

# STOLEN FOCUS

Why You Can't  
Pay Attention—  
and How to Think  
Deeply Again

JOHANN  
HARI

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*CHASING THE SCREAM* AND *LOST CONNECTIONS*

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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Author's Note*

*Introduction: Walking in Memphis*

Chapter One: Cause One: The Increase in Speed, Switching, and Filtering

Chapter Two: Cause Two: The Crippling of Our Flow States

Chapter Three: Cause Three: The Rise of Physical and Mental Exhaustion

Chapter Four: Cause Four: The Collapse of Sustained Reading

Chapter Five: Cause Five: The Disruption of Mind-Wandering

Chapter Six: Cause Six: The Rise of Technology That Can Track and Manipulate You (Part One)

Chapter Seven: Cause Six: The Rise of Technology That Can Track and Manipulate You (Part Two)

Chapter Eight: Cause Seven: The Rise of Cruel Optimism

Chapter Nine: The First Glimpses of the Deeper Solution

Chapter Ten: Cause Eight: The Surge in Stress and How It Is Triggering Vigilance

Chapter Eleven: The Places That Figured Out How to Reverse the Surge in Speed and Exhaustion

Chapter Twelve: Causes Nine and Ten: Our Deteriorating Diets and Rising Pollution

Chapter Thirteen: Cause Eleven: The Rise of ADHD and How We Are  
Responding to It

Chapter Fourteen: Cause Twelve: The Confinement of Our Children,  
Both Physically and Psychologically.

Conclusion: Attention Rebellion

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

*Groups Already Fighting to Improve Attention*

*Notes*

*Index*

*By Johann Hari*

*About the Author*

I have posted audio clips of all the people I quote in this book on its website, so as you read this book, you can listen along to our conversations. Go to [stolenfocusbook.com/audio](http://stolenfocusbook.com/audio).

## INTRODUCTION

# Walking in Memphis

When he was nine years old, my godson developed a brief but freakishly intense obsession with Elvis Presley. He took to singing “Jailhouse Rock” at the top of his voice, with all the low crooning and pelvis-jiggling of the King himself. He didn’t know this style had become a joke, so he offered it with all the heart-catching sincerity of a preteen who believes he is being cool. In the brief pauses before he started singing it all over again, he demanded to know everything (“Everything! Everything!”) about Elvis, and so I jabbered out the rough outline of that inspiring, sad, stupid story.

Elvis was born in one of the poorest towns in Mississippi—a place far, far away, I said. He arrived in the world alongside his twin brother, who died a few minutes later. As he grew up, his mother told him that if he sang to the moon every night, his brother could hear his voice, so he sang and sang. He began to perform in public just as television was taking off—so in a sudden swoosh, he became more famous than anyone had ever been before. Everywhere Elvis went, people would scream, until his world became a chamber of screams. He retreated into a cocoon of his own construction, where he gloried in his possessions in place of his lost freedom. For his mother he bought a palace and named it Graceland.

I skimmed through the rest—the descent into addiction, the sweating, girning stage-jammering in Vegas, the death at the age of forty-two.



Whenever my godson, who I'll call Adam—I've changed some details here to avoid identifying him—asked questions about how the story ended, I got him to duet “Blue Moon” with me instead. “You saw me standing alone,” he sang in his little voice, “without a dream in my heart. Without a love of my own.”

One day, Adam looked at me very earnestly and asked: “Johann, will you take me to Graceland one day?” Without really thinking, I agreed. “Do you promise? Do you really promise?” I said I did. And I never gave it another thought, until everything had gone wrong.



Ten years later, Adam was lost. He had dropped out of school when he was fifteen, and he spent literally almost all his waking hours at home alternating blankly between screens—his phone, an infinite scroll of WhatsApp and Facebook messages, and his iPad, on which he watched a blur of YouTube and porn. At moments, I could still see in him traces of the joyful little boy who sang “Viva Las Vegas,” but it was like that person had broken into smaller, disconnected fragments. He struggled to stay with a topic of conversation for more than a few minutes without jerking back to a screen or abruptly switching to another topic. He seemed to be whirring at the speed of Snapchat, somewhere where nothing still or serious could reach him. He was intelligent, decent, kind—but it was like nothing could gain any traction in his mind.

