriously, fundamentally misapprehends the situation we're in. We speak of attention as something we control. Are you paying attention, right?

Are you, the agent in the sentence, paying, choosing to, use your attention in a particular way? But attention is, to some degree, under our control. And we are, to some degree, under its control. How do you understand the causality of what we pay attention to?

## **Johann Hari**

This is such a good question. So when I started the research, I had these very simplistic stories in my head. Basically, I had two stories. I thought my attention had got worse. The young people who I love, their attention had radically deteriorated because, A, we didn't have enough willpower.

We weren't strong enough. And B, because someone invented the smartphone. And it's funny, I had an epiphany about the willpower moment very early in the research for the book. I went to interview an absolutely brilliant scientist call Professor Roy Baumeister, who's at the University of Queensland.

And he's the leading expert in the world on willpower. He's been researching this subject for 35 years. He wrote a book called "Willpower" – brilliant man and a brilliant scientist. And I got to see him and I said, I am thinking of writing a book about why people can't pay attention, really interested in your insights.

And he said something like – the exact words are in the book – he said something like, it's interesting you say that because I just find my attention just isn't very good anymore. I just play video games on my phone a lot. But I'm sort of sitting opposite him and I'm like, wait aren't you the leading expert in the world on willpower? Didn't you write a book called "Willpower," right? If even you're sitting there saying you play "Candy Crush" all day, it reminded me at the moment if "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," where they realize everyone's been body-snatched, right? So willpower is part of the solution, but, to be frank, a very small part of the solution. What I realized is our attention is being degraded by a whole series of things that are happening in the environment.



As Professor Joel Nigg, one of the leading experts on children's attention problems, said to me in Portland in Oregon, we need to ask now if we're living in what he called an attentional pathogenic environment – an environment which we're all going to struggle to pay attention, for a big and broad range of reasons that include the fact that we're subjected to tech that is designed to invade our attention, but also a much bigger range of factors from the food we eat, from the sleep we don't get, from the hours we overwork and are called on by our employers, from stress to the air pollution we're exposed to, which is causing brain inflammation.

But I think you're right. Attention occurs in a context. And at the moment, it is occurring in a context that is militating against the possibility of forming deep focus. You can still do it, but it's getting harder and harder.

### **Ezra Klein**

I want to get into that – these contextual changes. But before we do, I actually want to talk about attention without thinking about its change. What I really like about what you do with the context and what we'll get into is I think that we have a demand side attention story. Somebody invented the smartphone, somebody created MTV, and now there are all these things demanding our attention and distracting us.

You add this big supply side story – what furnishes our supply of attention – things like sleep and low air pollution, and we'll talk about all that. But before any of that is true, it is also true to just lay what I'm trying to get at on the table here that we do not and never have fully controlled our attention. Attention is not a fully conscious resource.

If there's a thunderclap, it's not like you think to yourself, hey, thunder, I should pay attention to the thunder now. Attention is also an evolutionary construct there to help us live in the world. We are under its control, because sometimes we have to pay attention to things faster than we can think about what it is we want to pay attention to. Can you talk a bit about that just basic level of attention?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. So it's often described by scientists as two kinds of attention. There's top-down attention and there's bottom-up attention. So bottom-up attention, you just gave a great example, a thunderclap, right?

Something happens, you don't make a choice about it, you just immediately turn and look to see where the thunder is, right? And then there's top-down attention, which is when we exert control over our attention. So you and I are exerting top-down control over our attention now.

I'm listening to you, you're listening to me. So bottom-up is involuntary. You don't have any control over it. If a bomb goes off near you, you don't decide whether to pay attention or not. Top-down is voluntary. Top-down is something you control.

And this is a perennial human dilemma. There's always going to be a conflict between those two things. And clearly, we need both. One of the reasons we're such a successful species is because we can do both. We're not entirely at the mercy of bottom-up attention – we're not thrown off by everything. We can achieve longer term projects.

But bottom-up attention also helps us be vigilant to risk, to potential benefits. And again, you can see how the environment in which we currently live is loading us with way more bottom-up stimuli that challenge your top-down attention much more.

So think about, of the 12 courses I write about, one part of one of them is about filtering. And Professor Adam Gazzaley, who's a brilliant neuroscientist, gave me a good metaphor for this. He said, look, in your brain, you've got a part of your brain called the prefrontal cortex. Picture that part of your brain as the bouncer in a nightclub.

It's a strong bouncer. It's ripped. It can keep out lots of people who are trying to barge their way into the nightclub. It can fight off five people, it can fight off seven people. It can't fight off 12 people. And we know there's lots of evidence there are aspects of the environment that are currently overloading our top-down capacities.

Think about really basic stuff like there's research that shows children in noisy classrooms do significantly less well than children in quiet classrooms, because your bouncer has to work harder. Your bouncer has to keep out all that noise. And at the moment, we're being so overloaded with stimuli – it's one of the reasons my attention got so much better in Provincetown. For the first time in many years, I wasn't being overwhelmed. It was like going from drinking from a fire hose to drinking sips of water at a pace that I wanted, to shift metaphor slightly.

