

Hyperfocus in College Students with ADHD

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF HYPERFOCUS among college students with ADHD, and how is it different from the experience of flow?

Hyperfocus is an experience that involves intense concentration on a task of interest, leading to less attention to activities outside of the task at hand. Such experiences have been described as similar to experiences of flow, in which one is *in the zone* or fully immersed in a task, although hyperfocus has been viewed more negatively as a psychological problem whereas flow has been described as a positive phenomenon involving peak performance. This research update reviews two recent studies that examine the experiences of hyperfocus and flow among university students with and without symptoms of ADHD.

The first study suggests that hyperfocus is different from experiences of flow and related to ADHD, showing that students with ADHD symptoms reported less flow and more hyperfocus experiences in general compared to students without ADHD symptoms. The second study also found that hyperfocus may be different from flow and unique to ADHD symptoms.

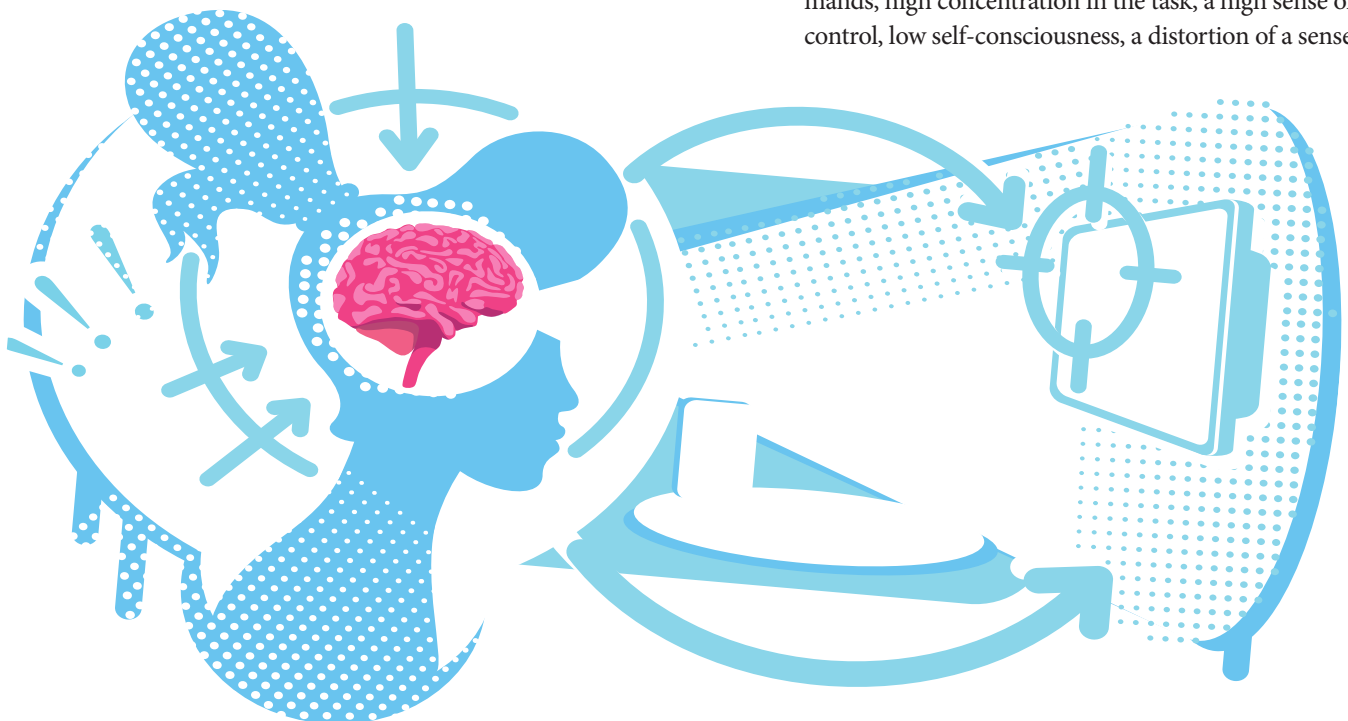
Together, these results suggest that hyperfocus and flow experiences are separate from each other and that hyperfocus, rather than flow, is related to ADHD. This

research indicates that individuals with ADHD may not have difficulty paying attention, but rather have difficulties with regulating attention. These studies highlight the possibility of psychological treatments for ADHD to support individuals in transforming their hyperfocus experiences to be more characteristic of experiences of flow.