During the decade in which Adam had become a man, this fracturing seemed to be happening—to some degree—to many of us. The sensation of being alive in the early twenty-first century consisted of the sense that our ability to pay attention—to focus—was cracking and breaking. I could feel it happen to me—I would buy piles of books, and I would glimpse them guiltily from the corner of my eye as I sent, I told myself, just *one* more tweet. I still read a lot, but with each year that passed, it felt more and more like running up a down escalator. I had just turned forty, and wherever my generation gathered, we would lament our lost capacity for concentration,

as if it was a friend who had vanished one day at sea and never been seen since.

Then one evening, as we lay on a large sofa, each staring at our own ceaselessly shrieking screens, I looked at Adam and felt a low dread. We can't live like this, I said to myself.

“Adam,” I said softly. “Let's go to Graceland.”

“What?”

I reminded him of the promise I had made to him so many years before. He couldn't even remember those “Blue Moon” days, nor my pledge to him, but I could see that the idea of breaking this numbing routine ignited something in him. He looked up at me and asked if I was serious. “I am,” I said, “but there's one condition. I'll pay for us to go four thousand miles. We'll go to Memphis, and New Orleans—we'll go all over the South, anywhere you want. But I can't do it if, when we get there, all you're going to do is stare at your phone. You have to promise to leave it switched off except at night. We have to return to reality. We have to reconnect with something that matters to us.” He swore he would, and a few weeks later, we lifted off from London Heathrow, toward the land of the Delta blues.



When you arrive at the gates of Graceland, there is no longer a human being whose job is to show you around. You are handed an iPad, and you put in little earbuds, and the iPad tells you what to do—turn left; turn right; walk forward. In each room, the iPad, in the voice of some forgotten actor, tells you about the room you are in, and a photograph of it appears on the screen. So we walked around Graceland alone, staring at the iPad. We were surrounded by Canadians and Koreans and a whole United Nations of blank-faced people, looking down, seeing nothing around them. Nobody was looking for long at anything but their screens. I watched them as we walked, feeling more and more tense. Occasionally somebody would look away from the iPad and I felt a flicker of hope, and I would try to make eye contact with them, to shrug, to say, Hey, we're the only ones looking

around, we're the ones who traveled thousands of miles and decided to actually see the things in front of us—but every time this happened, I realized they had broken contact with the iPad only to take out their phones and snap a selfie.

When we got to the Jungle Room—Elvis's favorite place in the mansion—the iPad was chattering away when a middle-aged man standing next to me turned to say something to his wife. In front of us, I could see the large fake plants that Elvis had bought to turn this room into his own artificial jungle. The fake plants were still there, sagging sadly. "Honey," he said, "this is amazing. Look." He waved the iPad in her direction, and then began to move his finger across it. "If you swipe left, you can see the Jungle Room to the left. And if you swipe right, you can see the Jungle Room to the right." His wife stared, smiled, and began to swipe at her own iPad.

I watched them. They swiped back and forth, looking at the different dimensions of the room. I leaned forward. "But, sir," I said, "there's an old-fashioned form of swiping you can do. It's called turning your head. Because we're here. We're in the Jungle Room. You don't have to see it on your screen. You can see it unmediated. Here. Look." I waved my hand at it, and the fake green leaves rustled a little.

The man and his wife backed away from me a few inches. "Look!" I said, in a louder voice than I intended. "Don't you see? We're *there*. We're *actually there*. There's no need for your screen. *We are in the Jungle Room.*" They hurried out of the room, glancing back at me with a who's-that-loon shake of the head, and I could feel my heart beating fast. I turned to Adam, ready to laugh, to share the irony with him, to release my anger—but he was in a corner, holding his phone under his jacket, flicking through Snapchat.

At every stage in this trip, he had broken his promise. When the plane first touched down in New Orleans two weeks before, he immediately took out his phone, while we were still in our seats. "You promised not to use it," I said. He replied: "I meant I wouldn't make phone calls. I can't not use Snapchat and texting, obviously." He said this with baffled honesty, as if I had asked him to hold his breath for ten days. I watched him scrolling

through his phone in the Jungle Room silently. Milling past him was a stream of people also staring at their screens. I felt as alone as if I had been standing in an empty Iowa cornfield, miles from another human. I strode up to Adam and snatched his phone from his grasp.

