

So, you've decided to do a
PhD...



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So, you've decided to do a PhD

Hey there you!

I'm Gareth. That is my old face over there ----->

I am the eMental Health Project Officer with Health, Counselling and Disability Services (HCDS). You can get to know me better at <https://bit.ly/2SXBr6p>



My role at the university is to give students the tips, techniques and tools required to perform at their best academically. I do this on the assumption that **everyone** studying at university wants to do well, to get good grades/complete their degree, to feel they have learned something valuable in their time here and be able to apply that knowledge in their life beyond university.

If you're reading this guide it means you've decided to do a PhD. I did one of those. It was one of the best things I've ever done. It's been 14 years since I completed it, but the positive impacts of it continue to resonate in my career, despite the fact that I no longer work in the same area of psychology. I've also been lucky to be a co-supervisor for a couple of PhD completions which has provided me with the perspective of a supervisor as well.

The purpose of this guide is to give you some tips on how to successfully complete a PhD. It is a mixture of tips taken from the research, from my own personal experience, from the personal experiences of other PhD completers, from PhD supervisors and from the counsellors here at HCDS who have collectively worked with hundreds of higher degree students over the years to help them get through. *Note: This is version 1.1. of this document. We hope to improve it over time with your input and feedback (see page 54).*

If you are thinking "there is a lot in this document", you'd be right. This document is intended to be a fairly jam-packed collection of PhD enhancing tips. However, you don't need to apply them all. Start by getting a broad feel for the ideas presented in here, before taking 1 or 2 of them and getting started on your journey of PhD completion.

Given the size of the document, I've thrown in a contents page, which should help you navigate to the relevant sections.

Enjoy!

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PhD – The Basics

I don't know what your expectations are in terms of doing your PhD. You might be excited or nervous or unsure or confused or nonplussed. All are normal responses to starting something as big as a PhD.

What I can say, having observed the process many times, is that you can realistically expect for one or more of the following to happen during your PhD:

- It's probably going to be hard and you'll think you've bitten off more than you can chew
- There are probably going to be times where you wonder why the hell you decided to do this in the first place
- There will be times when you are frustrated and annoyed at your supervisor(s)
- You will likely be pushed to your intellectual and emotional limits
- Things will take longer than expected
- You'll experience a range of practical setbacks
- You will seriously doubt your ability to complete the PhD
- Other stuff will happen in your life that will disrupt you from your PhD
- You'll go down some dead-ends before realising your way through
- You will feel disenchanted with the area you've chosen or your field as a whole



And all of this is GOOD!

You might think I am crazy for saying so but we have a tendency to frame the adversity that happens during a PhD as something that needs to be removed. In truth however, much of the adversity experienced during a PhD is a natural part of the process and will ultimately contribute to you becoming a more capable and adaptive researcher (and person).

Another tendency we have is to only ever discuss PhD's in the context of the challenges, as opposed to the opportunities and positive experiences that they provide:

- There will be times when you feel like you are on the cutting edge of research and practice in your area
- People will actually turn to you for advice because of your expertise in the area you are studying
- You'll meet other students, academics, collaborators who are doing really interesting work and who might become future collaborators
- You'll get excited about your PhD having a positive impact on the field. You might even get to witness first-hand your work having a positive impact on your field
- You'll get job and work experience opportunities as you develop knowledge and skills in your chosen area
- You'll discover just how resilient you can be during times of stress
- You'll develop a range of field-specific and generic skills that will serve you well throughout your career
- Whilst PhD's are more common these days, you are still in a relatively small group that get to do this level of higher study
- You'll build friendships with other PhD students that are 'forged in fire' and may sustain you long after your study has finished



So what do you do to ensure more of the good stuff and less of the bad stuff?

That is the purpose of this document.

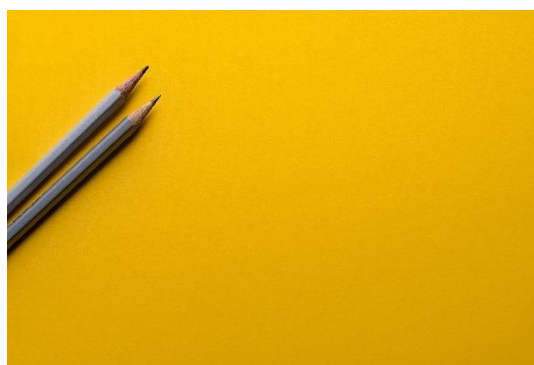
In it, we've tried to collate some of the best/most robust ideas around PhD success that we know, drawing on research, lived experience and clinical experience. These are organised under a few headings, "PhD – The Basics", "PhD – What the Research Says", and "PhD – Self-care".

I want to kick it off with some things I think you should focus on in the early days of your PhD, as it is all starting to take shape.

Getting off to a good start

Topic and supervisor choice

These two go hand-in-hand. I am of the view (*note: this is an opinion*) that you should try to find a supervisor with whom you seem to get along, and then look for a topic/project that sits at the intersection of their interest/ expertise and your interests. Given how important the supervisor relationship is in a PhD, I would generally preference that relationship over getting to do the exact topic you want to do. Better to have a successful experience on a topic you're interested in versus an unsuccessful experience of a topic you are passionate about.



However, that is just my opinion.

The reason I think this way is that I see a PhD as a jumping off point for a future research/ academic career. If you have a successful PhD (completion and publications and maybe funding) that will be a much better jumping off point for an academic career than a less successful PhD in your specific area of interest.

Furthermore, if your work is closely aligned with that of the supervisor and/or team in which you will do your PhD, then you have the advantage of using some of their existing momentum and motivation in getting the research done.

But it is worth talking to others on this point, as my recommendation is advice, rather than based on any formal research.

Treat it like a full-time job

If you're enrolled as a full-time PhD, then treat it as a full-time job – 38 hours a week – 7.5 hours per day. You might do this in a standard '9am to 5pm' format or organised around your existing life, but you should try to allocate that kind of time to what you are doing. For part-time PhD people, do the pro-rata amount. Half-time = 19 hours per week.

This takes incredible discipline in the early stages of a PhD, but it is critical in a number of ways. Although it might not seem like you have a lot to get done in the first 6-months, this is actually some of the most valuable time in terms of familiarising yourself with the relevant literature, starting the process of writing your literature review/ background, formulating your research plan and getting some of the practical elements of a PhD in place (e.g. relationships with stakeholders, ethics).

The other thing is that research always takes longer than we predict. The earlier you get started the greater the buffer you will have against the inevitable setbacks and delays.

Finally, if you don't formally allocate the appropriate amount of time to your PhD, you may find yourself overcommitting with other activities (e.g. work, volunteering, side projects) which can lead to burn-out down the track when the demands of your PhD ramp up.

Research proposal ASAP

Depending on your field of study, you may need to prepare some kind of overview of what you intend to do during your PhD – your research question/topic, your methods, your studies, your hypotheses etc. In psychology this was called a Research Proposal.

If you do need to prepare one of these I suggest you get started on this straight away!

A well written Research Proposal allows you to gather important feedback on your project before launching into critical aspects of it. I remember my research proposal meeting. It was nerve-wracking; experts were telling me what was wrong with my idea. However, it was incredibly valuable in terms of identifying potential problems with my study, that I could address early.

A good Research Proposal also gets you practicing a number of the skills relevant to finishing your PhD: research, problem formulation, writing, referencing. You will also identify areas where your knowledge or skills are lacking and where you might need professional development. For me, it was about statistical analyses. I knew early on that I was going to have to wrap my head around some more challenging analyses in order to complete my PhD.

Timelines and buffer periods

Immediately start setting timelines for things you need and want to achieve. Whilst your supervisor might set some milestones in place, don't rely on others to control your timeline. Unlike undergraduate study, where there are set deadlines around assignments and exams, in a PhD you are expected to manage your own time.

When it comes to research components such as ethics or collecting data, always include a buffer period, as things invariably take longer than you predict and setbacks will set you back (hence the name). Expect practical setbacks, in fact, try to welcome them. It is the solving of those setbacks that is training for an academic career in your chosen area.

Don't be afraid to set yourself strict deadlines and timeframes and apply some pressure to yourself in this regard. Some research has shown that students who have very specific timeframes for their PhD (as a result of VISAs or funding) often submit earlier. Granted you will need to be flexible with your time and be open to changing or modifying those deadlines as the research progresses but try to start early the practice of setting yourself deadlines and sticking to them.

Check out the milestones identified the Office of Graduate Research as a starting point - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/my-course/hdr/milestones>



Start reading AND writing as soon as possible

Most PhD students get off to a decent start in terms of reading, but only a few get off to a good start in terms of writing. The writing is the part that will contribute most to your success. It will help you memorise relevant content but also formulate your ideas. It is what will identify you as an expert in your area.

From the moment you start reading research in your area, be sure to be writing as well. Bring that writing to early supervisor meetings so you can both get a handle on your writing ability. You may need to do further professional development when it comes to writing. Try to correct fundamental writing problems in the first couple of years, rather than waiting until the 3rd and 4th years. Trying to complete a PhD at the same time as correcting fundamental writing deficits will be stressful for you and your supervisor(s).

Put simply, write early and regularly.

Note: I left a lot of the writing in my PhD to the last couple of years which I regret.

Regular supervisory meetings with content and actions

Supervisors will differ in their preference/ capacity for regularity of meetings as well as other things like amount of feedback they provide, how much other (e.g. emotional) support they provide. At a minimum you should negotiate with your supervisor a meeting schedule that works for both of you and then stick to that schedule.

You can enhance the quality of those meetings by a) bringing content (ideas, writing) to those meetings to discuss and b) clarifying at the end of each meeting what the expectations are for both of you leading up to the next meeting.

If you are bringing significant chunk of writing to a supervisory meeting and want well thought out commentary on it, you will need to provide it ahead of time (e.g. a week).



Familiarise yourself with the resources available to you at the university

The University wants you to succeed – it looks good for you, it looks good for them. With this in mind, you need to make the Office of Graduate Research your friend - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/my-course/hdr>. They have a range of programs and tools and supports to help you complete your PhD.

Also, don't forget the:

Student Learning Support Service - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/study-support/slc> (academic writing, basic maths, endnote, study skills, statistics, referencing)

Flinders Library - <https://libraryflin.flinders.edu.au/> (personal research advice, statistical PC, data management, endnote, publishing your research, statistical workshops, systematic review assistance)

{I'll mention counselling support services later 😊}

Be honest with yourself about the skills you need to develop

By the time you finish your PhD, there will be the expectation that you have the core skillset required to work as an academic in your chosen field.

That is, it will be expected that you can synthesise previous research, formulate research questions, select and apply appropriate methodologies and summarise that in research papers or theses.

Some of those skillsets you will have started to develop in your undergraduate degree, or already have because of work in the area. However, your PhD is time to refine those skills as well as develop new ones.

In this process, be honest with yourself about what you need to learn and focus on that as soon as you can. You don't need to be self-critical in this process, that is, berating yourself for your lack of knowledge/ skill. Instead be self-compassionate and action oriented, by simply acknowledging to yourself where your strengths and weaknesses lie, and which skill/knowledge gaps you will need to plug.

For example, I needed to develop unique statistical analysis techniques for my PhD which I had to learn independently. Often, we avoid those skills that we know we really need to learn, so save yourself some stress in the future by identifying early the areas for self-development.

