

## Thriving in an Age of Attention Deficit

"Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense."

--Gertrude Stein

Living in the 21st century is an exciting time. One of the advantages of our technology is the breakdown in barriers we have to information. The increased access we have to information is amazing, but also comes along with its challenges; the same information that adds value to our lives can also, at times, be overwhelming. Each of you knows what it feels like to be on "information overload," saturated with more information than you can absorb or respond to effectively: too many channels on the TV to find something that you are interested in watching, emails arriving in your inbox faster than you can read and respond to them, social media that keeps you connected to your network of friends and colleagues but provides more than you need to know.

One of the downsides of our information age is the development of a chronic attention deficit disorder in the general population – not a clinical diagnosis, rather, more of a societal plague we are suffering. You can see the signs of this around you: trying to have a conversation or meal with someone when they are in the middle of emailing or texting, people talking on the phone or texting while they are driving, being in a meeting in which other participants are online reading/responding to their email or texting, or even feeling the persistent need to check email or FaceBook. I experience people all around me who live as if they are on an electronic leash, constantly wired to incoming information, persistently reactive to their electronic devices. More than once, I have taught a mindfulness program in which a participant insisted on engaging with their Blackberry throughout a class that is intended to teach them to pay attention to the present moment; the irony of this needs no explanation. It points to the challenge that many of us have dealing with the onslaught of information at our finger tips and the expectations that we will respond immediately to requests placed upon us 24/7. Whereas Jon Kabat-Zinn's second book on mindfulness is entitled, "Wherever You Go, There You Are," I suggest the title, "Wherever You Go, There You Aren't" more accurately describes the reality of our day-to-day existence.

This symptom of chronic attention deficit disorder in our society is beyond overwhelming; in addition, it takes a physical, emotional, and cognitive toll on us. The attempt to consume and respond to an excess of information contributes to your body being in a heightened state of stress arousal, which ultimately creates wear and tear on you, challenging your well-being. At a minimum, you may have trouble focusing, may become exhausted or start feeling burned out; worse, you may begin to have health problems that force you to slow down, or even come, involuntarily, to a screeching halt.

Before you reach these physical, emotional or cognitive limits, you can learn to relate differently the information that surrounds you. Unplug! Take the example of some companies that have initiated the “topless” meeting, in which not only laptops but iPhones and other tools are banned, to combat a new problem they are calling “continuous partial attention.” You can set similar boundaries for yourself. Although the plethora of information accessible to you can be very seductive, try to notice when your attempts to consume it leave you depleted rather than feeling better off. Be more deliberate about how and when you give your energy away. For instance, try driving without doing anything else, including listening to the radio. Choose some specific times to turn off your cell phone and be away from your computer so that you aren’t accessible to incoming requests or interruptions at all hours. Limit the time you spend absorbed in social media. Pay attention and reclaim your energy for yourself so that you can make conscious choices about how you expended it. By doing so, you can thrive in an age of attention deficit.

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