

How Getting Used To Silence Can Help Your Productivity



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Sitting alone in a quiet place can be a difficult experience. Without distractions, we can feel bombarded by unpleasant thoughts and emotions. All the ways we're unhappy about ourselves and our lives come raging back into our awareness when there's space for them to come up.

It's no surprise, then, that our culture is hostile to silence. Everywhere we go, it seems, we're confronted with some kind of noise—whether it's background music in stores and restaurants, cars and airplanes going by, or something else. And when we're alone, we often find ourselves habitually switching on the TV or radio to fill the emptiness.

Why Being With Silence Is Important

However, the ability to be with silence is critical to getting our work done efficiently and enjoyably. My sense is that, for most of us, our work requires us to spend large amounts of time focusing on a single task in silence. Although phone calls and e-mails come in occasionally, the bulk of our time is devoted to working on that computer program, presentation, or other creative project.

If we haven't learned to tolerate quiet, we get jittery and distractible, and find ourselves putting off our work to avoid the experience. As psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi puts it in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, "unless one learns to tolerate and even enjoy being alone, it is very difficult to accomplish any task that requires undivided concentration." But when emptiness no longer bothers us, we can hold our attention on our task with little effort.

I think this is one reason lots of us have trouble putting into practice the productivity tips we find in books, seminars and blog posts. Many writers on time management advise us to unplug our phone and e-mail, and eliminate other sources of distraction, while we're doing important tasks. However, they don't tell us what to do when we can't deal with the quiet that results.

Phasing Out Self-Distractions

How do we get accustomed to silence? One useful exercise, I've found, is to start eliminating all the ways we create background noise in our lives outside work. Some examples include:

Leave the car radio off. Driving can be a stressful experience, and many of us use the car radio to "take the edge off." But if we learn to be with the "edgy," unnerving feeling of driving in silence, dealing with the same feeling at work becomes easier.

Turn off the TV. When we get home at night, many of us habitually switch on the TV and "veg out," desperate for something to take our attention off our work. Instead, see if you can "veg out" in silence—try just sitting on your chair or couch with no stimulation. Many people are surprised at how tough this can be, but getting used to it can have a big positive impact on your work.

Leave the iPod at home. Many of us push silence away by keeping our headphones on throughout the day. While this drowns out our chattering minds, it also diverts some of our attention from what we're doing, so the quality of what we produce suffers.

I recommend doing this exercise gradually, phasing out your self-distractions one by one. For instance, on the first day of the week, you might try leaving the TV off; on the second day, you could drive to work without the car radio, and so on. Going completely "cold turkey" from background noise in a single day can be overwhelming for some people.

As I said earlier, when you bring silence into your life, you may be confronted with intense thoughts and sensations. The best way to handle these, in my experience, is to simply allow them to be. Keep breathing, relax your body, and allow each thought and feeling to pass away, without resisting or running from it.

What you'll discover, I suspect, is that the experiences you may have been drowning out with background noise actually aren't so threatening. Allowing your thoughts and feelings to be, just as they are, isn't likely to hurt you. And when your inner experience no longer seems so scary, you become able to concentrate on your work for longer periods of time, and maybe even start enjoying what you do.

Use of silence and wait time

Parker Palmer (1983) writing in *To Know as we are Known* offers some an excellent suggestion for improving the emotional climate of a learning experience. He recommends the use of silence. Although silence can be threatening at first, and probably most threatening for the teacher, **once students understand the use of silence in the class, it can be a powerful tool.** He recommends beginning each class with a period of silence. This allows for a time of settling in or centering down. When asking a question or whenever things seem to be confused, allowing a period of silence can help students to sort through their own thoughts and emotions. When a handful of students seem to dominate a class and others seem to be reluctant to participate, one can limit each student to speaking two times only during the class. Allowing time for all students to think before anyone responds can also encourage those who may feel threatened to gather their thoughts before speaking.



The use of wait time is a less drastic approach to ease the sense of threat. Very early in my teaching career a mentor taught me the importance of allowing my students enough time to formulate answers before jumping in to supply one. So often I focus on passing on information that I forget the students' need to process information. We remember in the brain function model that retrieving information from **long-term storage** can require some time, especially if the neural connections are not strong. Robin Fogarty (1997) points out that waiting three to ten seconds, which can appear as an almost interminable silence to an anxious teacher, encourages higher level thinking and more thoughtful answers. She suggests the following to use wait time most productively, thereby reducing stress, anxiety and the sense of threat:

- Wait at least three seconds after asking a question before letting a student begin a response. ...
- Wait at least three seconds after any response before continuing the question or asking a new one. The second wait-time recognizes the possibility that the student may wish to elaborate on the initial response and also gives other students an opportunity to see whether they agree or disagree and why.
- Avoid verbal signals, positive or negative, and leading phrases such as "Isn't it true that..." when asking questions.
- Eliminate mimicry, that is, repeating a response the student has just made.

However, in the case of ESOL students, repeating back what a student has just

said is a useful tool. It can be a way of reinforcing the student by indicating that the answer was comprehensible. Even in such situations though, when it is clear that everyone in the class has understood the comments of a foreign student, repeating the answer can make the student unsure that the response was comprehensible.

- Eliminate verbal rewards and negative sanctions such as ok, fine, good, right, yes, but.. Such comments can stifle on-going discussion.
- Ask "what else" to elicit multiple answers (p. 85)