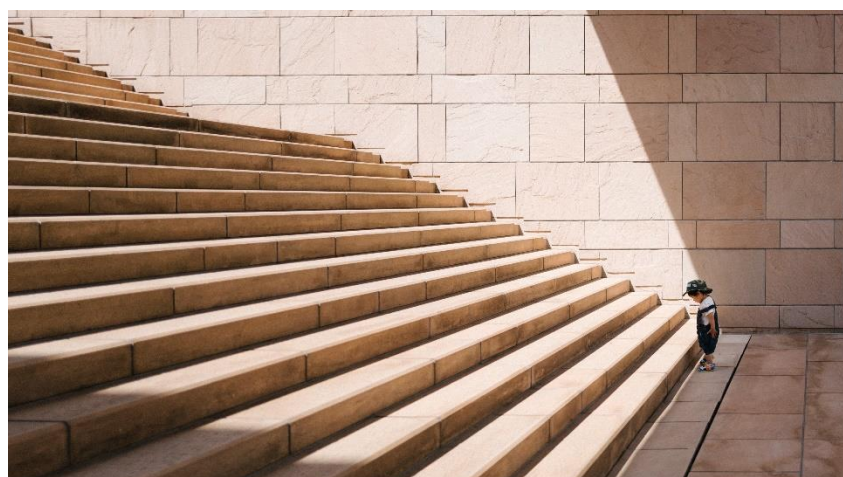
Try to fix these skillset deficits as quickly as you can. Waiting till the end of the PhD to do so will cause you a lot of stress.

Connect with other PhD students

PhDs can be stressful. This leads many students to isolate themselves to focus on just trying to get their work done. At first this seems like a good plan, but later, when you are feeling socially isolated and disconnected, it will actually make things worse.

Early in your PhD, try to connect with other PhD in your area. Find out if there are clubs in your discipline for PhD students. Talk to the HDR Student representatives, they can be found on this page - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/my-course/hdr/contacts>

And remember, you don't just have to connect with PhD students from Flinders. The internet has opened up a wealth of information sharing between PhD students - <https://thesiswhisperer.com/>



PhD – What the Research Says

Many of the factors that predict timely PhD completion are not modifiable by the individual.

So, I went looking to see what I could find in terms of modifiable individual-level factors that predict PhD completion.

What I found was a literature that was fairly sparse but with a few potential nuggets of wisdom that you might be able to apply to improve your PhD experience.

I've summarised the main points below without specific referencing but have included links to all the things I looked at along the way at the end of this section.

If you find an interesting article on PhD completion in your travels, I'd love for you to send it through to me, so I can update the information below.

Potentially modifiable factors that improve the likelihood of PhD completion and satisfaction

Choose your own supervisor

Where possible take a leading role in choosing your supervisor. This might mean meeting with a few potential supervisors to discuss your respective goals and looking for mutual interest and complementary expertise.

This is a person you are going to be working closely with for a number of years so it makes sense that having a role in picking them is going to bode better for completion than being assigned someone.

That being said, it isn't just a case of finding someone you 'like'. It is about finding someone you can work with, who has the knowledge and skills and project experience to help you achieve your goals.

Realistic expectations

In those early conversations with potential supervisors or other HDR people, your job is to try and get a realistic sense of what the PhD is going to involve. This means asking some relatively blunt questions:

- How much time will I have to spend on it each week?
- How often will I need to provide you with something to look at?
- What has worked for past students?
- Is my current writing good enough?
- Are you someone I can turn to if other stuff is happening in my life?
- How often do you meet with students?
- How much feedback do you give on writing?
- What are the acceptable methods and times for contacting you?
- And other such questions.....

What you want to avoid is building up a picture in your mind of what the PhD is going to be like and have that be in stark contrast with the reality of the PhD.

Speaking with recent PhD graduates or students in latter years of their PhD can be useful in this regard. You can get a first hand account of what it is like to do a PhD in the team/field you have chosen.

Take ownership of the PhD

A PhD isn't something that happens to you. It is something that you make happen.

That is a headset that is worth trying to get into as early as possible. What it means is taking responsibility for tackling the inevitable challenges and problems that arise along the way. It is being active in seeking solutions, rather than passive in hoping solutions will present themselves.

To be clear, this doesn't mean you can't reach out for help. Help of some sort will be required in any PhD. What it means though is that rather than hoping others will fix the problem, you are calling on others to help you develop the resources/skills/knowledge necessary to tackle the problem yourself.

Perceived competence

Students who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to complete in a timely fashion. Now you probably can't just fake feeling competent (I know, I've tried ☺), but you can make deliberate efforts to learn as much as you can about your area, practice and develop those skill areas where you feel like you might lack and try to achieve regular milestones/achievements along the way with your PhD.

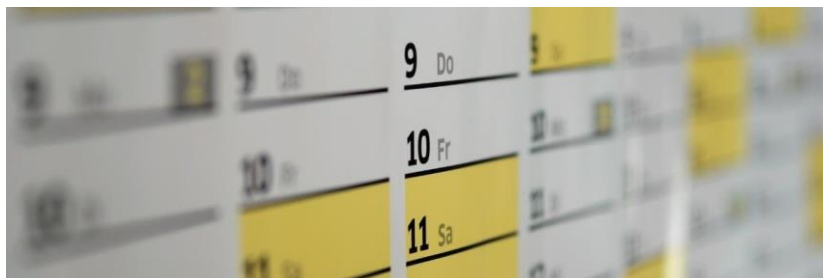
Essentially, I am saying that to **feel** more competent, you need to **become** more competent. What does that mean in practice? It means focusing in on those things that are necessary for your PhD but which you know you aren't as good at, versus sticking to those things you can already do. It means deliberate practice - <https://jamesclear.com/deliberate-practice-theory>

Set yourself strict deadlines

I mentioned this in "PhD – The Basics". There is a finding in the literature that those students who are under pressure to finish in a set period of time have higher rates of completion. There is an external pressure on them to complete in a timely fashion that can provide additional motivation.

Now it might be impossible to recreate those kinds of pressures in your situation, but it does potentially speak to the idea that strict deadlines and putting yourself under pressure to complete work in specific time frames may actually be helpful, as opposed to giving yourself 'carte blanche' to move at your own pace.

A similar idea is explored below in 'completion mindset'.



Intellectual curiosity

Under "PhD – The Basics" I spoke of picking a topic and supervisor based at least on convenience, that is, be willing to take a topic that is less interesting in order to get a supervisor who you gel with, and the benefit of their expertise and interest.

A counter-argument to that view is that those students who have the greatest 'intellectual curiosity' seem to show higher likelihood of completing in a timely fashion. What is 'intellectual curiosity'? Basically it is an

ongoing interest and desire to learn more about your chosen topic. This will be arguably be easier if you pick a topic that resonates with you.

How do you reconcile these competing ideas? Pick a topic that is manageable and achievable given the resources and people involved but dedicate some time to seeing how that topic intersects with your other areas of interest. These might form the basis of future research, or another stage of your PhD.

Conscientiousness (self-discipline, planning, willingness to work hard)

Conscientiousness is often described as a personality trait, meaning it is a little harder to modify.

Conscientious people want to do their work well and thoroughly, so tend to be quite organised and work hard.

One way to mimic or work towards this is to be very deliberate with your allocation of time. Create a schedule and discipline yourself to follow it. This means allocating an appropriate amount of time to research activities – reading, writing, referencing, summarising.

Don't be disheartened if you find yourself not sticking to your schedule. Simply revise the schedule and try again. Scheduling your time is something you get better at the more you try it.

Emotional/social intelligence

You might be wicked smart but not be super great at a) managing your own emotions and/or b) getting along with other people.

If those are areas of deficit, then the good news is that you can improve both those areas. The bad news is you'll probably have to push yourself out of your comfort zone to do so.

If you struggle with unpleasant emotions, then look into some of the free/low cost online therapy options such as <https://mindspot.org.au/> or <https://thiswayup.org.au/>. Consult our 'Digital Resources for your Mental Health' guide for more suggestions - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/07/20/digital-resources-for-your-mental-health/>

If you struggle in social situations, consider chatting to a psychologist or counsellor about what might be happening. For some it is about social anxiety, which is highly treatable. For others, it might be about lacking social skills or having trouble reading the behaviour or social signals of others. Getting to the crux of what your social struggles are will help you develop a plan.

Sometimes it is as simple as increasing the number of social events that you attend, so you can build confidence in social situations. If you struggle with the idea of attending events that are strictly social in nature (e.g. pub crawls), consider instead events that revolve around a common goal (e.g. a professional development event - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/careers/horizon>).

Growth mindset

People with a growth mindset view effort and persistence as the keys to success, not innate ability. They focus on the capacity to grow and get better, rather than their natural skill level. They're energised by the opportunity to self-improve, as opposed to paralysed by a sense of 'not being good enough'.

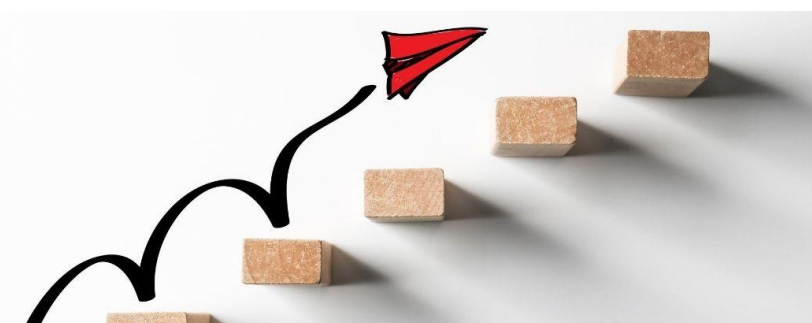
People with a growth mindset tend to adapt better to failure because they see it as an opportunity to grow and get better, rather than a definitive demonstration of ability.

The opposite of a growth mindset is a 'fixed mindset' which places innate ability as the primary driver of success. You can spot a fixed mindset when you hear statements like 'I'm not smart enough to do a PhD'. A growth mindset sounds more like 'I'm going to have to work harder/ smarter in order to get this PhD'.

You might have a growth mindset in relation to some aspects of your life (e.g. sporting ability) but a fixed mindset in relation to others (e.g. intellectual ability).

Switching mindsets is not necessarily simple, but you can catch yourself preferencing ability over effort/ growth in explaining your PhD difficulties ('I'm not good enough' vs 'I can get good enough'). Individuals stuck in a fixed mindset get very self-critical, but don't tend to search for solutions or ways of improving themselves.

I had this experience recently where I gave a bad presentation and then got stuck thinking about 'how crap I am at presentations'. After a period of self-pity, I asked myself what I need to do to improve future presentations and instead focused on trying to get better at them. The next presentation I gave was much better as a result.



Completion mindset

Another mindset that can help is what we call a completion mindset.

A completion mindset focuses on outputs. New ideas and concepts are explored inasmuch as they help create outputs that bring you closer to completion.

This kind of mindset can counteract the free-floating, un-anchored creativity that can arise in the PhD environment. For example, I know during my PhD that I got wrapped up in a whole lot of ideas that bore no real relationship with me completing my PhD but gave me the feeling that I was being creative and productive.

A completion mindset can also counteract an obsession with getting the PhD 'perfect'. At times in a PhD you will have to sacrifice quality for completion.

A completion mindset forces you to weigh new ideas or the desire for perfection against the need to complete a task. A completion mindset is admitting that you may need to compromise the perfect PhD for a completed PhD.

Strategy and goals

If you were doing any other kind of 3+ year project, you'd be asked to provide a map of how it was going to unfold: outline what was to be done and when.

The same should apply to your PhD.

Map out the entire length of your PhD, with milestones and goals along the way. Keep this updated and revise as necessary. Include in the map the things you will need to do to achieve those milestones. For

example, if you need to do data analysis as part of your PhD, include in your map some time or activities that will provide you with the necessary skills.

Revisit the map and your timelines regularly. I know I used to create timelines and then ignore them, which was pretty common. Like scheduling though, this is an activity you get better at with repetition.

Self-sabotage

There are some really common self-sabotage activities that we all engage in: procrastination, overcommitting, getting wrapped up in our imposter syndrome, balancing time and quality.

These acts of self-sabotage reflect underlying cognitive biases/ errors that we have that lead us astray. For example, procrastination can arise because of some natural biases in how we view time that can lead us to always rate 'now' as the worst time to work and 'tomorrow' as the best time to work.

Because these self-sabotage tendencies are very common, there are programs to address them such as <https://www.ithinkwell.com.au/>

These programs are based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and help individuals address some of the cognitive errors that frequently derail those doing research and higher degrees. Consider doing some of this training and applying the principles to your PhD.