**Ezra Klein**

I think that bouncer metaphor is actually really, really helpful for then getting into the supply and demand question here. Because, OK, if we take the bouncer, what's interesting about attentional supply is some days you have a very ripped bouncer, some days you have a lot of bouncers, and some days you don't.

I'm a parent of young kids. And it is a remarkable experiment in your personal attentional resources to see what happens to your attention when you don't get much sleep. It's not just that it is hard to read a book; it's also, in a very strange way, I notice for me, anyway, that I begin to crave distraction.

Distraction is stimulating. It wakes you up a little bit. So I begin to crave what I think of actually as a less healthy attentional state. And this is going to be a big thing. I want to talk to you about, the paradoxes of what we want attentionally.

But talk me through some of the supply side factors that you discuss in your book as creating our attentional resources before you ever get to the demand side. What helps shape how much attentional strength — how many bouncers and how good those bouncers are — that we have to bring to our environment?

**Johann Hari**

I think you've just framed that really well. And I think there's lots of them. So let's hone in on one of the ones you mentioned, and we can discuss lots of the others. So let's think about sleep. We sleep 20 percent less than we did a century ago.

**Ezra Klein**

Can I ask if you're sure about this? Because I just heard an episode of the podcast "Maintenance Phase" about the so-called sleep loss epidemic, and their argument is that the sleep debt is really tricky. What makes you sure that we sleep less and we're in a sleep crisis?

**Johann Hari**

We had pretty good research a century ago about how people slept. People kept time diaries. People wrote about sleep 100 years ago. People studied sleep 100 years ago. So it's absolutely true, there are some people who dispute that.

They're a minority in the field — doesn't necessarily mean they're wrong, but there's a pretty broad consensus that we sleep significantly less than we used to, for all sorts of reasons — partly because of that historical data and partly because we know there are all sorts of things we are now exposed to that damage sleep that people were not exposed to hundreds years ago.

To give an obvious example, as Doctor Charles Czeisler put it to me, humans are as sensitive to light as algae. And one of the things that's happened to our sleep is we are exposed to enormous amounts of artificial light — much more than people in the past. 90 percent of Americans stare at a glowing screen within an hour of going to sleep. Obviously, 100 years ago, no one was staring at an electric light bulb for hours before they went to sleep. Why would they?

And we know the evidence is just overwhelming that undermines sleep. So I think it is very reasonable to conclude, both from the historical data and from the more local experimental data about things that people are exposed to now that they weren't in the past, that this is a very real issue. And the evidence of where this has brought us is pretty remarkable.

So when I interviewed all these leading experts on sleep, let's think about one in particular who I just mentioned, Dr. Charles Czeisler, who's the leading expert at Harvard Medical School — he's advised everyone from the Boston Red Sox to the U.S. Secret Service on this question — he did one study that really chilled me. There's a technology that can scan your eyes to see what you're looking at. And there's a technology that we all know about that scans your brain.

So what he does is he puts people into this technology — tired people, people who are not that tired. And what he discovered is can appear to be awake — you can be looking around, you appear to be as awake as you and I are now, but whole parts of your brain have gone to sleep. This is called local sleep because it's local to one part of the brain.

When we say we're half asleep, it turns out that's not a metaphor. A lot of us are literally living half asleep. And I can talk about why sleep is so important for focus and attention — essentially, there's many reasons, but when you're sleeping, your brain is repairing. Your brain is cleaning itself. And if you don't give it the time to do that, your brain is literally clogged up with metabolic waste.

But this goes to a deeper thing that I think you're getting at, Ezra, which is, to me, so important. That thing you're saying about when you're tired, you want the things that are bad for your attention. I think is true about so many of the factors that I learned about with "Stolen Focus." The way I began to think of it is you think about the debate at the moment is overwhelmingly dominated by tech, right?

Think about that tech, for the purposes of this metaphor, as a virus that is designed to hack and invade our attention. And it is designed to hack and invade our attention in its current iteration, as the people who designed it admit. OK, so that would have been powerful at any point in human history if it had arrived.

But it arrived at a moment when our immune systems, our attentional immune systems, were already down. Dr. Czeisler said to me even if the only thing that had happened in the last 100 years is that we sleep 20 percent less, that alone would be causing a very serious attention crisis.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

What are the key environmental, ecological level changes that have happened to create this intentionally pathogenic culture? So we've talked about sleep. Societally or individually, if we're getting less sleep, that's obviously going to be terrible for attention. What else did you find in working on this book that really drives attention and that has gotten worse or is, for many people, at a level of crisis?

### **Johann Hari**

Let's focus on two. I go through many in the book, but let's focus on two — one that I think will be completely intuitive to people and the one that most surprised me. So I'll start with the one that most surprised me. The way we eat is profoundly harming our ability to focus and pay attention. There's this fascinating new movement called nutritional psychiatry of people who study how the ways we eat affect our mental capacities. So imagine that every morning you eat the standard American or British breakfast.

You have sugary cereal, you have white bread with butter. What that does is it releases a huge amount of energy really quickly into your brain. It releases a lot of glucose and you just wake up. You suddenly feel like, OK, I'm in it. The day has begun.

But what happens is you'll get to your desk or your child will get to their school desk a few hours later and you'll experience a severe energy crash. And you'll get what's called brain fog. Brain fog is when you really struggle to focus until you have another sugary, carby treat or something or some caffeine or something like it.

