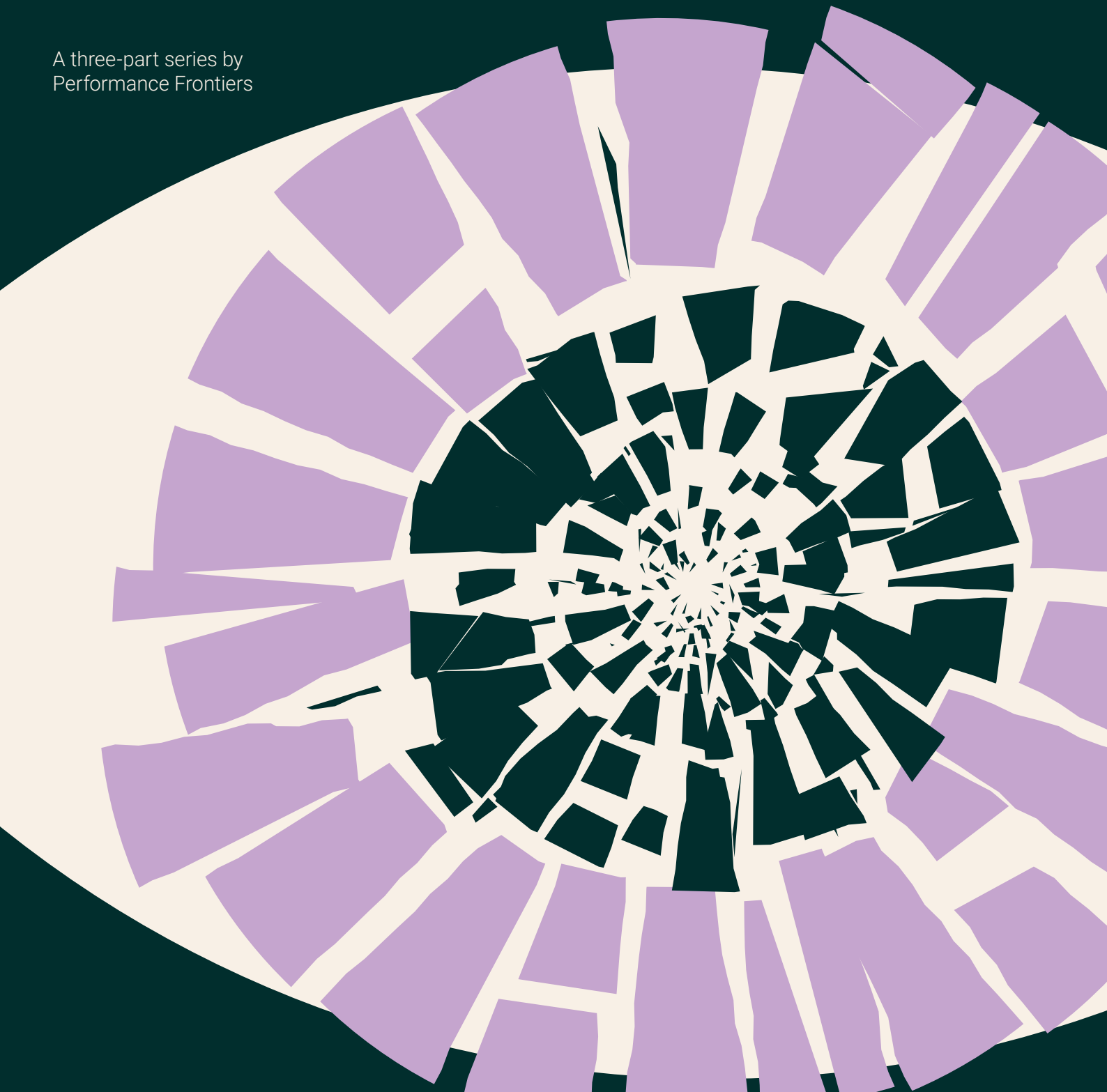


Defragmentation: Attention by Design

SYSTEM . SELF . TEAM

A three-part series by
Performance Frontiers



02 SELF

Attentional Sovereignty: Reclaiming Your Attention

Attention shapes how you experience your life. It determines what you notice, what stays with you and what passes unseen. As we discovered in [Article 1](#), much of it is claimed before you choose: by notifications, other people's requests, unresolved worries and borrowed urgency. Reclaiming it begins with refusing to cede that choice automatically.

