

Energy and Calm: Brain Breaks and Focused-Attention Practices

Quick breaks that help students refocus so they can return to work feeling centered and ready to learn.

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January 14, 2015 Updated September 16, 2016



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When presented with new material, standards, and complicated topics, we need to be focused and calm as we approach our assignments. We can use brain breaks and focused-attention practices to positively impact our emotional states and learning. They refocus our neural circuitry with either stimulating or quieting practices that generate increased activity in the prefrontal cortex, where problem solving and emotional regulation occur.

BRAIN BREAKS

A brain break is a short period of time when we change up the dull routine of incoming information that arrives via predictable, tedious, well-worn roadways. Our brains are wired for novelty. We know this because we pay attention to every stimulus in our environment that feels threatening or out of the ordinary. This has always been a wonderful advantage. In fact, our survival as a species depended on this aspect of brain development.

When we take a brain break, it refreshes our thinking and helps us discover another solution to a problem or see a situation through a different lens. During these few minutes, the brain moves away from learning, memorizing, and problem solving. The brain break actually helps to incubate and process new information. Consider trying these activities with your class:

The Junk Bag: I always carry a bag of household objects containing markers, scrap paper, and anything that one would find in a junk drawer—for example, a can opener or a pair of shoelaces. Pick any object out of the junk bag and ask students to come up with two ways this object could be reinvented for other uses. They can write or draw their responses. Once students have drawn or written about an invention, they can walk the room for one minute sharing and comparing.

Squiggle Story: On a blank sheet of paper, whiteboard, or Promethean Board, draw one squiggly line. Give students one minute to stand and draw with their nondominant hand, turning the line into a picture or design of their choice.

Opposite Sides: Movement is critical to learning. Have students stand and blink with the right eye while snapping the fingers of their left hand. Repeat this with the left eye and right hand. Students could also face one another and tap the right foot once, left foot twice, and right foot three times, building speed they alternate toe tapping with their partner.

Symbolic Alphabet: Sing the alphabet with names of objects rather than the letters.

Other Languages: Teach sign language or make up a spoken language. In pairs, students take turns speaking or interpreting this new language for 30 seconds each.

Mental Math: Give a set of three instructions, counting the sequence to a partner for 30 seconds. Example: Count by two until 20, then count by three until 50, finishing with seven until 80. Switch and give the other partner another set of numbers to count.

Invisible Pictures: Have a student draw a picture in the air while their partner guesses what it is. You could give them categories such as foods or places, or other ways to narrow the guessing.

Story Starters: A student or teacher begins a story for one minute, either individually or with a partner. The students then complete or continue it with a silly ending.

Rock Scissors Paper Math: After players say, “Rock, paper, scissors,” the last call-out is “math.” With that call, students lay out one, two, three, or four fingers in the palm of their hand. The first player to say the correct sum of both players’ fingers wins.

A focused-attention practice is a brain exercise for quieting the thousands of thoughts that distract and frustrate us each day. When the mind is quiet and focused, we’re able to be present with a specific sound, sight, or taste.

Research repeatedly shows that quieting our minds ignites our parasympathetic nervous system, reducing heart rate and blood pressure while enhancing our coping strategies to effectively handle the day-to-day

challenges that keep coming. Our thinking improves and our emotions begin to regulate so that we can approach an experience with variable options.

For the following practices, the goal is to start with 60 to 90 seconds and build to five minutes.

Breathing: Use the breath as a focus point. Have students place one hand close to but not touching their nose and the other on their belly. As they breathe in, have them feel their bellies expand. As they exhale, they can feel the warm air hit their hand. Students will focus on this breath for only one minute. Let them know that it's OK when thoughts sometimes come into the mind uninvited. Tell them to exhale that thought away.

Colors: Visualize colors while focusing on the breath. Inhale a deep green, and exhale a smoky gray. Have students imagine the colors as swirling and alive with each inhale. If a student is de-escalating from an angry moment, the color red is a great color to exhale.

Movement: This one is for younger children. Direct students to stand and, as they inhale, lift an arm or leg and wiggle it, exhaling it back to its original position. For younger grades beginning these focused-attention practices, it's good to include an inhale and exhale with any type of movement.

The Deep-Dive Breath: Have students inhale for four counts, hold for four, and exhale for four counts. You can increase the holding of breath by a few seconds once the students find the rhythm of the exercise.

Energizing Breath: Have students pant like a dog with their mouths open and their tongues out for 30 seconds, and then continue for another 30 seconds with their mouths closed, taking short breaths with one hand on the belly. We typically take three energizing pant breaths per second. After a full minute, have students do the deep-dive breath.

Sound: The use of sound is very powerful for engaging a calm response. In the three classrooms where I teach, we use rain sticks, bells, chimes, and music. There are many websites that provide music for focus, relaxation, and visualization. Here is one of my favorites.

Rise and Fall: As we breathe in and out through our noses, we can lie on the floor and place an object on our stomachs, enhancing our focus by watching the rising and falling of our bellies.

When we're focused and paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and choices, we have a much greater opportunity to change those thoughts and feelings that are not serving us well in life and in school. When we grasp this awareness, we see and feel the difference.