The way we eat at the moment puts us on a roller coaster of energy spikes and energy crashes, which cause patches of brain fog throughout the day. If you eat food that releases energy at a steadier level, which most humans have in the past, you will not experience so much brain fog.

So Dale Pennock, one of the leading nutritionists in Britain, said to me at the moment, it's like we put rocket fuel into a Mini. It goes really fast for a little while and then it just stops. What we need to do is put in the fuel that our bodies were designed to absorb. There's two other just quick ways.

The second way is for your brain to function fully, you need to have all sorts of nutrients in your diet. And our diets lack lots of those nutrients. Turns out supplements don't cut it, because your body just doesn't absorb nutrients from supplements in the way it does from food.

The third way is, to me, the most disturbing, which is not just that our food lacks the nutrients we need, it often contains chemicals that act on us like drugs and harm our attention. So you can see how these three factors are really harming our ability to focus and pay attention.

### **Ezra Klein**

OK, so one of the factors that drives our attention that creates a supply of attention is nutrition. What's another one?

### **Johann Hari**

Yeah. So let's look at, for example, one that I think will be playing out in the lives of everyone listening today. You can only consciously think about one or two things at a time. That's it.

This is just a fundamental limitation of the human brain. The human brain has not significantly changed in 40,000 years. It's not going to change on any time scale any of us are going to see. You can only think about one or two things at a time.

But what's happened is we've fallen for a mass delusion. The average teenager, according to Professor Larry Rosen's research, now believes they can follow six or seven forms of media at the same time. So what happens when scientists get people into labs is they get them to think they're doing more than one thing at a time.

And what they discover is you're not. What you're doing is you're very rapidly juggling between your tasks. You're going from, what did it say on WhatsApp, what's this on Netflix, what's that notification I just got? You're switching, switching, switching.

Of course, your consciousness papers over this. It feels like you're doing them at the same time. And it turns out that comes with a really big cost. The technical term for that is the switch cost effect. When you try and do more than one thing at a time, you will do all the things you're trying to do much less competently.

I think most people hearing that will intuitively know it's true, and the scientific evidence is overwhelming. But it feels like a small effect. When I looked at the evidence, I was actually amazed by how big an effect it is. If you're interrupted, it takes you on average 23 minutes to get back to the level of focus you had before you were interrupted. But most of us never get 23 minutes to spare, so we're constantly operating at this diminished level of brainpower. If you receive text messages, it diminishes your brainpower for the main thing you're trying to focus on by 30 percent. That's a staggering amount of brainpower and attention that most of us are hemorrhaging most of the time at the moment.

### **Ezra Klein**

So there's a way in which this feels very intuitive to me. I don't think I am smarter anywhere in the world than I am on an airplane, because I don't buy internet there. There's nothing to do. And I just achieve levels of almost fugue statelike focus, particularly when reading. I'm just astonished at how much more creative I am on airplanes than anywhere else in my life.

And whenever I get off an airplane, I get off with the exact same resolution — I'm going to pursue this kind of focus more often in my life. I'm going to be in my room, and shut off the internet, and get back into these creative, open, associational states. And then I don't.

And this gets to, I think, an important paradox or at least tension in this conversation, which is we, human beings, also crave distraction. It isn't just being done unto us. Some of it is being done on to us, and I'm not here to defend the way algorithmic social media is constructed or quick cuts of music videos, which I remember being a panic when I was young. But still, I'm one of these people who will sit there watching a movie with my partner at night, and I will notice that I've picked up my phone to look at something else because my brain wanted to be distracted while I was watching the movie.

And this craving for distraction, even when it comes with all of these costs you're talking about, is very real. And it's what all these companies who profit off of our attention are exploiting. So how do you think about that craving for distraction? And how do you think about the legitimacy, the worth, the validity of that desire?

Because implicit in this whole conversation is we should rebuild society to not do this. But also, people kind of want to be distracted. They like being able to send GIFs to their co-workers on Slack or whatever it might be. And sometimes, I worry about a kind of patronizing dimension of this conversation where it's, you should have constant academic attention. And your desire to just jump around from thing to thing is unworthy, even though you like it and maybe it's not hurting anybody.

### **Johann Hari**

So you're absolutely right that this is a perennial human dilemma to some degree. You can read letters from monks 1,000 years ago where they say, oh, I'm really struggling with my attention. But the fact that something is a perennial human problem doesn't mean that it can't get acutely worse in some contexts, right?

Queen Victoria was quite fat, that doesn't mean there isn't an obesity crisis now. There was some obesity in the past, there's an enormous amount of obesity now as a result of social changes. So I would say a degree of distraction of switching between tasks is healthy and positive. And I do it myself. I wish it on other people. It's great.

But I think most people would agree, in the balance between some switching, distractions, speed and some deep thought, deep focus, we're hugely imbalanced. That seesaw is not at a healthy equilibrium, right? And I would say that we crave distraction in some contexts more than others.



So there are big, structural factors that drive a lot of this distraction that we can deal with. And if we deal with them, people will be able to make healthier choices — in fact, the choices they already want to make. I'll give you an example — in France they were having a huge crisis with what they called Le Burnout, which I don't think I need to translate.

