

Year 11

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# Teen Daydreaming: a bit of idleness can go a long way



JACK HUNT SCHOOL PARENT NEWSLETTER

## Exam prep starts now

This may be something drives most parents to distraction in their teenage offspring, but an unfocused, daydreaming mind might actually be an essential part of the learning process.

### Losing control

Barbara Oakley, a professor of engineering at Oakland University in California suggests that there are two modes of thinking: focused attention - the head-in-a-textbook kind of concentration typically associated with exam revision; and the 'default' or 'diffuse' mode - essentially, just letting your thoughts wander.

### The 'Default Mode Network'

This is one of the hottest topics in neuroscience at the moment, although it was officially discovered in 2001 when neuroscientist Marcus Raichle revealed a characteristic pattern of baseline (default) activity in certain areas of the brain during periods of mind-wandering, which quickly switches off when attention is directed towards a task.

Studies now suggest that we spend 30-50% of our daily life in this default mode; if you're the one doing the ironing or washing up in your house, you probably already know this. This state is associated with what neuroscientists call 'internal mentation' - thinking and reflecting, lost in one's own thoughts rather than focusing on the external world. As the mind roams free, we think through scenarios and daydream, looking at different options and potential outcomes.

### What's the point?

Researchers are now suggesting that this mind-wandering is actually essential for emotional and social growth, and that the ability to switch quickly between the default mode and outwardly-focused attention tends to be found in people with better reading and memory skills.

### Really?

Yes! Furthermore, it has also been shown that people with stronger connections between different parts of their default network do better on cognitive tasks such as comprehension tests, something that every student will face in GCSE English this summer.

### So what?

Professor Oakley thinks that this is where we are all missing a trick:

"When you focus in on a task you know how to

do, you're only using a certain way of perceiving the world and running certain brain patterns that you are already familiar with... but this doesn't work if you're learning something new."



For example, if you already know how to multiply, you simply use brain patterns you already have to complete a multiplication. However, if you try to learn something new like division, you start by trying to use the multiplication brain patterns you are familiar with, but then get frustrated as they won't work. It turns out that the brain's way of analyzing the completely new patterns you need but have never experienced often requires the mental ability to step back and use a more diffuse kind of thinking to work it out.

So, two types of thinking - focused and fluffy - are both needed for learning, but not at the same time. It is also worth knowing that the focused will always override default thinking, but that in order to learn something, switching off allows the problem to rumble away in the background for your brain to figure out for itself. Therefore, if they're stuck or just overwhelmed by some work, encourage your child to go for a walk, have a bath, do something that allows them to relax and daydream.



# Mindfulness: not a load of old rubbish

Mindfulness is essentially the use of simple breathing techniques and meditation to reduce stress and anxiety and boost levels of concentration and attention. So, ideal for Year 11s! With practice, mindfulness allows you to deal with any negative feelings and allows you to focus on the moment. So, mindfulness should help students feel more in control, maximise their performance and reduce any feelings of anxiety or stress they might be experiencing during Year 11. Do this with your child and, who knows, it might help you out as well.

## Okay, so how do I do it?

Try this simple exercise as a starting point. It is called ‘**Puppy Mind**’....

Sit upright somewhere comfortable and when you have a bit of time to yourself when you won’t be interrupted.

Focus on your body, the feeling of the floor and the chair against you, the sensation of clothing against your skin.

Become aware of the breath as it enters your body and then leaves your body. Just follow your breathing - in and out, in and out - without trying to change it in any way.

Focus on the way that each breath moves your body in a gentle rocking motion as your abdomen rises in and out with each breath. Notice each breath, whether it is warm or cold, rough or smooth, long or short.

Notice the pause between each breath. Don’t change anything, just focus on what is happening.

Like a puppy, you will find that your mind will wander away from your focus on your breathing to thoughts, planning, daydreams, worries. Like a puppy, your mind will wander off to explore. This is fine and normal. When you notice that your focus is no longer on your breath, congratulate yourself - you are back and once more focused on the experience. Put the thought to one side and, like a puppy, guide your mind back to focusing on each breath, the sensations in your lower abdomen as you breathe. Using your breath as the anchor, gently reconnect to the present moment and relax...



## So how you breathe matters?

Yes. In fact, breathing is the most important thing to practice and is something that your child can make good use of if they find themselves getting stressed out in any situation - for example, when they are about to go into a big GCSE exam. We will talk to your child about ‘**Breathing like a baby**’ as it is also something that can help them put their phone down and get to sleep each night...

Focus on your breathing and gradually slow it down to a comfortable, gentle rate.

Put your hand on your tummy. Remind yourself how much you love your tummy.

Now focus on moving your **tummy out** as you **breathe in**. This is how a baby breathes, before they get all stressed about silly things that don’t really matter. Force yourself to move your tummy out as you breathe in. Then your tummy moves in as you breathe the air out. Slowly. Slowly...

As you do this, you will see how much more air and oxygen you are getting into your body. If you breathe by lifting your shoulders and keeping your tummy sucked in, you cannot fill your lungs properly, so you don’t get the full benefit of every breath. Also, you are likely to tense up when you breathe like that. If you can train yourself to breathe like a baby, you will get more oxygen and feel better.

Every time you feel worried about something or just can’t make sense of something in your revision, step away from it and try to breathe like a baby for a little while. Honestly, this will make a real difference!



**So, relax, focus and keep breathing!**