“We can’t live like this!” I said. “You don’t know how to be present! You are missing your life! You’re afraid of missing out—that’s why you are checking your screen all the time! By doing that, you are *guaranteeing* you are missing out! You are missing your one and only life! You can’t see the things that are *right in front of you*, the things you have been longing to see since you were a little boy! None of these people can! *Look at them!*”

I was talking loudly, but in their iPad iSolation, most people around us didn’t even notice. Adam snatched his phone back from me, told me (not without some justification) that I was acting like a freak, and stomped away, out past Elvis’s grave, and into the Memphis morning.

I spent hours walking listlessly between Elvis’s various Rolls-Royces, which are displayed in the adjoining museum, and finally I found Adam again as night fell in the Heartbreak Hotel across the street, where we were staying. He was sitting next to the swimming pool, which was shaped like a giant guitar, and as Elvis sang in a 24/7 loop over this scene, he looked sad. I realized as I sat with him that, like all the most volcanic anger, my rage toward him—which had been spitting out throughout this trip—was really anger toward myself. His inability to focus, his constant distraction, the inability of the people at Graceland to see the place to which they had traveled, was something I felt rising within myself. I was fracturing like they were fracturing. I was losing my ability to be present too. And I hated it.

“I know something’s wrong,” Adam said to me softly, holding his phone tightly in his hand. “But I have no idea how to fix it.” Then he went back to texting.



I took Adam away to escape our inability to focus—and what I found was that there was no escape, because this problem was everywhere. I traveled all over the world to research this book, and there was almost no respite. Even when I took time out from my research to go to see some of the world’s most famously chill and tranquil places, I found it waiting for me.

One afternoon, I sat in the Blue Lagoon in Iceland, a vast and infinitely calm lake of geothermal water that bubbles up at the temperature of a hot bathtub even as snow falls all around you. As I watched the falling snowflakes gently dissolve into the rising steam, I realized I was surrounded by people wielding selfie sticks. They had put their phones into waterproof casings, and they were frantically posing and posting. Several of them were livestreaming to Instagram. I wondered if the motto for our era should be: I tried to live, but I got distracted. This thought was interrupted by a ripped German, who looked like an influencer, bellowing into his camera phone: “Here I am in the Blue Lagoon, living my best life!”

Another time, I went to see the *Mona Lisa* in Paris, only to find she is now permanently hidden behind a rugby scrum of people from everywhere on earth, all jostling their way to the front, only for them to immediately turn their backs on her, snap a selfie, and fight their way out again. On the day I was there, I watched the crowd from the side for more than an hour. Nobody—not one person—looked at the *Mona Lisa* for more than a few seconds. Her smile no longer seems like an enigma. It appears as though she is looking at us from her perch in sixteenth-century Italy and asking us: Why won’t you just look at me like you used to?



This seemed to fit with a much wider sense that had been settling on me for several years—one that went well beyond bad tourist habits. It felt like our civilization had been covered with itching powder, and we spent our time twitching and twerking our minds, unable to simply give attention to things that matter. Activities that require longer forms of focus—like reading a book—have been in free fall for years. After my trip with Adam, I read the

work of the leading scientific specialist on willpower in the world, a man named Professor Roy Baumeister, who is based at the University of Queensland in Australia, and then I went to interview him. He had been studying the science of willpower and self-discipline for more than thirty years, and he is responsible for some of the most famous experiments ever carried out in the social sciences. As I sat down opposite the sixty-six-year-old, I explained I was thinking of writing a book about why we seem to have lost our sense of focus, and how we can get it back. I looked to him hopefully.

It was curious, he said, that I should bring up this topic with him. “I’m feeling like my control over my attention is weaker than it used to be,” he said. He used to be able to sit for hours, reading and writing, but now “it seems like my mind jumps around a lot more.” He explained that he had realized recently that “when I start to feel bad, I’d play a video game on my phone, and then that got to be fun.” I pictured him turning away from his enormous body of scientific achievement to play Candy Crush Saga. He said: “I can see that I am not sustaining concentration in perhaps the way I used to.” He added: “I’m just sort of giving in to it, and will start to feel bad.”

