

# GIVE YOURSELF A *break*

Are you suffering from attention fatigue? Heidi Scrimgeour discovers why 'soft fascination' is the answer

**I**n the midst of lockdown, I had a moment of simple bliss. It felt like a 'factory reset' for body, mind and soul. It had been a long, tiring day at my desk. I'd been cajoling my reluctant children to complete their online school lessons in between hustling for freelance work and worrying about my parents, who were shielding. Wearily, I looked up from my laptop and glanced outside.

Something about the movement of the trees in the breeze framed against the window in the evening light looked magical. I was transfixed, gazing at the garden and losing track of time. When I came out of my little reverie, I felt different. In a moment of quiet attentiveness, something had been restored.

Teachers used to tell us off for this. They labelled it idle daydreaming but these days psychologists call it 'soft fascination'. To simplify the premise, it does you good to do more of the things that soften your focus. Activities that require intense focus – such as writing a report – can have a negative impact on your wellbeing and performance, while activities that soften your attention – such as getting lost in thought while watching branches dancing in the breeze – can invigorate your brain and boost wellbeing. No wonder working while homeschooling was so exhausting.

'We are not meant to be switched on all the time; balance is crucial for our wellbeing, for sustainable results and for maintaining a sense of joy,' says Karin

Peeters, a coach and psychotherapist. 'The ancient symbol of yin and yang represents the balance between the masculine (activity) and the feminine (receptivity) – they are not opposing, they are complementary forces that form a dynamic whole. The same applies to our attention. Our inner masculine energy helps us focus, set goals, plan, accomplish and achieve. It's the practical, let's-make-things-happen attitude. There's adrenaline and achievement but it can lead to stress and exhaustion if there is no respite. The inner feminine energy enables us to soften our attention. It's a place of trust, renewal, rest and surrender.'

Soft fascination, or diffused thinking, is important because how well our brain functions is directly related to the quality of our work – especially as more of us become knowledge workers, says career coach Ruth Thomson. 'The ideal of working like machines and always being "on" and focused for hours at a time doesn't fit with how our brain works. If we keep working and forcing our minds to focus, we all know that we get tired and the quality of our thinking and output decreases.'

In particular, time outdoors stimulates the kind of attention that does us good. Attention restoration theory is the idea, developed by the environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, that spending time in nature can help people concentrate

