

Hyperfocus: Mastering Your Attention or Losing Control?

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Hyperfocus is an intense form of mental concentration or visualization that focuses consciousness on a subject, topic, or task. In some individuals, various subjects or topics may also include daydreams, concepts, fiction, the imagination, and other objects of the mind. Hyperfocus on a certain subject can cause side-tracking away from assigned or important tasks.

Hyperfocus may bear a relationship to the concept of flow. In some circumstances both flow and hyperfocus can be an aid to achievement, but in other circumstance or situations, the same focus and behavior could be a liability, distracting from the task at hand. However, unlike hyperfocus, "flow" is often described in more glowing terms, suggesting they are not two sides of the same condition under contrasting circumstance or intellect.

Confusion with Perseveration, as a Clinical Symptom

Hyperfocus may in some cases also be symptomatic of a psychiatric condition. In these cases it is more commonly and accurately referred to as perseveration - an inability or impairment in switching tasks or activities ("set-shifting"), or desisting from mental or physical response repetition (gestures, words, thoughts) despite absence or cessation of a stimulus, and which is not excessive in terms of quantity but are apparently both functionless and involve a narrow range of behaviours, and are not better described as stereotypy (a highly repetitive idiosyncratic behaviour).

Conditions associated with perseveration include neurodevelopmental disorders, particularly those considered to be on the autism spectrum (especially Asperger syndrome), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In the latter, it is informally but probably incorrectly called "hyperfocus" and may be a coping mechanism or a symptom of self-regulation impairment-as well as people who are both intellectually gifted and suffer a learning disability who may have either or both of hyperfocus and perseverative behaviours. Other conditions involving dysfunction or dysregulation within the frontal lobe could also theoretically have similar effects.

It is typical for individuals with ADHD to say they 1), cannot focus on boring things and 2), can only focus on stimulating things, and that focus is often extreme. Thus it is both a concentration deficit and over-concentration, or generically: "hyperfocus." More concisely, some types of ADHD are a difficulty in directing one's attention, (an executive function of the frontal lobe), not a lack of attention. Glickman & Dodd (1998) found that adults with self-reported ADHD scored higher than normal adults on self-reported ability to hyperfocus on "urgent tasks", such as last-minute projects or preparations. Adults in the ADHD group were uniquely able to postpone eating, sleeping and other personal needs and stay absorbed in the "urgent task" for an extended time.

Conditions unlikely to be confused with hyperfocus - clinical conditions involving clear repetition of words or behaviours, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or trauma; and cases of physical brain injury, trauma or damage, such as traumatic brain injury and frontal lobe lesions.