

 Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

• [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#) • [Order a reprint of this article now](#)

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

HEAD CASE | FEBRUARY 19, 2011

## Bother Me, I'm Thinking

*Why you should drop that espresso and bounce a ball instead*

By JONAH LEHRER



Corbis

**HIGH PRODUCTIVITY:** This fellow is likely coming up with a slew of new ideas.

considered such an essential life skill that the lack of it has become a widespread medical problem. Nearly 10% of American children are now diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In recent years, however, scientists have begun to outline the surprising benefits of not paying attention. Sometimes, too much focus can backfire; all that caffeine gets in the way. For instance, researchers have found a surprising link between daydreaming and creativity—people who daydream more are also better at generating new ideas. Other studies have found that employees are more productive when they're allowed to engage in "Internet leisure browsing" and that people unable to concentrate due to severe brain damage actually score above average on various problem-solving tasks.

We live in a time that worships attention. When we need to work, we force ourselves to focus, to stare straight ahead at the computer screen. There's a Starbucks on seemingly every corner—caffeine makes it easier to concentrate—and when coffee isn't enough, we chug Red Bull.

In fact, the ability to pay attention is

A new study led by researchers at the University of Memphis and the University of Michigan extends this theme. The scientists measured the success of 60 undergraduates in various fields, from the visual arts to science. They asked the students if they'd ever won a prize at a juried art show or been honored at a science fair. In every domain, students who had been diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder achieved more: Their inability to focus turned out to be a creative advantage.

And this lesson doesn't just apply to people with a full-fledged disorder. A few years ago, scientists at the University of Toronto and Harvard gave a short mental test to 86 Harvard undergraduates. The test was designed to measure their ability to ignore irrelevant stimuli, such as the air-conditioner humming in the background or the conversation taking place nearby. This skill is typically seen as an essential component of productivity, since it keeps people from getting distracted by extraneous information.

Here's where the data get interesting: Those undergrads who had a tougher time ignoring unrelated stuff were also seven times more likely to be rated as "eminent creative achievers" based on their previous accomplishments. (The association was particularly strong among distractible students with high IQs.)

According to the scientists, the inability to focus helps ensure a richer mixture of thoughts in consciousness. Because these people struggled to filter the world, they ended up letting everything in. They couldn't help but be open-minded.

Such lapses in attention turn out to be a crucial creative skill. When we're faced with a difficult problem, the most obvious solution—that first idea we focus on—is probably wrong. At such moments, it often helps to consider far-fetched possibilities, to approach the task from an unconventional perspective. And this is why distraction is helpful: People unable to focus are more likely to consider information that might seem irrelevant but will later inspire the breakthrough. When we don't know where to look, we need to look everywhere.

This doesn't mean, of course, that attention isn't an important mental skill, or that attention-deficit disorders aren't a serious problem. There's clearly nothing advantageous about struggling in the classroom, or not being able to follow instructions. (It's also worth pointing out that these studies all involve college students, which doesn't tell us anything about those kids with ADHD who fail to graduate from high school. Distraction might be a cognitive luxury that not everyone can afford.)

Nevertheless, this new research demonstrates that, for a certain segment of the population, distractibility can actually be a net positive. Although we think that more attention can solve everything—that the best strategy is always a strict focus fueled by triple espressos—that's not the case. Sometimes, the most productive thing we can do is surf the Web and eavesdrop on that conversation next door.

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page C12

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

