

Brain Breaks

A wise investment strategy for your mental capital

The Basics

Understanding the brain health value of taking an intentional Brain Break can change everything. Think about the last time you were reading an article, a report or a book and suddenly realized that you could not remember reading those last three paragraphs or the last three pages. Your brain may not technically have been full, but it certainly reached a point of diminishing returns. A hard-working but “tired” brain needs a few moments to “recharge” by thinking about something else. In other words, STOP for a moment and do something to reset and renew your brain’s capacity to absorb or create that next thought. Or maybe it needs to refuel with a bit more oxygen and/or glucose delivered with an intentional deep breath or a few extra heart beats per minute. Keep in mind that your brain is 2% of your body mass but can at times consume well over 20% of your oxygen and glucose intake.



About our Brain Breaks

We invented Brain Breaks in 2004 while teaching brain health courses in Salem, Oregon. We realized that regardless of the topic there were consistent patterns. After about 8 to 10 minutes on any topic, we repeatedly observed minds wandering and sometimes eyes drooping or glazing over. So, we tried surprising the students. Building upon the title of Jerome Kagan’s book “*Surprise, Uncertainly and Mental Structure*”, we “surprised” the brains of these students by suddenly, seemingly at random moments, shifting gears for brief unscheduled detours. These should never be confused with the traditional model of “*Let’s take a five minute break.*” To be effective, Brain Breaks need to be, to some extent, random. If you are listening, really listening for it, your brain will tell you. It will let you when it needs a break but you’ll hear it only if you are on the alert for those signals.

Our Brain Breaks evolved into strategic teaching points that recognized the physical challenges facing anyone who is trying to use their brain to “think” for periods of time, especially while remaining in the same position. When sitting still, your oxygen intake and pulse rate and therefore your blood flow are at minimal levels. The blood flow that delivers the brain’s fuel, oxygen and glucose, is down to a smooth pace, think trickle. When you are thinking hard as well as sitting still, your brain requires the body to send additional fuel to the brain. When that brain is absorbing new, sometimes complex information or is working with previously encoded and stored thoughts, there are predictable points of diminishing returns. This is when that hard thinking brain begins to sputter as though they are nearly out of gas and finally slows to a crawl. Your neurons actually do “get tired”. You think to yourself: *What did that speaker just say? What was I going with this? What were those last three pages about?*

What counts as a Brain Break? How often? For how long?

This territory is somewhat uncharted and certainly varies with each brain. While groups need that element of surprise, planned Brain Breaks can also refuel . . . one mind at a time. My MINDRAMP partner, Michael Patterson came up with a design for his regular research and writing schedules. He noticed the need and devised a pattern of 17-minutes of brain work followed by intentional Brain Breaks of 2 to 4 minutes with a sweet spot of three minutes. This allows three brain cycles per hour of work: THINK – MOVE – THINK – MOVE - THINK”. During those types of planned breaks, we suggest that you not start talking on the cell phone or get online or on a social network. That will all be there when you finish your planned work session. Music, short podcasts or a few minutes of an audio book are fine. Radio music is OK even with a few commercials but talk radio just won't work. A “Walk & Talk” with another person, however, might just provide a high-octane Brain Break benefit.

So, until your Brain Break becomes a brain healthy habit for you, we suggest that you set a gentle alarm to remind you to start and finish of your break. You might even try setting your timer on your smart phone to give you a “two-minute warning”. At the 15-minute mark, you are signaling yourself that you have 120 seconds to “wrap up and store”, just for a few moments, whatever you are doing. End the phone call, make a note or two, complete and send that email. Then take your mind away for its well earned Brain Break.

In 2009, our presentation at Oxford included these Brain Break techniques and also used them throughout our all-day Smithsonian brain health seminar. We now deploy them whenever and wherever we teach, train or present. Every course we teach begins with the basics of taking a Brain Break. Here's some of the 2014 feedback from an encore learner, a retired marketing professional, planning to make a difference in the field of Gerontology:

I take intentional Brain Breaks often especially when I have a big paper to write. It helps me remember what I saw and heard on a video or what I read. It makes a huge difference on how I study and do my assignments. I love my Brain Breaks.
Sarah Curran Barrett, Portland, OR.

Our Top Brain Break Secret? MOVE!

Stand up, sit down, and stand up again. Raise your arms up, wave them around, and maybe stretch them. Walk around. Take a deep breath of oxygen. Do something other than whatever temporarily numbed your brain. Do what the forward thinking corporations are doing: (1) Schedule times for regular brain breaks and (2) then do your mind a favor by keeping those *brain-healthy* appointments.



Roger Anunsen is a brain health strategist, a principal in MINDRAMP Consulting and teaches college gerontology courses in Portland, OR including “*The Aging Mind.*” For more information visit www.mindramp.org