You already know the feeling. You arrive at your 9am meeting. Your body's on time. Your attention isn't. It's still in the morning's feeds, the email thread that spiked your cortisol at 7am, the conversation that went sideways yesterday. The room gets your physical presence. The matter at hand gets whatever's left.

For leaders, the cost of fragmented attention reaches beyond lost productivity. It erodes the judgement, emotional regulation and strategic thinking the role demands, rippling across the organisation. Leadership in the modern age therefore heavily depends on your ability to protect attention.

Attentional sovereignty is about retaining greater agency over where your attention goes. It's the practice of noticing what is making a bid for your attention, deciding whether it deserves access, and setting a boundary when it does not.



Attention is the most precious resource we have; it's the window through which we experience our lives. And right now, we are treating it like a **bottomless pit to be mined, rather than a fragile ecosystem** that requires defense.



Johann Hari, Stolen Focus (2022)

The four surrenders, and one central reclaim

We give attention away in four directions: to systems designed to profit from it, to people who lay claim to it, to the past and future, and to priorities we've adopted from someone or somewhere else.

Too often these bids for attention seem reasonable. They arrive in disguise: as a quick break, an existing commitment, the pull to stay informed, perhaps something or someone we really care about.

Reclaiming attention doesn't ask us to demonise these directions, but to be more selective with where we surrender attention. To practice one master skill:

At the moment of capture, the millisecond where attention is snared, pause and ask: Do I choose this?

Everything that follows is a variation of this central reclaim.



We surrender to the attention economy

Feeds, notifications and news cycles are engineered to harvest and sell your attention. You are just one person with finite willpower facing thousands of engineers running A/B tests on your impulses (Wu, 2016; Williams, 2018). It's so easy to succumb. Some may laugh off having a cheeky scroll or a well-deserved bed rot: it's just a bit of entertainment, a well-earned break or staying in the loop. But the cost is measurable: average attention on a single screen has fallen from two and a half minutes in 2004 to about 47 seconds today (Mark, 2023).

The reclaim: Learn to tolerate the gap.

You often reach for the phone when boredom, uncertainty or a difficult feeling begins to surface. The phone becomes an anaesthetic. App blockers can help, but the deeper work is learning to tolerate that discomfort you're trying to escape.

Decide once which apps live on your phone and when news and messages reach you, rather than negotiating the same choice hundreds of times a day. Then practise sitting in the gap. When the urge to fill a quiet moment arrives, occasionally let it remain unfilled.



We surrender to other people

Requests, moods, expectations and messages all make claims for your attention. During core working hours, highly interrupted employees receive a meeting, email or chat notification about every two minutes (Microsoft, 2025). The average worker also receives around 117 emails and 153 Teams messages each weekday (Microsoft, 2025). This surrender carries a sense of nobility: you are available because you are committed. You respond quickly because you are a good team player. Some claims are legitimate. Others are simply poor planning or unclear priorities dressed up as your emergency.

The reclaim: Make your availability explicit rather than ambient.

Simone Weil writes that attention is "the rarest and purest form of generosity". Half-attention, offered constantly to everyone, serves no one. Good leadership depends on the quality of attention you bring when you are present, not your capacity to be permanently reachable. Tell people when you will respond, which channel to use and what genuinely counts as urgent. Then protect the space between. Ten undivided minutes with a colleague can build more trust than a week of mindless instant replies.

As we explore in [Defragging Teams](#), you also play a role in shaping environments for attention through the meetings you schedule, the channels you use and the response times you reward. These choices tell others whether focused work is genuinely protected. An organisation cannot create constant interruption and then ask people to solve it through personal discipline.



