

# 2

## *“I can’t teach the learners who aren’t really there ...”*

For Adult Literacy Practitioners

One of six info sheets about the effects of violence on learning

- ✓ Learn more about how violence affects learning.
- ✓ Identify approaches to program delivery that promote more effective teaching and learning.

Dealing with the impact of violence on learning is not as difficult as you might think. It may transform some of your most frustrating challenges, and lead to more success for everyone.

### Your journal might say ...



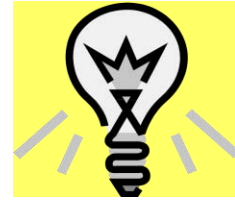
*“I sometimes wonder what’s going on for some of my learners. Today Julie seemed to be lost in space. When I asked her what was wrong she started but couldn’t explain.*

*Half the group didn’t do the work I set for them last week and the very learners I planned the class for today didn’t show up. GRRRRRRRRR. It’s so frustrating.*

*Then there are those new women. Esther talked a lot about what she wanted to learn. She seemed so keen, but only came for a couple of days and I haven’t seen her since. Bev seems like a different person some days than others. I don’t know what’s going on or how to teach her.”*



## But did you know ...



- ① Violence can teach a person to space out – to leave their body and take their mind elsewhere. Julie might be lost in space. Esther might stop and start, and miss class. People develop this behaviour – often called dissociation or daydreaming – as a vital response to survive an unbearable situation. But it may become such a habit that they don't know they're doing it.

The more that violence has shaped a person's nervous system, the less anxiety they need to space out. When this happens a lot, a person may look lazy or unmotivated, mentally ill, or disabled.

- ① Learners may:
- Be restless and have trouble getting started, or persisting with a task.
  - Miss all or part of a lesson or course, and find it hard to fully understand the whole.
  - Be inexplicably unable to hear, or see, or read.
  - Space out and run away from things that make them anxious, miss tests, fail to complete work on time, and blank out and completely 'forget' assignments.
  - Often arrive late to class, and stop and start again repeatedly.
  - Have trouble trusting other learners, the teacher, or even trusting their own knowing.
  - Seem 'not too bright' or simply a little odd - as if 'no one is home'.
- ① If people face something that feels life-threatening they prepare to fight, flee, or freeze. Those who can't flee or fight - especially babies and young children - become totally immobile, freezing like a deer in the headlights.

Repeated experiences of threat can lead people to feel terrified at even the tiniest change, and trigger this response. The frontal lobe of the brain - the area of complex thought - closes down, while the blood supply goes elsewhere and prepares for survival. Frequent repetition strengthens this response. This was originally a vital response to a threat, but it may become an automatic response to change or risk.

- ① Learners may be absent from class to escape into alcohol, or recreational or prescription drugs – to 'space out' and get some relief from unbearable anxiety. Learners and others may struggle with addiction and use these



substances more if school or work is too stressful. Experience of violence can make reality totally unbearable.

- ① Some people - for whom school was a safe place - escape into the world of the mind as a way to leave behind the unpleasantness of the body. They may do well at school, often at a cost to physical health. Experience of violence can also lead to a more permanent escape from the real world, into a fragmented self and a diagnosis of mental illness. Bev may be an example of this.

### What Can I Do to Help Everybody Learn?

#### 1. Make it OK to space out.

- Introduce the different faces of spacing out and help everyone see them as everyday occurrences for many people - learners and teachers alike.

#### 2. Help learners to stay present.

- Think and talk about what everyone can do to make the classroom, tests, and assignments feel safer - with as few anxious reactions as possible.
- Talk with learners about what might help them stay present. Look for what you, the group, or individuals can do. For example: avoid shouting. Or learners can sit near the door or where they can't easily look out the window, and 'leave' with whatever passes by.
- Teach everyone ways to soothe, step down from anxiety, and ground in the present. For example: rub the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other hand, rub their hands on their thighs, or try different breathing exercises and meditation.
- Provide pipe cleaners, modeling clay, or stress balls and encourage learners to try them out. Explain that fiddling with these kinds of things might help them stay present.

#### 3. Make it OK to leave.

- Recognize that sometimes a person may be too caught in an old memory or too stressed to stay present. Encourage them not to judge themselves if they space out.



- Provide a comfortable chair in the corner of the room as a temporary retreat. This may help learners create a new pattern, instead of spacing out or leaving the room entirely when they are anxious.

#### 4. Make it OK to return.

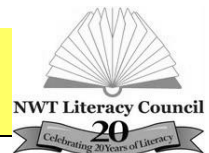
- Talk with individual learners to see whether you can help them return when they space out. Ask them what might work for them. For example: One person might want you to touch their shoulder, another to call their name gently, and another to ignore them until they bring themselves back.
- Call learners who miss class to encourage them to return. Welcome them back with no hint of criticism.

#### 5. Make it OK to need help.

- Bring therapists and counsellors into the program and provide resource information. Show that it is ordinary - that most people need help at some point in their lives.
- Help learners understand the connections between trauma, addictions, and illness. Tell them about resources and programs, and encourage them to explore resources that suit them, when they are ready. Try not to shame - remember you don't know what they 'should' do.



## More Information



Go to [www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net)

- [Impacts of violence on learning](#) – esp. Spacing out, Silence, Missing school.
- [Helping others learn](#)
- [When you feel bad](#)

NWT Literacy Council

- Box 761, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2N6
- Phone toll free: 1-866-599-6758
- Email: [nwtliteracy@nwtliteracy.ca](mailto:nwtliteracy@nwtliteracy.ca)
- Website: [www.nwt.literacy.ca](http://www.nwt.literacy.ca)

Funding for these info sheets came from literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT, and BC. Jenny Horsman did the research and wrote them. Mary McCreadie, NWT Literacy Council did this layout and editing. Oct. 2009

