
We forget that we are whole...

“We forget that we are whole, body and mind together”

By Clive Loertscher of Sansui Dojo (Switzerland)

"Lack of attention? A generalized problem" according to Clive, who teaches at the center for continuous training FuturPlus, in Lausanne. He explains its causes and how to deal with it.

What are we talking about?

Clive Loertscher is a teacher, a specialist in NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and a regular practitioner of zen meditation. He drew on his various experiences to explain the complex concept of attention. Highlighting the current difficulty that the students - as everyone else - have in concentrating, he notes that we are trapped by a multitude of external demands and the impossible requirement of "multitasking".

Why are you interested in the topic of attention?

Many teachers find that keeping the student's attention is becoming increasingly difficult. And at FuturPlus, we have a significant number of students with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder without hyperactivity). But paying attention is the starting point of the learning process, which then leads to concentration, memorization and, finally, to the lasting assimilation of the subject studied.

According to you, which are the causes of these problems?

The brain can perceive "passively", through our five sensory channels, the multiple information that the outside world offers constantly. Even a tiny stimulus, such as a smell for example, can be picked up, and our brain will imagine a story that will take up all the space in our mind. And the mind is then no longer available for the task of learning.

People have been complaining a lot about mental fatigue for the past ten months. Is there a connection?

Yes, with the constant and contradictory information that we receive about the virus, our mind is continuously occupied. People are overloaded with disturbing data that they have no control over. And as far as students are concerned, depending on their family situation, I can imagine that daily life can be just awful for them. There is also a general overexcitement today, and our minds are racing.

Do screens also have an impact on attention span?

Yes, since we are confronted with them a lot, with all the notifications, alerts, etc. that are linked to them, attention is continuously solicited and most people are thus captured - including myself. So, I cancelled 95% of the notifications.

In an article I wrote in the FuturPlus educational magazine, I quote the view of a neuropsychologist who underlines that capturing our attention is the raw material of all sites

that try to sell us something. The latter are very clever, since they created algorithms specifically designed to keep our attention. Indeed, advertisers know that once we are attracted to something, we fix our attention on it and it is difficult for us to get away from it. At the moment, the "catchment market" has become a real monstrosity.

How do you explain this immediate interest?

For our ancestors, it was a question of survival to spot a prey to attack it or a danger to avoid it, and to be able to perceive very quickly what was new in their environment, whether it was threatening or rewarding. Our attention thus allows us to spot what is new around us, and this novelty then incites our brain to produce dopamine, the hormone of reward and well-being. It's just the way we are, there's nothing we can do about it.

Are there other things that cause our attention to wane?

We live in a society that puts a lot of emphasis on performance and ability, and we are constantly under the injunction to be able to direct our attention in all directions. This is extremely harmful.

There are in fact two types of attention: routine attention, known as "floating" attention, which allows us to perform an easy and familiar task without thinking too much about it, and cognitive attention, which allows us to learn and retain something.

One can certainly use two attentions at the same time, but only if they are of a different nature: one cannot read two books at the same time for example. This fantasy of multitasking is therefore completely false. But we keep believing that we can do everything at the same time, we are caught in a kind of flow and we don't realize how bad it is for us.

On the other hand, studies have shown that it takes between 45 seconds and one minute to refocus. So, if you have fifty or sixty different emails or solicitations during the day, you lose an hour trying to refocus. That's a lot of time!

Being attentive is therefore a choice that we make consciously?

There is the exogenous attention, which is attracted by external stimuli, and the endogenous attention, which comes from ourselves and which is therefore effectively a mental gesture and a choice we make.

What is very important to understand is that it can only be exercised in the present moment.

One cannot be attentive in the past or in the future. The big problem in our society is the difficulty to be present in the here and now. Because this is a little bit the "curse" of our mind: we can travel in time and space in mind, we can project ourselves in our memories and in the future, but we completely "skip" the present moment.

The arrival of the coronavirus does not seem to have improved things...

It is true that we do not realize to what extent we "over-occupy" our mind all the time. With all the real worries (or the ones we create for ourselves), we have a continuous chattering in our head, parasitic thoughts, a "little voice" that chatters continuously and takes all our mental space. The mind is an incredible tool. But even if you have a Swiss Army knife with six, ten, fifteen blades, we are not going to use it all the time and for everything. There are times when we don't need it.

But is there a way to exercise and improve our attention span?

Yes, by realizing that the present moment is linked to the body. Our western civilization tends to overemphasize the separation of body and mind and forgets that we are a whole, body and mind combined. Wanting to better control our mind by the spirit is like adding a log to a fire to put it out: we "use" ourselves badly, and it is necessary to realize that it is our body and our breathing that keep us in the present. If we want to develop our attention, it's only through our body and our breathing that we are in the present.

What does this mean concretely?

There is a very simple exercise that everyone can do : to be attentive when opening and closing a door, a gesture that we frequently do during the day. The fact of concentrating on opening or closing a door forces us to be aware of what we are doing at the present moment.

It is a small but very effective exercise that can be applied to other actions: turning on the computer, for example. This way of acting consciously has the efficiency of the drop of water that falls continuously during days and days on a rock... it becomes more and more integrated in our daily life and becomes a kind of reflex.

And what can the students do, on their side, to better concentrate?

When doing homework, for example, it is important to eliminate all external stimuli and to create a calm sensory environment, if possible. And also find a comfortable position, neither too relaxed nor too tense.

And in the classroom?

Currently, there are specific programs for schools that have been developed, notably in France and a little bit in Switzerland, on what is called "mindfulness". Through different exercises, essentially breathing exercises, students are invited to become aware of the present moment, of their body sensations, and thus eliminate tensions and worries.

It has also been known for a long time that attention wanes after 20-25 minutes and that it is necessary to change activities in order to renew it (and this is also the case for adults, because it is physiological). Thus, one can simply ask students to empty their lungs as much as possible, then breathe in, holding the breath for a few seconds after each exhalation and exhalation. They can do this exercise five to ten times: it will create a relaxation of the body and therefore a relaxation of the mind.

There is no miracle: our mind is part of our body, and if the body is relaxed, the mind will be calmer. It is a trick you can use before a presentation or a test, before falling asleep, or as soon as you think it is necessary.