We have a couple of programs here at Flinders that might help: Studyology and Mindfulness for Academic Success. Details of those programs can be accessed via Oasis Online - <https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=63157>

Also, the Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) is greatly expanding their study guides and resources - <https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=11825>. Often our self-sabotage is simply the result of not knowing enough about common study skills (e.g. referencing, Endnote, statistics, essay writing).

Funding

Funding helps – it provides the necessary resources to get stuff completed. This might be a scholarship or funding from a research grant that supports your research.

Consider doing your PhD on a topic connected to existing funding. This will give you important insights into how the (often competitive) funding process operates. You will also be more likely to get included in future applications for funding as that project expands or continues.

Socialisation vs isolation

As indicated before, it is common for students to get caught in a cycle of working hard → rejecting social opportunities → getting stressed → working harder → etc

When we're stressed out we tend to minimise the beneficial effects of staying socially connected. We equate time spent with others as simply time spent 'not doing my PhD'.

But social connections provide all sorts of benefits that either directly or indirectly impact on our PhD completion. You might meet someone who can help you with a specific problem in your PhD. You might meet a future employer at a networking event. Or you might just spend an hour chatting with a close friend who gives you the confidence to tackle a difficult part of your PhD.

Isolation is virtually never a good solution. Even introverts, who prize alone time to help them think, still need social connections and a sense of belonging.

The goal is to nurture these social contacts early in the PhD, so you have a robust social support network leading into the latter years.

Also, remember it is not just about the supports available to you. You are also a source of support for other students and the 20 minutes you spend with a colleague helping them solve a difficult problem in their PhD will likely help you solve problems in yours.



Supervisor choice and relationship

If you've yet to pick your supervisor(s), try to meet a few potential supervisors, chat with them and see if you have common interests and goals. Think of it like interviewing a few people for the job of being your supervisor. This is a person who you might be working with closely for the next 3+ years, so take the process seriously.

The working relationship you have with your supervisor(s) is critical to success. Whilst you can't control the person they are, you do have some control over how you nurture that relationship. You have control over what you put into that relationship.

- Book in regular meetings.
- Keep your supervisor updated on your progress (fortnightly is usually sufficient).
- Bring content to your meetings to discuss - show that you've made independent progress.
- If you want them to review content, give them plenty of notice and time to do so. It takes quite a bit of time to comprehensively review a chapter.
- Don't submit hastily or poorly prepared material to them.
- Ask for feedback and then be willing to take that feedback onboard.
- Respect their professional boundaries by showing respect and appreciation for the time and input.

-
- Be courteous.
 - Set timelines and do your best to meet them.
 - Develop actions from each meeting.
 - Consult with them about your goals.

It is common nowadays to have multiple supervisors. If this is the case for you, ensure that you utilise the relevant skills of each supervisor. Sometimes a multiple supervisor approach can help to address knowledge or skills gaps you, or your primary supervisor have.

It should be noted however, that even if you do all of these things, you may still encounter problems in the supervisor-student relationship. Consider chatting to someone if the Office of Graduate Research if this is the case - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/my-course/hdr/contacts>

Interactions with other faculty

You don't just belong to your PhD and your supervisor. You belong to a school or a college or a research group. Get to know the other staff and students in that group. You might find yourself a co-supervisor or a mentor that assists you along the way.

These people can help you expand your understanding of what it means to work in your field and develop knowledge and skills that complementary to your core topic knowledge.

Things I read in putting this together:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0361476X15000107>

<https://www.wiley.com/network/researchers/writing-and-conducting-research/improving-phd-completion-rates-where-should-we-start>

<https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2012/09/cover-success>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360701658781>

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0068839>

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/09684881211198257/full/html>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2017.1298717>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6355122/>

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-019-00448-7>

Found an interesting PhD completion article? Would love you to send it to me.

PhD - Self-care

What is self-care?

Self-care is any deliberate/intentional/strategic activity we do to look after or improve our physical, intellectual, mental, social, spiritual, financial or environmental wellbeing.

Self-care provides the backdrop to a successful PhD completion. It is the investments you are making in other aspects of your life that form the wellbeing foundation upon which you can work on a challenging project like a PhD.

Over the next few pages I will provide you with a bunch of 'activities' that you can engage in that constitute self-care that fall into 12 categories.

I find self-care to be a fascinating topic. Not so much because of the actual self-care strategies (most are common sense), but more because of the strange tendency of humans to be totally shite at self-care, particularly when they're stressed and could most benefit.

There are many reasons for this:

- Sometimes people aren't actually aware of what constitutes self-care. It might be a topic they've never really thought about. Hopefully by the end of this section, you'll have a better idea of the different activities that constitute self-care.
- Self-care strategies often just sound like 'common sense' and trigger people to think 'as if that will be really helpful!' so people ignore them even though many self-care strategies have been empirically demonstrated to help (i.e. supported by scientific research).
- Humans often do not pay attention to their health/ mental health until something goes wrong. Then we scurry about trying to fix the problem and forget we might have been able to prevent it. Whilst humans are very good problem solvers, we are not as good at solving problems of the future (think climate change).
- Self-care often involves some sacrifices in the short-term in order to get some medium to longer-term health wellbeing benefits. Humans aren't always very good at this prevention approach. We like to maximise the gain in the present moment and tend to discount future gains.
- When others tell us what we 'should' do, it can trigger a kind of internal rebellion that makes us reject the information. People are so bombarded by (often contradictory) information about self-care, that for many of us, we have switched off.
- We all secretly want 'quick fixes' to our problems and challenges, whereas most self-care strategies involve a significant investment of time and effort.

Why is self-care important?

Well the obvious answer to that question is that your health and wellbeing improves and given that humans are naturally inclined to want to be happy, healthy and connected to others, self-care is a critical component of achieving that.

However, there is more to it than just that.

1. *'I want more balance in my life'* – It is easy to find oneself consumed by a single activity (PhD, work, study, family, health) and feel one's life is out of balance. When we engage in self-care, we are paying deliberate attention to developing multiple aspects of our life and discovering the right balance for us of those different aspects. Self-care helps us find better balance across the different areas of our lives.
2. *'I want to be the best version of myself I can'* – Self-care is a pathway to self-improvement and self-development. Sometimes people think 'self-care' means something more like self-indulgence and assume engaging in self-care is the antithesis of productivity and improvement. But just like athletes need to rest and recuperate between competitions to ensure high performance in future competitions, self-care is what you need to do to ensure you can capitalise on the rapid self-development that is taking place during your PhD.
3. *'I want to be prepared for tough times'* - When you look after yourself, you are more resilient to the inevitable setbacks of life (and PhD's will throw a few of those your way). Some people call this resilience, or mental toughness. Resilience is built through ongoing investments in self-care, so that you have the mental, physical and financial resources to cope with setbacks when they happen. If self-care becomes something that is embedded in your everyday life, then during really difficult times, you are more likely to put things in place to look after yourself.
4. *'I want to get stuff done!'* - When you look after yourself, you are more productive, and more able to achieve the goals you set yourself. For many people, who are striving for academic or work success, this is what often clinches the deal. Think of it like this. You have finite mental, physical and financial resources. Not looking after yourself consumes these resources, at the cost of the things in your life that you want and need to do. Don't waste precious energy by letting your health and wellbeing decline.
5. *'I want to help others'* - There is a good chance that you are a role model to other people (e.g. friends, family, children, people you mentor, clients, participants). Part of being a role model is living the strategies that you recommend to others. I am not saying you need to be a perfect person, but it is good if you are involved with such supportive roles, to have real-life experience of trying to improve your own life and wellbeing. For example, if I didn't try to take care of myself, would you trust me to give you advice on caring for yourself?
6. *'I want a better future for myself and the people I care about'* - Self-care is an investment in your future self. Imagine yourself 1, 2, 5 or 10 years down the track. Imagine future 'you' asking current 'you' - 'could you please look after your body and mind because I am going to need them in 5 years?'. Looking after yourself now is an investment in your future health and functioning.

Fine then, stop being a know-it-all and just tell me the strategies

☺ Ok. A few things first though.

I try to base all my self-care recommendations in some kind of evidence. It might be research studies that have shown that the strategy works, or it might be advice from health and mental health professionals who work with students every day.

I do not present these strategies with the expectation that you will do all of them. Instead, I just want you to be aware of the many things that individuals can do to look after themselves. Some of them you are probably doing already. Some of them might be new to you.

Most self-care strategies require some degree of practice, persistence and patience. They are not necessarily difficult but can take a bit of time and effort to implement in an ongoing way in your life. For example, making dietary changes involves some planning, diligence and practice.

Some strategies might require you to do some additional reading or research to understand the strategy better. I've tried to provide relevant links to content where appropriate.

If this kind of stuff interests you, you can read more on the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/> - where I write about self-care, mental fitness and resilience. I also write on the related topic of Mental Fitness which you might find interesting if you are keen on the topic of self-development and self-improvement – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/>

If you have any questions about what is written in this document, feel free to get in contact with me below.



Write me - Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au

Tweet me - @FurberGareth

Skype me – search ‘eMental Health Project Officer Gareth’

Otherwise, let's get started.....

Strategy 1 – Build positive feelings

Do you ever feel like you are wired to experience more unpleasant feelings than pleasant ones?

If you do, it is not your imagination. There is a potential evolutionary advantage to having a bias towards negative emotions. Those ancestors of ours who were more sensitive to threat and danger were more likely to survive and procreate.



The problem is this negative bias can be debilitating when the threats to us have changed from lions, tigers and starvation, to daily stressors like talking in public, exams or rejection on social media.

For years, psychologists have focused on giving people strategies to deal with unrelenting negative feelings like depression, anxiety, anger (*see Strategy 2 below*), but it is just as valid to teach people how to generate positive feelings such as awe, compassion, connection, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, kindness, optimism and self-compassion. These are all feelings that encourage us to move forward, rather than retreat, so their presence in our life is important if we are trying to grow.

I've got three basic recommendations if you want to bring more positive emotion into your life:

1. Subscribe to the *Greater Good In Action* website (<https://ggia.berkeley.edu/#>) and try their evidence-based strategies for building positive feelings in your life. Examples include things like gratitude journals, random acts of kindness, different types of meditation and noticing nature. At first glance these kinds of exercises can sound trite and superficial, but many of these exercises work by focusing your attention on powerful concepts and ideas. So, I suggest giving a couple of them a go before passing judgement. Furthermore, the group behind the website base all their strategies on studies that have shown the exercises to be useful.
2. *Plan enjoyable activities.* It might sound a bit obvious, but the science supports the deliberate planning of enjoyable and valued activities in treating depression and anxiety. Enjoyable events put us back in contact with naturally reinforcing and pleasurable situations, which can be a powerful antidote to the avoidance and withdrawal that characterises mental illness or mental distress. Remember, what is enjoyable for one person, is not necessarily enjoyable for another. Pick activities that **you** find enjoyable. This handout has a good schedule and pleasant events list - <https://bit.ly/2RopmaA>
3. If you get a chance to do the Be Well Plan (it runs regularly here at Flinders), then I recommend you do it. That will teach you how to build a wellbeing plan, that includes the kinds of activities outlined in #1 above.

Strategy 2 – Learn to manage challenging feelings

Experiencing negative or unpleasant feelings is perfectly normal.

Like any other emotion, unpleasant emotions like fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt are useful information we can use to guide our behaviour. For example, if I have treated a friend badly, feelings of guilt can remind me to make amends.



It is however easy to be trapped in negative and unpleasant feelings. Feelings of anxiety or self-doubt can lead us to retreat from the world, which then causes more anxiety and self-doubt because the likelihood of being around good people or having good experiences decreases.

Overwhelming or chronic negative feelings can cause a bunch of problems:

- We retreat from the world and lose the good bits of our life
- We stop looking after ourselves
- We lose faith in ourselves
- We become alienated because we end up treating people badly or don't tell them what is happening to us
- The feelings get in the way of our work or study or the activities we enjoy most

Often people do not reach out for help or assistance for these feelings, until they have been struggling with them for a long time. My recommendation is to get in as early as you can, if you find you have been feeling funky for a while.

