



Spacing Out – For Teachers

You may sometimes find learners seem lost in space, and others might be frequently late or absent, because they are learning in the aftermath of violence.

Violence can lead many of us to learn to space out—leave our bodies and take our mind elsewhere. This was originally an effective strategy in an unbearable reality; when no physical escape is possible, we can just disappear mentally.

In the face of things that feel life-threatening we prepare to fight, flee, or freeze. Those who are unable to flee or fight, especially babies and young children, become totally immobile, freezing like a deer in the headlights. Repeated experiences of threat can cause even minor changes to feel terrifying, triggering this response. When triggered, the frontal lobe of the brain—the area of complex thought—closes down while the blood supply goes elsewhere preparing for survival. Frequent repetition strengthens this pathway that makes the frontal lobe—and our path to learning—close down; it may become an automatic response to change or a slight risk. The more that violence has shaped our nervous system, the less anxiety is needed for us to space out.

Though it was vital to survive past situations, it certainly gets in the way of successful learning in the present. It may now be such a habit that we don't know when we are doing it, or how to stop. When spacing out behaviours happen a lot, learners may look lazy or unmotivated, mentally ill, or learning or intellectually disabled—and/or be labeled as such.

Students who struggle with spacing out may:

- seem to constantly be doodling or fiddling with stuff—music players, labels from drink bottles, their nails, etc; they may often make and take phone calls in class
- miss all or part of a lesson or course and find it hard to fully understand the whole
- space out and run away from things that make them anxious, so that they miss tests, fail to complete work on time, blank and completely 'forget' assignments
- be restless and have trouble getting started, or persisting with a task

- be inexplicably unable to hear, or see, or read—whenever they get anxious
- often arrive late to class, and stop and start courses again and again
- have trouble trusting other students, the teacher, or even trusting their own knowing
- seem not too ‘bright’, as if ‘no one is home’, or simply seem a little odd
- have been told learning disabilities, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, or mental health ‘disorders’ explain all their learning difficulties
- miss class because escape into alcohol, or recreational or prescription drugs, is a way they can ‘space out’ and get relief from unbearable anxiety or pain
- too much violence can also lead to a more permanent escape from the real world into ‘craziness’, a fragmented self, and a diagnosis of mental illness.

What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Make it OK to space out.

- Introduce the different faces of spacing out, and help everyone to see them as everyday common occurrences for many people, students and teachers alike.

2. Help students to stay present.

- Think and talk about what everyone can do to make the classroom, tests, and assignments feel safer, and lead to as few anxious reactions as possible.
- Talk with students having difficulty about what might help them stay present. Look for what you or the group can do—for example, avoid shouting. Look for things the individual can do themselves—for instance they might be less likely to space out if they sit near the door or where they cannot easily look out the window (and ‘leave’ with whatever is passing by).
- Teach everyone ways to soothe, step down from anxiety, and ground in the present: include such things as rubbing the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other hand, rubbing their hands on their thighs, breathing exercises, and meditation.
- Affirm fiddling as a tactic that works for many people. Provide pipe cleaners, modeling clay, or stress balls. Explain to students that fiddling with these might help them stay present. Encourage them to try them out.

3. Make it OK to leave.

- Recognize that sometimes a person may be too caught in an old memory, or too stressed, to stay present. Encourage them not to judge themselves if they space out.
- Provide a comfortable chair in the corner of the room as a temporary retreat. This may help students create a new pattern, instead of spacing out or leaving the room entirely when they are anxious.

4. Make it OK to return.

- Talk with individual students to see whether you can help them return when they space out. What helps one person might be wrong for another person. One person might want you to touch their shoulder, another to call their name gently, and another to ignore them until they can bring themselves back to the present.
- Call students who miss class to encourage them to return. Welcome them back with no hint of criticism if you can.

5. Make it OK to need help.

- It is ordinary; most of us need help at some point in our lives. Bring therapists and counselors into the program and provide resource information.
- Help students to understand connections between trauma, addictions, and illness. Tell them about resources and programs. Try not to shame—remember you don't know what they 'should' do. Encourage them to explore resources when they are ready.

Where can I find more information and ideas?

On www.learningandviolence.net:

In the Impact of Violence on Learning, <http://learningandviolence.net/impact.htm> especially “Spacing out”, “Silence”, “Missing school”.

In Helping Others Learn: <http://learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

In Helping Yourself to Learn: What to do when you feel bad
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself/whenyoufeelbad.htm>