**Work Readiness Activity #8: Managing Your Environment to Increase Attention**

"Wealth is the power to choose.

Financial wealth is the power to choose how to spend money.

Social wealth is the power to choose who to hang out with.

Time wealth is the power to choose how to spend your day.

**Mental wealth is the power to choose how to spend your attention**." (Clear, 2020)

Research shows that a contributing factor to being happy is staying present and savoring the moment, acknowledging our current physical and emotional state. In past activities, and in the most recent newsletter, we discussed the importance of staying engaged, taking an active role in our life (including career development), and practicing gratitude, mindfulness, and meditation. We can engage in these internal practices to work on building the muscles in our brain which control mind wandering. In a study by Dan Gilbert and Matthew A. Killingsworth, findings revealed that “people were less happy when their minds were wandering than when they were not. … A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost.” (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010)

Gaining control of our focus and decreasing mind wandering can feel very difficult at first, and our surrounding environment can make this a smoother process or even more trying. External factors (i.e. people, technology, sounds/noises, lighting and visual movements, temperature, cleanliness and comfort level of workspace) play a significant role in our ability to focus, quiet our wandering minds, and live a productive life. In this week’s activity, we are going to dig a bit deeper into attention management, specifically exploring ways to decrease distractions by managing our environment. The environment/surroundings can truly make or break productivity and goals/intentions you set for work, school, and your personal lives. School and work can demanding enough, why make things more difficult on yourself? **Work smarter, not harder!**

**First:** “Take a look around your living space? Have you set it up to make achieving your goal easier? Are your goals and intentions visible? If you have something you want to accomplish (write a paper, read a book, search the web, play your guitar), can you just walk right in and do it? Or do you have to clean up a bunch of junk first and remove last night’s pizza crusts … ? Your personal environment plays a big role in shaping your dreams. … When you’re trying to set new goals and move forward in your career plans, it’s important that your lifestyle support those plans.” (Brooks, 2009, p. 159)

**Next:** Review this article from The Learning Center at UNC Chapel Hill to learn more about distractions and strategies to manage them: <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/take-charge-of-distractions/>

**Then:** Check out and utilize this priorities worksheet or use it as a reference when creating your personal to-do list: <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/files/2017/07/Priorities-Worksheet_must-do_should-do_could-do-S17.pdf>

As you may remember, I first introduced ideas from James Clear in Work Readiness Activity #6, featuring his video presentation, *Atomic Habits: How to Get 1% Better Every Day.*

For today’s activity, I’ve pulled together suggestions that I think you will find the most relevant quoted from James Clear’s article, *The Productivity Guide: Time Management Strategies That Work,* which areas follows:

1. **Turn your phone off and leave it in another room.**

Or on your colleague's desk. Or at the very least, put it somewhere that is out of sight. This eliminates the urge to check text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and so on. This simple strategy eliminates the likelihood of slipping into half–work where you waste time dividing your attention among meaningless tasks.

1. **Work in a cool place.**

Have you ever noticed how you feel groggy and sluggish in a hot room? Turning the temperature down or moving to a cooler place is an easy way to focus your mind and body.

1. **Sit up or stand up.**

When you sit hunched over, your chest is in a collapsed position and your diaphragm is pressing against the bottom of your lungs, which hinders your ability to breathe easily and deeply. Sit up straight or stand up and you’ll find that you can breathe easier and more fully. As a result, your brain will get more oxygen and you’ll be able to concentrate better.

1. **Develop a “pre–game routine” to start your day.**

My morning routine starts by pouring a cold glass of water. Some people kick off their day with ten minutes of meditation. Similarly, you should have a sequence that starts your morning ritual. This tiny routine signals to your brain that it’s time to get into work mode or exercise mode or whatever mode you need to be in to accomplish your task. Additionally, a pre–game routine helps you overcome a lack of motivation and get things done even when you don’t feel like it.

Feel free to check out the full article <https://jamesclear.com/productivity> for more productivity strategies.

I encourage you to give these a try (in addition to the suggestions above from The Learning Center at UNC Chapel Hill) and brainstorm ways in which you can create a positive environment to build your goals and habits.

**Tech Tip:**

Focus Assist on Windows 10

<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/help/4026996/windows-10-turn-focus-assist-on-or-off>

**Consider and answer these questions, then share your responses with us:**

1. What strategies can you identify that are already working for you and that you will continue to incorporate to limit external distractions?
2. What changes can you make to your environment to increase productivity and decrease distractions? Implement them!
3. Why are these changes necessary and how will they help you stay focused on the present?
4. “What is something that feels productive to you in the moment, but usually ends up wasting time and energy?” (Clear, 2020)

**Please email your responses to XXXX Staff Member by XXX. As always, please speak up and reach out if you need support or would like to talk through any of these strategies and ideas.**

**References**

Brooks, K. (2009). *You majored in what?: Mapping your path from chaos to career*, 159.

Clear, J. (n.d.). *The productivity guide: Time management strategies that work*. James Clear. <https://jamesclear.com/productivity>

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Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilbert, D. T. (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science, 330*, 932.

<http://www.danielgilbert.com/KILLINGSWORTH%20&%20GILBERT%20(2010).pdf>