

Spacing Out

Characters

Teacher: *Clare has been teaching for 12 years. She loves her job. She did really well in school and chose to work in literacy because it seemed exciting and important. Clare was born in Alberta and comes from a Polish background.*

Students:

Juan *came from the Philippines about 6 years ago. He is 45 and has only one arm with mobility.*

Moses *is from Sudan, about 27 years old.*

Bonnie, *born in Canada, is about 50 years old.*

Laura *is Métis, about 20 years old. She went to school in Alberta.*

Scene 1

Bonnie hesitates before entering the classroom. She looks depressed and nervous.

Bonnie: I wish Clare didn't ask me to start today. What if everyone thinks I'm stupid? I don't want to talk about how hard it is for me to remember what I read. I should just go home.

Scene 2

Everyone is seated, including Bonnie. Clare turns to Bonnie who is now sitting down in the group with the others.

Clare: Let's pick up on what Bonnie mentioned yesterday about having trouble remembering. Bonnie, are you ready to kick off the discussion?

Bonnie has her head and shoulders down. She speaks in an uncertain voice.

Bonnie: When I was a kid I felt stupid. I found myself looking out the window instead of listening to what the teacher was saying. It still feels like I'm that stupid little Bonnie again.

Bonnie (*continues*): Sometimes I don't remember what we were talking about just before you ask me a question. I only remember bits of what you say and what I read. I have to re-read most things.

Scene 3

Clare: Bonnie, you did great. I appreciate your honesty. You can breathe now.

It's hard to answer questions when you don't remember what was just said and it's hard to talk about what you've read, when you have to keep going back just to remember it. There are names for what happens when our minds go elsewhere. Many people call it 'spacing out,' some therapists call it dissociation.

Scene 4

Bonnie looks as if she is having a panic attack.

Bonnie: Spacing Out? What's that? Is that what I do?

Clare: Well I don't know for sure. When we space out, it makes sense that we can't pay attention. It's not our fault. Our bodies are there but our minds leave. It happens to some people a lot more than others.

Spacing out is more than daydreaming. It feels and looks differently for different people. For some people, it feels like disappearing somewhere else - sounds or sights just fade. Similar to what Bonnie talked about.

Scene 5

Clare: Others have to be on the move. They have a hard time sitting still long enough to finish a single task. It's surprising how many different things can remind us of old fears.

Some people's minds go to their problems; others go to things that happened to them as children. Still others want to keep busy and never stay with anything too long. Spacing out can make us feel anxious or ashamed.

Scene 6

Clare: This discussion is important for our learning. When we space out a lot, it doesn't mean we can't learn or don't want to learn. It just means we have to go a little easier on ourselves when we realize we've been spacing out. The idea is to bring ourselves back to the present when we can and to stay with learning - even when we don't get it all. What do the rest of you think?

Scene 7

Bonnie: (*thinks*) I hope no one is looking at me. I wonder if they think I'm stupid. Somebody else had better say something.

Scene 8

Narrator: Before we continue the discussion, let's find out a little about everyone in this class.

Narrator: Bonnie lived in Alberta most of her life. Her mother watched a lot of TV, drank, and took drugs. Her mother used to beat Bonnie with a broom. Bonnie took care of herself and her brother when she was young. Whenever her father came back home, he sexually abused her. He told her she was stupid and all she was good for was sex. He said she was nothing. When he touched her, Bonnie blocked out what was happening. She didn't want to know what he was saying or doing - it felt wrong. She would close her eyes and disappear. She always made sure he stayed away from her brother.

Scene 9

Narrator: Juan worries about his family. He has only been in Canada for 6 years. He has three kids and his wife is dying of cancer. He often worries about how he will manage to work, go to the hospital, and take care of his kids at the same time. Juan is strong. He survived many things, just to come to Alberta. He often thinks about his family when he is in class. When he starts to feel overwhelmed, he looks out the window to watch the sky change colours. Sometimes he loses himself in the clouds.

Scene 10

Narrator: Moses feels uncomfortable in the class. He never went to school before. He thinks students should be learning not talking. He thinks that people in Alberta don't know what suffering is. Moses was a child during war time in Sudan. When he was 7, his family was killed. Moses was kidnapped from his village to become a child soldier. He learned very quickly that he had to kill or be killed. During the day, he doesn't want to think about sickening things he had to do to other people. At night, Moses is tortured by his nightmares. He wants to learn as fast as he can and he doesn't want to waste any time on talk.

Scene 11

Narrator: Laura is Métis. She lived in rooming houses for most of her life. She smokes 2 packs a day and finds sitting in class unbearable. When she can't leave the room, Laura fidgets with her hands and things in her purse, such as her lighter. Her leg is always moving or shaking. She often feels trapped. She likes to draw and doodle on her notebooks. She wants to be a fashion designer. Everyone tells Laura that she draws beautifully. Laura doesn't listen to what other students say. Sometimes she feels afraid of Moses. Laura likes nice clothes and owes a lot of money to the ABC Quick Cash Mart.

Scene 12

Narrator: Clare is lesbian. She likes women. She recently broke up with her girlfriend. Her girlfriend was angry most of time and cheated on Clare. Clare feels sad that the relationship ended but she knows it wasn't good for her. Sometimes she wonders what's wrong with her that she got into such a bad relationship. Clare is a good teacher and was an excellent student. She tries hard to help each student learn as much as they can. When she is home, Clare thinks a lot about finding another girlfriend. Some nights she finds that even though she starts early on her marking or lesson plans, she gets very little done. Clare often puts things off to the last minute and then gets mad at herself. When she was young, her parents argued a lot. Clare would shut the door to tune them out.