And the French government, under pressure from labor unions, commissioned a guy called Bruno Mettling to just figure out what was going on. So he did loads of research. He discovered one of the key factors, which is that 35 percent of French workers felt they could never stop checking their email or their phones because their boss could message them at any time of the day or night, and if they didn't answer, they'd be in trouble. People could never unwind. They could never truly unplug. They could never really get into a sense of just rest. And I don't think most people want to be enslaved to their boss. I don't think most people want to be checking their work email constantly.

There are some people like you and me who absolutely love our work. We want to be on it most of the time. Actually, a lot of people just want what our parents had, our grandparents had, which is you finish your work day and you get to go home and have another life.

And so the French government introduced a legal reform — I went to Paris to interview people about this. It's very simple. It's called the right to disconnect. And it just says two things: Every worker has a legal right to have their work hours stipulated in their contract, and every worker has a legal right to not have to check their email or phone once they've left, unless they're paid overtime, right? Of course, employers can pay them overtime if they want to.

That's a societal change which we can all fight for. Of course, I talk about lots of individual things we can do as well in the book. But that's a societal change that frees people up to make the individual change that they want to make. I don't think you could say those workers in France were choosing to be constantly checking their email.

### **Ezra Klein**

So I agree on things like right to disconnect policies. But I want to hold this on something we had gotten at earlier, which is perhaps an evolutionary mismatch around how our attention works and what it looks like in the modern age. Because I don't agree — strongly, I don't agree — that if you pass something like the French policy, you would fix even a particularly large portion of this problem.

I think you'd make people's lives better, but I think you would open up just room for other kinds of distraction. And so we were discussing what the evolutionary nature of attention is. And some part of attention, you brought up vigilance, and probably the evolutionarily deeper forms of attention than the kind of attention that lets us read a long book, is about scanning — scanning for new information, for food, for threat.

We're very scanning-oriented creatures. And as technology makes it possible for there always to be new information, new threat, new whatever in our environment, it's just very hard to turn that off. I really struggle with even the language here. Crave always strikes me as the right word rather than like or choose, because we often crave things that aren't good for us.

But the difficulty of this, it does seem to me, is that we crave it. It's all good to say we should pass a law where the New York Times can't make me be on email after 6 p.m. And great. If we do that and it works, I'm all for it. But I don't think we're going to pass a law that says you can't have a smartphone.

I don't think we're going to pass a law that says YouTube can't have autoplay. And we're definitely not going to pass a law that says you can't have electric light at night for sleeping. And so this, to me, is the really tough question or set of questions we get into, which is there is this mismatch between our attention and our world, particularly our technology now.

And I don't always when thinking about the scale of intervention you would need to radically change our attentional commons how to think about the weird mix of choosing, instinct, preference, exhaustion, liking it, hating it that goes into what we end up attending to. And I'm curious about how you think of that mix of factors there. Because I think it's kind of easy to say the corporations are bad. But what do we do about what's in us, recognizing that we can't just change it all individually because it's part of a context and an environment?

### **Johann Hari**

So as you know, and I know we agree on this bit, I argue, although there are loads of things we can do as individuals — and I talk about lots of things I've done in the book and particularly things we can do with our kids and for our kids — but this is a systemic problem and ultimately requires systemic solutions. And we crave things in context.

So to give an obvious example, the United States has a much higher level of obesity than the Netherlands. Now, that is not because of some evolutionary difference between Americans and Dutch people. That's because the Netherlands had social movements that very early in the obesity crisis made a whole series of big social decisions.

They decided to subsidize healthy food, not unhealthy food. The United States made the opposite decision. They decided to build cities that it's possible to bike and walk around. Obviously, we didn't make that decision here in the U.S. So you can see how cravings happen in contexts.

To act like they're sort of apolitical urges that occur outside this context, I think, is to miss what's really happening, which is not to say there wouldn't always be some desire for these things. Yeah, there was some obesity 50 years ago – not very much, but there was some. And then the United States changed in all sorts of ways that made people crave things they did not crave in the past.

But to go to a deeper thing you're getting at, Ezra, because I've heard you say, and lots of people say it, and I understand why – this phrase that there's an evolutionary mismatch. There's an evolutionary mismatch between the technology we have and our instincts. And that's why we're in this state.

But the metaphor I would use is it's not like there's an evolutionary mismatch between us and the tech or us and these other factors, it's more like we're wearing shoes that don't fit our feet properly. If I gave you shoes that were the wrong size for you, you would feel uncomfortable. And I think metaphor puts the onus on the environment to be designed to match us, our needs, our wants. Does that ring true to you? Tell me why not if you don't, because I'm interested in your thoughts.

### **Ezra Klein**

It doesn't. But let me try to build the case, because I think this is really interesting. The reason the term, evolutionary mismatch, is in my head is I recently read a book called "The Hungry Brain." And you've used the analogy of obesity here a couple of times. And this is a book about the way the brain controls appetite and as such, the way you have to understand changes in society-level body weight as coming from the brain, not the gut.

