



Soft fascination

Description

My ability to concentrate on any task is limited, no matter how much I enjoy that task. Eventually I reach a point where my performance is severely hampered, things take longer than usual, and I make mistakes and easily distracted. Sound familiar?



To concentrate on a task you need to block out distractions.

In fact that's what it is to concentrate, to inhibit other instinctual inclinations. Once that blocking function gets worn down by fatigue then you are more likely to act on impulse, to run away if something challenges you too much, to take unnecessary risks, to become irritable, and to get distracted from your task by things that are more engaging but less challenging, such as video games, television programmes, or random images on the Internet. These are symptoms of **attention fatigue**.

In a way attention fatigue is a good thing. If I kept on with challenging tasks, no matter how important, without a break, then I would be less likely to notice what's going on around me. I'd be like the dysfunctional inventor, scientist or writer who has to be dragged from his laboratory in order to wash, eat and socialise, like Archimedes or Albert Einstein, or anyone cramming for an exam.

How can you restore your ability to concentrate on the important task at hand? Sleep is one approach, but attention fatigue can disrupt it and can lead to irregular sleep patterns and sleepless nights. The solution seems to reside in giving the difficult kind of concentration a rest, and instead redirecting one's concentration to things that don't require as much effort, ie things we find naturally

fascinating.â?• (See Notes below for references to the work of my colleagues Jenny Roe, Peter Aspinall, Catharine Ward Thompson and Panos Mavros on this subject.)



Recuperation

It seems that you can restore your ability to concentrate on the important things by spending time focussing on something different for a while. Here are some candidates for recuperative attention, depending on your inclinations: reading a novel with a suspense element, checking up on whether the mail has arrived, buying lottery tickets and following the results. Most people are fascinated by animals, so watching YouTube cat videos might do it, or even playing with a real pet.

Most people are drawn to [extremes](#) in physical appearance and circumstances. So watching car racing, cartoons, soaps, reading gossip columns, and experiencing unusual architecture may fit the bill. Whether through biological, social or cultural attunement these are sources of fascination for many. They easily arrest and hold our concentration, and offer some restorative benefits, though exaggeration in its own right can have other disturbing effects, a bit like the effects of watching a horror movie.

But thereâ??s another kind of fascination that maintains our ability to concentrate, willingly, with little effort, and more effectively. This is **soft fascination**, as proposed by the psychologist Stephen Kaplan. Soft fascination is best for recuperation as it provides opportunities for reflection, is non-taxing, and deals less with exaggeration and its attendant disturbances.

The most obvious environment category that provides soft fascination is what we loosely term the â??natural environmentâ?• â?? the outdoors, with plants, sweeping vistas, water, and wildlife â?? but even just a vegetable garden or a row of indoor plants might play a part. Kaplan positions soft fascination as one of four factors that contribute to the ability to restore our concentration.



Soft fascination. Kaplan says, “Nature is certainly well-endowed with fascinating objects, as well as offering many processes that people find engrossing” (p.174). There’s clouds, sunsets, leaves rustling in the breeze, and attending to these patterns doesn’t take much effort.

Being away. You can spend time in a different environment to the one you are working in. This helps rest your concentration. It’s obviously good to get away to the countryside if you can, but Kaplan suggests that this restorative capability can be accomplished by experiencing an old environment in a new and different way, or even looking physically in a different direction from time to time. Being away involves a conceptual shift. I think of this as entering into an alien environment, or seeing the familiar as alien in some way, a bit like the effects of tourism. The outdoors can provide this.

Extent. The restorative environment needs to provide a “whole other world.” Kaplan says, “It must provide enough to see, experience, and think about so that it takes up a substantial portion of the available room in one’s head” (p.173). Places that evoke memories, stories and histories, including natural environments, provide this. So looking at images at random on the Internet would probably not fit the bill. There’s no structure, nothing to be probed in depth as offered up by the natural world.

Compatibility. The environment must be responsive in ways that mean something to me in my particular situation. So I suppose that a walk through a garden centre would do little to restore my attention if I don’t like buying plants. Kaplan maintains that we human beings have an instinctual inclination towards outdoor activities “as predators, nomads, domesticators, observers, and survivors. So most of us relate well to the countryside.



Digital recuperation?

Do ubiquitous digital media help or hinder this aspect of restorative outdoor environments. Some people are certainly suspicious of smartphones and other digital technologies, and think they provide a barrier between us and the restorative benefits of the outdoors. According to a book on nature and health by Selhub and Logan, “instead of stroking the keyboard or rubbing the belly of your smartphone screen, you—and the world—will be better served by petting your dog” (p.138), and “strolling through a park while engaging with a smartphone screen may cause a vitamin G deficiency” (p.216) where vitamin G is vitamin B2 or the “green” vitamin. A book by Larry Rosen presents a similar view: “If you are going to use nature as a restorative cure for technologically-induced brain overload, it is best to remove all technology from the scene” (p.206).

On the contrary, smartphones *may* help us get out more, adding to a sense of safety, GPS means you can explore more, there are countless information sources and apps about the outdoors, and there’s the full set of UK Ordnance Survey maps available for download on a GPS enabled app. Photography provides a means of exercising soft fascination and probing the world. There’s a sense in which the great outdoors and what we get out of it is already mediated by decades worth of technology, not to mention presentations via art and the mass media.



References

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Notes

- This post is really a precis of the first half of Kaplan's seminal 1995 paper listed above. The second half of that paper cites evidence from various studies and elaborates on the theme of stress.
- I was introduced to the concept of restorative environments by landscape architectural researchers Jenny Roe and Catharine Ward Thompson, and psychologist Peter Aspinall.
- I'm reminded of the film, *Trainspotting* (1996), where the drug taking city down-and-outs venture into the spectacular Scottish countryside, which doesn't seem to have the restorative effect we might expect. Renton says, "It's a shite state of affairs to be in, Tommy, and all the fresh air in the world won't make any ****ing difference."
- This post was prompted by feedback and questions related to our paper about using an EEG device for gauging people's responses to walking in different outdoor environments: Aspinall, Peter, Panagiotis Mavros, Richard Coyne, and Jenny Roe. 2013. The urban brain: Analysing outdoor physical activity with mobile EEG. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, (doi:10.1136/bjsports-2012-091877) ([PDF](#), subscription required).
- Also see [The brain in the city](#), and [Exaggeration](#).

Category

1. Creativity

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