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WELLBEING QUICKSTART

Attention Deficit or Surplus? Flood vs Flow



One of the defining characteristics of ADD is racing thoughts, distractibility and an inability to concentrate on one thing at a time. However, describing this as an 'attention deficit' can be somewhat misleading from a therapy viewpoint because these symptoms can actually feel more like a surplus or excess of attention – literally attending to multiple things all at the same time.

If our attention was truly in deficit, we wouldn't be trying to concentrate on multiple things at once. Instead, when we are in an attention surplus – doom scrolling, jumping from one thing to another, or having multiple thoughts competing for our attention – our minds can feel like a river in flood, with water overflowing everywhere.

And just like a river in flood, we need to let this excess attention drain away until we reach a more manageable level of flow. We need to turn down the source of the water (our current stress response state) and allow the excess attention to drain away until the flow returns to a level that suits the task we want to do – moving from a state of 'over-focused' to normal focus. Conversely, when our attention is in deficit, we are under-focused and the river is running dry. There simply isn't enough water flow for the task at hand. In this case, we need to 'turn on' the flow of water (trigger a mild stress response) to increase our energy and attention until we reach the level of focus we need.

The good news is that one of the most useful things we can do when our attention is either in deficit or surplus is a simple mindfulness practice called the 60 Second Pause. The 60 Second Pause is as simple as it sounds – stop what you're doing and notice your breathing. Closing your eyes is optional, but I prefer it.

If your attention is in surplus, imagine your excess thoughts flowing like a river torrent downstream and out of sight. Picture the flood gauge slowly going down as the high-water mark drops and the flow begins to ease. As you see the water level receding and the flow slowing, imagine your attention settling with it until you reach a point where you can focus on one thing at a time. Then return to the task at hand.

If your attention is in deficit, do the opposite. Imagine more thoughts about the task you want to focus on – its importance, its urgency and its personal value to you. Imagine yourself doing the task and enjoying it. These thoughts increase the water flow in the dry riverbed, gradually filling the empty space until your energy and focus have increased to a level that allows you to engage fully with the task at hand.

If, after 60 seconds, you need another minute or two to deepen the process, go for it. Spending up to five minutes doing this should be enough to create meaningful change. If your attention is still not where you need it to be, check in with your body and consider whether there are other things affecting your ability to focus – for example, hunger, fatigue or illness. Your psychologist will have other coping strategies that may help too.

Remember, the aim isn't to have more attention or less attention. It's to have the right amount of attention for the task in front of us. Too little, and the river runs dry. Too much, and the river floods. In between is where we find our flow.