Examining experiences of hyperfocus and flow

This study examined the hyperfocus and flow experiences of 84 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 45 years old in the United States. Participants completed questionnaires that measured their ADHD symptoms and experiences of hyperfocus and flow.

The questionnaire on hyperfocus asked about individuals' general tendency to engage in hyperfocus as well as experiences of hyperfocus in different areas of life such as school, screen time, and hobbies. The measure of flow asked about various dimensions of flow experiences, which include a balance between the level of challenge of the task at hand and the individual's skill, an automatic and spontaneous process of engaging in the task, clear goals of the task, direct and immediate feedback in the task that enables adjusting reactions to meet task demands, high concentration in the task, a high sense of self-control, low self-consciousness, a distortion of a sense of



time, and being intrinsically rewarded by the activity.

The findings revealed that among students with and without ADHD symptoms, higher hyperfocus was either generally related to lower flow or not related at all to flow. In addition, students with significant ADHD symptoms experienced greater hyperfocus in general and lower levels of most dimensions of flow, compared to students without ADHD symptoms.

Examining the pattern of results, experiences of hyperfocus may be different from flow because they are experienced as less controllable, with less clear goals and feedback from the activity at hand, and holding less of a challenge of the activity for the individual. Interestingly, the questions in the flow questionnaire were more positively phrased than those in the measure of hyperfocus. Therefore, further studies should also examine whether the wording of these questionnaires may affect the results.

As a whole, this study suggests that adults with ADHD are capable of immersing themselves in a task, and that treatment for ADHD may need to involve helping individuals better channel their attentional efforts towards the characteristics of optimal experiences of flow.

Grotewiel MM, Crenshaw ME, Dorsey A, & Street E. (2022). Experiences of hyperfocus and flow in college students with and without Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). *Current Psychology*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02539-0>

Examining ADHD symptoms, hyperfocus, perseveration, and flow

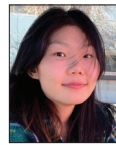
This study examined hyperfocus, flow, and perseveration experiences among 215 undergraduate students in Canada. Perseveration involves thinking or behaviour that is rigid and out of one's ability to attentionally control. The term *hyperfocus* has generally been used in the ADHD literature to describe this type of thinking or behavior, whereas the term *perseveration* has been more often used in literature on psychological disorders outside of ADHD, such as autism spectrum disorder, anxiety, and depression.

Participants in this study completed questionnaires assessing ADHD symptoms, hyperfocus, flow, and perseveration. As this study also aimed to examine how hyperfocus, flow, and perseveration were related to emotion dysregulation, participants also completed a survey of emotion regulation.

The findings demonstrated that higher levels of hyperfocus were related to higher levels of perseveration but also related to lower levels of flow, suggesting hyperfocus to be more similar to perseveration than flow. Moreover, when taking into account emotion regulation, ADHD symptoms were associated with more hyperfocus ratings than ratings of flow or perseveration. As well, when compared to students without ADHD, students with ADHD had significantly higher levels of hyperfocus and perseveration, and lower levels of flow. These findings indicate that hyperfocus may be separate from flow while sharing similarities with perseveration, and that greater hyperfocus may be uniquely related to ADHD symptoms.

This study suggests that ADHD involves a difficulty with regulating attention rather than a deficit in attention itself. Such an interpretation supports the potential of interventions for ADHD that involve better regulating attention so that hyperfocus experiences include more of the qualities of flow.

Ayers-Glassey S & MacIntyre PD. (2021). Investigating emotion dysregulation and the perseveration- and flow-like characteristics of ADHD hyperfocus in Canadian undergraduate students. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cns0000299>



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The advertisement features the text "ATTENTION TALK VIDEO" at the top, with a colorful puzzle piece graphic. Below this is the website "www.attentiontalkvideo.com". The main text reads "Your ADHD TALK SHOW Station!". At the bottom, it says "Watch Attention Talk Video!" and "Catch Us On You Tube Search: Attention Talk Video". The background shows silhouettes of people in a meeting.