

Mind wandering affects learning – students' perspective

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Introduction

Just like anyone else, medical students are also prone to distractions, which take their attention away from teaching and learning activities. There is a well-known ubiquitous phenomenon called 'mind wandering' (MW). MW can cause a student to become distracted during an academic activity, either by external or internally generated stimuli. MW may constitute up to 50% of waking time. MW is generally correlated with impairment of learning and negative effects on mood and health. This qualitative descriptive study was designed to explore the students' perspective on MW.

Material and methods

It is a phenomenological study with exploratory case study design and interpretive-constructivist perspective. After all necessary ethical considerations and approvals, 16 final year MBBS students of Azra Naheed Medical College (in equal number from both genders) were selected by convenient non-probability sampling technique. They were explored through semi-structured interviews from September 2017 to February 2018. Data recorded as audio files and notes were converted to verbatim and processed to themes and sub-themes.

Results and discussion

Many themes and sub-themes were identified through data analysis. Important themes included: understanding and experience of MW, impression, content and factors responsible for MW, negative and positive effects and solutions of MW. A majority of the students were of the opinion that mind wandering has negative impacts on their learning. They identified many responsible factors that may increase this phenomenon. A few of the students were of the opinion that MW also has some positive effects. Although generally considered as a phenomenon with negative effects on learning, many scientists raise an important question: how can a phenomenon occupying up to half of a person's waking life have only negative effects? Consequently, many beneficial effects are also attributed to MW, such as creativity, relief from boredom, problem solving and dishabituation.

Conclusion

MW as an important phenomenon must be understood by students as well as teachers. Solutions for MW, such as mental

exercises including mindfulness exercises, should be available to students. At the same time MW should also be understood as having many positive effects. An aware and trained student should be able to efficiently handle his/her mind wandering. ■

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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