Roy Baumeister is literally the author of a book named *Willpower*, and he has studied this subject more than anyone else alive. If even he is losing some of his ability to focus, I thought, who isn’t it happening to?



For a long time I reassured myself by saying this crisis was really just an illusion. Previous generations felt their attention and focus were getting worse too—you can read medieval monks nearly a millennium ago complaining that they were suffering from attention problems of their own. As human beings get older, they can focus less, and they become convinced that this is a problem with the world and with the next generation, rather than with their own failing minds.

The best way to know for sure would be if scientists, starting years ago, had done something simple. They could have given attention tests to random members of the public, and continued doing the same test for years and decades to track any changes that took place. But nobody did that. That long-term information was never gathered. There is, however, a different way I think we can reach a reasonable conclusion about this. As I researched this book, I learned that there are all sorts of factors that have been scientifically proven to reduce people's ability to pay attention. There is strong evidence that many of these factors have been rising in the past few decades—sometimes dramatically. Against this, there's only one trend I could find that might have been improving our attention. That's why I came to believe that this is a real crisis, and an urgent one.

I also learned that the evidence about where these trends are taking us is stark. For example, a small study investigated how often an average American college student actually pays attention to anything, so the scientists involved put tracking software on their computers and monitored what they did in a typical day. They discovered that, on average, a student would switch tasks once every sixty-five seconds. The median amount of time they focused on any one thing was just nineteen seconds. If you're an adult and tempted to feel superior, hold off. A different study by Gloria Mark, professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine—who I interviewed—observed how long on average an adult working in an office stays on one task. It was three minutes.

So I went on a 30,000-mile journey to find out how we can get our focus and attention back. In Denmark I interviewed the first scientist who has, with his team, shown that our collective ability to pay attention really is rapidly shrinking. Then I met with scientists all over the world who have discovered why. In the end, I interviewed over 250 experts—from Miami to Moscow, from Montreal to Melbourne. My quest for answers took me to a crazy mixture of places, from a favela in Rio de Janeiro, where attention had shattered in a particularly disastrous way, to a remote office in a small town in New Zealand, where they had found a way to radically restore focus.

I came to believe that we have profoundly misunderstood what is actually happening to our attention. For years, whenever I couldn't focus, I would angrily blame myself. I would say: You're lazy, you're undisciplined, you need to pull yourself together. Or I would blame my phone, and rage against it, and wish it had never been invented. Most of the people I know respond the same way. But I learned that in fact something much deeper than personal failure, or a single new invention, is happening here.

I first began to glimpse this when I went to Portland, Oregon, to interview Professor Joel Nigg, who is one of the leading experts in the world on children's attention problems. He said it might help me grasp what's happening if we compare our rising attention problems to our rising obesity rates. Fifty years ago there was very little obesity, but today it is endemic in the Western world. This is not because we suddenly became greedy or self-indulgent. He said: "Obesity is not a medical epidemic—it's a social epidemic. We have bad food, for example, and so people are getting fat." The way we live changed dramatically—our food supply changed, and we built cities that are hard to walk or bike around—and those changes in our environment led to changes in our bodies. Something similar, he said, may be happening with the changes in our attention and focus.

He told me that after studying this topic for decades, he believes we need to ask if we are now developing "an attentional pathogenic culture"—an environment in which sustained and deep focus is extremely hard for all of us, and you have to swim upstream to achieve it. There's scientific evidence for many factors in poor attention, he said, and for some people there are some causes that lie in their biology, but he told me what we may also need to figure out: Is "our society driving people to this point so often, because we have an epidemic [that's being] caused by specific things that are dysfunctional in our society?"

Later I asked him—if I put you in charge of the world, and you *wanted* to ruin people's ability to pay attention, what would you do? He thought about it for a moment, and said: "Probably about what our society is doing."

I found strong evidence that our collapsing ability to pay attention is not primarily a personal failing on my part, or your part, or your kid's part.



