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Free-Floating Attention

## ATTENTION

# How Therapists Can Heal Our Attention

Therapy is a stronghold against human fracking and the war to control attention.

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## KEY POINTS

- Human attention is a foundational but finite resource.
- Our attention is being deformed by the tech industries for financial gains at the expense of our well-being.
- Attention activism is an emergent grassroots movement that has psychological and social well-being at heart.
- Therapists are well-positioned to help stop these forces through attention activism.

Therapists are practitioners of attention. Our craft requires a kind of sustained, attuned, unhurried attention that holds, safely, the inner lives of our clients—to support their emotional and behavioral growth.

While we are specialists, the art of professional psychotherapeutic attention is actually a refinement of something far more ordinary. In therapy, clients can be inspired to develop a similar quality of attention to their own experiences (the attention of the compassionate and engaged observer) and to learn what it feels like to bring this quality of attention to their own relationships. Attention is a foundational but finite human re-

But our entire discipline is in danger. And serious risks have emerged that present an authentic threat to our profession: Our attention—human attention generally, our attentive capacities as practitioners, and the attentional lives of our patients—is being eroded by forces conspiring to exploit its essence for financial gains.

On an incalculable scale, our attention is being incrementally deformed—exploited and transformed under our very noses—by a **trillion-dollar tech industry that operates in what is often called the attention economy**. This attention economy slices, dices, and prices human attention to be sold to the highest bidder.

The tech companies that operate in the attention economy have shown little regard for the individual damage (anxiety, isolation, addiction) or societal damage (political polarization, toxicity, distrust) left in their wake. These disastrous psychological effects are not just toxic byproducts of the attention economy. They are its fuel.

On the border where the attention economy meets the field of therapy, a variety of pseudo-remedies have emerged to address these harms (mindfulness apps, screen time limiters, AI assistants, the gamification of executive functioning). These spurious solutions shuffle the responsibility of psychological damage onto the individual, extracting even more attention and packaging it as data to be harvested.

Most insidious is the digital platformization of therapeutic practices, complete with tools ostensibly to help our clients address the very compulsions at the heart of the sense of dread, disconnection, and malaise that the technology itself produces.

This global unwellness is not a matter of individual psychology, self-management, or emotional regulation that might be addressed therapeutically. The extractive profit models of the attention economy have, at present, successfully instrumentalized our inner lives and the inner lives of our clients.

Our attention is being forcibly commodified at the societal scale. This is a systemic problem, and a problem of systems—operating in ways that defy and traduce agential personhood. The ongoing challenges of ADHD certainly index these issues, but the broader problem goes well beyond any diagnosis or tailored treatment regimen.

#### THE BASICS

[Understanding Attention](#)

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## Human Fracking

One way to name this crisis is **human fracking**: People are reduced to a standing reserve of an exploitable resource (attention) for corporations to buy and sell. Hydraulic fracking, a technique used by the oil industry where metric tons of soapy water are forced into the earth to break up shale and suck out tiny pockets of oil, often results in poisoned water, devastating earthquakes, and fractured communities.

In the case of human fracking, high volumes of internet content are pumped into our brains from our screens, breaking up our attention into smaller and smaller fragments that can more efficiently be sold. Like hydraulic fracking, human fracking devastates individual lives and communities: our attention ecology becomes polluted by an infinite scroll of content.

#### ATTENTION ESSENTIAL READS

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Dire as it may seem, understanding the forces of human fracking helps reframe the situation: This is being done to people. Which means people can push back. As clinicians, we are on the frontlines of this key issue. Because when what is at stake is our ability to connect, what we need more than ever is connection.

We need collective action against these extractive forces that benefit from our complacency. Like labor movements rising in response to the Industrial Revolution, solidarity around our attention can act as a unifying, empowering, protective force towards collective well-being.

Those of us who do the work of therapy are both witnesses to the fallout of the human fracking crisis and potential practitioners of a genuine solution.

Because the good news is that this is not inevitable.

There is an **emerging grassroots movement** pressing for this work of **“attention activism.”** Attention activism has at its core a commitment to building solidarity around attention through the cultivation of **joint attention.**

What is joint attention? It is the stuff of a shared world, of community: the act of sharing attention with others around a common subject. Book clubs, sports teams, surfers alike all practice joint attention; religious institutions, scientific research, schools, and our government all require collective, shared attention to function effectively for the common good. Therapists practice a special form of joint attention. Attention activism asserts a powerful truth: authentic joint attention resists commodification. If we can practice and deepen the skills of joint attention, we can build a resistance to these extractive, commodifying forces and re-wild our attentional ecosystem.

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Our divided attention, once gathered, becomes an unstoppable, revolutionary force.

### References

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