

Concentration and Focus

Nearly all of the women involved in the research¹ wrote about having problems concentrating, focusing or remembering what they were learning.

Anna:²

I couldn't concentrate in class. I remember always feeling tired and not being able to keep up or understand what the teacher was saying

I think that the violence that I was experiencing at home affected me in a way that when I was at school I felt as though I was not really there. Although I was there physically, mentally I was unable to absorb anything that was going on. I had so much anxiety in school that I just didn't have the attention span to follow what the teachers were teaching.

I still have a shortened attention span, which I have been working on, however because I can relate to a lot of the material we are learning it helps me stay focused when I feel my attention drifting.

Joanne:

...teachers used to have to get my sister from the grade 1 class to calm me down. I suffered from separation anxiety from my sister because she was my main source of comfort. This was a major restriction on my ability to retain any information in school.

...now looking back I can say no wonder I had such a difficult time retaining information.

Sierra:

It was very difficult to study and concentrate since the incident had occurred with a former partner of mine. I found everything difficult. I just did not want to study anymore.

The violence I had endured affected me so drastically. I was black and blue and too embarrassed to attend any of my classes. I was still in shock of what had happened. I could not think, I could not concentrate on anything.

Theme: Concentration and Focus

Fumi:

I remember being really exhausted during grades six, seven and eight and had a difficult time concentrating. I would often get in trouble for daydreaming, but it was more like 'zoning out' to nothing than actual daydreaming.

Amina:

Looking back into my past of learning in school, violence played a role in not being able to concentrate, not being able to sit down and sit still without my mind wondering or thinking that something is wrong or going to happen

Priya

I found that I couldn't focus or really concentrate like I used to be able to. My mind was always thinking about what would happen when I got home, what hell would I have to deal with today.

Marlene:

I was always worrying about what was going to happen next, so I didn't make an effort to do my homework.

Sonya:

I could concentrate when I was out with my friends at a coffee shop, drinking, smoking pot and doing homework but the moment I was alone in a class or at home I felt anxious and couldn't concentrate. I developed an eating disorder that made it very physically challenging to focus and I didn't get much sleep

Asha:

Witnessing my mother and sister endure this is another memory of violence that impacted my ability to engage in learning, to be able to focus on learning in the classroom when this was happening to my family.

When my mother or sister or I was "sick", institutionalized and medicated, the classroom was one of the furthest things from my mind.

Theme: Concentration and Focus

Grace:

I never wanted to go to school, and when I did, I did not listen. I didn't think anyone would understand me or accept me. I couldn't do the work in class, I had no attention span.

I couldn't do my schoolwork because my brain was so fried and I was constantly thinking about what abuse is going to happen next, that my brain was on overload and couldn't take in any more information. I also believed that none of this schoolwork would be beneficial for me if I wasn't alive to use it.

Kari:

...the memory loss I experience had been something that has either been a side effect to the medication I have been prescribed or a developed coping mechanism. Regardless it affected my ability to remember things at school and therefore my concentration. I become frustrated that I can't remember something and I loose focus on what the task at hand is and it becomes a spiraling effect.

I had terrible anxiety to the point where I started to stutter and have terrible chest pains. These feelings were dealt with through changing my meds. Learning was difficult in this period because it was difficult to concentrate and feel grounded

Some women clearly identified zoning out as a survival strategy:

Joanne:

I believe I was on automatic pilot during those years to be sane today.

Amina:

[in response to the question, "What, if anything, helped to make the classroom experience good/ positive/ useful?"] Daydreaming, disassociating myself from the classroom, pretending like I was okay, and being friendly and obedient to everyone

Theme: Concentration and Focus

Women also spoke about how what looked like zoning out was, in fact, about using classroom time to plan their survival when they got home after school:

Amina:

Learning was the last thing on my mind. I didn't care about learning and didn't think it was useful for my life at the time. While the teacher would sit and teach I was thinking the whole day, did we (my brother and sister) leave the house clean, was everything perfect like my mom wanted it and praying to God that nobody would piss my mom off that day because she would come home angry and that's when the abuse started... As kids did their exercise in class I planned ways to get out of trouble and wished that our dad would come one day to rescue us from our abusive mom.

Priya:

Couldn't focus on material I felt was irrelevant to me and my situation.

I remember thinking how useless the material we were learning was because of all the other things I had on my mind that were far more important at that time. While the teacher was talking about math I was thinking about survival. I thought that none of it was relevant because what they were talking about was fiction to me when mine was real life, at times it even felt like life or death. I could have cared less about reading a science book all I was thinking was how I was going to get through another night after I left this place.

¹ In 2007 some students in the Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program at George Brown College took part in a research study where they reflected on the ways they could now recognize that violence had had an impact on their own learning. This research was carried out as part of the Weaving a Web project to develop www.learningandviolence.net The rest of the themes identified can be found in other sections of The Impact of Violence on Learning.

² All Names are fictional.