



The Politics of Hope E-zine “*Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders*”



What is Continuous Partial Attention?

By Donna Zajonc

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Continuous Partial Attention (CPA) means we are paying only partial attention -- continuously-- to what we are listening to, doing or thinking in the present moment. The primary symptom of CPA includes scanning the many stimuli that surround our lives for the next opportunity---the next email, breaking news headline, a text message or an up-to-date baseball score.

Continuous Partial Attention describes how we focus our attention and is different from multi-tasking. When we multi-task we are giving our attention to several tasks at once in order to complete those tasks and be more productive. The reason we are capable of multi-tasking is that many of the things we are doing require little cognitive skills so we complete the tasks almost without thinking.

If you give your attention to what’s next rather than what is present, you are in a state of “continuous partial attention.” An advanced case of CPA may affect your decision making, leadership capacity or diminish the quality of your relationships.

“To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter to others,” states Linda Stone, a communications consultant who has worked for both Apple and Microsoft. Stone first described the Continuous Partial Attention condition a few years back.

“We pay continuous partial attention in an effort not to miss anything, Stone reports. It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis. We are always in high alert when we pay continuous partial attention. This artificial sense of constant crisis is more typical of continuous partial attention than it is of multi-tasking”

Advanced cases of CPA will add stress to your work and personal life and compromise your ability to make thoughtful decisions or think creatively. Continuous Partial Attention may add to the drama in your life or feelings of overwhelm. No wonder many of the top-ten best selling books today address the meaning-of-life questions and how to develop quality relationships. Our ability to give focused attention to the things that matter to us is seriously compromised when CPA dominates our concentration. (Are you still with me or have you checked your email already?)

Recently my teenage son was talking with me while we were sitting on our living room couch. His cell phone rang and he quickly pulled it from his jean pocket. Paying little attention to the fact that he was having a conversation with his mother, he immediately began a new conversation. **Linda Stone says the result of Continuous Partial Attention is that we are so accessible, we're inaccessible. My son was suddenly inaccessible to me even though he was sitting right next to me on the couch!**

“The question today is less about time management and more about focusing our attention.”

~Donna Zajonc

The latest and greatest powerful technologies have contributed to our increased feelings of estrangement and disconnected relationships. Bouts of CPA may also help account for unusual individual and cultural responses to complex world events.

Emotional responses to world crisis may encourage some people to: (1) numb-out to the seriousness of the crisis (become inaccessible) or (2) enter a state of overwhelm and grief because they endlessly subject themselves to bad news (being so accessible they become paralyzed).

This may help us understand why some citizens sit on the side-lines and avoid civic discourse or public leadership and why others are in a constant state of doom and gloom----wanting to take action but not knowing where to begin.

A few years back, the strategy to deal with overwhelm was to take a time management class. These classes taught innovative new systems that improved a leader's ability to organize tasks.

The question today is less about time management and more about focusing our attention.

Much like an attention deficient student, our modern culture under the stress of Continuous Partial Attention, has become overwhelmed by stimuli. Here are a few strategies that may help you learn to focus your attention:

- ◆ Check your beliefs about work and productivity. Do you pride yourself in doing many things at once and believe you can handle everything if you just work harder? If the answer is yes, you may want to readjust your beliefs about a realistic work style, what to let go of or delegate.
- ◆ Your brain needs a break! A brief walk, quiet time or change of pace is essential every two hours for the brain to integrate and grow new synapses.
- ◆ Schedule play time and do more of what you love! Your body, mind and spirit will feel refreshed and alive.
- ◆ When needing to focus, turn off all email, cell phones, TV's and limit interruptions. Ask others to honor your focused time and not to interrupt.
- ◆ Limit time with negative news. Science has proven that a constant onslaught of devastating news drains our energy and zaps our inspiration.
- ◆ When in a conversation, put your pen down, turn away from your computer, do not answer your cell phone, and look the person in the eye. Concentrate on being present to the moment and deeply listening.

As we make choices to turn the technology off and give our full attention to what we want to focus on rather than our continuous partial attention to whatever comes up, we will deepen our relationships and become more inspired and innovative leaders.

