The counselor’s wandering mind:
Being empathic by default

Day and night our minds wander; wander between past and future, images of the self and others, reality and fantasy, unpredictable chains of thoughts and a cascade of emotions. Our minds seem to cover unlimited territories in each short period of time. Our wandering minds are like time-travel machines, indifferent to the physical constraints of external “reality.” Not infrequently, we encourage our minds to wander when listening to a Mozart concerto, contemplating a landscape by Degas or simply choosing to relax in our favorite chair or take off for an evening run. However, at times we also struggle to keep our minds from wandering when we are trying to concentrate on our reading, a lecture we are attending or even during our daily conversations.

It is not uncommon for counselors to feel apprehension and guilt when recognizing that their minds are wandering despite trying to stay focused on their clients’ experiences. We know now that our wandering minds are “expensive,” meaning that in order for our minds to wander, we are using limited resources that are also needed for focused attention. Nevertheless, mind wandering is an unavoidable consequence of focused attention. The counseling relationship is a bidirectional stream — “outside in” as well as “inside out.” Outside in, the more we focus out, the more we feed our mind wandering. Inside out, the wandering of our mind helps to guide our attentional focus.

The persistence of mind wandering, along with its generalization across individuals, may be explained by its important adaptive function. Benjamin W. Mooneyham and Jonathan W. Schooler have been studying the costs and benefits of mind wandering at the University of California, Santa Barbara. They remark that mind wandering accomplishes some important functions such as autobiographical planning, self-reflection, goal-directed thoughts, future planning and creative incubation. All of these functions are instrumental in the process of actively listening to our clients. No wonder that the mind of the counselor is often wandering!

The brain’s default mode network

The spontaneous wandering of our minds seems to be the brain’s default mode. There is evidence that in absence of a specific task demand, our minds tend to wander. As shown in a study by Malia Mason from Dartmouth College, along with colleagues from Harvard and Aberdeen universities, mind wandering is associated with the brain’s default mode network (DMN), an important brain connectivity system that seems to be particularly active when the individual is resting without focusing on any specific task. The DMN, which is spontaneously activated in resting nontask conditions, connects regions of the medial frontal
cortex with the posterior cingulate, prefrontal, inferior parietal and lateral temporal cortices. Interestingly, these regions are usually deactivated when the individual performs a task that requires focused attention. Sina Fazelpour and Evan Thompson, two philosophers from the University of British Columbia, claim that the DMN is neural evidence for Immanuel Kant’s idea of “spontaneous” mind. According to this principle, our brain is continuously self-generating spontaneous rhythms to construct meaning from the flow of internal and external experience. In neurophenomenology terms, mind wandering is a way of connecting internal experience with the outside world. Neurobiologically, this activity is sustained by functional connectivity among the different areas of the DMN.

Recent studies have been providing evidence that the DMN may play an important role in high-level social cognitive processes present in mind wandering (e.g., self-referential thought, judgment of others’ beliefs, focus on the internal representation of affective states and social processing). Additionally, efficient deactivation of the DMN has been found to be a good predictor of the ability to switch between a self-referential task and an externally focused attention task.

The empathy response
Several decades ago, Robert Carkhuff and colleagues found that a counselor’s empathy response could be empirically differentiated into several levels depending on the degree of focus on the client’s experience. With “subtractive empathy,” a counselor’s responses are out of focus and dissociated from the client’s experience. The “interchangeable empathy” response mirrors a client’s discourse in a process of emotional and cognitive contagion. Finally, with “additive empathy,” by taking the client’s experience into account, the counselor is able to convey a complementary perspective.

Recently, our lab put together a series of studies looking at the neurobiological correlates of the empathic response. In one of these studies, we hypothesized that additive empathy would require higher level social-cognitive processing such as that involved in mind wandering. That is, for counselors to appropriately respond to their clients, they need to be able to absorb clients’ experiences while also gaining sufficient cognitive and emotional distance. This “tuning in” and “tuning out” seems to be important in being able to feed back a refreshing framework. In other words, counselors need to let their minds wander while listening to their clients.

If this is the case, at the psychophysiological level additive empathy responses should be associated with biological markers representing higher social-cognitive processes (i.e., cardiac response) rather than markers of emotional arousal contagion (i.e., skin conductance response). Our results confirmed that additive empathy is, indeed, a question of “heart” rather than a question of “skin.” In other words, additive empathy responses are accompanied by an increase in heart rate without a corresponding increase in electrodermal activity. The increase of cardiac response may be a good autonomic indicator of the mind wandering activity required to respond with additive empathy.

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In a more recent study, we looked directly at the relationship between the DMN and the empathy response. We found that each time participants chose to respond with additive empathy, no significant attenuation of activity in the DMN was evident. In contrast, interchangeable and subtractive empathic responses were associated with a pattern of deactivation of the DMN. These findings suggest that the DMN seems to support the mind wandering state required to respond with additive levels of empathy.

To learn more
- Patricia Oliveira-Silva & Oscar F. Gonçalves, “Responding empathically: A question of heart, not a question of skin,” Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback, September 2011. An empirical study from our lab showing the association between different levels of empathic response and psychophysiological markers.

Letting your mind wander
Finding the optimal level of counselors’ focused attention has been a source of concern for both practitioners and trainers. Allen Ivey, in what is probably the most influential model for counseling training, suggests that effective therapy implies a strategic balance of attending and influencing skills. Attending skills seem to be mostly dependent on mechanisms of outward-focused attention and are probably sustained by other resting brain state networks apart from the DMN, such as the dorsal attention network, which controls the attention given to behaviorally important cues in one’s environment. In contrast, influencing skills, not unlike additive empathy, seem to rely on a counselor’s mind wandering and are sustained by a functional connectivity among the different areas of the DMN.

Curiously, during the inception of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud recommended that counselors maintain an “evenly suspended attention” — a process of attending to the client’s experience while allowing the mind of the analyst to freely associate. Stated differently, counselors should attend to (focus on) the client’s experience while letting their minds wander into their
inner experiences as a way to come up with the most influencing counseling interventions.

As a counselor, you should trust the potential of mind wandering. Every time your mind wanders, you are entering a very active default mode zone — a zone in which core brain areas are processing high-level social-cognitive information that is necessary for most effectively understanding and responding to your clients. Thus, each time you feel apprehensive that your mind is wandering in a counseling session, remember Oscar Wilde's famous quotation: "To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual."

Lori Russell-Chapin and Laura Jones serve as co-editors of the Neurocounseling: Bridging Brain and Behavior column. Contact them with comments, questions about neurocounseling or ideas for future columns at lar@fsmail.bradley.edu or Laura.Jones@unco.edu.

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