

THE BIG IDEAS

Attention 101

Key things to know.

Rapt Attention

It's all about control.

Paradox of Choice

You a maximizer or satisficer?

Grit + Focus + You

How're you doing with it?

Virtue

Let's focus on it.

Want to Be Happy?

Focus on this.

Ready to Wake Up?

Let's get rapt!



Rapt

Attention and the Focused Life

BY WINIFRED GALLAGHER · PENGUIN BOOKS © 2010 · 256 PAGES

“We’re all amateur psychologists who run private experiments on how best to live. Some of us specialize in relationships and mostly explore bonding. Others concentrate on work and test ways to be more productive and creative. Still others look to philosophy or religion and investigate the big picture: the ultimate way things are. Five years ago, a common-enough crisis plunged me into a study of the nature of experience. More important, this experience led me to cutting-edge scientific research and a psychological version of what physicists trying to explain the universe call a ‘grand unifying theory’ or ‘theory of everything’: your life—who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love—is the sum of what you focus on. ...

Along with performing the Apollonian task of organizing your world, attention enables you to have the kind of Dionysian experience beautifully described by the old-fashioned term ‘rapt’—completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even ‘carried away’—that underlies life’s deepest pleasures, from the scholar’s study to the carpenter’s craft to the lover’s obsession. Some individuals slip into it more readily, but research increasingly shows that with some reflection, experimentation, and practice, all of us can cultivate this profoundly attentive state and experience it more often. Paying rapt attention, whether to a trout stream or a novel, a do-it-yourself project or a prayer, increases your capacity for concentration, expands your inner boundaries, and lifts your spirits, but more important, it simply makes you feel that life is worth living.”

~ Winifred Gallagher from *Rapt*

“As psychology increasingly investigates what makes people feel and function well rather than poorly, it’s ever more clear that the skillful management of attention is the first step toward behavioral change and covers most self-improvement approaches like a vast umbrella.”

~ Winifred Gallagher

Attention.

If you want to optimize your life, this is the place to start.

Basically E.V.E.R.Y.T.H.I.N.G. you want in your life comes down to being able to master it.

[Winifred Gallagher](#) gives us a beautiful target: *rapt* attention that leads us to live the focused life.

Gallagher is a behavioral science writer who, five years before writing this book, received a cancer diagnosis that dramatically shifted the way she saw the world. That experience inspired her to understand the neuroscientific underpinnings of how attention works—which led to this book.

It’s a fascinating look at a ton of research. The book walks us through how our focus (or lack thereof) affects everything from our relationships and productivity to our creativity and sense of meaning and happiness. (Get the book [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas and I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

"In short, to enjoy the kind of experience you want rather than enduring the kind that you feel stuck with, you have to take charge of your attention."

~ Winifred Gallagher

ATTENTION 101

"Far more than you may realize, your experience, your world, and even your self are the creations of what you focus on. From distressing sights to soothing sounds, protean thoughts to roiling emotions, the targets of your attention are the building blocks of your life. Sometimes your focus is captured by compelling stimulus—a bee sting or a fender bender—but much more of the time it's potentially under your control. Like other forms of energy, this mental sort is used most effectively by those who understand how it works."

Welcome to chapter 1: "Pay Attention: Your Life Depends on It" in which we are given a quick introduction to the neuroscience of how attention works.

First thing to know is that the quality of your life is determined by what you focus on.

(I'll repeat that because it's extraordinarily important (like, jumbo-uber-important): The quality of your life is determined by what you focus on.)

Second thing to know is that your mind can, essentially, only focus on one thing at a time. (Researchers call this "the selective mechanism of biased competition.")

Third thing to know is that you can deliberately move your focus from one thing to another.

And, finally, we need to know that cultivating our ability to shift our minds from a less-than-helpful focus to a more empowered one is probably the most important skill we can develop if we want to optimize.

This book, of course, is all about helping us do that. Let's look at some of my favorite practical Ideas on how to go about doing that.

P.S. Did I mention that the most important thing we can master is our ability to put our minds where we want, when we want, for how long we want? Oh, good. (How're you doing with that?)

