



# Can I Catch a Break?!?: Studying During a Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

Though the well-documented spacing effect suggests better memory when study sessions are distributed with breaks in between, research shows undergraduates may be underutilizing this strategy (Susser & McCabe, 2013; Morehead et al., 2016). Recently Gurung et al. (2020) showed that use of spaced practice predicted exam scores in Computer Science (but not Psychology) students.

The limited research on break activities indicates potential benefits of exercising or wakeful resting over tech-based activities including social media (Fenesi et al., 2018; Martini et al., 2020). Yet overall little is known about whether or how real-life study breaks are correlated with undergraduate learning. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has likely brought changes to study behaviors during the transition to distance learning.

The current study investigated characteristics of intentional study breaks, comparing reports from the current (mid-pandemic) semester and retrospective reports from pre-pandemic times.

## METHOD

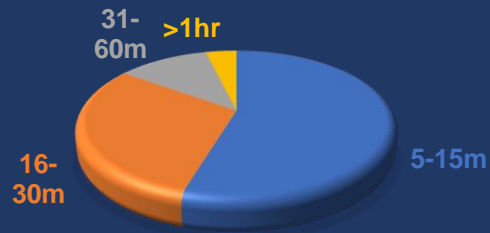
Participants (N = 67) were 28.4% first-years, 26.9% sophomores, 28.4% juniors, and 16.4% seniors. They averaged 2.30 (SD = 2.73) college psychology courses and reported a median psychology knowledge of 3 (on a 1 to 5 scale). 86.6% were taking online courses, 6.0% were face-to-face, and 7.5% were experiencing mixed formats.

A Qualtrics survey administered in late Fall 2020 asked participants to describe their break-taking habits in learning conditions before and currently mid-pandemic. For those who indicated taking intentional study breaks, with the aim of returning to schoolwork/studying after the break, we asked about reasons for taking these breaks, how long they were, and preferred break activities.

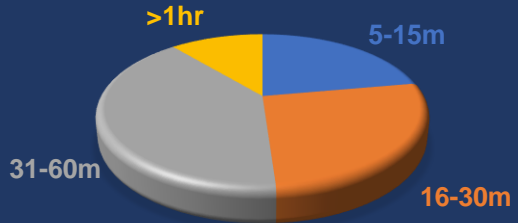
Reasons for Breaks (% endorsement)	Pre-Pandemic	Currently
Mental overload	79.2%	88.9%
Bodily needs	79.2%	64.4%
Reward for work	64.2%	60.0%
Anxiety/stress relief	60.4%	75.6%
Physical exhaustion	35.8%	40.0%
Improved learning**	26.4%	37.8%

Break Activities (% endorsement)	Pre-Pandemic	Currently
Socialize**	67.9%	33.3%
Eat or drink	67.9%	73.3%
Listen to music	66.0%	73.5%
Watch videos	58.5%	75.6%
Use personal electronic device (e.g., phone)	58.5%	68.9%
Sleep	30.8%	35.6%
Meditate	18.9%	22.7%
Doodle or draw	17.8%	24.5%
Study another subject	17.0%	20.0%
Exercise	17.0%	22.2%
Read for pleasure	15.1%	8.9%
Nothing	13.2%	8.9%

Typical Break Time: Pre-Pandemic



Typical Break Time: Current



\*\*p < .01

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Why do students take intentional breaks?

Mental overload as the most-reported reason for pre-pandemic breaks may suggest students are aware of attentional resource depletion during intensive study. Though possibly informed by metacognitive insight, breaks may also occur when they feel a lack of focus due to overload, and essentially have no choice but to discontinue studying. Indeed, that improved learning was the least-selected reason indicates students were not using knowledge about effective memory strategies (i.e., spaced sessions) to guide behavior.

Improved learning was more frequently endorsed mid-pandemic. It is an open question as to whether pandemic study conditions might encourage taking breaks for the sake of learning.

### What do students do during intentional breaks?

Only socializing was differently endorsed pre- vs. mid-pandemic. With students learning from home, there are fewer opportunities for interaction with peers during breaks. Those endorsing socializing as a break activity were likely using virtual spaces.

### How long are typical and ideal breaks?

Amount of typical break time was longer in mid-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times. Ideal break time was also longer for mid- (M = 28.38, SD = 17.02) vs. pre-pandemic (M = 18.94, SD = 10.21) learning, p = .002. Explanations may include different types and amounts of non-academic demands, different (potentially new) distractions, and general pandemic anxiety. To the last point, Boals and Banks (2020) argued pandemic-related stress could impact cognitive function, making it difficult for students to stay focused and productive.

### Conclusion

This study helps further our knowledge about how and why undergraduates take intentional study breaks, and how break behaviors may have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As more research is published about learning during this pandemic (e.g., Gurung & Stone, in press), we will come to understand more about possible shifts in undergraduates' study behaviors, and we will be better able to identify those factors most important for academic success.