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TEDX PRACTICE SCRIPT · TEDXUMKC

How Real Connection Breaks the Trap of the Attention Economy

Attention as the thing actually being bought and sold — and why a satisfied person is the one the attention merchants cannot reach.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



From the talk at TEDxUMKC. Retained as part of the record of how the talk was presented.

Last year, I spoke to the world for the first time at a TEDx-event and I discovered something……

The world has an attention problem! You --- [POINT]--- have an Attention Problem! In today's world, we've turned attention into a commodity, creating a digital and media economy that has monetized peoples' attention, feeding on the fundamental human need to be seen, heard and acknowledged.. …… [PAUSE] …..as a result we live a life where we are constantly distracted, constantly jumping from one stimulus to another completely unable to disregard and find our center of inner balance. It is as if our environment has made the population of the whole world into ADHD individuals…. Bouncing from idea to idea like a bunch of squirrels.

In the 1970's a team of psychologists conducted what would become known as the "Rat Park" experiments,. They showed that rats in isolation would compulsively choose drug-laced water over regular water until they died. But rats in enriched environments-- with community, activity, and purpose, with companionship-- mostly ignored the drugs. Giving access to community, connection and companionship with other rats made them resistant to seeking the addictive water.

It turns out that we're not so different.

Similar research by sociologists and psychologists has shown that when we're emotionally and socially malnourished, we become susceptible to every ping, every like, and notification, that promises a quick hit of validation. A quick hit of cheap dopamine. Quick because it is available on demand. Cheap because we do not have to engage in the work of a real relationship to get it. It is porn for our attention! Attention merchants understand this vulnerability. They've created

platforms that trigger our dopamine responses, just like some of the most addictive substances,,.... And we collectively chase likes, clicks, and views hoping they'll fill an emptiness within us that we feel but don’t know the source of.

After 42 years as a physician helping people overcome physical, biological, emotional and mental challenges, I have repeatedly found that in a world that constantly demands our attention, the ability to stop chasing digital approval and discovering what makes us whole before going online sets us all free....

Just like a well-fed person makes better food choices at a grocery store, Similarly, an internally satisfied person makes better choices in online engagement.

I had to learn this the hard way. Early in my medical career, I would sleep with a bucket of water and a towel next to my bed. I was a young doctor building my practice, and I was available to patients 24/7/365. They could reach me at any time. I did this because I needed to. I had started a solo practice amidst a sea of large, well-established groups. The only way I could stand out was by offering incredible access.

I would splash water on my face before I answered 2 AM patient calls sounding perfectly alert. I did it because I loved being a physician. But being always on call also fed a subtle egotistical satisfaction from the constant validation of the attention from my patients. My patients thrived on my willingness to indulge their every whim while I never demanded them to take responsibility for themselves.

Then one night I woke up overwhelmed by a wave of nausea. I staggered to the bathroom, hugged the commode and started vomiting. The waves of nausea refused to stop and finally I had myself admitted to the hospital where I was diagnosed with a stomach stress-ulcer. Lying there on the hospital bed, I had an epiphany of sorts. I suddenly realized that if I died, right then, none of my patients would have been at a loss to find a physician who could serve them just as well within 24 hours of my demise This wasn't about them – it was about my insecurity about my own self-worth and my own hunger for validation through attention.

I walked out of that hospital the next day and started to set boundaries .... first rewarding myself, and ensuring my well-being before engaging with my patients. My practice never suffered; instead, I started seeing a new breed of patients. People who were truly ill, who cherished what I offered and put my advice to good use. My reputation as a doctor who cared for his patients grew and the fact that I insisted on my patients taking responsibility for their health empowered them.

My transformation began with a shift in my context and self-identity which moved from a position where I was seeking to reward myself out of my engagement ...[DEFINITIVE SIDE-STEP] ..... To a new position, where I was seeking to engage as an act of contributory self-expression coming out of a state of fulfillment. This simple declarative stand made me a better doctor, and it showed me that we can participate in attention-demanding roles without becoming controlled by them.

There are many voices out there advocating for digital detox or suggesting the necessity of fighting addiction to social media. While these and other strategies approach the issue from the viewpoint of closing the barn door before the horse bolts my approach is about training the horse to control its urge to leave.