RAPT ATTENTION: WHAT MATTERS IS CONTROL

"Having thought about attention with great depth, rigor, and ingenuity over decades, Csikszentmihalyi has some particularly well-informed ideas about how it can improve daily life. Stay focused on the moment, he says, even when you're engaged in routine tasks or social encounters. Practice directing and mastering your attention by any enjoyable means. You don't have to go off to a cave to meditate if you find tap-dancing or crewel embroidery a more amiable way to concentrate your mind, he says: 'What matters is control.' Because you actually might not know what activities truly engage your attention and satisfy you, he says, it can be helpful to keep a diary of what you do all day and how you feel while doing it. Then, try to do more of what's rewarding, even if it takes an effort, and less of what isn't. Where optimal experience is concerned, he says, 'I just don't have the time' often means 'I just don't have the self-discipline.'"

"Research increasingly shows that just as regular physical exercise can transform the proverbial 110-pound weakling into an athlete, focusing workouts can make you more focused, engaged with life, and perhaps even kinder"

~ Winifred Gallagher

Of course, one of the #1 ways to strengthen our attention muscles is to practice meditation. In fact, Gallagher calls it "the practice of rapt attention." She shares wisdom from a number of researchers describing the benefits. (See [Meditation 101](#) for more on that.)

Although I personally think an attention strength training workout (aka meditation) is a very wise practice of an Optimizer's life, the fact is there are many ways to build our attention.

[Csikszentmihalyi](#) tells us that attention is "psychology's bottom line. Any complex behavioral issue has attention at its core." And, he tells: "What matters is control."

We want to practice this ability in whatever ways inspire us the most. So... What activities truly engage your attention and satisfy YOU?

Get clear. Practice.

" I can imagine a future in which, just as many of us exercise physically, we'll also exercise mentally for twenty or thirty minutes a day. ... it's clear that getting people to pay attention to what's good in their lives is a good thing. There's no question about that."

~ Daniel Kahneman

P.S. I'm reminded of [Pathways to Bliss](#) in which [Joseph Campbell](#) tells us: "For myself, well, Alan Watts once asked me what spiritual practice I followed. I told him, 'I underline books.' It's all in how you approach it."

(Underlining books. Now, that's an *awesome* spiritual + focusing practice, eh?)

P.P.S. One of the researchers Gallagher features is [Richie Davidson](#) who created the whole field of contemplative neuroscience (the study of the effects of meditation on the brain). (Check out our Notes on [The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#).)

He says: "My strong intuition is that attentional training is very much like the sports or musical kinds. It's not something you can just do for a couple weeks or years, then enjoy lifelong benefits. To maintain an optimal level of any complex skills takes work, and like great athletes and virtuosos, great meditators continue to drill intensively."

Back to Csikszentmihalyi. In [Flow](#), he talks about this as well and says: "To develop this trait, one must find ways to order consciousness so as to be in control of feelings and thoughts. It is best not to expect shortcuts will do the trick."

No tricks. Let's train!

ARE YOU A MAXIMIZER OR A SATISFICER? (CHOOSE WISELY!)

"Even maximizers and New Yorkers can husband their finite attention by applying a few of Schwartz's simple principles of decision-making. The next time you face a choice, he says, rely on habit. Instead of fretting over which is the supremo suitcase or cordless drill, buy the same one that you bought last time. When in doubt, let a more knowledgeable friend choose for you. 'Don't think about your cell phone or long-distance plan,' he says. 'Just call the right person and do what he or she says. A group of friends could have a designated expert in investments, restaurants, electronics, and so on.'

Finally, don't worry if the choice you made wasn't the absolute best, as long as it meets your needs. Offering the single most important lesson from his research, Schwartz says, 'Good enough is almost always good enough. If you have that attitude, many problems about decisions and much paralysis melt away.'"

That's from a chapter all about making decisions in which, among other things, Gallagher introduces us to [Barry Schwartz](#) and his research on [The Paradox of Choice](#) (see those Notes).

Here's what we need to know: 1. We have a finite amount of attention we can divvy up in any given day. 2. Don't waste it on stupid stuff. :)

Schwartz talks about "maximizers" and "satisficers."

The maximizers are the ones who want the absolute best for themselves and their kids.

Now, that sounds pretty good on the surface, but they wind up driving themselves crazy because they have to make sure every.single.decision they make every.single.day is the absolute best one they could have made. That leads to a ton of perfectionistic stress and, ultimately, unhappiness.

Schwartz's recommendation (based on research that shows it works) is to become a satisficer. A satisficer still has high standards, but they don't need everything to be perfect. They are comfortable with things meeting a certain good enough standard then they move on. That leads to a lot more happiness and flourishing.

