

Paying Attention Can Transform Your Life... But Be Careful What You Choose to Ignore

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Making an effort to pay attention to the bright side of life, while turning away from negative thoughts, words and ideas, can have a significant effect on our wellbeing. These are the findings of a long-term field study conducted in Croatia among practitioners of a spiritual healing and development method known as hagiotherapy. The research found that practitioners employ a number of techniques based on the conscious direction of their attention and report a range of positive effects. Some of these effects include greater self-awareness, overcoming depression and increased resilience in the face of adversity. However, the practice of turning attention away from that which is considered “not good” can limit people’s engagement with challenging political issues and opinions that differ from their own; potentially leading to hardening of their

political stances and contributing to polarisation. This work builds on a growing body of research in anthropology, psychology and neuroscience that demonstrates how practices such as prayer or meditation can have transformative effects in people’s cognition and a positive impact on their wellbeing. However, it takes these ideas further by highlighting the importance of our ability to choose where to focus our attention. In an age where technologies such as social media are becoming increasingly effective in monopolising our attention, where anxiety and depression are widespread, and where political polarisation has become a significant challenge around the world, these findings are of great relevance for everyone, but especially for practitioners and policymakers trying to understand and address these pressing issues.