What I am suggesting is fundamentally different and focuses on training ourselves to not fall prey to the seductions of attention merchants.

Instead of trying to resist or escape the attention economy, I’m talking about transforming our relationship with it by shifting our context and entering it from a position of prior satisfaction.

This isn't just about limiting screen time or setting boundaries, it's about changing the nature of our engagement by ensuring we have a contextual sense of ourselves as whole, as satisfied, before we engage.

Ultimately this approach provides a far greater degree of lasting agency and control that spills over to impact all facets of our life.

The need to acquire internal balance prior to engaging with digital platforms becomes obvious when we recognize the digital economy is here to stay. As content creators we all will have to engage with THESE platforms .....We have to use it to do our work, to communicate our gifts and messages to the world through it. And as we do this.... you, me, we..... WILL have moments when we will unintentionally cross a platform boundary and we will be sanctioned, our content flagged, or restricted in reach ..... But instead of becoming shattered and disempowered, as we would if our engagement had been from the viewpoint of seeking validation from these platforms.... if we remember that it is our light that we bring to our engagement with the stages, platforms, and digital worlds of our life we can retain our sense of balance and BE THE CUSTODIANS OF OUR WELLBEING.

If we take the ideas I illustrate today and apply it we will regain agency and control that is going to become essential for our own sanity in the world of tomorrow AS WELL AS ENABLE US TO PUSH BEYOND BOUNDARIES AND STAND TALL AS OWNERS OF OUR OWN LIGHT.

The data exists that real connection and a state of prior satisfaction does result in resistance to the digital world. People with real friendships and connections use cell phones less. This appears to have a biological basis. Research is emerging that pharmacological agents that work on the satiation centers of the brain induce a state of satisfaction and also reduce compulsive cravings for tobacco and alcohol. These findings are still being actively studied and appear to show great promise in advancing our understanding of human gratification.

The solution I propose is simple and as straight forward as calling upon a friend.

Everyday Real face-to-face connections rooted in physical presence and engagement allows us to reclaim our agency and develop a sense of inner fulfillment that sustains us for long periods, even later when we are alone. In my work I have repeatedly found that helping people develop the ability to observe their experience without the narrative mental chatter of interpretive judgement creates a sense of inner poise and balance that enables them to navigate the challenges and demands on their attention. Take a walk with a friend and listen as a space of connection. Sit down for an hour-long connected conversation and dialogue over coffee. By identifying, nurturing and cultivating what truly fulfills us first, we can transform our relationship with the attention economy from one of dependency to one of purposeful engagement ....

So as we each walk toward the Future of our Creation..... Recognize that Our Attention is Our True Wealth and let us start treating our attention like our most valuable currency. When we say No to Attention theft we are saying Yes to everything that makes us valuable. Live with the Intention that You are sufficient Right now just as you are. Before you reach for your phone, ask yourself: "Am I seeking satisfaction, or am I already satisfied?

" The answer will transform your life and how you engage with the world.

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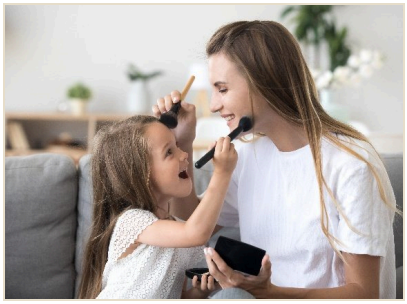















SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY, AS PUBLISHED BY THE EVENT

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Harvard trained molecular biologist, researcher, multi-book non-fiction genre author and inventor, R. R. Iyer has had a 42 year career in healthcare, drug development and human leadership spanning the globe. Iyer is is passionate about human potential and conducts workshops that have been rated as transformational for enabling individuals, teams, and organizations to discover their grounding narrative and allowing them immense focus and creativity as well as resilience and flexibility in navigating the uncertainties of their life. His programs on neuroinclusion training are used by organizations to integrate neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals into teams that perform with excellence in diverse fields.

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Ravi R. Iyer, MD is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author and five-time TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: what makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology and human behavior.

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