As Schwartz says: "The difference between the two types is that the satisficer is content with the merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best. I believe that the goal of maximizing is a source of great dissatisfaction, that it can make people miserable—especially in a world that insists on providing an overwhelming number of choices, both trivial and not so trivial."

" On the one hand, you've got to defend your limited cognitive resources so that you can attend to what really matters. On the other, you can't just tune out. You need to find a way to be a part of society as it is without being weighed down by all the claims on your attention it imposes."

~ Barry Schwartz

Wise optimizers are satisficers.

As discussed in [Conquering Perfectionism 101](#), we have high standards AND we embrace the constraints of reality—knowing that nothing is ever going to be perfect and that “good enough” is pretty much always good enough and that, somewhat paradoxically, when we truly embrace that standard and quit wasting time trying to perfect every little inconsequential thing, we can get a lot more done while (very importantly!) enjoying the process a whole lot more.

Let’s melt the perfectionistic paralysis.

How can you let good enough be good enough today?

GRIT + FOCUS + YOU (<— HOW’RE YOU DOING W/IT?)

“Life is relatively short, so don’t labor under the delusion that you can keep switching your focus from goal to goal and get anywhere.”

~ Angela Duckworth

“Some very focused individuals have lots of stick-to-itiveness, epitomized by heroes from Clint Eastwood to *The Little Engine That Could*, that the Penn psychologist Angela Duckworth calls ‘grit.’ When it comes to understanding achievement, she believes that our cultural bias toward the idea of innate talent and ability causes us to undervalue this tenacious trait. Grit clearly involves motivation and perseverance in the pursuit of a goal despite setbacks, but its less obvious component is closely bound up with attention: maintaining consistent interest in a project or idea over time.”

That’s from a chapter called: “Motivation: Eyes on the Prize.”

We need to stay raptly focused on a goal that fires us up OVER THE LONG RUN if we want to achieve great things.

We can’t just get excited in the beginning and let our focus wander.

As we know from our Notes on [Angela Duckworth’s](#) great book *Grit*, there are four key aspects to the science of grit: Interest + Practice + Purpose + Hope.

Let’s do a quick re-cap + check in on how you’re doing + how you can optimize. Think about your #1 most important project in your life right now as we go through each of these elements.

#1. Interest. You need to be truly captivated by something. You can’t be doing it because you think you should, or it because you think it’ll impress people or make you a lot of money or whatever. It needs to intrinsically fire you up.

#2. Practice. You cultivate that interest by developing mastery as you show up DAILY to work on your gritty project. Like, every single day. Deliberately stretching yourself *Peak*-style to see if you can get just a little bit better today and you show up like a *Turning Pro* master—especially on the days when you don’t (insert whiney “Wah!”) *feel* like it.

#3. Purpose. If you want to sustain your interest over the long run, Angela tells us we need to connect our personal passion with something bigger than ourselves. We need to be dedicating our energy to the greater good. That’s the source of deep, abiding purpose—a powerful fuel for long-term persistence which is the hallmark of grit.

#4. Hope. And, finally, we need to have hope. We need to believe that, if we continue to put in the effort, our future will be better than our present. We need to focus our attention on all the awesome we’re committed to creating and experiencing and sharing with the world if we want to maintain gritty interest over the long run.

How’re you doing with that?

Where are you strongest? What needs some work?

How will you incrementally optimize a bit today?

"As to the theory that what you focus on creates your experience and that choosing those targets wisely is the key to the good life, Csikszentmihalyi simply says, "Yes, absolutely."

~ Winifred Gallagher

LET'S FOCUS ON VIRTUE

"Attending to the pursuit of virtue rather than profit or pleasure may sound positively un-American, but the string of best sellers chronicling the lives of the Founding Fathers suggests otherwise. Flaws and failings notwithstanding, Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Franklin actively focused on cultivating and projecting good character, which included public service. 'Nowadays you don't hear people saying they're working on becoming a better person,' says Peterson, 'but once upon a time, they did. Wouldn't it be great if instead of just working out at the gym, we'd go off and focus on doing something that made us better people?'"

That's from the chapter on "Meaning: Attending to What Matters Most."

What matters most? At the end of the day (and our lives), it's all about being a good person. Living with virtue.

In [Positive Psychology 101](#) we talked about [Martin Seligman](#)'s research on the power of virtue. As we know, he and his colleagues (including Chris Peterson whose wisdom Gallagher shares) have established the scientific fact that virtue is tied to happiness and flourishing.

