



You might say...

"I sometimes wonder what's going on for some of my students. Today Julie seemed to be lost in space—when I asked her what was wrong she started but couldn't explain. Half the group didn't do the work I set for them last week and the very students I planned the class for today didn't show up—grrrrrrr. It's so frustrating.

Then there are those new women: Esther talked a lot about what she wanted to learn—she seemed so keen—but only came for a couple of days and I haven't seen her since. Bev seems like a different person some days than others—I don't know what's going on—or how to teach her."

I can't teach the students who aren't really there.

...but did you know:

Julie might be lost in space, and other students, like Esther, stop and start and miss class because they live with the aftermath of violence.

Violence can lead many of us to learn to space out—leave our bodies and take our mind somewhere else. Often called dissociation or day-dreaming, this may have been vital to survive an unbearable situation, but it may become such a habit that we don't know when we are doing it.

The more that violence has shaped our nervous system, the less anxiety is needed for us to space out. When this happens a lot we may look lazy or unmotivated, mentally ill, or learning or intellectually disabled.



Too much violence can make reality totally unbearable.

In the face of threat that feels life-threatening we prepare to fight, flee, or freeze. Those who are unable to flee or fight, especially babies and young children, become totally immobile, freezing like a deer in the headlights. Repeated experiences of threat can lead even the tiniest change to feel terrifying, triggering this response. When triggered, the frontal lobe of the brain—the area of complex thought—closes down while the blood supply goes elsewhere preparing for survival. Frequent repetition strengthens this pathway that makes the frontal lobe—and our path to learning—close down. Although it was originally a vital response to a threat, it may become an automatic response to change or a slight risk.

Some student absences from class may be because escape into alcohol, or recreational or prescription drugs, is a way they can “space out” and get relief from unbearable anxiety. Students and others may struggle with addiction and may use the substance more if school or work is too stressful. Too much violence can make reality totally unbearable. Some people, for whom school was a safe place, escape into the world of the mind as a way to leave the unpleasantness of body behind and may do well at school (often at a cost of physical health). Too much violence can also lead to a more permanent escape from the real world into “craziness,” a fragmented self, (Bev may be an example) and a diagnosis of mental illness.

Students may:

- miss all or part of a lesson or course and find it hard to fully understand the whole
- space out and run away from things that make them anxious, so that they miss tests, fail to complete work on time, blank and completely “forget” assignments
- be restless and have trouble getting started, or persisting with a task
- be inexplicably unable to hear, or see, or read – whenever they get anxious
- often arrive late to class, and stop and start again repeatedly
- have trouble trusting other students, the teacher, or even trusting their own knowing
- seem not too “bright,” as if “no one is home,” or simply a little odd



What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Make it OK to space out

- **Introduce the different faces of spacing out**, and help everyone to see them as everyday common occurrences for many people, students and teachers alike.

2. Help students to stay present

- **Think and talk about what everyone can do** to make the classroom, tests, and assignments feel safer, and lead to as few anxious reactions as possible.
- **Talk with students having difficulty about what might help them stay present.** Look for what you or the group can do—for example, avoid shouting—and things the individual can do. For instance they might be less likely to space if they sit near the door or where they cannot easily look out the window (and “leave” with whatever is passing by).
- **Teach everyone ways to soothe, step down from anxiety, and ground in the present:** include such things as rubbing the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other hand, rubbing their hands on their thighs, breathing exercises, and meditation.
- **Provide pipe cleaners, modeling clay, or stress balls.** Explain to students that fiddling with these might help them stay present. Encourage them to try them out.

3. Make it OK to leave


- **Recognize that sometimes a person may be too caught in an old memory**, or too stressed, to stay present. Encourage them not to judge themselves if they space out.
- **Provide a comfortable chair in the corner of the room as a temporary retreat.** This may help students create a new pattern, instead of spacing out or leaving the room entirely when they are anxious.

4. Make it OK to return

- **Talk with individual students to see whether you can help them return** when they space out. What helps one person might be wrong for another person. One person might want you to touch their shoulder, another to call their name gently, and another to ignore them until they can bring themselves back to the present.
- **Call students who miss class to encourage them to return.** Welcome them back with no hint of criticism if you can.

5. Make it OK to need help

- **It is ordinary; most of us need help at some point in our lives.** Bring therapists and counsellors into the program and provide resource information.
- **Help students to understand connections between trauma, addictions, and illness.** Tell them about resources and programs. Try not to shame—remember you don’t know what they “should” do. Encourage them to explore resources when they are ready.



Where can I find more information and ideas?

Each of the six information sheets in this set will look at a learning problem through a typical journal entry and give more information about what might lead to the problems practitioners see.

Go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net>

In the **Impacts of violence on learning:**
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact.htm>

...especially **Spacing out, Silence, Missing school.**

Go to **Helping others learn:**
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

..and **When you feel bad:**
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself/whenyoufeelbad.htm>

This is one in a set of six information sheets for adult literacy practitioners on learning and violence, written by Jenny Horsman, Spiral Community Resource Group. Funded by literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT and BC. October 2009. For more information:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/>

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What is literacy?


Literacy is **the** essential skill.


It is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.


It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our own lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

How to reach us...

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