



When Your Brain is All Over the Place

Time to Refocus

Today I woke up and realised that I needed to get a whole lot done – but I was not at all focused. The days had run one into another. This got me thinking. Being unfocused is how it is for many during the lockdown period, or perhaps coming back from a school break or even after a particularly difficult day. It may also be with long periods of time with our smartphones. Our brains are waiting for the next pleasure hit and so we get distracted easily as we look for excitement. The trouble is, it does not get the work or study done.

How can we support ourselves to focus our brain and calm our thinking so we can take time to think and learn? Then, how can we use these ideas with our students to support their learning? The problem is, for whatever reason, our brain is not working at its best. We cannot think as clearly and rationally as we normally would. We may be tense and muscles might be tight around our neck and shoulders. Maybe our stomach is tight or we might be feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

We wonder what we can do to be thinking optimally, how to relax and not be so tense or wound up like a spring. It might be that when we are worried, we think we can't do much about it. It begins to impact our self-confidence and we think that we will never be able to get back to being the smart person who works hard, gets good results, is well liked and sociable.

So, how to focus the mind? We can do this in two ways.

1. **Slowing our breathing down and breathing correctly.**

When we learn how to manage our breathing, we are able to think more clearly and solve problems more easily. We are

calmer under stress. It also has been shown to improve high blood pressure, pain management, sleep problems, depression and anxiety.

Imagine if we were able to feel calm everyday? And, what if, just for the practice of breathing slowly for one minute a day we could?

Here is an exercise that we can do – right now in fact. Read the instructions and then give it a go.

Step One: Count the number of times you breathe out in one minute. Time yourself. Write that number down on a piece of paper.

Step Two: Now, repeat the exercise. Count how many times you breathe out in one minute, but this time, work to halve the number of breaths. Start by taking a big deep breath in. One, two, three go.

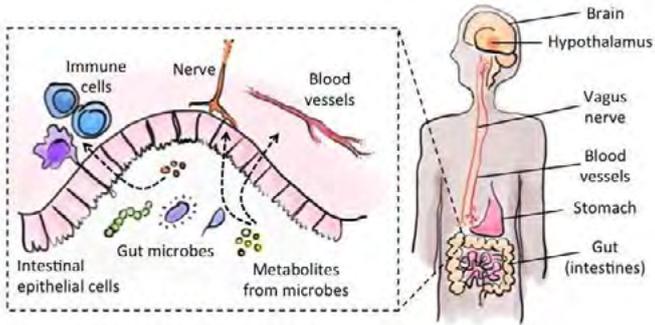
Write down the number. Did you make improvements?

If you did not, repeat the exercise a couple more times. What do you notice? How do you feel?

Let me explain why this works:

Our body is made up of the autonomic nervous system (our body's autopilot systems) which keeps us alive even when we sleep – breathing, heart rate, blood flow and digestion. Just like a fish swimming in water we don't even know we are doing it. Breathing is the only aspect of that system that we can influence. Technically, what is happening is through the Vagus Nerve

(which links your heart, lungs and digestive tract), when you purposefully calm your breathing, the Vagus nerve acts like a brake and slows down your entire nervous system.



By breathing slowly, between 4.5 and 6 breaths a minute, you decrease your heart rate and increase the production of calming hormones. So, in short slowing your breathing down triggers a 'relaxation response' in the brain and body.

2. The second idea is to practice a focus exercise.

Choose an object – anything will do - it might be something on your desk, something special to you or an ordinary stone or shell. Start by examining it – notice the colours, angles, the way the light plays on the surface of the object. Allow yourself to enjoy the sight of the object.

Now feel the object, exploring it with your touch. Perhaps feel it on your cheek as well as your fingers. Is it smooth, rough, hot, cold or warm?

Give yourself permission to become fully absorbed in your object, pouring yourself into the experience of examining your object. Appreciate the uniqueness of this object.

Now, notice how you feel.

As we practice being fully absorbed in our object, we notice our focus can stay on our appreciation for this simple thing. There is little room for the past or future. We are in the now. When we are focused on the now, there is little room for regret, worry or distraction. You are fully in the present.

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Classroom Application

Think now about how your classroom can create a starting and finishing ritual of breathing and refocusing. It may be through a song, a prayer, or an exercise.

It may be that you create an agreement with your students that they do a breathing exercise between subjects, after a heated debate or an uncomfortable moment.

Whatever you do, do it. And when you do, you will be changing lives. Thanks for your great work and good luck with applying. 



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