Getting Ready for a Return to Learning

Going back to school can be challenging for adults. You have to create space and time for school in your already busy life and manage multiple demands. One of the things you will need to do is manage distractions.

Let's be honest, we all struggle with distractions to some degree. Distractions can take many forms, including our phones, computers, friends, or our own thoughts. In college, distractions can be even more numerous than in high school, because there are so many new opportunities and experiences available. Additionally, most college students have more flexibility and less structure in college than they did in high school. Whether you're learning remotely or living on campus, you may have long periods of unstructured time when you will have to decide how to use your time wisely. Usually, no one else is there to keep you on task—you're in charge of making your own schedule and focusing when it's time to study.

Many students struggle to stay focused and end up not getting the most out of their study sessions. Then they sometimes find they need to cram at the last minute to get work finished. Fortunately, there are many strategies you can use to keep yourself free of distractions. This section of the module shares strategies to manage internal and external distractions so that you can maximize your focus (and your success) in college.

Managing Internal Distractions

Internal distractions are the result of your own thoughts and emotions. These can include thoughts about pressing responsibilities or pleasant things that you'd rather be doing. This can also include emotions about life circumstances, the task you are working on, fears, and worries. Circumstances like major world events and personal struggles can also be sources of internal distractions. Below are some tips to help you manage your internal distractions.

Make a daily plan:
- Schedule time for each task that you have to do. Plan to work in short chunks (no more than one hour at a time) and then take a break! Incorporating breaks will help you stay focused during your work time.
- Incorporate a change of scenery. Take a break by going on a short walk around your neighborhood or apartment complex.
- Discover the best time of day for you to tackle challenging assignments. Doing the most challenging tasks first thing in the morning can help prevent getting caught up with distractions, but do what works best for you.
- Discover where you study best. Does working in your bed make you tired? Try studying somewhere you designate exclusively for work, like a desk, a comfy chair in your house, a coffee shop, or the library.
- Incorporate movement and fun. Make sure to schedule in time to participate in activities that you enjoy each day and week. Add some movement or exercise into your daily schedule. This could mean taking a fitness class at the gym, going on a run, following an exercise video online, or dancing. Movement while studying can also help you stay focused.

Manage your thoughts while studying:
- Plan an activity to transition your mind for focus, like deep breathing or listening to music.
- Write down competing and distracting thoughts on a post-it or in a notebook and save them for later. This way, you won't forget about them, but you hopefully will be able to put them aside until you are done working.
- Consider building movement into your study time.

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Managing Internal Distractions

Get enough rest:
- Everyone is more distracted when tired. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep each night.

Set SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely):
- Having specific goals can help you stay on task and feel motivated.

Engage in self-talk:
- If you find your mind wandering when you should be working, tell yourself to get back on task and that you need to complete this work.
- Praise yourself and verbally reinforce positive behaviors. Tell yourself that you did a great job when you accomplish a task.
- Remind yourself that you are capable and just need to put forth more effort if you start thinking you don't have what it takes to succeed.
- Engage in self care and be kind to yourself. Make sure your goals are achievable and realistic. Focus on progress and growth. Remember that during challenging times, it can be easier to start with small goals and build from there.

Practice self-regulation:
- Self-regulation is when you use processes to be aware of and control your behaviours and thoughts. This will help you deal with distractions that can interfere with your learning. For example, move to another table when you are in the library and distracted by someone talking near you. If studying in your living room tempts you to talk with your roommates or your family, consider working in your bedroom.

Managing External Distractions

External distractions are ones that originate outside of you—things like technology (phones, social media, websites, YouTube, video games, Netflix), other people, or noises around you. Below are some tips for managing external distractions.

Pick a setting that is a good match for the academic task. Consider these questions before committing to a study location:
- Can you really stay focused in your dorm room or house when studying?
- How can you manage distractions within your home? Are there certain rooms that are quieter than others? Which areas of your home have the most foot traffic?
- What's better: a group setting or working alone?
- What's better: the library or a cozy spot in a coffee shop?

Consider the noise level you need to work productively:
- Do you work better with complete silence or a little background noise?
- Do you need earplugs or headphones to cancel out surrounding noise?
- Try background sound. Play white noise on your computer, like rainymood, coffitivity, or simplynoise. Run a fan or play quiet music.
- Can you coordinate with your roommates or family to create "quiet zones" in certain spaces of your home depending on the time of day?

Getting Ready for a Return to Learning

Managing External Distractions

Seek accountability. Ask a friend, family member, roommate, or classmate to keep you accountable to your goals and fight against distractions. Here are some ways a friend/family member can help:

- Give your phone or laptop to a friend or roommate to hold onto when you are studying.
- Try studying with a friend or group to hold each other accountable to staying on task.
- Try studying virtually with a friend or classmate through video chat to help both of you stay accountable.

Take charge of technology distractions:

- Limit or bar yourself from unnecessary technology use during study and class times. This is another thing you can ask a friend to hold you accountable to.
- Leave your smartphone, laptop, etc. at home, in another room, or with a friend while studying.
- Use internet-blocking sites or self-management tools. You can put your device in airplane mode to disconnect entirely. There are also many programs and browser extensions that can help you limit internet access:
- LeechBlock: "a Firefox add-on that lets you specify which sites to block and when to block them."
- Stay Focused: A Google Chrome extension that "restricts...time you can spend on time-wasting websites. Once your allotted time has been used up, the sites you have blocked will be inaccessible for the rest of the day."
- Mac Freedom "...locks you away from the internet on Mac or Windows computers for up to eight hours at a time..."
- Self Control: "an OS X application which blocks access to incoming and/or outgoing mail servers and websites for a predetermined period of time."

Material in this section was sourced from:

The Learning Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/managing-college-stress/