To some degree, it's an attack on the things like saying, well, we should just have a low carb diet or we should just have a high carb diet or a low-fat diet. But the point the author is making – I think his name

is Stefan Gianni — is our brain evolved for a certain kind of nutritional environment. And when you found something that was really salty, really fatty, really sweet, and even more than that, when you found things that had a lot of variety, that was just great.

And so it kicks appetite into overdrive. And we now live in a nutritional or even non-nutritional environment that is designed to grab at these pleasure and variety centers in the brain which just gets us to eat a lot more food. And he's got all these great studies about how if you make people eat the same food — the same people, if you give them food that is boring to them, they just eat a lot less of it than if the food is interesting to them.

But the difficulty here — and this is the bridge I'm drawing — the difficulty here is that people like the variety of food. It's not like this was simply done unto us. You talked about different policies you have about subsidizing healthy and unhealthy food in, say, Scandinavia — and I agree. I'm 100 percent with you on those policies.

But as somebody who has looked at these kinds of policies a lot, I don't think they are what really make the difference. And I can tell you that if you try to pass a soda tax, it is going to be very hard going in politics. If you try to, as Michael Bloomberg did, ban the bucket-sized sodas, you don't get greeted with a parade for that. And that's because we like it.

And I think this we like it is where your analogy of the shoes falls apart. Wearing shoes that are on the wrong feet, it is uncomfortable. We don't like it. So we try to put the shoes on the right feet. The reason I bring up "The Hungry Brain" is I read it and I thought, this is a great book about social media. This is such a good book about social media, because we're basically in a hyper-stimulating attentional environment in the same way we're in a hyper-stimulating food environment. And it's why I think the politics of it are hard.

### **Johann Hari**

I think there's so many things in what you just said, Ezra. And part of what you're saying, I think, if I understand correctly, and it's absolutely true and important, which is this is a perennial human dilemma. We're always going to have it and there's always going to be some pleasures in surrendering your attention. That's true.

But let's get the environment right so people can make those choices. Because at the moment, the environment is wholly loaded against them. Let's look at an example that I think everyone who's been through what we've been through in the last two years, ie all humans, will totally get, right?

You mentioned before, vigilance. So I remember at the start of Covid, loads of people who were not doing the heroic work of being emergency workers and so on saying to me, oh, we're going to be locked in. I'm going to finally read Tolstoy. I'm going to learn French on Duolingo.

**Ezra Klein**

Remember the whole thing about how Newton invented calculus during quarantine?

**Johann Hari**

Yeah, Shakespeare wrote King Lear during a plague —

**Ezra Klein**

We didn't invent a whole lot of new math.

**Johann Hari**

Exactly. Sadly, I did not write King Lear. Everyone will have noticed no one read Tolstoy and no one learned French, right? People googling, how do I get my brain to work, went up by more than 300 percent.

**Ezra Klein**

You're going to drive by fact checker crazy, who's now going to have to figure out if any human being learned French during this whole period.

**Johann Hari**

Presumably, there's one. So I think I was unusually well prepared for understanding why people were not going to do that. Because prior to this, I'd spent a lot of time looking at the science that you alluded to earlier, Ezra, of stress and what it does to attention.

One of the people who really opened this up for me is an amazing woman called Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, who's the Surgeon General of California now. And she said to me one day when we were sitting

together in San Francisco, look, imagine one day you were attacked by a bear out of the blue and you survived. In the weeks and months that followed, something completely involuntary would happen to you – you would find it harder to focus on something like, say, reading a book, doing your homework, because your brain would be involuntarily scanning for risks. Because something came out of the blue to attack you, so your brain is thinking, what else might come out of the blue and attack us, right? OK, now imagine that you were attacked by a bear again. You would likely go into a state called hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is where you really struggle to focus on what we think of as deep focus, spotlight focus, because so much of your brain is scanning for risk. Now, that is a form – you mentioned before the different forms of attention – hypervigilance is a form of attention. It's an attention to profound risk. Most traumatized children, for example – survivors of sexual abuse and so on – go through long periods of hypervigilance because they are just looking out for the danger.

A wonderful child psychiatrist in Adelaide in Australia called Doctor Jon Jureidini said to me one day, look, deep focus is a really good strategy when you're safe. Read a book, you'll grow, you'll learn. Deep focus is a really dumb strategy when you're in danger. You'd be a fool to sit at the Battle of the Somme and read a novel, right? You're going to be shot.

So we evolved to be able to pay these deeper forms of focus and attention when we feel safe. And there's all sorts of social factors that are playing out that are making us vigilant. Going into the pandemic, 60 percent of Americans had less than \$500 in savings. Through no fault of their own, that money has been hugely transferred upwards to the rich.

Anyone who's ever been broke, as I have some points in my life, that causes a tremendous amount of vigilance. If your kid loses one of their shoes, you're screwed. If your washing machine breaks, you're screwed. If one of your teeth gets injured, you're screwed.

And this is why there was a really interesting little study – and this fits with something I know you and your wife are really interested in, Ezra – in Finland, as you know, they did a big experiment where they gave a significant number of people a guaranteed basic income. I think it was \$700 a month, if I remember rightly. And this was studied very well by the social scientists there.

