

CONTINUOUS PARTIAL ATTENTION AND THE FEAR OF MISSING SOMETHING

The first time I recall identifying this peculiar phenomenon was when I began attending California Coast Music Camp in 1991, after my original cancer diagnosis. CCMC offered more than 20 classes of instruction on such wildly diverse subjects as bluegrass flatpicking guitar, fingerstyle blues guitar, playing African polyrhythms, beginning bossa nova guitar, jazz band and the like. Roughly seven concurrent courses in three designated timeslots. What to study? All of these great teachers and such intriguing courses! We were told that it was acceptable to switch classes, if one wasn't to our liking. So, I did. Not ever because the class wasn't to my liking, but because there was something more or different that I wanted to experience.

At the time, I was so hungry to reconnect with the love of playing music, which I foolishly had relinquished upon attending law school, that these rich choices became difficult to assess - almost burdensome by their sheer number and variety. Likewise, after the classes, there were late afternoon and evening jam sessions scattered throughout the grounds. Blues at the campfire, bluegrass at the amphitheater, swing at the infirmary, jazz at the Big Tree, singer-songwriter workshops at the Lodge.

In my early years of camp attendance, I moved from class to class, from jam sessions to jam session - all in search of the right place to be. Although not consciously, I was becoming a victim of that mix of exhilaration and angst known as FOMS - "fear of missing something." The problem with FOMS was that, in my desire to be everywhere and to not miss anything, I found myself being nowhere and missing most everything. I was not grounded. I wasn't particularly available for learning, not because I didn't want to learn. I simply was too distracted.

As I became aware of FOMS and its consequences, I began to shift my behavior over the subsequent years of music camp. First, I winnowed down courses from three to two, then to one. But I learned that it wasn't the number of courses that created the stress. It was more about how I approached them. For example, if I were trying to learn how to play a new instrument (this year, I took up the upright bass), that would be my only "technical" course. Any more than one and I would experience difficulty in retention. But, I could participate in a gospel choir, exposing myself to new repertoire, because it was a different kind of learning experience. As to the jam sessions, I determined to relax into whatever experience I was having at the moment, recognizing that if something extraordinary was going on elsewhere, I could live without it. I simply couldn't be everywhere at once.

Psychologist Linda Stone has been researching the phenomenon of continuous partial attention (CPA), which sounds a great deal like FOMS. She describes CPA as a dominant form of attention giving in our high tech culture. She distinguishes it from multitasking, which is driven by different motivation. When you multitask, you are seeking to be more productive and efficient. Multitasking generally is given over to behavior that is automatic, requiring little cognitive processing. Things like scanning email while talking on the phone or meeting with a colleague over lunch are typical. You are trying to get as many things done at one time as possible, presumably to make room for more meaningful pursuits. My criticisms of multitasking are it is more difficult to do each individual task as well and people are having problems assessing what is appropriate for multitasking behavior. Whoever dreamed that you could text on a handheld device while driving or scroll through an address list while jogging probably isn't someone I want as my surgeon, lawyer, or accountant.



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CPA emanates from a different source. It is motivated by the desire to be continuously connected - to scan for and optimize every opportunity for engagement, whether cognitive, social, somatic or emotional. You pay partial attention *continuously*, under the mistaken assumption that you will be able to realize, moment by moment, the best that life has to offer and to *miss nothing*. There are times and places when judicious use of CPA is effective. For example, when I arrive early to a public hearing on behalf of a client, my CPA is fully engaged. Sometimes larger patterns or cues arise that I otherwise would miss with focused attention.

But many people operate from CPA on a 24/7 basis. You are always “on” everywhere and every place. Under such conditions, CPA gives rise to a sense of incipient crisis. You will miss *something* eventually. Operating in CPA, over extended periods of time, is just plain stressful and exhausting. It gives rise to a sense of overwhelm, over-stimulation and moves your mood toward despair. As with other constant stressors, it ultimately is detrimental to your health. Finally, it compromises your ability to think before acting, to otherwise make appropriate decisions, to act creatively, and ironically, to perceive what actually is going on around you - your receptors become so overloaded that you lose contact with the world that you are continuously attempting to monitor.

Unfortunately, developments in technology contribute to this phenomenon. As you become more and more accessible, it is harder and harder to turn CPA off. I recently advised a friend and client that I was recovering from the surgery for the removal of my cojoined laptop and that, if needed, I could be reached on my cojoined cell, which I also planned to have removed.

The difficulty with CPA is that it is insidious. Its initial effects pass without notice. Only when your relationships, emotions, competency and health start to break down do you see the consequences. But, by then, the procuring cause is so obscured, it is impossible to trace.

There are some things you can do to head off or reign in CPA. First, recognize that your attention is yours to manage. Become conscious of how you use it. Second, identify those pursuits that require your focused attention and turn off all your technology and

external distractions while engaging in them. If you find yourself becoming uncomfortable without CPA, consider what that is telling you. Can you remember to breathe? Can you initiate a contemplative practice, an art form or physical activity which allows you to routinely experience spacious, open awareness? Can you become conscious of how your body releases when it is not constantly on alert? Can you establish some simple new habits that allow you to regularly enjoy a desirable activity? Consider banning access to electronic devices during meal times. Savor your meal. “Disconnect” from CPA each evening at 8 p.m. Instead, take up a good book or engage a loved one in conversation. Start each day with a 10 minute period of contemplation, before turning on any electronic devices.

The bottom line is this - you must become aware of where your attention is directed and understand the consequences of how your attention impacts you. Anything that helps you develop that capacity for awareness is a worthy pursuit.

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