

Pause Breathe Smile Enrichment / Follow-On Lesson

Focus

Experiential practice: "Sitting Like a Mountain"

Content:

Did you know that we can only really pay attention to one thing at a time? Even though our brains are very good at taking in lots of information at once passively, we cannot use our noticing mind to truly pay attention to more than one thing in any given moment.

Lots of us, including adults, try to do something called "multi-task," which means juggling two or three or four things at a time. For example, you might try to write a short assignment while watching a tv show or talk with a friend at the same time as sort of listening to your teacher. But the reality is, you aren't doing two things at once. You're asking your brain to do something called "constant task switching." Your brain is going back and forth between the two things, which may seem like it works, until you miss something important in one of the two things you're paying attention to!

Also, scientists have found that constant task switching takes a lot of our brain's energy. We don't do as good of a job on either thing, or enjoy either as much (for instance, we get more tired and irritable), as we would if we paid full attention to one and then moved on to the other.

There are exceptions to this, of course. For example, when someone gets very good at a physical skill, like cooking, riding a bike, or doing something with their hands, the part of the brain that is responsible for that movement, called the motor cortex, handles the situation. But that takes a lot of practice and even then, if something new or unusual comes up, the whole brain must switch to pay attention to it.

In one experiment, scientists found that students receiving text messages when taking a test did 20-30% worse than students who didn't have their phones on! That's because the brain takes a long time to refocus back on the task that the students were doing before they were interrupted.

The best way to do anything is to give it your full attention, and we can get better and better at noticing when our attention is divided.

We do this by practicing and strengthening our attention muscle over and over again. It doesn't have to be for long stretches of time; even just a minute or two of bringing your noticing to one thing, like your breath, the sounds around you, a cloud, your heartbeat, can calm you down and give you another boost of benefit for your focus.

Experiential practice: "Strengthening Attention"

Additional Guided practices to try out: "Mindful Listening", "Dropping Anchor", "Filling the Balloon"

Note for Teachers:

This enrichment activity can be delivered as one complete lesson or you could break it down into chunks across a series of days. Feel free to use it in a way that makes sense with your learners in your context.