Narrator: Now we know a little bit more about everybody in this class and why each of them might space out. Let's return to the classroom to find out what the learners talk about.

Scene 13

Juan (*looking sad*): I guess I do that too. I daydream or space out.

Moses: Home. I think about my country.

Laura: I'm like that. I feel trapped. I always need to go for a smoke.

Scene 14

Clare: Those were great comments everyone. Thanks, Bonnie, for starting us off.

Now it's time to write in your journal. Remember, your journals are private. Even though we won't be sharing them, they will help us with our discussion afterwards. Here are some questions to think about as you write in your journal.

1. When did I first notice that I had trouble concentrating?
2. What am I doing instead of paying attention? For example, do I disappear, or is my mind racing? Do I feel numb, or am I remembering everything in my past?
3. When do I lose my focus the most?
4. How do I feel when I realize I stopped paying attention?
5. What do I say to myself right afterwards?

Scene 15

Laura: Do I have to write? Can I draw instead?

Clare: That's a good idea. Drawing uses a different part of our brains. Sometimes it can make it easier to understand.

You can write, draw or perhaps a combination of both. Keep the questions in mind when you are working in your journal.

Scene 16

Narrator: Let's see what each learner is thinking about as they write.

Juan: I am so thankful to this country that I can go to school. I never had a chance in the Philippines. We were so busy working and the school was so far. No one in my family went past the 3rd grade. But I might have to leave class soon. I work nights and I may have to be at home for the children. Oh, but I love to dream about the beauty in my country. I want to go back one day. No, I must stop thinking about home. I must work hard and learn as much as I can here. I can't let my family down.

Moses

I wonder if the teacher could help me to write my story. Maybe if I wrote it down, I wouldn't keep remembering it. I would tell people about Sudan, about how I was drugged and beaten. They made me do terrible things. How can I write about these things? When I start remembering, I feel sick and dizzy. When that happens, I can't even hear what Clare is saying.

Laura: It's like Clare said. I used get in trouble for fidgeting or not listening. Then they put me in a special education class. They said I had "ADD" or Attention Deficit Disorder. They gave me pills. I didn't want to take the medicine. Now I take pills all the time. I am a regular pill dispenser. Any kind of pill. I must have 20 different kinds at home.

I hate to write. I would rather draw. I want to be a fashion designer so badly but I am still in this literacy class. I wonder if Clare knows how badly I feel when I don't hear what she is saying. I am embarrassed to hand in my work - I always scribble all over it. I feel like such a loser.

Bonnie: I really don't remember much about school. I know I always felt invisible. I don't have to worry about that now - no one could miss me. I still don't like to talk in class. When I do my heart beats hard, my hands shake, and I feel like I have to pee. I get so mad at myself. I can't help thinking I am slow or nuts.

Scene 17

Clare: Were you able to think about the questions as you wrote?

Laura: I liked that I could draw. I wrote as well.

Juan: It was good.

Scene 18

Clare: Let's talk a bit more about spacing out. During tough times, it actually helps us to space out or not pay attention. It makes it easier to cope. But, we learn it well. So when we no longer need it to stay alive, we still do it. It becomes part of how we get by. We can learn ways to space out less and we can accept that we don't have to pay attention all the time and not feel so bad about spacing out.

Laura: But we have to pay attention to learn.

Scene 19

Clare: In spite of everything that goes on in your lives, you are each here today. I hope you feel good about that – it may not have been easy, but you're here anyway. Every one of you is capable of learning and there will always be times when you miss something.

You could try noticing more when you fade or when you feel like quitting. Try to notice what you were feeling or thinking about just before that happened. The more you notice what goes on for you, the better you will get at staying with your reading or listening. It's important to go easy on yourself.

It's great if you can encourage yourself to come back and carry on – whether your mind wanders off or you have to leave for a bit. The goal is not to blame yourself for spacing out and to get quicker at returning to your learning.

Scene 20

Juan: Can we talk more about this? I want to know other things that will help me re-focus when I stop paying attention. I do that a lot.

Clare: Tomorrow we will make a list of ideas to help us when we lose our concentration. Perhaps you could spend a little time tonight thinking about this so we'll be ready to create that list when we start. Juan, I'd like you to kick off the discussion tomorrow. Would that be okay?

Scene 21

Narrator: Let's see what each person is thinking as they prepare to go home.

Juan: I guess I shouldn't be so hard on myself. If I have to leave, I can always pick up where I left off.

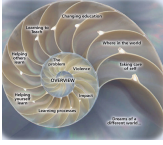
Moses: Yesterday Clare said a famous person said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". I did not know what she meant. I think today I do. I like that.

Laura: I don't ever want to get mad at myself again for needing to move around. I've got a truck load of reasons for feeling anxious and uneasy.

Bonnie: Oh boy, that was heavy but I survived. Maybe I'm not that stupid.

Clare: The class went well.

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This is the script of an animation from the “Helping Myself Learn” kit, a part of *Web-based tools to support effective learning and teaching for survivors of violence: a project of the School of Work and College Preparation, Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies, George Brown College, in partnership with Spiral Community Resource Group.*



All of the tools can be found online at:

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