

## MANAGING DISTRACTIONS

To improve the effectiveness of the time you put into studying, work at recognizing and getting rid of distractions. The result will be an improved ability to focus on the task at hand, which means you'll be working, and using your time, more productively.

Distractions can be found in both your external and internal study "environments." By external study environment, we mean your study location. By internal, we mean your ability to control distracting thoughts and concentrate on your work. Maximizing the effectiveness of both these environments requires that you become aware of the distractions in each that impact on your learning.



### EXTERNAL STUDY ENVIRONMENT

Where you study can have a great deal to do with how effectively you study. Noise and other distractions considerably reduce your ability to concentrate on, and therefore engage with and retain, complex academic material. If you've been struggling to focus when studying, or if you feel that your concentration span is too short, take a good look at your external study environment.

#### NOISE

Probably the most common issue is noise - in almost any location there's the possibility of too much or not enough. If you're bothered by external noises you can't control, get an MP3 player if you don't already have one and invest in noise cancelling headphones rather than using ear buds. Listen to soft, soothing music. Research done at Stanford has suggested that listening to the music of Mozart, with its complex patterns, can even foster higher cognitive functions. The music should provide a soothing background sound to drown out the noise, rather than create a different kind of noise. If you require complete silence to work well, consider well-made, heavy duty earplugs (check at your local pharmacy) if you can't find a quiet enough location. For students who can't work in silence, an MP3 player can also help with locations that are too quiet.

## **DISTRACTIONS**

Residence is notorious for its distractions. Even the study areas are often used for other activities. If you find that you're having difficulties getting work done in your room or in the study lounge, the obvious solution is to find another spot. The library is an old favourite, and places like a quiet lounge in one of the teaching buildings or an empty classroom can work well too. And, although you'll see students attempting it, common sense should tell you that studying in a cafeteria or eating area can't possibly be effective.

## **WHOSE TIME IS IT, ANYWAY?**

Sometimes the circumstances are such that you just have to study in your room, or perhaps it's your preferred location. The most difficult distraction to deal with sometimes isn't noise - it's interruptions from friends and floor mates. Part of the residence subculture may dictate that it's not "cool" to study, plan your time, work hard, or get high grades. There may be a lot of peer pressure to participate in activities that won't contribute to your academic success. And sometimes it's really hard to say no. If you find it difficult to turn down offers to socialize, learn to say "yes - but later" when others issue invitations but you need to get something done. Don't let floor mates, friends, or a boy/girlfriend plan your time for you. By negotiating a time that suits your needs, you can help protect the thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours you're investing to get your degree.

## **GET PHYSICAL**

- Whether you live in residence, an apartment, or at home, put visual distractions like photos or posters where you can't see them when sitting at your desk. Instead, put up a list of your goals or post the total amount of money you've spent so far to go to university to remind you of why you are here.
- The keyboard on your computer should be low enough that you don't need to raise your forearms to reach it. Often a keyboard tray is necessary to accomplish the correct typing height, since the standard desk height is too high for most people. Without this, a repetitive movement injury like carpal tunnel syndrome is a real risk.
- Your chair should be comfortable with good back support, but not so cushy that it encourages napping.
- Proper lighting is essential to minimize eye strain and fatigue. You need both ambient light (general room lighting like the ceiling fixture) as well as task lighting - a good desk lamp for reading and writing. It's particularly hard on your eyes if you work in a dark room with only a desk light or the computer on.
- The temperature should be warm enough that your hands and feet don't get cold, but not so warm that the room gets stuffy and you get sleepy. Some residence rooms can be extremely warm, especially in spring and fall when the temperature fluctuates a lot. Keep a supply of shorts and t-shirts at school through the winter to wear when working in your room if the heating system seems uncontrollable.