Whilst many of the self-care ideas in this document will likely help with managing difficult feelings, you can also address these kinds of feelings therapeutically.

We are lucky in Australia that there are some excellent online therapy resources. These resources teach you skills (psychological and behavioural) that can be applied to managing many difficult feelings and situations (because many difficult feelings arise from not being able to cope with difficult situations).

People often use these first before making the decision to engage directly with a therapist or counsellor (such as one of our counsellors - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/support/hcd/counselling>).

Some examples are:

Try <https://mindspot.org.au/> for anxiety, depression or chronic pain

Try <https://www.mentalhealthonline.org.au/> for anxiety, depression or stress

Try <https://thiswayup.org.au/> for anxiety, depression, OCD, panic, pain, PTSD, insomnia (note: there is a fee of \$59 for some courses)

Try <https://moodgym.com.au/> for anxiety and depression

We cover more of these at <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/11/23/online-cbt-courses/>.

Other similar types of online therapy resources can be found through <https://headtohealth.gov.au/> and <https://www.emhprac.org.au/directory/>

If you are struggling to find a suitable online therapy resource, get in contact with me (Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au) and I can give you some assistance.

Remember that therapy isn't only accessed online. Some people use phone support lines or online chat services – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/04/08/phone-and-chat-services-for-just-about-everything/>

And of course, many people access therapy support directly from mental health professionals. Chat to your GP, one of ours or one of our counsellors to learn more about what therapy options are available to you - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/support/hcd>

Barriers to people seeking help

We know from research that many people who experience emotional challenges or mental ill health won't actually seek out help.

There are many reasons for this: embarrassment, expectation of a negative response, unsure if symptoms warrant help, preference for self-reliance.

People worry about what asking for help means about them as a person. In dark times, some people don't think they are worth caring for.

It is hard to express in words just how important each student in the Flinders Community is to us. You are a member of our community, the Flinders Community, and we want to know if you are struggling and we want to help. You are worthy of assistance, just as you are, with all your struggles.

<https://students.flinders.edu.au/support/hcd>

Flinders Out of Hours Crisis Line – Call 1300 512 409 or text 0488 884 103

Strategy 3 – Become a better thinker

You've probably heard the phrase '*you are what you eat*' referring to the health of your body being a function of the quality of the food that you eat.

Well that big grey lump between your ears is a bit the same.

If you only feed it the same stuff over and over again (e.g. constant video games) or feed it crap (constant binge-watching of the Kardashians), it will reward you by performing sub-optimally.

What do I mean by 'sub-optimally'? I mean you won't be a very imaginative or critical thinker. You won't have good clarity of thought around issues that really matter – culture, people, politics, emotions, people, philosophy. You'll have inflexible ways of thinking and struggle to take the perspective of others. Conversely, working on your thinking will improve your academic and personal outcomes.

The onus is on you to improve your thinking. University will provide opportunities to do so.



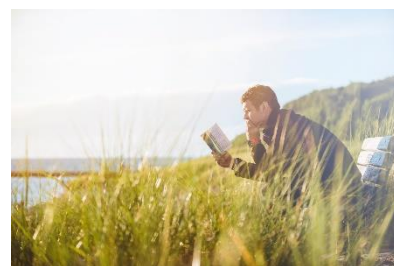
Critical Thinking

One of the primary strategies for improving the quality of one's thinking, that is taught in university is called Critical Thinking. Critical thinking is 'the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it' (Paul & Elder, 2001). There is a great little guide, available from the library on Critical Thinking concepts and skills - https://flinders-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/7a2uma/TN_pq_ebook_centralEBC5783637. It doesn't take long to read and introduces you to the main concepts you'll need to know to start improving your thinking. For example, you'll learn a stepped-out process for addressing problems in your life.

You'll then start noticing the same kinds of skills being taught in your course. During your degree, you'll get chances to practice critical thinking in your assignments and tutorial exercises. Like a muscle, the more you use Critical Thinking, the better you get at it.

Reading and writing

Another avenue for improving your thinking is to read widely and write as much as possible. Reading, including fiction, exposes you to different ways of seeing the world and expands your frame of reference. You understand better how other people think and feel, you learn about new fields, and you also discover what topics resonate most with you.



If you aren't a big fan of reading, then I suggest a couple of things:

- **Give it a go anyway, even just for a while.** After my degree, where I had to do a lot of reading and writing, I kinda lost interest in reading. It took me many years to get that interest back. Years lost that I could have been expanding my mind. Getting into reading involves setting aside a small amount of time to read – e.g. 20 minutes a day – and repeating that till you achieve some momentum. This is separate from the reading you need to do as part of your degree.
- **You explore 'new' media options like podcasts and YouTube.** There is now an incredibly rich variety of content available for free through podcasts and YouTube channels. I have about 5 podcasts that I listen to regularly, on the way to work in the car. These podcasts which are typically interviews with subject matter experts of different types expose me to topics that I would not otherwise gravitate towards. For many, podcasts and YouTube have replaced reading. Podcasts particularly can be listened to when doing other activities. Through podcasts I often hear about books that I then want to read.

Complementing reading is writing. This could include journaling, or writing a blog, or using your social media channels to write about what you are learning. Writing requires clarity and forces your mind to organise its knowledge in a coherent way. The more you practice this, the better you get at it (and the better it will be for your PhD). For example, the more I write about self-care, the clearer I get about what it is I am trying to say.



Contemplation and Intention

A while back I had an interaction with a trusted psychology colleague who had been treating people for a long time. We got on the topic of improving one's thinking. He felt there were two key components to improving one's thinking:

1. Learn contemplation - assigning deliberate time to quietening the mind in preparation for addressing a big issue in one's life; a quiet mind thinks more clearly than an agitated one, AND
2. clarifying your intention(s) – taking multiple moments throughout the day to ask oneself 'why am I doing this?' in relation to the activity you are doing. This is especially useful if you find yourself just going along with your mates or 'going with the flow' & not getting satisfaction out of that.

Adaptive Mindsets

A mindset is a collection of beliefs, feelings and attitudes you have about a particular topic. You have mindsets relating to people, work, study, life in general – just about any topic.

Mindsets influence how we perceive the world and how we react to events in our life. Some mindsets are adaptive, meaning they help us navigate the world successfully. Other mindsets are maladaptive, meaning they hinder us in our attempts to navigate the world.

Two mindsets that are particularly relevant to students are a Growth Mindset and Self-compassion Mindset.

A **Growth Mindset** is the belief that success is more a function of persistence, effort, and deliberate attempts to better oneself (learn), rather than innate ability. Individuals with a Growth Mindset tend to stick at tasks longer, make greater efforts and respond better to setbacks. A lot has been written about Growth Mindset, so a casual Google search will yield you some interesting resources. Maybe start here - <https://fs.blog/2015/03/carol-dweck-mindset/>

A **Self-compassion Mindset** is the belief that self-kindness and acceptance, rather than self-criticism is the most effective motivator following setbacks or failures. Highly self-critical people tend to dismiss self-compassion as being flowery or self-indulgent, but the data is clear that self-compassion is actually a far more constructive approach to coping with setbacks than self-criticism. Kristin Neff is probably the leading thinker on self-compassion - <https://self-compassion.org/>

It's not simple to shift one's mindset. If you've spent a lifetime being highly self-critical, it will be hard to turn it around quickly. But the starting point is **the realisation that you may hold a mindset that is holding you back**. From there, learning and reading and practising approaching life from a different perspective is how to develop a new mindset.



Pushing out of your comfort zone

Finally, anything that helps you push your thinking or push you out of your comfort zone is likely to have positive cognitive benefits. This might include taking up a musical instrument, challenging yourself with puzzles and games, taking up a new hobby or craft.

The biggest barrier to developing your thinking capacity is just sticking to what you know already and repeating the same patterns over and over again. Deliberately push yourself to learn new things, try new things, meet new people and operate at the edge of your abilities.

Useful resources I've found on the topic of thinking better

I'm constantly finding new and interesting resources on the topic of how to 'think' better. One is the Farnam Street blog - <https://fs.blog/> - which explores different mental models and how you can use them to 'understand how the world works, make better decisions, and live a more meaningful life.

Another is a blog called Effectiviology - <https://effectiviology.com/> - which explores our biases in how we think and respond in the world.

I like this course called OpenMind which helps people develop intellectual humility and the ability to engage in constructive conversations across differences - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/02/07/openmind-online-course-for-developing-intellectual-humility-and-open-mindedness/>

Finally, one that I found recently and have started exploring is this blog/podcast - <https://evidencebasedwisdom.com/> - on how we develop 'wisdom'.



Strategy 4 – Develop self-awareness and understanding

We each have our own unique set of personality characteristics, experiences, interests, tendencies, obsessions and quirks. Self-awareness is about having a good understanding of these different parts of ourselves. Sometimes we call it 'insight'.



Self-awareness/ insight helps us identify situations that play to our strengths, but similarly situations that activate our weaknesses. This allows us to make better decisions, but also prepare ahead of time for situations that will be challenging for us.

Self-awareness is typically achieved through self-reflection – that is, taking the time to reflect on our behaviour, thoughts and feelings in different scenarios.

There are a few ways you can go about this:

- *Deep and meaningful conversations with friends and family* – Once you get past 'small talk', conversations with friends and family may be a powerful avenue through to better self-understanding. Talking aloud about your experiences, fears and hopes gives you a different perspective on yourself. Furthermore, how your friends and family respond to you is further data to help you understand yourself.

- *Mentorship* – I've found getting a mentor to be one of the best things I've done in my career. Having someone with whom you can map your professional life forwards and learn from their experience is invaluable. My only regret is I didn't get a mentor sooner. I waited until I was struggling in my career before getting a mentor. Mentoring opportunities can be found at Horizon - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/careers/horizon>

- *Counselling/ therapy* – Sometimes we do not feel comfortable talking about sensitive issues with friends and family. When this is the case, spending time talking about yourself with a professional counsellor (<https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling>) or therapist can provide a similar, but more confidential experience. You aren't limited to seeing a counsellor at the University either. There are online avenues to get counselling as well. If you are under 25 consider <https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace/> - If you are over 25 consider <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support> There are also more informal online chat options like <https://www.7cups.com/>

- *Meditation* – There are many types of meditation, but the act of regularly creating a quiet space in which you notice and reflect on your thoughts, feelings and experiences is a pathway to better self-understanding. During meditation, it is possible to become aware of thoughts and feelings that have otherwise been working below your normal level of consciousness. It is possible to find a version of yourself that isn't as wrapped up in the minutiae of everyday life. Try this free app - <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/> - or free program - <https://jackkornfield.com/event/mindfulness-daily/> - as a starting point. If it resonates, maybe then look into paid programs that provide greater guidance and supplementary learning materials – e.g. <https://wakingup.com/> or <https://www.tenpercent.com/>

- *Expressive writing* – keeping a journal or writing regularly about yourself and your experiences is a way to process your life in more depth. In addition, you might produce a private record of your thoughts and feelings that you can refer back to later. Check out our post - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/05/13/four-writing-exercises-that-might-improve-your-health/> for some different expressive writing methods.

- *Trying out new things* – One of the simplest ways to learn more about yourself is to put yourself in new and challenging situations. Take up a new hobby or sport, join a group, try to learn a new skill, visit a place you have never been before, or talk to someone you have never talked to before. Watching how you respond in new situations with new people gives you clues to who you are. Start with Clubs @ Flinders - <https://fusa.edu.au/clubs/>, or do some Horizon Professional Development programs – www.flinders.edu.au/horizon.