This is being done to us all. It is being done by very powerful forces. Those forces include Big Tech, but they also go way beyond them. This is a systemic problem. The truth is that you are living in a system that is pouring acid on your attention every day, and then you are being told to blame yourself and to fiddle with your own habits while the world's attention burns. I realized, when I learned all this, that there is a hole in all the existing books I had read about how to improve your focus. It was huge. They have, on the whole, neglected to talk about the actual causes of our attention crisis—which lie mainly in these larger forces. Based on what I learned, I have concluded there are twelve deep forces at work that are damaging our attention. I came to believe we can only solve this problem in the long term if we understand them—and then, together, we stop them from continuing to do this to us.

There are real steps you can take as an isolated individual to reduce this problem for yourself, and throughout this book you'll learn how to carry them out. I am strongly in favor of you seizing personal responsibility in this way. But I have to be honest with you, in a way that I fear previous books on this topic were not. Those changes will only get you so far. They will solve a slice of the problem. They are valuable. I do them myself. But unless you are very lucky, they won't allow you to escape the attention crisis. Systemic problems require systemic solutions. We have to take individual responsibility for this problem, for sure, but at the same time, together, we have to take collective responsibility for dealing with these deeper factors. There is a real solution—one that will actually make it possible for us to start to heal our attention. It requires us to radically reframe the problem, and then to take action. I believe I have figured out how we might start to do that.



There are, I think, three crucial reasons why it is worth coming on this journey with me. The first is that a life full of distractions is, at an individual level, diminished. When you are unable to pay sustained

attention, you can't achieve the things you want to achieve. You want to read a book, but you are pulled away by the pings and paranoias of social media. You want to spend a few uninterrupted hours with your child, but you keep anxiously checking your email to see if your boss is messaging you. You want to set up a business, but your life dissolves instead into a blur of Facebook posts that only make you feel envious and anxious. Through no fault of your own, there never seems to be enough stillness—enough cool, clear space—for you to stop and think. A study by Professor Michael Posner at the University of Oregon found that if you are focusing on something and you get interrupted, on average it will take twenty-three minutes for you to get back to the same state of focus. A different study of office workers in the U.S. found most of them *never* get an hour of uninterrupted work in a typical day. If this goes on for months and years, it scrambles your ability to figure out who you are and what you want. You become lost in your own life.

When I went to Moscow to interview the most important philosopher of attention in the world today, Dr. James Williams—who works on the philosophy and ethics of technology at Oxford University—he told me: “If we want to do what matters in any domain—any context in life—we have to be able to give attention to the right things.... If we can't do that, it's really hard to do anything.” He said that if we want to understand the situation we are in at the moment, it helps to picture something. Imagine you are driving a car, but somebody has thrown a big bucket of mud all over the windshield. You're going to face a lot of problems in that moment—you are at risk of knocking off your rearview mirror, or getting lost, or arriving at your destination late. But the first thing you need to do—before you worry about any of those problems—is clean your windshield. Until you do that, you don't even know where you are. We need to deal with our attention problems before we try to achieve any other sustained goal.

The second reason we need to think about this subject is that this fracturing of attention isn't just causing problems for us as individuals—it's causing crises in our whole society. As a species, we are facing a slew of unprecedented tripwires and trapdoors—like the climate crisis—and, unlike

previous generations, we are mostly not rising to solve our biggest challenges. Why? Part of the reason, I think, is that when attention breaks down, problem-solving breaks down. Solving big problems requires the sustained focus of many people over many years. Democracy requires the ability of a population to pay attention long enough to identify real problems, distinguish them from fantasies, come up with solutions, and hold their leaders accountable if they fail to deliver them. If we lose that, we lose our ability to have a fully functioning society. I don't think it's a coincidence that this crisis in paying attention has taken place at the same time as the worst crisis of democracy since the 1930s. People who can't focus will be more drawn to simplistic authoritarian solutions—and less likely to see clearly when they fail. A world full of attention-deprived citizens alternating between Twitter and Snapchat will be a world of cascading crises where we can't get a handle on any of them.