They identified 6 core virtues that *all* wisdom traditions come back to: Wisdom + Courage + Self-Control + Justice + Love + Transcendence. We can actively cultivate these virtues by engaging in what they call the "Virtues-in-Action Signature Strengths." Check out the class + our Notes on [Flourish](#) and [Authentic Happiness](#) for more.

In [Optimal Business 101](#) we talked about the fact that the most direct route to profit AND pleasure AND a sense of deep joy in actualizing our potential is found in cultivating virtue.

And, we drilled into this even more in Leadership 101 where we reflected on the fact that, as [Kouzes](#) and [Posner](#) tell us in [The Leadership Challenge](#), "*Credibility is the foundation of leadership.*" The source of credibility that we need to actively chisel? Character. Virtue.

→ "*Nowadays you don't hear people saying they're working on becoming a better person,' says Peterson, 'but once upon a time, they did. Wouldn't it be great if instead of just working out at the gym, we'd go off and focus on doing something that made us better people?'"*

Yes, it would. How are you going to become a better person today? Let's optimize!

HERE'S WHAT TO FOCUS ON IF YOU WANT TO BE HAPPY

"Research on savoring shows that your sense of satisfaction depends more on your top-down focus, whether it's enjoying the first day of spring or stewing over your [cranky] relative's behavior, than on your circumstances, such as whether you're rich or poor, sick or well. In one experiment, Bryant tested his subjects' psychological health, then divided them into three groups. Each was asked to go for a twenty-minute walk every day for a week, but in pursuit of three different top-down goals. One group was told to focus on all the upbeat things they could find—sunshine, flowers, smiling pedestrians. Another was to look for negative stuff—graffiti, litter, frowning faces. The third group was instructed to walk just for the exercise.

At the end of the week, when the walkers' well-being was tested again, those who had deliberately targeted positive cues were happier than before the experiment. The negatively focused subjects were less happy, and the just plain exercisers scored in between. The point, says Bryant, is that 'you see what you look for. And you can train yourself to attend to the joy out there waiting to be had, instead of passively waiting for it to come to you.'"

That's from a section all about "savoring." (How great is that study?)

One of the key ideas of the book is that most of us spend most of our time focusing on the H.U.G.E. goals in our lives (which don't provide as much happiness as we think they will) and we

miss out on all the t.i.n.y. little things that happen throughout our day that provide a way bigger boost to our happiness than we may think. We need to celebrate the little things that are upbeat in our lives, all the small wins and goodness we might take for granted! All day every day.

So... What are YOU looking for in your life? The beauty or the graffiti?

Let's choose wisely. It matters more than we think.

" Learning to shift your attention away from unhelpful thoughts and emotions and recast negative events in the most productive light possible is one of the most important of all ' health habits ' to cultivate."

~ Winifred Gallagher

READY TO WAKE UP?

"Focused is how we want to feel. The evidence is all around us, from the calm yet alert faces of athletes 'in the zone' to mothers cradling their babies, tradesmen bent over their work, musicians playing their instruments. In *Shine a Light*, Martin Scorsese's documentary on the Rolling Stones, when Keith Richards is asked how he feels when he emerges onstage to confront a hundred thousand screaming fans, he says simply, 'I wake up.' He's a rocker, not a philosopher, yet his remark echoes those of William James—'Compared to what we ought to be, we are half awake'—and the Buddha: 'I am awake.' In life's best moments, whether we're writing a book or a letter, making love or dinner, that's how we are, too: awake, focused, *rapt*."

Imagine walking on stage to greet one hundred thousand fans. How'd you feel?

If you're like Keith Richards, you'd wake up! (Now THAT's rapt attention, eh?!)

—> "Compared to what we ought to be, we are half awake."

Here's to doing the work so we can create more of those precious moments when we are fully awake, focused, *RAPT*!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#)

[Flow](#)

[The Marshmallow Test](#)

[The Paradox of Choice](#)

[Mindfulness - Langer](#)

[Wherever You Go There You Are](#)

[Flow](#) + [The Power of Now](#)

About the Author of "Rapt"

WINIFRED GALLAGHER



Winifred Gallagher's books include *House Thinking*, *Just the Way You Are* (a *New York Times* Notable Book), *Working on God*, and *The Power of Place*. She has written for numerous publications, such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times*. She lives in Manhattan, and Dubois, Wyoming.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.