

MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

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Zoning Out: The Signs, Causes and When to Get Help

“Zoning out” is a mild and common form of dissociation. Nearly everyone does it from time to time. Zoning out can serve as a coping mechanism when you are bored, tired, distracted, stressed, anxious or dealing with a difficulty in life.

Zoning out is like your brain switching into autopilot mode. During this short period, you may feel disconnected from the things happening around you and briefly forget what you’re doing or where you are. Daydreaming is a common way of zoning out.

Zoning out is a normal brain function but has pros and cons. It can offer a brief mental break from external pressures or stresses, allowing the mind to recharge. However, zoning out can lead to errors or accidents during critical tasks. For example, it could impact productivity and impair workplace performance. Also, zoning out in social settings could impact interpersonal communication and relationships, potentially leading to misunderstandings.

Getting Back in the Zone

Consider these strategies to help you refocus and not zone out during less-than-ideal times:

- Track when you’re zoning out to help identify any patterns of mind-wandering. With that awareness, you can proactively try to change them.
- Ground yourself by breathing in a strong fragrance, enjoying a hard candy with an intense flavor (e.g., sour, peppermint and cinnamon), or running cold or warm water over your hands.
- Take short, frequent breaks during the day to stretch, rest and fuel up with a snack to increase concentration.

It’s essential to seek medical attention if zoning out involves repeat episodes or occurs for more than a few minutes. Memory loss, odd or uncharacteristic behavior, loss of bowel or bladder control, and injury are also red flags. Mental health professionals can offer personal guidance and support when exploring the causes of zoning out and developing coping techniques.

Social Media and the Risks of Self-diagnosis

More individuals are using technology and social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, to self-diagnose mental health conditions. While awareness and understanding of mental health issues are important, certain exposure to information on these platforms can be harmful. Getting an accurate diagnosis is key to mental health treatment and recovery.

Self-diagnosis can be a step toward taking responsibility for your mental health and overall well-being. As such, seeking information about mental health on social media has potential benefits. Learning about mental health conditions and hearing how others experience them can be helpful. As a result, you may pay more attention to yourself and how you’re feeling. In general, consuming content about mental health concerns or conditions can destigmatize them, normalizing the topics and offering a starting point to learn more about mental health.

Conversely, there are risks associated with consuming online content and self-

diagnosing. Just as easy as it is for influencers, celebrities and others to share content on social media, it’s even easier to spread misinformation or misconceptions about mental health diagnoses. Keep in mind that the DSM-5 TR, the standard classification of mental disorders used by U.S. mental health professionals, lists nearly 300 mental illnesses. Each diagnosis varies from person to person, which makes interpreting mental health information and diagnosing accurately even more challenging. An incorrect self-diagnosis can lead to several issues, such as focusing on the diagnostic label instead of coping strategies or solutions.

Takeaway

Although social media is not meant to replace professional health care, these platforms can help destigmatize mental illnesses and increase your mental health literacy. However, self-diagnosis is no replacement for professional help. Contact a qualified medical provider for a personalized diagnosis and guidance.