- *Completing online assessment tools* – There are thousands of online quizzes and tests that purport to provide you valuable information about yourself that you can apply in your life. Many of them are crap. Some of them are good. Working out which is which is a little challenging. A couple that are worth exploring include: <https://www.viacharacter.org/> which helps you discover your strengths, <https://www.understandmyself.com/> which helps you understand your personality and <https://onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au/?s=w> which assesses your mental health. Try a few. Find a few of your own. Don't get too invested in the results (any given questionnaire is only ever assessing a small aspect of who you are) but be willing to learn something about yourself in the process.

The examined life

The process of living an 'examined life' means reflecting regularly on the intricacies of why your life is the way it is and why you are the way you are.

Be prepared for it to not always be a positive experience. You will learn stuff about yourself that you don't like in addition to finding things that you do like. This might lead you to become highly self-critical or focus primarily on your flaws.

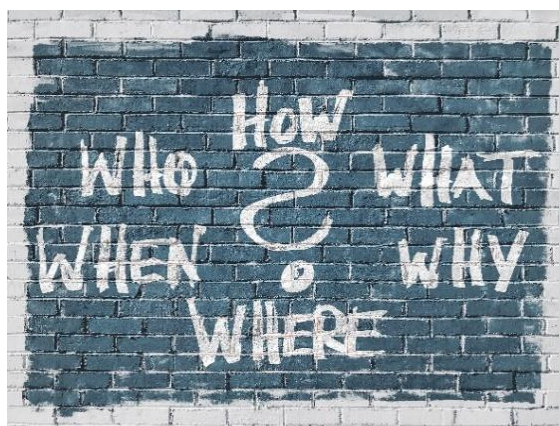
This is where 'self-compassion' comes in. Self-compassion is the acceptance that you are a human being, with all the flaws and strengths that come with being human. It is an acknowledgement that not everything about you is going to be amazing, that you will make mistakes, stuff up, fail, but that you also have the capacity to rise above those limitations and make something good of your life. It is taking responsibility and ownership of all aspects of who you are.



Strategy 5 – Search for meaning, purpose and identity

Whilst self-awareness and understanding involves an understanding of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, there is also the question of who we want to be to others. What contribution do we want to make to the world?

Some people know when they are a child what they want to be in life: a doctor, marine biologist, or a no-good layabout. For others it takes a bit longer to work out who or what they want to be.



Having meaning or purpose in life helps us in a number of ways. It helps us focus our time and effort on things that are meaningful to us. It helps buffer against stress, if we know we are working towards something meaningful. It helps us to communicate to others who we are, what we like and what we are trying to do with our lives. **So how do we work out what our purpose is?**

Finding meaning in what we do everyday

Most of us don't have the luxury of just being able to abandon everything we're doing and set off on a journey of self-discovery. We have bills to pay, people to look after, responsibilities to meet. As a student, you have a PhD to complete!

The search for meaning and purpose can however be done whilst doing those things. I've written previously about how to derive meaning from your studies (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/09/derive-meaning-study/>). In short, there are a few things you can do to develop more meaning and purpose in your life, whilst doing the things you have to do:

- *Have more fun* – Fun and meaning are interconnected. Finding situations and activities that you find fun and engaging gives you clues to where you can find meaning. For example, if you enjoy working outside, then being close to nature might be part of what gives your life meaning. Look for ways that you can make existing activities more enjoyable. For example, I try to lighten our morning team meetings with jokes and silly observations. We still get the job done, but we do it with a greater feeling of connection.
- *Be around people* – Even if you are an introvert, social interaction is a critical component of feeling like you belong. We can derive a sense of meaning and purpose from helping the groups we belong to achieve their goals. Likewise, having helpful people in our lives helps us achieve our goals. For example, I couldn't do my job here at Flinders without the support and direct help of the Health, Counselling and Disability Services team. Focus on surrounding yourself with people who energise and motivate you. If there are tasks you dislike but are necessary, is there a way you can get other people involved?

-
- *Take regular moments to consider what contribution you are making to the world* – Just about any task in life (including the unpleasant or monotonous ones), if considered at the level of the family, or community, or country or world can be discovered to be of much greater value than it appears superficially. I'm sure the people that clean our office toilet everyday don't relish that job, but if they thought about it, the cleanliness and tidiness of our surrounds has a measurable impact on wellbeing and a happy workforce is a productive workforce. They are partially responsible for the wellbeing of our entire building! So take regular moments to track the potential positive flow-on effects of even the most mundane events in your life. You'll discover a level of connectedness that is meaningful.
 - *Set goals* – We derive meaning from being able to conceptualise and successfully achieve our goals. Look for opportunities in your everyday life to set and pursue goals. Maybe you explore trying to find the fastest way to get to uni. Or maybe you set yourself the goal of making one small dietary modification per week. It doesn't matter how small or seemingly significant the goal is, the point is to shift yourself out of auto-pilot mode and make your everyday life a game to see if you can improve on it.
 - *Set up habits and routines* – Life is naturally a bit chaotic, so establishing routine and order amongst that chaos helps you make sense of the world and understand better your place in it. Your routine may be very different from that of other people, but as long as it fits and works for you, it is a good routine. Habits and routines help shorten the time spent on mundane activities so you can free up the mental resources to focus on activities that are more challenging and likely to be meaningful.

Tasks specific to finding meaning and purpose

Try answering these questions (adapted from here: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/talk_with_teens_about_purpose) in your head or in writing:

1. What is most important to you in life at the moment?
2. Why do you care about this thing (these things)?
3. Do you have any long-term goals?
4. Why are these goals important to you?
5. What does it mean to have a 'good life' and be a 'good person'?
6. If you were looking back on your life, how would you want to be remembered?
7. What are you good at?
8. What are your strengths?
9. What do you enjoy doing?
10. When are you at your most engaged?
11. How do you think you'll leave your mark on the world?

If you can find activities that sit at the intersection of what you are good at, what you enjoy doing and what you think will be helpful to others, you have likely found activities of significant meaning for you.



It is never too early, or too late to think about what you want your contribution to the world to be. And don't just think about it once. Treat it like a mental project/ puzzle that you return to regularly, as what gives your life meaning and purpose will shift and change over time.

You might also consider trying exercises that specifically focus you on what you hope to achieve in your life and the person you want to be. There is this free values exercise that I've talked about previously -

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/30/values-who-do-you-want-to-be-in-life/> , this

'best possible self' exercise -

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best_possible_self or this

paid self-authoring online course -

<https://selfauthoring.com/future-authoring.html>

Finally, you might be interested in my mental fitness and self-improvement materials which encourage you to become a

more deliberate and positive force in your own life – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/>



Strategy 6 – build and maintain supportive relationships

It is very hard to get things done in life without other people and loneliness is very hazardous to your health and wellbeing.

In contrast, having strong relationships and a sense of belonging (to family, friends, clubs, or work) are powerful health boosts.

Making and maintaining relationships with people can be hard work. Like anything though, building positive relationships is a set of skills that can be learned.



Building new relationships

It takes time and effort to build strong friendships/ relationships - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/25/many-hours-take-make-friend/>

It also takes a fair bit of skill.

This means you need to have patience as well as a good internal model of how to form new friendships/relationships.

One perspective that I have found helpful is to think of relationships is as an opportunity for mutual assistance in achieving goals.

- *Try and help others achieve their goals.* Listen to them and try to understand what they are trying to achieve in their life and their work. **People love a good listener.** Where possible, and where you think you have the skills, help them achieve those goals. This could be achieved through family relationships, friendships, professional relationships, or volunteering. It can also be achieved in the physical world or online (e.g. through contributions to online forums). The types of support you can provide include:
 - *Emotional support (e.g. a space and listening ear for them to express how they are feeling)*
 - *Tangible support (e.g. financial assistance or help with a task)*
 - *Informational support (e.g. advice or direction towards relevant resources)*
 - *Companionship (e.g. friendship and helping them feel they belong)*
- *Talk about your own life and work goals.* Spending hours talking about yourself is likely to alienate you, but that doesn't mean you can't talk about your goals and what you are trying to achieve. People like hearing about what other people are working on and like to help if they can. So, talking about your goals can help draw people to you who believe they can help you achieve those goals. Related to this,

we are naturally drawn to people who we can see have purpose and direction. Focus on finding your purpose and direction and then be open to others helping you in that process.

Keep in mind that many friendships and relationships start through mutual interests, so pursuing hobbies, clubs or volunteering are good starting points for meeting people that might ultimately become friends.

- FUSA is your place if you want to find clubs and societies at Flinders (<http://fusa.edu.au/clubs/>)
- Health, Counselling and Disability Services /OASIS run a range of wellbeing programs, some of which have a social component; <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/03/21/2018-wellbeing-programs/>
- The Horizon Awards Program runs professional development events where you can meet like-minded students developing their skills for the workforce: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/careers/horizon/>
- Start a study group of your own: <https://www.wikihow.com/Form-a-Study-Group>
- Outside of the university consider something like - <https://www.meetup.com/en-AU/>

And of course, there are dating apps, but having not ever been on one and also not being aware of any good research suggesting their effectiveness, I suggest they are merely a tool for introductions. You will still have to do the actual work to build a meaningful relationship from them.

Don't forget your existing relationships

Don't forget the friends and family already in your life. There is a tendency when we get busy to neglect our existing relationships. But given how long it can take to form new friendships, I'd suggest cultivating existing relationships is a faster route to a sense of belonging.

With just a small investment of time and effort, you can reconnect with the people already in your life:

- A quick email or phone call
- Catch up for a morning coffee
- Send someone an encouraging text message
- 'Like' or comment on something they've done or said on social media

Those little gestures can re-ignite a once supportive relationship.

Psychological barriers to establishing close relationships

Human interactions are complex. Added to that, many of our beliefs and habits when it comes to interacting with other people are learned early in life, in the relationships we have with our primary caregivers and immediate others (e.g. siblings). This means we aren't always conscious of our style of interacting with other people, because those patterns were set down long ago in our life.

If you find yourself socially isolated or lonely, you may need to spend some time exploring whether there are any beliefs you hold that are getting in the way of you finding social connection. Perhaps you fear that others will evaluate you negatively, which makes you awkward and tense around people. Or maybe you've been burned in the past, so are distrustful of people which means you keep your distance.

Therapy is one of the primary avenues through which we discover and address the beliefs or past experiences that are holding us back in connecting with people.

Start with an appointment with one of our counsellors, who can then direct you to the right therapy option for you - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling>



Some people say coffee fixes everything

Strategy 7 – Care for your body


The healthier your body, the healthier your mind.

You can improve your physical **and** mental health and lengthen your life through attention to diet, physical activity, sleep, breathing, drug/ alcohol use and cognitive enhancement.

Research studies are increasingly showing that lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity and sleep play **as big a role** in our mental health as they do in our physical health. Furthermore, getting these right can improve your academic performance!