The third reason we need to think deeply about focus is, for me, the most hopeful. If we understand what's happening, we can begin to change it. The writer James Baldwin—the man who is, for my money, the greatest writer of the twentieth century—said: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” This crisis is human-made, and it can be unmade by us too. I want to tell you right at the start how I gathered the evidence I'm going to present to you in this book, and why I selected it. In my research, I read a very large number of scientific studies, and then I went to interview the scientists who I thought had gathered the most important evidence. Several different kinds of scientists have studied attention and focus. One group is neuroscientists, and you'll hear from them. But the people who have done the most work on why it is changing are social scientists, who analyze how changes in the way we live affect us, both as individuals and as groups. I studied social and political sciences at Cambridge University, where I got a rigorous training in how to read the studies these scientists publish, how to assess the evidence they put forward, and—I hope—how to ask probing questions about it.

These scientists often disagree with each other about what is happening and why. This isn't because the science is rickety but because humans are

extremely complex, and it's really hard to measure something as complicated as what affects our ability to pay attention. This obviously presented a challenge to me as I wrote this book. If we wait for perfect evidence, we will be waiting forever. I had to proceed, doing my best, on the basis of the best information we have—while always being conscious that this science is fallible and fragile and needs to be handled with care.

So I have tried, at every stage in this book, to give you a sense of how controversial the evidence I am offering is. On some of the topics, the subject has been studied by hundreds of scientists, and they have achieved a broad consensus that the points I am going to put forward are correct. That's obviously the ideal, and wherever it was possible, I sought out scientists who represent a consensus in their field and built my conclusions on the solid rocks of their knowledge. But there are some other areas where only a handful of scientists have studied the question I wanted to understand, and so the evidence I can draw on is thinner. There are a few other topics where different reputable scientists strongly disagree about what's really going on. In those cases, I am going to tell you up front, and try to represent a range of perspectives on the question. At every stage I have tried to build my conclusions on the strongest evidence I could find.

I have tried to always approach this process with humility. I'm not an expert on any of these questions. I'm a journalist, approaching experts, and testing and explaining their knowledge as best I can. If you want more detail on these debates, I delve much deeper into the evidence in the more than 400 endnotes I have put on the book's website, discussing the more than 250 scientific studies I have drawn on in this book. I have also sometimes used my own experiences to help explain what I learned. My individual anecdotes obviously aren't scientific evidence. They tell you something simpler: why I wanted to know the answers to these questions so badly.



When I came back from my trip to Memphis with Adam, I was appalled at myself. One day, I spent three hours reading the same first few pages of a novel, getting lost in distracted thoughts every time, almost as though I was stoned, and I thought—I can't continue like this. Reading fiction had always been one of my greatest pleasures, and losing it would be like losing a limb. I announced to my friends that I was going to do something drastic.

I thought this was happening to me because I wasn't disciplined enough as an individual, and because I had been taken over by my phone. So at the time, I thought the solution was obvious: be more disciplined and banish your phone. I went online and booked myself a little room by the beach in Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod. I am going to be there for three months, I announced triumphantly to everyone, with no smartphone, and no computer that can get online. I'm done. I'm through. For the first time in twenty years, I'm going offline. I talked to my friends about the double meaning of the word "wired." It means both being in a manic, hyper mental state, and being online. They seemed to me to be tied together, these twin definitions. I was tired of being wired. I needed to clear my head. And so I did it. I quit. I set up an auto-reply saying I would be unreachable for the next three months. I abandoned the buzz in which I had vibrated for twenty years.

I tried to go into this extreme digital detox without any illusions. I knew this ditching of the entire internet couldn't be a long-term solution for me—I wasn't going to join the Amish and abandon technology forever. Even more than that, I knew this approach couldn't even be a short-term solution for most people. I come from a working-class family—my grandmother, who raised me, cleaned toilets; my dad was a bus driver—and saying to them that the solution to their attention problems would be to quit their jobs and go and live in a shack by the sea would be a spiteful insult: they literally couldn't do it.

I did it because I thought that if I didn't, I might lose some crucial aspects of my ability to think deeply. I did it in desperation. And I did it because I felt that if I stripped everything back for a time, I might start to be able to glimpse the changes we could all make in a more sustainable way.

This drastic digital detox taught me a lot of important things—including, as you'll see, the limits of digital detoxes.

It began on a morning in May when I set off for Provincetown, with the glare of the screens of Graceland haunting me. I thought the problem was in my own distractible nature and in our tech, and I was about to give my devices away—freedom, oh freedom!—for a long, long time.