Helping Students Stay Focused

Are you feeling tired, worn out, and barely getting by? So are many students, and that is the focus of this teaching tip. I work at a community college that has a very diverse student population, and part of my job is to support student learners. When they come to me for help with learning strategies, I usually start the conversation by asking, “How are you doing?” In my mind, I’m curious about how they are managing notetaking, homework, exams, etc. But, inevitably, one of the most common answers I get is, “I’m so tired.” This tells me that their physical need for sleep may not be getting met. I get that; faculty and staff are tired too. While we can’t control what happens off campus, we can control what happens while they are with us. My goal is to give students strategies to deal with being tired, and provide suggestions to instructors so that they can help students focus while they are in class.

One of the first things that instructors can do is acknowledge that we understand that students have busy lives and often can’t control the amount of time they have to sleep or relax. One way to do this is on the first day of class have a brief discussion about life and responsibilities outside of college. Let the students know that you understand that their lives are busy and that they do the best they can to juggle all of life’s demands. In addition to acknowledging their struggle, we can also offer them suggestions that will help them stay awake and attentive in class.

Share with students numerous strategies that they can use to help them stay awake and focused during class time. If we lay them out on the table at the very beginning of the term, students will know that we “get it” and are trying to support them. Some strategies that we can suggest include:

1. **Sit in the front** – This may not be a popular choice, but students who sit front and center are less likely to nod off. Making a conscious decision to be there is a good first start.

2. **Take deep breaths** – It is amazing how just one minute of deep breathing can refresh and focus the mind. Taking slow deep breaths in through the nose and exhaling slowly through the mouth is the secret. Everyone can benefit from this simple technique.

3. **Chew gum** – Just the simple act of chewing gum may enhance alertness and sustained attention. The effects may not last long, so save the gum for the middle of class when the fading often begins.

4. **Bring a water bottle** – Since our brains are made up of mostly water, staying hydrated is very important. Drinking water improves concentration and cognition, maintains memory function, and increases blood flow and oxygen to the brain. When the sluggish feeling starts to hit, take a drink.

5. **Lift arms/feet off the table/floor** – Instead of resting arms on the table and feet on the floor, try raising them 3 inches off of the surface. This muscle tension and activity will keep the brain active.
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6. **Write/draw/doodle** – Most students attempt to take notes during lectures, but many struggle to keep up and end up giving up completely. One option for them is to write phrases, draw simple pictures, or doodle. This strategy helps students connect to the concepts which leads to better retention.

7. **Stretch in your seat** – Simply sitting up straight, extending arms and legs, and switching positions is often enough to get blood circulating and to the brain.

8. **Use fidget toys** – We recently held a faculty workshop and provided a basket with fidget toys on each table. The participants were very appreciative and used the squishy balls, pipe cleaners, spinners etc. when they started to lose focus. If faculty need that support, we know students do too! Suggest that students bring their own manipulatives and allow them to use them during class.

9. **Stand up** – Allow students to move to the side or back of the room to stand up if they are feeling sleepy. After all, wouldn’t it be better to have a room of standing students than one full of sleeping ones?

10. **Get a little sunlight** – If possible, get a little sunlight before going to class. Because sunlight has an alerting effect on the body, a short walk outside may provide a mental boost.

These suggestions may seem simple, but often students aren’t aware of the difference a few little strategies can make. By giving them tools that they can use, we are empowering them to take control of their learning. Once they know that we are empathetic to their situation and want to support them, they will be more comfortable using the suggested strategies. If we see them using the methods, we will know that they are making an attempt and can acknowledge their efforts.

If the class in general is starting to seem lethargic, then maybe it’s time for a whole class activity that will bring them back. Maybe everyone could stand up and stretch or practice deep breathing together. Students may be reluctant at first, but after they see the benefits and realize they are more focused after using some of these tactics, they will appreciate the opportunity.

Finally, by acknowledging that students have legitimate reasons for being tired and giving them strategies to deal with tiredness, we are building rapport with them. The benefits are two-fold. The students will get more out of class because they are alert and attentive, and instructors will get more out of them!

Submitted by:
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