We surrender to the past and the future

Attention has a rightful home in the present moment, and yet also a stubborn tendency to be anywhere else but the here and now. It also has inertia: redirect it and part stays behind, what Leroy (2009) calls “attention residue”. This is why interrupted workers take over 20 minutes to fully return to a task (Mark, 2023).

Reflection and planning are part of good judgement. Their counterparts, rumination and worry, are different: they keep attention fixed on a moment you can no longer change, or one you cannot yet affect. The pull towards the future can be especially compulsive because it is powered by uncertainty, which the brain registers as a threat. You feel on edge, reach for the phone and search for the update that will finally make sense of things. It is tempting to call this staying informed. Although it feels like helpful action, compulsive checking during ambiguous periods only increases distress rather than reducing it.

The reclaim: Return to what you can act on now.

It's incredibly human to find yourself thinking about yesterday's mistake and tomorrow's threat. These thoughts have a tendency to invite themselves in when we're feeling vulnerable. While you cannot always shut the door, you can choose how long you let them stick around.

If you're spiralling in rumination and worry, name what is happening. Identify what you know, what remains uncertain and what action, if any, you can take. You might ask whether replaying a memory is producing understanding, or whether future predictions are grounded in objective reality or subjective emotion. Ask yourself how this type of thinking is serving you and your team, and if there is any action you could take to create forward momentum.



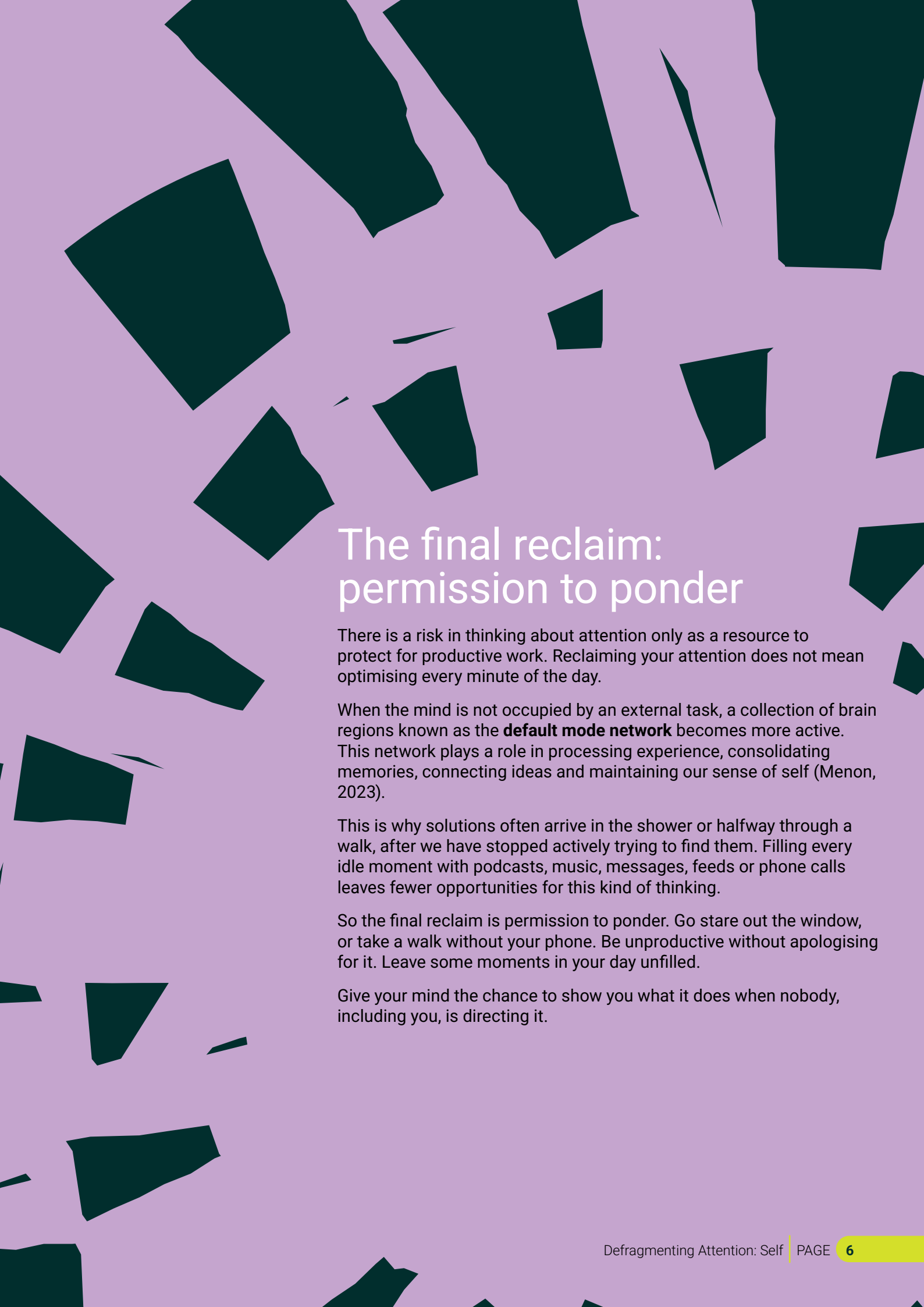
We surrender to what other people believe is important

