

February 27th, 2009

Doodling while listening can help with remembering details, rather than implying that the mind is wandering as is the common perception. According to a study published today in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, subjects given a doodling task while listening to a dull phone message had a 29% improved recall compared to their non-doodling counterparts.

Asked to remember names they'd heard on a recording, people who doodled while listening had better recall than those who didn't. This suggests that a slightly distracting secondary task may actually improve concentration during the performance of dull tasks that would otherwise cause a mind to wander.

"People may doodle as a strategy to help themselves concentrate," said study co-author Jackie Andrade, a University of Plymouth psychologist. "We might not be aware that we're doing it, but it could be a trick that people develop because it helps them from wandering off into a daydream."

Andrade's findings, published Thursday in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, are an interesting wrinkle on cognitive load theory: The mind has a limited amount of attention to give and, once occupied, stops processing other stimuli.

"It takes a large cognitive load to daydream. That has a big impact on the task you're meant to be doing," said Andrade. "Doodling takes only a small cognitive load, but it's just enough to keep your mental resources focused on the main task."

Andrade's team asked 40 people to listen to a recording containing the names of people and places. Afterwards the people wrote down the names they could remember.

While listening, half of the test subjects were also required to shade in shapes on a piece of paper. Afterwards, they remembered one-third more names than test subjects who didn't doodle while listening.

"The exciting thing is that people actually got better while doing two things at once," said Andrade. "Doodling is not as bad a thing as we might think."

Citation: "What does doodling do?" By Jackie Andrade. Applied Cognitive Psychology, Vol. 23, No. 3, Feb. 26, 2009.