And one of them, Olave Kangas, said to me, one of the most striking results and unexpected ones was people's ability to pay attention got a lot better, because they were less stressed. They were less

vigilant. Now, that improvement in their attention when they've been given a universal basic income illustrates they weren't choosing that stress before — 60 percent of the American public didn't choose to have \$500 in savings; that's something that's been done to them. That doesn't negate your wider point, which is there is a wider dilemma among human beings. And we will always struggle with this to some degree.

But just to go back to what you said before about the book you were talking about in relation to obesity — it didn't come from the brain, it came from the gut, I think you said. I would argue the obesity crisis came from neither the brain nor the gut, it came from a series of enormous social changes that took place. We know that, because the kind of food you're talking about can be bought anywhere in the world. And only here in the United States and a handful of other countries is there anything like the obesity epidemic you have. That's because these social changes were taken further here in the United States.

### **Ezra Klein**

So I'm going to keep us from going too deep into food, because that's another podcast. But I do think we're switching a little bit as we talk, I realize, between what you might call the demand side solutions and the supply side solutions. So I'm talking a bit about the demand side problems here.

But where you moved on a bunch of those questions, and I think correctly so, is to the supply side problems. Whether or not it would solve what you might think of as the distraction or attentional problems we have, it's a good thing for people to not breathe in such polluted air. Whether you think they would have much more attention, it's better for people to be able to sleep the amount they need to sleep. You were talking about Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, who's been on the show — it's a great episode and people should look it up from last year — whether or not it would lead to children having better grades in school because they pay closer attention — it is better for them to have fewer traumatic experiences. It's not that the only reason to not have people's stepfathers sexually abuse them is so that they can do better on standardized testing. And so this is something that I think is true across your books — across the book on drugs, you brought this up in the way you think of addiction. It's also your book about mental health and then your book about attention. One of the things you're getting at, it seems to me, is that there are a lot of ways in which our society is just bad for human flourishing. And if

you create a context in which people don't flourish across all kinds of levels — they don't sleep enough, they have a lot of childhood trauma — then all kinds of bad things are going to happen to them.

The people with really, really, really pathologically bad attention are also more likely to become addicted to heroin or more likely to become depressed and anxious. And so we talked about the demand side. But in a funny way, the supply side, it's both truer and less true about attention, because almost all of these things are good things to do because they're good things to do.

It's good for people to have enough money to live and not worry about their kids losing their shoes, because that's just good. And that would also help attention, but that's almost a side benefit.

### **Johann Hari**

I think you're right, and I get what you're getting at. It reminds me of a New Yorker cartoon from years ago — I'm going to be misremembering it — but I think the premise of it was that it turned out we did everything that we needed to do to deal with the climate crisis, and it turned out global warming was fake. And they said, oh no, we were tricked into building a cleaner, greener world, right?

And in a similar way, yeah you're absolutely right that all the things that I advocate, the big changes that I think we need to make — and a quarter of the book is about what we're doing with our children and a big part of what we need to do is change the school system. If you wanted to design a school system that would ruin kids' attention, you would design the one we have and restore childhood so kids can play outside because it turns out playing freely is absolutely essential to the development of attention.

And I particularly talk about one of the heroes of the book who's shown us how we can do that practically. But where I don't agree is I don't think it's an incidental benefit. I think your ability to pay attention is absolutely foundational to the texture of your life. What is your life like if, through no choice of your own — this is the environmental change — your life is dissolved into a hailstorm of three-minute fragments? There may be moments when you want to switch between things for three minutes — I'm all in favor that. There are periods when I do that. But if that's your typical working life, that profoundly degrades the texture of your life. And I would just say to anyone listening, think about anything you've ever achieved in your life that you're proud of — setting up a business, being a good parent, learning to play the guitar.



That thing that you're proud of required a huge amount of sustained focus and attention. And when attention and focus break down, I think there's good evidence that tension of focus down, your ability to achieve your goals and your ability to solve your problems also breaks down.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

Before we wrap up here, I do want to ask about some of the solutions you put forward in the book. What are two or three of the biggest things that you think if we did them would lead to a healthier technological commons?

### **Johann Hari**

I think there's a historical analogy that really helped me to think about this. So you'll remember, Ezra, from when we were kids — I remember it — leaded gasoline used to be the standard form of gasoline in the United States. And it was discovered exposure to lead really damages children's brains, and particularly their ability to focus and pay attention.

They didn't say, let's ban all gasoline. They said let's ban the specific element in the gasoline that is harming our focus and attention. And I think there's an analogy that really helps us to think about this in terms of social media.

So I spent a lot of time interviewing key figures in Silicon Valley who designed some aspects of how the internet works. And I think there's an analogy to the lead in the lead paint. Because you said before, we're not going to ban smartphones. You're absolutely right, nor should we.

What we want to do is deal with the specific aspects that are harming our attention. And the equivalent of the lead in the lead paint is the current business model for social media. At the moment, every time you open any social media app, the longer you scroll, the more money they make.

So all of that engineering power, all of their algorithmic genius is geared towards one thing: thinking, how do we get Ezra to pick up his phone as often as possible and scroll as long as possible? How do we get Ezra's kids to pick up his phone as often as possible and scroll as long as possible? That's it. That's their business model, right — what Professor Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.