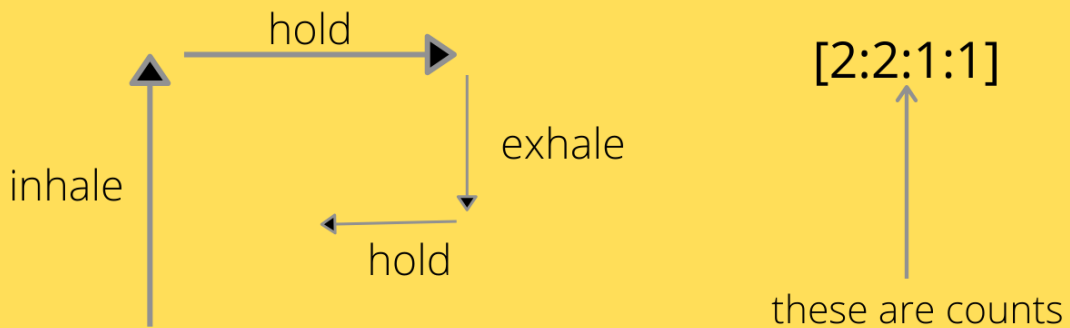


- Nutrition – Google ‘*Mediterranean diet*’ - which has been shown to improve both physical and mental health outcomes. There is a lot of misinformation about diet floating around. Unless there are specific medical reasons for you to follow a restricted diet (e.g. low FODMAP for IBS) stick with Mediterranean diet or the updated Australian Dietary guidelines - <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/> - If you are struggling to afford healthy food, consider the Flinders Market – <https://oasis.flinders.edu.au/flinders-community-market/> I’ve also found the following website incredibly helpful in learning more about plant-based nutrition - <https://nutritionfacts.org/>
- Get moving and if possible do so according to Australian physical activity guidelines – <https://bit.ly/2vr65OZ>
 - Minimum - 150 mins of moderate, 75 mins of vigorous per week (moderate = brisk walking, heavy cleaning, mowing lawn, light riding, casual tennis)
 - Ideal - 300 minutes moderate, 150 minutes vigorous (vigorous = hiking, jogging, carrying heavy loads, fast riding, competitive sports)
 - Break up periods of sitting as often as possible (e.g. get up and move every 40 mins of sitting time, get a sit/stand desk)
 - Strengthening activities on at least 2 days every week (i.e. weights, resistance exercises, body weight exercises like pushups)
 - Try to embed physical activity into your daily routine – such as walking or riding to uni, using the stairs, getting a standing desk. Try this app - <https://wakeout.co/>
- Sleep - <https://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/> - this site has many fact sheets on multiple sleep topics. But for the average person:
 - 7-9 hours per night
 - Aim to get regular times – i.e. consistent bedtime and wake time
 - Try to relax for an hour before bed
 - Reduce light exposure in the hours leading up to bedtime

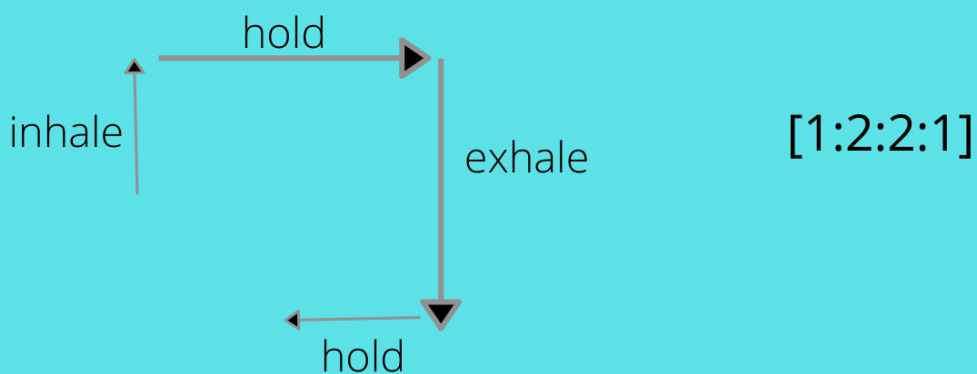
- On mobile devices enable 'night mode' (which reduces blue light)
 - Minimise distractions in bed (cue rude jokes)
 - Get sunlight during the day, preferably early. An early morning walk takes care of this and adds physical activity to your day.
 - If you are struggling with sleep (e.g. insomnia) consider talking to someone at the Flinders Insomnia Clinic. They treat individuals of any age with insomnia and circadian rhythm disorders. To learn more, email them on casc.enquiries@flinders.edu.au or call them on 8201 7587.
 - Follow this blog from Flinders Professor Michael Gradisar. He knows his stuff when it comes to sleep - <https://winksleep.online/blog>
- I hate to break it to you but there is no 'healthy' level of alcohol or drug use (with the exception of prescription drugs for specific conditions). Follow drinking guidelines to minimise damage from alcohol intake - <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol>. As far as drug use goes, I recommend abstaining from using drugs where you can't verify the source. But if that isn't palatable to you, then at least inform yourself to the best of your ability on the types and effects of different drugs - <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/> If you are using drugs and alcohol with friends, make sure to look out for your mates in terms of them having a bad reaction, or it impairing their judgement, decision making or behaviour. If you decide to use drugs or alcohol, you are **still responsible for your behaviour** whilst on them.
- 
- Breathing – we take for granted that we breathe, right up until the point we stop. But learning more about breathing can be a pathway to stress and anxiety reduction and improved physical performance. This is a good article on breathing in relation to anxiety - https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_the_way_you_breathe_making_you_anxious. I also recommend the book Breath by James Nestor - <https://www.mrjamesnestor.com/breath>. As a rough rule, focus on breathing through your nose, slowly, into your belly with long exhales. An app might help with getting the breathing rate about right - <https://calmaria.app/> . I also like this simple diagram, stolen from Andrew Huberman (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2D2CMWXMOVWx7giW1n3LIq>)

How to use breathing to change your state

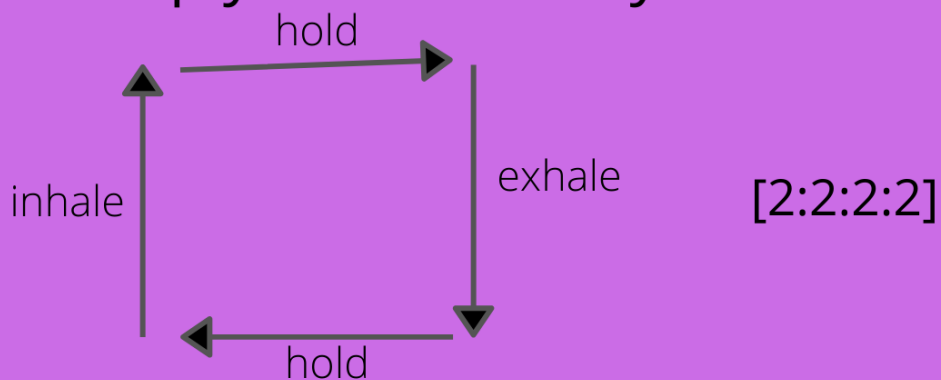
to make yourself more alert



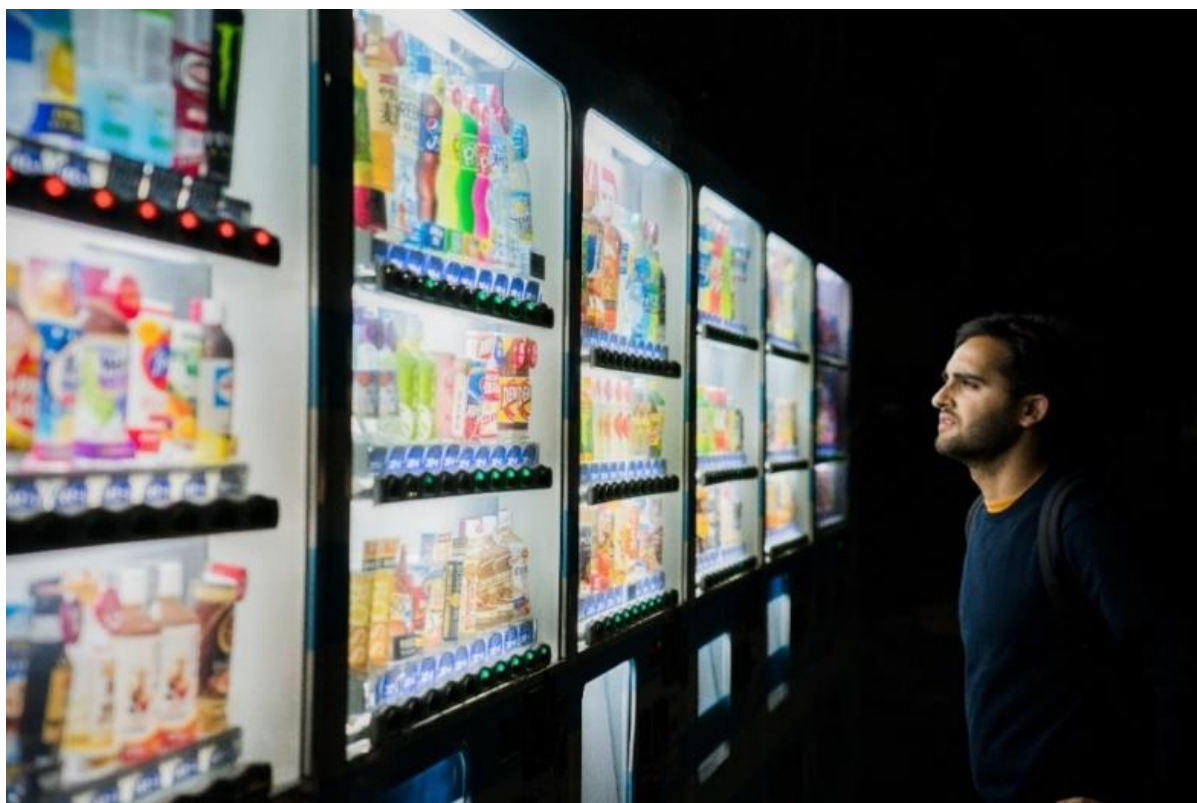
to calm yourself down



to keep yourself steady



-
- Cognitive enhancement is the process of using activities or substances to enhance the way our brains work. For example, the most common substances used by people to enhance their mental functioning is caffeine. There are lots of people who would like to sell you supplements or foods that purport to boost mental functioning. Most are not worth the money. Eating a good diet and getting plenty of sleep would lead to much greater benefits than using supplements. There are however a few supplements that have been shown, under specific conditions to be beneficial for mental health - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/09/16/nutrient-supplements-for-mental-health/> - If this is a topic that interests you, I recommend visiting the website <https://examine.com/> who publish extensively on the evidence for different supplements.



Strategy 8 – Develop the skills for professional success

Ok, so this one is a little out of left field in terms of self-care strategies but it is based on the idea that study and work are activities that dominate our days, so we should endeavour to be as good at these as we can. Students who feel in control of their studies typically show greater wellbeing.

As a student this means adopting a growth mindset, overcoming procrastination, improving attention and focus, effective time management, using evidence-based learning strategies and developing high level communication skills (written and verbal). These skills help you maximise your grades, but also set you up to be an effective person throughout your life.



I've written a fair bit about procrastination on the blog, including providing a workbook for tackling procrastination (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/04/12/self-guided-workbook-tackling-procrastination/>).

I've also talked about evidence-based study tips that help you learn information more effectively, with a focus on exams. Although we spend a lot of time studying, we don't necessarily spend time learning **how to study**. Take the time to familiarise yourself with the strategies used by expert learners and teacher - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/06/19/the-study-and-exam-preparation-strategies-that-successful-students-use/>

