



## Spacing Out – Learning to Learn

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What do people mean when they say we have to learn how to learn? Well, in this resource we are going to talk about two parts of it, ***Concentrating*** and ***Focusing***.

### ***Concentrating***

Breathing, getting enough sleep, and drinking water (yes water! and lots of it!) can all help with concentration. So can fun exercises like these three BRAIN GYM exercises.

#### **Brain Buttons**

This exercise helps improve blood flow to the brain to "switch on" the entire brain before a lesson begins. The increased blood flow helps improve concentration skills required for reading, writing, etc.

- Put one hand so that there is as wide a space as possible between the thumb and index finger.
- Place your index and thumb into the slight indentations below the collar bone on each side of the sternum. Press lightly in a pulsing manner.
- At the same time put the other hand over the navel area of the stomach. Gently press on these points for about 2 minutes.

#### **Cross Crawl**

This exercise helps coordinate right and left brain by exercising the information flow between the two hemispheres. It is useful for spelling, writing, listening, reading and comprehension.

- Stand or sit. Put the right hand across the body to the left knee as you raise it, and then do the same thing for the left hand on the right knee just as if you were marching.
- Just do this either sitting or standing for about 2 minutes.

## **Hook Ups**

This works well for nerves before a test or special event such as making a speech. Any situation which will cause nervousness calls for a few "hook ups" to calm the mind and improve concentration.

- Stand or sit. Cross the right leg over the left at the ankles.
- Take your right wrist and cross it over the left wrist and link up the fingers so that the right wrist is on top.
- Bend the elbows out and gently turn the fingers in towards the body until they rest on the sternum (breast bone) in the center of the chest. Stay in this position.
- Keep the ankles crossed and the wrists crossed and then breathe evenly in this position for a few minutes. You will be noticeably calmer after that time.

## ***Focusing***

At times it's hard to focus – perhaps we've gotten freaked out or distracted when trying to concentrate – but that doesn't mean we CAN'T focus. In fact, many of us who usually have difficulties in this area can focus extremely well – like a laser beam!

For us, learning to control what we focus on, and for how long, becomes very useful. Here is an exercise to play with and explore – do part of it, or all of it, once or many times, or just read and think about it. No pressure. But see what happens...

There are 6 parts to this exercise.

1. Use a quiet work space with a minimum of distractions: no TV, no radio, and so on. Get a kitchen timer or a watch. Have some specific task, like an assignment from class, to complete.
2. You want to shut everything out of your mind but this work. Get into this mind-set of total focus before starting. Deep breathing helps. You might want to consciously put away everything else in your mind, like thoughts of what you have to do later, maybe by imagining sweeping or erasing your mind...

3. Set the timer or watch for a short period of time, say 8 or 10 minutes. As soon as the timer begins to tick, tell yourself to hyperfocus (in other words, to concentrate really, really hard)! Do your very best work on the task as fast as possible. Do not let yourself get up or move or scratch or even take your eyes off your work, just for this short time. When the timer goes off or beeps, stop working. Get up and do something physical (walk around, make a sandwich, play with the dog, or something; just don't read or watch TV). After intense concentration, the mind needs this "mini-vacation".
4. After a brief time (5-8 minutes), reset the timer for the same period of time, and hyperfocus again on doing your very best work as fast as possible.
5. As before, when the timer goes off, stop. The work might be completed by now, and you may find the quality higher than usual because of your intense focus. If not finished, focus again after another "mini-vacation."
6. Even very long assignments can be completed, taking lots of little breaks. Maybe you want to try setting the timer for periods that are a bit longer... but keep the periods of intensity short and get into the rhythm: Focused work. Relaxation. Renewed Focus. You may find you get drawn in and feel determined to continue working after the timer goes off. If so, that's fine, but don't try to make that happen.