Look at what Sean Parker said, one of the earliest investors in Facebook. He said that right from the start, they had designed Facebook to ask, how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible? He said that we knew what we were doing, and we did it anyway. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.

But social media doesn't have to work that way. Just like we have gasoline that doesn't have lead in it, we don't have to allow social media to have a business model that is dominated by discovering the weaknesses in your attention, hacking them, and extracting your attention maximally. So there are lots of other business models we can move to. I would say that at the heart of it is that we have to ban that business model and force them to move to another business model.

And there are lots of other business models that exist within capitalism that are perfectly practical that everyone listening has experience of. So that would be my argument. I would argue we need an attention movement to reclaim our minds. And it requires a shift in consciousness.

We need to stop blaming ourselves. We are not medieval peasants begging at the court of King Zuckerberg for a few little crumbs of attention from his table. We are the free citizens of democracies. We can deal with these things if we want to, but we're going to have to come together and demand it.

### **Ezra Klein**

Let's talk, then, a little bit about childhood, though. Because something you said earlier I thought was quite profound, which is the world in which tech enters people's lives is a world in which they've already been shaped. What they want has been shaped, their attentional resources have already been shaped.

And childhood is a place where we actually have a lot more ability to be paternalistic, a lot more ability to make values choices. Things that I would not be comfortable telling another adult I am comfortable saying to my kid. School is a place we were explicitly shaping people and saying, we prefer this and not that. You should do this and not that.

So you said something interesting, which is that if you wanted to design an education system to wreck people's attention, you would design this one. How so? And as my final question before books to you, what would the alternative look like?

## **Johann Hari**

So your ability to pay attention is intimately tied to the meaning you find in the thing you're looking at. If you don't find something meaningful, your attention will slip and slide off of a bit. As Professor Roy Baumeister said to me, a frog evolved to pay more attention to a fly than it does to a stone, because the fly is meaningful to the frog and the stone is not.

And what we've done is we've rebuilt our school system, we have stripped learning of meaning. There was never a golden age, but we've made it even more about rote learning and completely meaningless tests. So I think we could really redesign the education system to infuse it with meaning. And I've seen places that did it.

Give you an example — there's a place called the Evangelische Schule Zentrum in Berlin, a wonderful place I went to. What they do is at the start of each term, every class of kids chooses something they want to understand. So when I went there, the class I went into said they wanted to learn, could humans live on the moon?

And almost all of their lessons are then built around exploring different aspects of this question. The history class is about, OK, what's the history of people going to the moon? The geography is like, well, what could grow on the moon? The math is, OK, how would we design a rocket?

You can see how that infuses education with meaning. And you could see how much better the kids' attention was. So the school thing is huge. I think there's an even bigger element in relation to childhood. There's a transformation in childhood — I almost think if you and I could go back in time and bring our great-grandparents into the present, I think this is probably the change that would be most bizarre and alienating to them of all the changes that have occurred that are affecting our attention.

So I tell this story in the book through one of the great heroes that I met, a woman called Lenore Skenazy. Lenore grew up in a suburb of Chicago in the 1960s. And from when she was five years old, Lenore would walk out of her house and walk to school on her own. It was about 15 minutes away. When school ended, Lenore would leave and just wander around the neighborhood freely on her own. She'd play games with the other kids that the kids would spontaneously organize, they'd run around, and she would go home when she was hungry.

That was how all childhood was, essentially, in the world at that point with very few exceptions. Children played freely with other children without adult supervision for most of the time. This was crucial for them. By the time Lenore was the parent in the 1990s, that had ended. She was expected to walk her kids to school, wait and watch them go through the door — even when they got pretty old — and to be there waiting at the gate to collect them at the end of the day. By 2003, only 10 percent of any American children ever played outdoors. So it essentially ended.

Childhood became something that happened either behind closed doors under tight adult supervision. And it turns out there are loads of things in this enormous and unprecedented transformation in childhood that are important for attention. Let's give you a real no shit, Sherlock one: exercise.

Kids who run around can pay attention much better. The evidence for this is overwhelming. One of the single best things you can do for kids who can't pay attention is let them go and run around. We have stopped that, right? Even before Covid, we stopped that.

We imprisoned our children. In fact, the only place where our kids get to feel they're roaming around at the moment is on Fortnite and on World of Warcraft. We can hardly be surprised that they've become so obsessed with them. There are lots of other changes. Children learn when they play freely what's called intrinsic motivation.

They discover meaning. This is absolutely essential for attention. Children learn through play how to deploy attention. And it has to be free play. Just like processed food isn't like food, supervised play where adults are telling kids what to do doesn't give them the benefits of free play.

So the reason Lenore is the hero, not one of the heroes of *Stolen Focus*, is not because she had this experience, but because of what she did with it. So Lenore was horrified by this change. She could see that it was really harmful.

And at first, she tried to just persuade individual parents to let their kids play outside. She would often say to them, what's something you did when you were a kid that you really loved that you don't allow your own children to do? And people's eyes would light up. They'd talk about going into the woods, playing marbles, whatever it might be. But she realized, look, if you just try and persuade individuals, it

doesn't work. If you're the only parent who sends your child out, they get frightened, you look crazy. In fact, often, people call the police. So it just doesn't work.