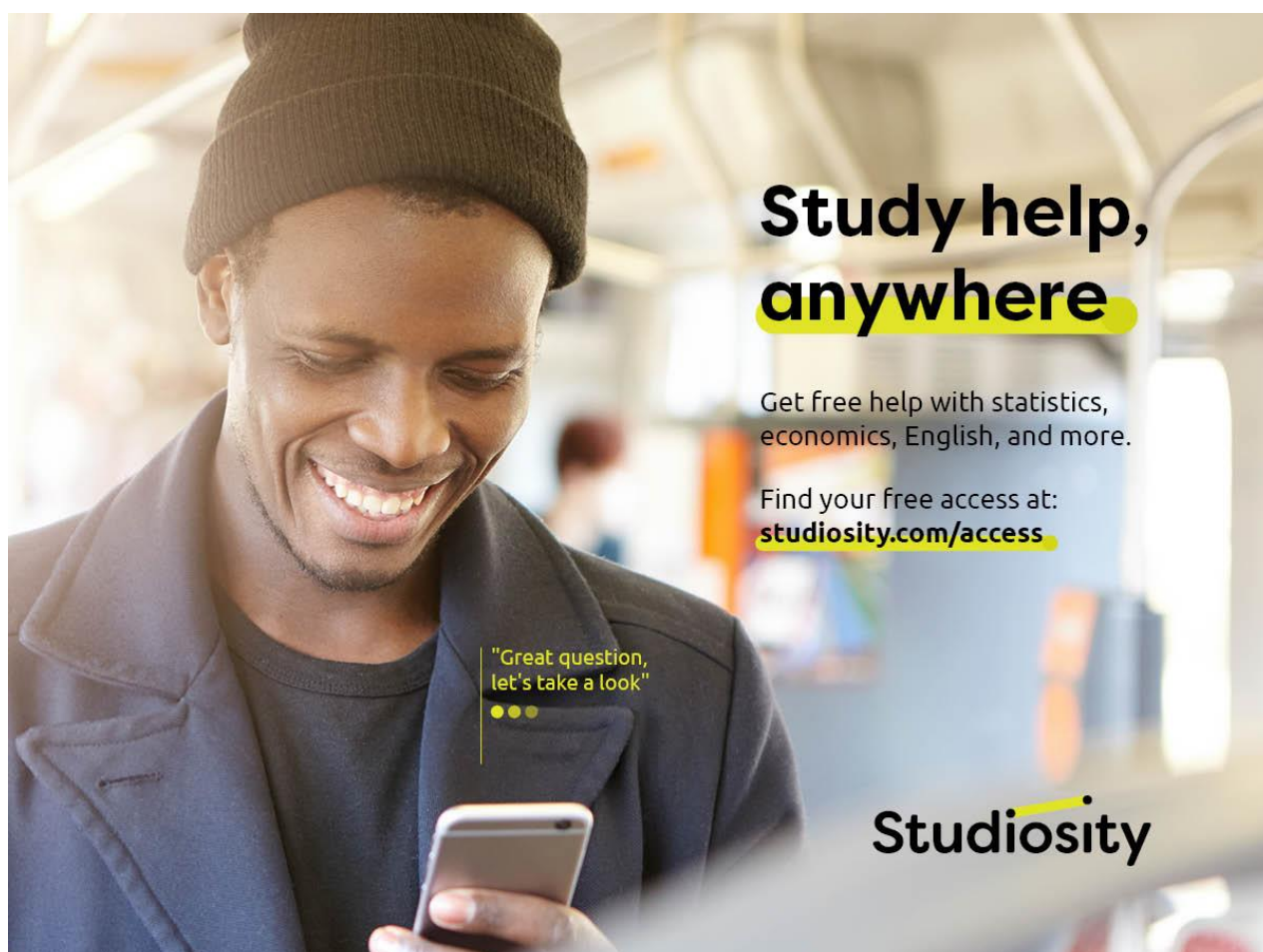
In addition to the strategies you can use to be a better learner, the attitude you adopt towards learning and success is also important. Where possible adopt a 'growth mindset'. Such a mindset emphasises persistence, adaptation and willingness to learn as superior to innate talent. I've spoken about this on the blog before - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/10/fixed-vs-growth-mindsets/>

It is important to note that things like concentration, attention, focus and motivation are influenced by the other lifestyle choices that you make. For example, the strategies included under 'Strategy 7 – Care for your body' will have a positive impact on your productivity and performance. Take sleep for example - <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/benefits-of-sleep/learning-memory>

If you need help with your writing (e.g. how to structure an essay/chapter), consider using Studiosity, a service for students that allows them to submit draft assignments/chapters for feedback and help - <http://www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/slc/studiosity.cfm> . Also check out Lauren from Yunggorendi's study skills blog - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/yunggorendi-study-skills/> - She goes in-depth on the process of writing essays which is equally appropriate to thinking about PhD chapters and papers.

Alongside that, if you need further advice and support on the academic side of life (academic writing, referencing, using Endnote, basic mathematics, statistics), consider the Student Learning Support Services – <https://students.flinders.edu.au/support/slss> . They have consultants you can meet with to discuss your academic challenges.

Finally, look into the many professional development courses and options provided by the Horizon Professional Development Awards scheme here at Flinders – www.flinders.edu.au/horizon. The Horizon program was set up to give students the opportunities to develop skills they will use in the workforce, after their degree.



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"Great question, let's take a look"
●●●

Studiosity

Strategy 9 – Modify your environment

Sometimes we forget that the environments in which we live and work in have a strong impact on our wellbeing.

On the plus side, this means we can influence our wellbeing and productivity by modifying the environments in which we study, work and play.

So what are the environments most relevant to students?



The first space to consider is your regular study space.

- 1) Don't use your bed to study. Create a dedicated space for study.
- 2) Make it *physically comfortable* – e.g. good chair, decent lighting, some airflow, sensible temperature and low levels of noise.
- 3) Make it *functional*, that is, with easy access to the things you need to study – books, internet connection, healthy snacks and hydration. Also make it harder to get hold of common distractions (e.g. mobile phones, TV, junk food).
- 4) Make it *low distraction* – remove or minimise those things that are likely to distract you such as your phone, conversations of other people, visual distractions.
- 5) Remove *clutter* – it is normal to make a bit of a mess whilst you are working with papers and books but seek to declutter your study space as best as possible and restore it neatly at the end of a study session. People vary in the level of clutter they can tolerate, but most studies find excessive clutter is associated with poorer productivity and wellbeing.
- 6) Make it *uniquely you* – give your study space a bit of your own personal identity by decorating with items that capture your personality. These items can give you inspiration.

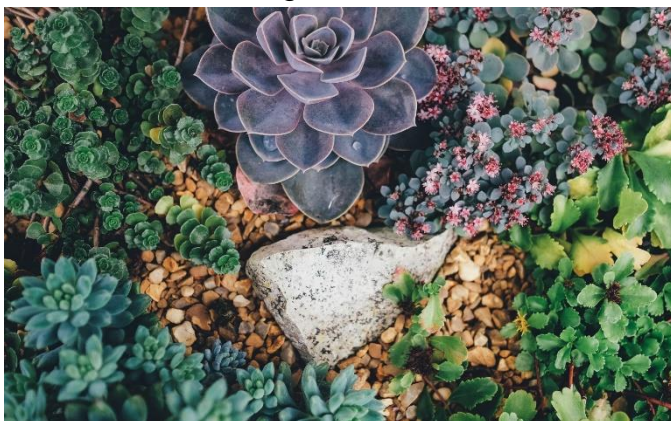
I've talked more about this here - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/07/11/create-study-space-makes-want-study/>

The second important space to consider is your living space, that is, your home or main room. Fundamentally, the goal is to try and create a living space that you find rejuvenating, that you want to spend time in. What this actually looks like will be different for each person (we each decorate our spaces in different ways) but some of the principles of creating a good study place apply here as well.

- Minimise clutter
- Ensure that everything has a home where it can be stored or put back
- Make it uniquely you by decorating it with items that bring you joy

If you want to delve further into how to create a more rewarding and satisfying living space, I like the writing of this Japanese woman - <https://konmari.com/> but honestly you can find lots of different guides online to creating a nice living space.

The third space to consider is not necessarily a space you have control over but is about trying to maximise your time in nature each day. This includes exposure to trees, parks, animals, sky and waterways. One of the reasons I love working at Flinders is because the Bedford Park campus has wonderful garden and park spaces, which can be very rejuvenating, even after just a few minutes each day.



There are a number of theories as to why exposure to nature is associated with wellbeing. These range from evolutionary theories that posit we have an intimate connection with nature based on millions of years of co-evolution, to the more simple fact that we often go outside to engage in healthy behaviours (e.g. exercise, social connections). Whatever the mechanism, there is accumulating evidence that increased time in nature is beneficial for our wellbeing. How long do you need to spend in nature? About 2 hours per week if this study is to be believed - <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2019-06-14/dose-of-nature-for-health-and-wellbeing/11203180>

The final space to consider is your personal space. It is hard to thrive when we are in situations that threaten our personal safety. This might be threats from outside of us (e.g. abusive relationships) or threats from within (suicidal ideation). These situations can be changed though and when they are, new opportunities arise.

- *Do I feel safe in my own home or work?*
- *Do I feel safe from myself?*

If you are being impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse, check out <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>. They have information and support services.

If you are suicidal, contact Lifeline <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

If you experience periods of high distress, where you feel unsafe from yourself, consider developing a coping plan - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/12/01/my-coping-plan/>

Remember that Flinders has a counselling service - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling> and an Out of Hours Crisis Line - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/10/new-hours-crisis-support-counselling-line/>

Strategy 10 – Financial control

Whilst intuitively we all know that increased financial resources generally means improved well-being, the relationship between income and wellbeing is actually quite complex.

There is no doubt that if you don't have the income necessary to support your basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, warmth), then wellbeing will suffer.

But once those basic needs are taken care of, it gets a little more complex. It isn't the case that wellbeing and wealth are perfectly linearly related. More wealth doesn't necessarily mean greater wellbeing.

An important factor in the relationship between wealth and wellbeing is 'financial control'.

Financial control is having the confidence and ability to be able to manage your financial situation. In fact, 'financial control' is considered by some to be one of the top 3 predictors of wellbeing. I've talked about this previously on <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/09/21/the-golden-triangle-of-happiness/>

Some people can earn very high incomes but be incapable of curbing their spending or way of life. They burn through cash, save little, and find they are unable to accumulate wealth (i.e. saved financial resources). Others on very modest incomes are able to save regularly, invest, live frugally and accumulate wealth.

We are mindful that most students are living on relatively low incomes. Their absolute spending power is fairly low and their ability to build wealth is limited. In fact, one of the driving forces in getting a degree is to get a higher income and greater wealth.

But low income and wealth doesn't negate you building financial control. In fact, the better you get at managing money during times of low income, the more skilled you will be managing your finances when your income changes.

So how do you build financial control?

Start by improving your financial literacy, that is, how much you know about saving, budgeting, investing, managing debt, superannuation, insurance. Spend some time on <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/>.

Subscribe to their newsletter - <https://moneysmart.gov.au/subscribe-to-our-newsletter>

Then start translating what you learn into specific behaviours – e.g. setting up a budget, setting up automatic savings, investing small amounts, limiting use of credit cards, knocking over debt.



You might find these couple of articles I've written helpful along the way -

- <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/05/02/financial-wellbeing/>

- <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/24/getting-financial-control-building-skills/>

- <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/12/10/budgeting-saving-investing/>

That sounds great, but my financial situation is pretty dire....

It is common for students to find themselves in crappy financial situations including debt, overdue bills, and inability to pay for basic necessities.

If this is you, start by making an appointment to see the Flinders financial counsellor at FUSA - <http://fusa.edu.au/financial-advocacy/>

FUSA also provide a range of welfare services:

- Free food is often available at their offices (Hub, Bedford Park).
- Their financial advocacy team can help you with all matters financial - <https://fusa.edu.au/financial-advocacy/>.
- Financial hardship grants can help you with overdue bills and study-related expenses - <https://fusa.edu.au/grants/>.
- They run a regular legal advice clinic on Wednesday mornings - <https://fusa.edu.au/legal-clinic/>
- Their Student Assist team can help you with accommodation problems - <https://fusa.edu.au/accommodation/>

Also check out the Financial Counselling Australia website - <https://www.financialcounsellingaustralia.org.au/Home>

For food needs, consider the Flinders Market – <https://oasis.flinders.edu.au/flinders-community-market/> as well as nearby Food hubs - <https://oasis.flinders.edu.au/food-thats-worth-the-visit/>

For clothing needs, consider the Thread Together Van - <https://oasis.flinders.edu.au/thread-together-van/>



Strategy 11 – Unwind and recharge

You might have been thinking, given everything written in this document that I equate self-care only with ‘getting better’.

Whilst those are important parts of my philosophy, I am also a firm believer that you need times to unwind, have fun, play, let loose, and simply enjoy your time on this planet (preferably not at the expense of others).



I can't tell you how to unwind and recharge, but I can recommend that you at least set aside time to do so. I draw the analogy with physical exercise, in that the rest and recuperation between workouts is as important as the workout itself.

Reflection Questions

1. *Do I know what rejuvenates/energizes me?*
2. *What relaxes me/ helps me feel centred and at ease?*
3. *When do I smile or laugh?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Remind yourself of what other people do to unwind, recharge and play – <https://bit.ly/2Z2vZn5>. Add some more of your own.

