

# Study finds that a dash of exercise can help students focus and enjoy university lectures

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A university professor has found a way to help students—and himself—power through long lecture classes: exercise breaks.

In a new study, a professor at The Ohio State University showed that five-minute exercise sessions during lectures were feasible and that students reported positive impacts on their attention and motivation, engagement with their peers and course enjoyment. The research is [published](#) in the journal *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

The results may not be particularly surprising, but they do suggest a solution for a long-standing issue in college classrooms, said Scott Hayes, author of the study and associate professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"Nobody can stay on task for 80 minutes straight without their mind wandering and their attention waxing and waning," Hayes said.

"If you give students a break and get their bodies moving for just a few minutes, it can help them get their minds back to the [lecture](#) and probably be more productive. I know it helps me, as well."

Hayes said he was inspired to do this research by a similar laboratory-based study of how students responded to exercise breaks during a single video lecture. That study found positive results, but Hayes wondered if it could work in the real world of in-person university lectures, over the course of a full semester.

He tested it in four of his own classes. One to two student-led exercise sessions (five minutes each) were implemented in each lecture during upper-level psychology courses with 20 to 93 students. The classes were 80 minutes long.

At the beginning of the course, Hayes broke the class into [small groups](#), and each group was responsible for developing a five-minute exercise session. Hayes reviewed the exercise sessions beforehand to make sure they were workable and safe.

"I wanted the students to design and lead the sessions because I thought it would help them buy into the idea, and help with their engagement and investment," he said.

Hayes admitted that the sessions were sometimes a bit awkward at the beginning of the semester. The students didn't know exactly how to act, and they weren't used to doing something like this during a class.

But students soon got into the flow and had fun with the sessions. Some of the exercises students included were jumping jacks, lunges, overhead press (with a backpack) and hamstring stretches.

Hayes said a few student groups got creative in designing their sessions.

"One of the groups designed a theme of going to an orchard and picking apples. So they had their fellow students reaching up as if they were picking apples from a tree and reaching down to put them in a basket," Hayes said.

Hayes said he knew the program was a success when students spontaneously provided anonymous comments with their end-of-semester students evaluations. One student's comment reflected a common response: "I enjoyed the exercise breaks in class and really felt like they motivated me to focus more."

In one of the classes studied, Hayes gave the students a survey at the end of the course about the exercise sessions. All the students reported that they had never taken a class that had an exercise break during the lecture.

Students rated the exercise breaks as improving attention, enjoyable, and improving peer engagement. They reported that compared to other classes, they preferred the class with an exercise break and they would

like more classes to offer such sessions.

One open question could be whether these exercise sessions improved student learning and grades. Hayes said that is beyond the scope of this study, and it would be difficult to do that kind of research. Comparisons of different classes, at different times of day, and with a variety of teachers, would make comparisons challenging to make.

But this study found that exercise breaks were feasible to do and that students enjoyed them and found them useful—which he said may make it worthwhile for other faculty to try.

Some already have.

"Two colleagues in the psychology department here at Ohio State have told me they have started [exercise](#) breaks in their courses," Hayes said. "It may be catching on."

**More information:** Scott M. Hayes, Establishing the feasibility of exercise breaks during university lectures, *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fspor.2024.1358564](https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2024.1358564)

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