So what Lenore did, Lenore now runs a group called Let Grow. And I really urge every parent, grandparent listening to go to [letgrow.org](http://letgrow.org). And what they do is they go to whole schools and whole communities and persuade them to restore childhood together, to let kids go out together on their own.

And I think of all the conversations I had for the book, I had so many moving conversations, I think the most moving was with a 14-year-old boy on Long Island. So I went to one of their Let Grow projects in Long Island, and there was a 14-year-old boy – to give a sense of him, he was a big, strapping 14-year-old. He was bigger than me. His parents wouldn't even let him go jogging around the block.

I asked him why and he said, my parents are frightened of all these kidnappings. To give you a sense of this town, it's a place where the French bakery is across the street from the olive oil store. His parents and him had a level of fear that would be appropriate if he lived in Medellin at the height of Pablo Escobar's terror.

Then Let Grow came along, and he started to play outside his house. And he started to meet up with his friends. And what they'd done just before I met him was they'd gone into the woods and they built a fort. As he talked, it was like watching a child come to life – the joy of realizing he could do things, that he didn't have to be constantly staring at screens, that he could go out into the world and explore it.

Lenore was with me that day, and I remember when he left she said, think about all of human history. Young people throughout our history had to go out and explore. They had to map the territory. They had to hunt. They had to find things. And then in one generation, we took all that away. And it's had all sorts of stunting and warping effects on them, from their attention to their bodies. And that boy, given a little bit of freedom, what did he do? He went into the woods and he built a fort. This is so deep in us. This is such a deep human need.

So the last quarter of the book is about children, because if we don't deal with kids' attention, if they don't form it when they're young, they're going to really struggle to develop it as they're older. And this

deadening school system and this home imprisonment makes them much easier prey for the invasive tech that we've alluded to and that I talk about in the book.

**Ezra Klein**

I think that is a lovely place to come to an end.

**Johann Hari**

Hurray.

**Ezra Klein**

Finally, what are three books everybody should read?

**Johann Hari**

There's three books I would recommend in particular that everyone read. One is called "The Anatomy of a Moment" by Javier Cercas, who is my favorite writer in the world at the moment. He's a Spanish writer. And The Anatomy of a Moment is a novel about a particular moment that is going to sound eerily familiar to everyone listening. In 1981, so not long after Spain had made a transition to democracy, they were about to swear in the new prime minister.

And a group of gunmen loyal to the dead fascist dictator Franco stormed the Spanish Senate, and fired into the air, and they ordered all the senators to get down onto the ground. And three senators that day refused to get down onto the ground and in their different ways, confronted the gunmen.

And they were three of the most unlikely people. And the book is about the story of who those three men were, the insane story of how they were linked before — they were mortal enemies in many ways — and I think it really is a masterpiece. We're all thinking at the moment about how do we defend democracy, and it has some really unlikely and fascinating lessons about how you defend democracy, and who defends democracy, and why. I really recommend it to everyone.

Another book I would recommend, a novel, is called Visitors. It's by Anita Brookner, who is my favorite novelist, I think. She writes stories about what seem like small lives that are so infused with close observation. It's funny, if you give a summary of one of her books — "Visitors" is basically a young gay man goes to stay with an old woman and nothing much happens, right?

So I summarized it, it does not sound very good. It is transformative and incredible. And I think she was a great genius. And if anything makes the case for deep focus, reading Anita Brookner is one of them. And the third I would recommend is a book called “The Apology” by V, who’s known by her former name Eve Ensler, who, of course, wrote the Vagina Monologues.

And V is a completely incredible person. If she was a man, she would be regarded as one of the great engage, intellectuals and artists of the last 50 years. Her activism is staggering. Her work is staggering. But Eve’s book, “The Apology” – V was sexually abused by her dad from when she was, I think, seven for many years.

And her father died and he never apologized for what he’d done to her. And maybe four years ago, V suddenly was almost possessed by it. She wrote the apology she wished her father had written to her. And it’s such an act of humanity and empathy, it’s so challenging.

But there’s so many reasons to read it – apart from everything else, it’s staggeringly well written, as everything V does is – but whatever the spirit we need now in the United States, it is the spirit that drove V to write “The Apology.” And I really think if everyone in the United States can read the book “The Apology,” it would enable our spirits and we will begin to find some way to listen to each other.

### **Ezra Klein**

Johann Hari, your new book is “Stolen Focus,” thank you very much.

### **Johann Hari**

Thanks so much, Ezra.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

### **Ezra Klein**

That’s the show. If you enjoyed it, there are a few ways you can help us out or shape the next episode. You can rate the podcast on whatever player you’re listening on now, or send this episode to a friend, family member, if you didn’t like it, an enemy who you think deserves it. Or you can tell us who you think we should have on the show next by emailing me at [ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com](mailto:ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com).

We really do get suggestions for guests we have on from the email. And though we can't respond to every message, we really do read every single one.

"The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of the New York Times. It is produced by Rogé Karma, Annie Galvin, and Jeff Geld. It is fact checked by Michelle Harris, original music by Isaac Jones mixing by Jeff Geld. Our executive producer is Irene Noguchi. Special Thanks to Shannon Busta and Kristin Lin.