



The flashlight of attention

A Japanese psychology approach to escape worry and regain focus

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In Japanese psychology, attention is often likened to a flashlight. Wherever you shine this flashlight is where your focus – and energy – goes. The problem arises when people shine this flashlight inwards for too long, focusing obsessively on their thoughts and emotions, and particularly those related to things outside of their control. Another common tendency is to focus the flashlight on other people's behaviour, the past or the future – all areas that are inherently uncontrollable.

Worrying about these factors leads to a mental loop where solutions seem out of reach. Fixating on past events you cannot change, for example, can lead to feelings of guilt, regret and depression. Similarly, focusing excessively on the future, trying to predict and prevent every possible negative outcome, fuels anxiety.

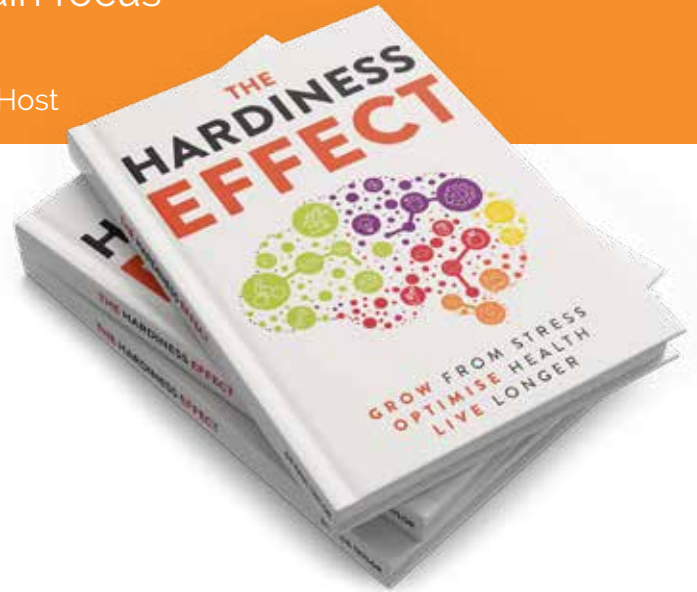
A powerful example

In a 2020 study by Lucas LaFreniere and Michelle Newman, participants with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) were asked to track their worries over time through a journal. Upon looking back on those journal entries, they found that 91.4% of their worries never came true. Even more strikingly, 30% of the worries that did come true turned out better than expected.

The implications of this study are profound: much of the mental energy we invest in worrying is wasted, because most of the time the feared outcomes either don't happen or aren't as bad as we anticipate. This research underscores the importance, whenever possible, of redirecting the flashlight of attention from uncontrollable, anxiety-inducing thoughts to more practical, solution-oriented thinking.

Some quick tips to shift the flashlight of your attention:

- **Zones of control exercise:** On a piece of paper, draw two circles. In circle 1, write down everything you can control about a problem. In circle 2, list what is outside of your control. Focus your energy solely on circle 1 – what you can control – and let go of circle 2.
- **Attentional flashlight practice:** Imagine your attention as a flashlight. Throughout the day, periodically pause and ask yourself: Where is my flashlight shining? Is it focused on something productive and within my control, or is it caught in rumination or worry about uncontrollable events?



- **Social media detox:** Take a break from social media for a day or a week. Replace your social media time with activities that enrich your life, such as exercise, reading or spending time with loved ones.
- **Mindful breathing:** Spend five to ten minutes each day practising mindful breathing. This helps redirect attention from racing thoughts and worries to the present moment, grounding you in what you can control – your breath and your immediate surroundings.
- **Attentional audit exercise:** Grab a blank page and write out a list of categories for how you spend your time, including work or purposeful activity, social media, TV or streaming, ruminating or worrying in your own head, exercise/movement, meaningful connections, and hobbies or worthwhile activities. Now estimate how much time you spent on each category in the last 24 hours. Finally, sketch this as a heat map, using circles of red or orange for activities of high attention, and blue or green circles for low-attention activities. Make sure the size of the circles reflects the time spent. Are you happy with your heat map? If you have a partner and/or kids, it is worthwhile doing it together, and using your heat maps as discussion prompts for what makes a meaningful life.

Attentional deployment is about redirecting your focus away from the unhelpful and towards the helpful. Attention is your mental currency – spend it wisely. ■

Edited extract from *The Hardiness Effect* by Dr Paul Taylor (Wiley, \$34.95). Dr Taylor is a keynote speaker, podcast host and thought leader with post-graduate qualifications in psychology, exercise science, nutrition and neuroscience. paultaylor.biz