The first three surrenders affect what receives your attention. This one affects the criteria you use to decide what is important. Celebrity feuds, culture wars and distant outrages arrive in our feeds pre-loaded with urgency. Workplaces create the same effect when the loudest stakeholder, newest request or most anxious leader determines what everyone treats as important. Borrowed priorities start to feel like your own convictions. As James Williams argues, the attention economy can influence not only our choices, but the values behind them (Williams, 2018).

The reclaim: Hold a claim of your own.

Iris Murdoch argued that what we attend to shapes what we are able to perceive. Attend to outrage all day and you become quicker to find more of it. The defence is a positive object worthy of your attention: a craft, a question, a project or a person deliberately placed at the centre. Decide which two or three things genuinely deserve your attention in the coming months. When something arrives claiming urgency, hold it against that list and ask: do I choose this?

This is perhaps the most powerful reclaim; one that protects against all other attention traps. Knowing what you value, where you find purpose, and what you want to focus on creates clarity of vision, and strength of resolve. You are better able to see information that deserves your attention, and can fend off bids that don't.



The final reclaim: permission to ponder

There is a risk in thinking about attention only as a resource to protect for productive work. Reclaiming your attention does not mean optimising every minute of the day.

When the mind is not occupied by an external task, a collection of brain regions known as the **default mode network** becomes more active. This network plays a role in processing experience, consolidating memories, connecting ideas and maintaining our sense of self (Menon, 2023).

This is why solutions often arrive in the shower or halfway through a walk, after we have stopped actively trying to find them. Filling every idle moment with podcasts, music, messages, feeds or phone calls leaves fewer opportunities for this kind of thinking.

So the final reclaim is permission to ponder. Go stare out the window, or take a walk without your phone. Be unproductive without apologising for it. Leave some moments in your day unfilled.

Give your mind the chance to show you what it does when nobody, including you, is directing it.

Attentional sovereignty does not ask you to judge yourself for where your attention goes. It is the practice of making choices more deliberately.

You cannot prevent every interruption, but you can notice when your attention has been pulled away and decide where it goes next. Sometimes that means proactively setting a boundary. Sometimes it means pausing the moment you're pulled away and deciding whether to follow.

The question is simple: Do I choose this?

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More on Defragmentation: Attention by Design

01. **SYSTEM** A systemic lens on how we fragment and the stakes.

02. **SELF** Where you're surrendering attention and how to start taking it back. ([here](#))

03. **TEAM** The conditions that fragment team attention and how to dismantle them.



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