Learn to distinguish between activities that have only a superficial impact on your wellbeing, versus those that genuinely help you unwind and recharge. For example, I find that watching TV numbs me but doesn't really revitalise me. I experience a much greater sense of stress relief from spending time in the garden. A fun activity is one that should leave you feeling good or revitalised or energised afterwards.

Schedule these activities into your week because you may find that when you are busy, these are the first activities that get knocked off your list, whereas they should be the ones you prioritise.



Strategy 12 – help others

Ok, I've spent 40+ pages telling you to focus on yourself.

But it turns out there are other people in this world as well.

One of the wonderfully strange quirks of human psychology is that focusing on helping others can sometimes be the best medicine for you.



Your best pathway to a life of helping others (because you are a Flinders Student) probably starts with the Horizon Professional Development Awards program - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/careers/horizon> - a Flinders University program designed to give students the skillsets required to be out in the workforce and community making a difference.

They offer a range of volunteering and mentoring and professional development opportunities that will give you a chance to work your unique magic on others.

There are a number of reasons why helping others can end up helping you:

- We tend to be a lot more critical of ourselves than others. When we help others, we develop compassion skills that we can ultimately apply to ourselves.
- You may end up feeling more grateful for what you have when you meet people who are struggling with less.
- Helping others opens up new opportunities for friendships, work/employment, skill development, finding new passions and interests.
- We learn alternative ways of seeing the world.
- You can get a 'timeout' from your own problems.
- You feel a sense of achievement when you help someone with a problem.

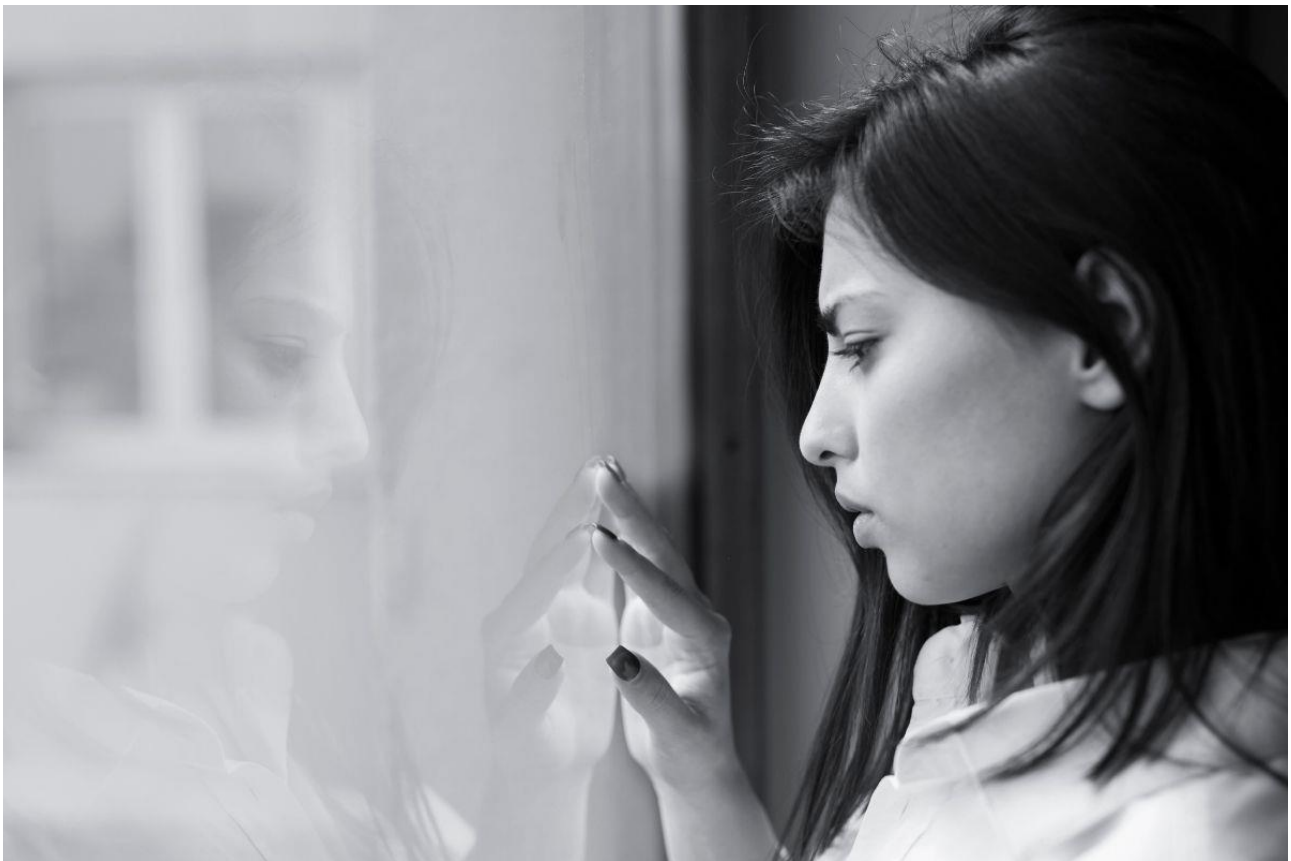
It doesn't just have to be people

Maybe you aren't ready to head out into the world and start assisting others. But what about caring for another lifeform? A pet or a plant?

Go easy to start with. I collected 250+ plants and it's a bit of a challenge to keep them all happy. But a couple is definitely feasible.

And even though, on the surface, it is simply about keeping a pet or a plant fed, doing so will teach you valuable life lessons. I've learned from keeping plants alive the value of routines and schedule.





Self-care during really difficult times

Many of the ideas presented in this self-care guide are things to implement when things are going OK. Investments we can in our future selves, when our current selves aren't too overloaded.

But sometimes life gets the better of us and we need simpler, more direct strategies to cope or keep us afloat. This is particularly the case if traumatic things have happened to us or someone we care about.

When we, or people we care about are affected by traumatic events, outside of our control, it can be distressing and upsetting and feel overwhelming.

Whilst you might not be able to change the event itself, there are things you can do during difficult times to look after yourself. These things can make a genuine difference to how well you cope.

FIRST - Understand there are a wide range of reactions that people have....

For example, it is normal to feel:

- Frightened, on-edge, worried, anxious or more alert than usual
- Helpless – that something really bad has happened or is happening, and you can't do anything about it
- Angry – about what has happened and with whoever is responsible
- Guilty – that you have survived or are not injured when others have suffered or died. You may wonder if you could have done anything to prevent what happened.
- Sadness – particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
- Grief – if you've lost something important to you
- Stunned or shocked
- Cut off from what is going on around you as if things aren't real
- Agitated or irritable

It is also normal to experience:

- Distressing dreams or intrusive memories of the event
- Headaches
- Crying
- Changes in appetite, upset stomach
- Aches and pains in your body, tiredness, fatigue
- Feeling that your heart is beating faster
- Not feeling like being with others or doing things you usually enjoy
- Thinking about what has happened repeatedly, finding it difficult to think about other things
- Poor concentration and memory, difficulty thinking clearly and making decisions
- A strong need to talk or a desire not to say much at all
- Acting or feeling as if nothing has happened, which people may see as meaning that you don't care or are being strong, but can be a way of trying to cope.



SECOND - Understand there are some simple things that you can do that will help you cope

Things that help:

- Spend time in places and with people with whom you feel safe and comfortable, if possible.
- Get plenty of rest if you feel tired, but try to have some kind of regular routine with your sleep e.g. not sleeping through the day and staying awake at night.
- Do things that feel good to you, even if they don't feel as good as they usually do (e.g. read, exercise, watch television, spend time with others, hobbies).
- Think about any coping strategies that you have used to manage difficult situations in the past and use them again.
- Be involved with people who are going through or have survived the same experience.
- Do some 'normal' things with people where you don't have to talk about what has happened if you don't want to.
- Allow some time for yourself – you may want to be alone at times.
- Get into a routine, even if you don't feel like eating try to have small healthy snacks regularly and do some light exercise (e.g. walk in the fresh air).
- Give yourself time – it takes weeks or months after a traumatic event has finished for people to accept what has happened and learn how to live with the experience.
- Find out what happened – try to gain information from a few reliable sources, when you are ready, so that you can better understand the reality of the situation.
- Take extra care – when we are going through or have gone through a recent trauma, we can be more vulnerable to accidents, so be mindful when driving.
- Talk it over - if you feel ready. It is important, however, not to force yourself or others to tell their story. Some people may need to talk repeatedly about their reactions, other people will cope with it differently, and perhaps not with talking. Sometimes if someone is not able to manage their own feelings or doesn't have the skills to listen openly to your story, they may unintentionally minimise or dismiss by saying “don't cry”, “calm down”, or “be thankful that it wasn't worse”. If this happens when you try to talk, find someone else to speak to who is better able to listen at that time. If you don't have anyone to talk to, you can write down your thoughts and feelings, or consider seeing a counsellor.
- Ask for practical help from family and friends as there is a good chance they want to help but don't know how to. So speak up and let them know what you need. This could include help around the house, help with studies, cooking or whatever practical assistance you need.



Things that don't typically help

Bottling up your feelings - Strong feelings are natural. Don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel, and don't worry if you cry.

Taking on too much - Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think to go over what happened so you can come to terms with it. Take some time to get back to your old routine.

Drinking or using drugs - Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.

Making big life changes - Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from people you trust.

Withdrawing from others – Although you might feel like being alone and it is OK to spend some extra time by yourself, try not to withdraw completely from other people.

THIRD - Understand that it is OK to seek professional help

Many people find that the experiences they go through after a traumatic event gradually reduce within about one month of a traumatic event ending. If the traumatic event is ongoing, it is normal to experience ongoing reactions. If you feel like things are not getting better, or you cannot manage the experiences you are having, then it is a good idea to seek professional help. See the next section.



What if you find that you are not coping?

No matter how prepared we try to be, sometimes things can get on top of us. Many students are reluctant to ask for help because of shame, thinking they have to deal with problems on their own and simply 'tough it out'.

On the contrary, supervisors, course coordinators, counsellors and the university as a whole much prefer if students reach out for help with they are struggling. Catching issues early typically means easier solutions.

Think about how you would feel if a friend or family member was struggling but didn't want to trouble you with it. You might say to them that talking about this stuff earlier, rather than later can help with finding solutions quicker.

How do you know if you are not coping? Excess stress manifests in a number of ways.

Mental

- Trouble thinking clearly
- Memory problems
- Can't concentrate
- Short attention span
- Poor judgement
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying
- Rumination – going over the same thoughts over and over again

Emotional

- Moodiness
- Easily upset or hurt
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, unable to relax or keep still
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Physical

- Tightness in muscles
- Aches and pains
- Headaches, trembling, sweating
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of appetite
- Lack of sleep, nightmares

Behavioural

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Interpersonal

- Impatient with people
- Irritable and snapping at others
- Avoiding contact with others

If you suspect you are not coping, contact Health, Counselling and Disability Services – www.flinders.edu.au/hcd . Use our After Hours Crisis Support Line if you are emotionally distressed, experiencing mental health issues or having thoughts of self-harm and it is out of normal business hours. Phone 1300 512 409 or text 0488 884 103.

To learn more about the services we offer, peruse our Service Brochure - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/content/dam/student/documents/hcds-service-brochure.pdf>

In short we provide free access to GPs, Nurses, Counsellors and Disability Advisors. We also run a range of program and produce handouts on a number of self-help topics. Help is always close by.

PHD – Final Words

On behalf of the team at Health, Counselling and Disability Services, I wish you all the best with your PhD.

I don't regret doing my PhD at all, and I wish the same experience for you.

If you want to drop me a line and share your PhD experience, so we might include some student stories in future editions of this guide, do so at Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au

Take Care,

Dr Gareth Furber



The team at Health, Counselling and Disability Services produces handouts on a range of self-help topics. To ensure we are providing good quality and relevant content, please take a moment to provide some feedback on this handout - <https://bit.ly/3tMv49C>