## LEARNING BY ASSOCIATION

- Aim to build the association between your study location and working effectively. This important strategy can be particularly challenging for residence students who sleep, study and socialize, all in the same room. Like people who work at home, residence students may have problems drawing the line between work and play because everything happens in the same physical space.
- Start by making your desk your sacred study spot - don't sleep, eat, or talk on the phone while sitting there. If you need a nap, go somewhere else other than the spot where you're supposed to be learning; this applies to the library as well.
- The reverse of this notion is also true - if you try to read course material when sitting or lying on your bed, you'll likely get sleepy because your body associates this place with sleeping. If you read on your bed a lot, eventually you could have trouble falling asleep because your body will come to associate being in that spot with studying rather than sleeping.

## INTERNAL STUDY ENVIRONMENT

### PHYSICAL DISTRACTIONS

Irregular sleep, exercise and eating patterns can be the unsuspected cause of concentration difficulties. Some students may not realize the connection between physical health and intellectual functioning. Finding a regimen that works for you and sticking to it can help to maintain your brain at its physiological peak. Time planning strategies such as working study periods around your body's energy highs and lows will ensure that your physical ability to concentrate will be at its best.

### SELF TALK

Many people are not aware that as they perform tasks, including studying, they are talking silently to themselves. "Self talk" can be motivating - praising accomplishments, helping to sort out what to do next, monitoring progress and achievement. However, if it becomes overly critical, self talk can have a negative effect on concentration. Have you ever started to write a paper, then given up in frustration because you can't even get through the first sentence? An overly critical "inner editor" may be the culprit. Comparing your abilities to other's and having unrealistic expectations about how long or well you "should" be able to concentrate may also contribute to negative self talk. With some coaching, you can learn to manage a lot of this distracting internal chatter. For more information on the services available, contact Counselling Services at ext. 53244, or visit the Counselling Services website.

## **PERSONAL ISSUES**

You'll be one of the lucky few if you can make it through university without having to cope with studying through some kind of personal disaster. Even something as common place as a breakup with a boy/girlfriend can cause a major disruption in your ability to concentrate. For the most part, these disruptions are short term, and the ability to concentrate normally returns quickly. Serious situations, or minor ones which seem to carry on, warrant outside help. Don't hesitate to get assistance from the Counselling unit. Contact [Counselling Services](#), 3rd floor, UC, ext. 53244 for free, professional and confidential assistance.

Sometimes personal issues combine with self-talk for a kind of double-whammy distraction. Here's an example. It's Monday and you're trying to work on a paper that's due at the end of the week, but your mind keeps wandering back to the big fight you had with your parents on the weekend. That's the distracting personal issue. Whenever you notice that your mind has wandered, the self talk kicks in: "Why can't I focus? I've got to get that fight out of my mind and get this paper done! I hate this. . . why does this always happen? I'm getting so frustrated I could scream!" and on and on and on...

It's bad enough that your mind keeps wandering, but when the self talk chimes in, it starts a downward spiral away from the task. A bandaid-type approach to dealing with this (but one that works for many students) is to use a refocusing strategy when you become aware that your mind has wandered. The objective of these strategies is to cut off the self talk before it takes you spinning further and further away from concentrating on the task.

### **THE "DESIGNATE A TIME" STRATEGY**

One refocussing strategy is called "designate a time." Setting a time to think about a problem can help reduce the amount of time that your mind spends wandering back to it. When you notice that you're not concentrating, say to yourself, "I'll think about that at 4 o'clock. Back to work." No criticizing, no guilt tripping, no worrying about how often it happens - just get back to work. Then, at 4 o'clock or whatever time you've chosen, sit down and think through whatever is bothering you.

### **THE "CHECKMARK" STRATEGY**

Another useful refocussing strategy is called the "checkmark" technique. Keep a piece of paper beside you as you're studying. Whenever you notice that your mind has wandered, put a checkmark on the paper and get back to work. Again, the point is to get refocussed quickly, without the usual self-talk sermon. If you keep track of the time spent studying, the checkmark technique also provides an indication of how many times your mind wandered during a particular study session. This can help determine the time of day when you concentrate the best, and indicate whether your concentration is improving as a result of trying the checkmark technique or the "designating a time" strategy described above.