

Stress Awareness Episode 3_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:11] Hello and welcome to Episode three of our BeWell podcast series. Today, we're going to discuss managing stress and learning effectively at home. Joining me today, I have Sam May who is a politics and international relations lecturer, Julie McLennan, a student support adviser from our student support and Advice Team, and students Michael Walker and Nicole Blanchflower, who are both 5th year civil engineering students. A huge, warm welcome to you all and thank you so much for joining me. Now, adapting to studying at home can be challenging and for many of us has brought a whole new level of academic stress, dodgy Internet connections, backaches from makeshift desk spaces, lack of traditional student experience, keeping on top of coursework, the list goes on. One of the most challenging things I have heard a lot of is that motivation and productivity at home can be quite low. Is this something that you have experienced and how have you coped?

Sam May [00:01:06] Can I start then and maybe then give the students a little bit of free will, to say what they want? As an academic, just like many of my students, I am struggling to keep that motivation going. It's hard. We've got so many things to think about. We've got the usual, you know, academics. We've also got in the back of our mind the Covid situation and the people we care about. It's hard to remain motivated and determined and to get on with things. Many of my students are doing exactly as I am sitting down to work at 9am and staring for two hours and not really doing anything. I was wondering if this is the same for Nicole and for Michael here, that if they're struggling as well to keep that motivation going.

Michael Walker [00:02:00] I mean, yeah, I definitely do. Like, I sort of find at home it takes me like four times as long to do half as much. So I think there is good and bad of being at home. So, like, I've got nothing to do apart from study. But when you've got, like, all day do something, you sort of find yourself not doing it, or I do anyway. And I have all my distractions here as well.

Nicole Blanchflower [00:02:23] I think something that I struggle with is, you know, I sit down at nine o'clock and I'm like, oh, I'll go grab a cup of tea. And I'll sit down with my cup of tea. I have got to wait for it to go down and do something for ten minutes, then maybe go back into the kitchen. Someone else is in the kitchen and then I'm stood talking for 20 minutes. And then I come back and I'm like, oh, I've just wasted a whole hour doing absolutely nothing. And I've woken up for nothing.

Bekah Walker [00:02:48] Yeah, I definitely also find it really difficult to get moving in the morning to get started and I am very much guilty for maybe sitting at my desk, flicking through my phone and before I know it, like, oh, it's lunchtime and I've not done anything. And I do find that I'm spending a lot more hours at my desk than what I would if I was working [in the office]. But actually, is the output any more? No, it's probably not. And actually, I think it is less. And I am finding that I spend so long at my desk and I'm almost spending too long. I actually think it'd be helpful if, you know, you set yourself a couple of hours to do a task and have a break and then come back and do it in small little bites can also help with motivation, I find, you know, because you can feel like you're just sitting standing at a screen all day and it can be quite soul destroying if you're not seeing any progress being made.

Julie McLennan [00:03:44] I'm going to come at it from a different approach. Our team has had a nine o'clock meeting every morning, so I find that that has motivated me because I've had to be at my desk at nine o'clock every morning. We do just have a chat for about ten, fifteen minutes and then we speak about work everyone's going to do for the day and then that seems to get the day going. So I feel as though I've been lucky during my time working from home because I haven't had any problem about getting motivated, because I do feel I've had a structured timetable as such in our calendars. So we've always been dropping in and speaking. So I have found that useful.

Nicole Blanchflower [00:04:25] Yeah, kind of speaking from calendars, I got a whiteboard and drew out nine to five every day just so I could be like, OK, from ten till one or whatever, I should be doing three computational fluid dynamics lectures. And if I don't do it then that's bad, and setting myself like the small goals and just being able to see it and keep the routine every week, I find is really positive.

Julie McLennan [00:04:50] Yeah, I would definitely say that time management is one of the best skills that you can have for working from home and not even just working from home, even if you were on campus. To have time management and have structure is one of the best things to have.

Sam May [00:05:05] I would absolutely agree with everything you've all said, and I think doing a timetable in advance is really helpful because you can instantly see when you've spent too long talking to your flatmates in the kitchen, you know, you can instantly see that perhaps you shouldn't watch that daytime television show and it can get you back on track really quickly. What I would suggest to everyone during this Covid pandemic is to be realistic when they do the timetable. Like Bekah said, do not think we have to sit there at nine am until nine o'clock in the evening because that just brings in guilt when we don't do anything but to maybe schedule smaller sessions. Yeah, smaller sessions and regular breaks where we do get up and have a cup of coffee and speak to our housemates and then go back to another short session, an hour to an hour and a half probably Max, and then do something else. That I have found very helpful.

Julie McLennan [00:06:08] Yeah, but even being realistic as well include day to day chores, preparing your lunch at half 12 and know that it might take 30 minutes to prepare the lunch. So you're not going to be able to go back to your studies until maybe half past one. Whereas if you just see lunch and then that eats into your study time, then you feel as though that you're falling behind and then that can cause stress because you start to panic when, oh my God, I'm still preparing lunch, but I should be doing my essay for engineering that is due on Friday. And then panic starts kicking in.

Michael Walker [00:06:39] It's like you read my mind. [Laughing]

Nicole Blanchflower [00:06:43] We do have an essay due on Friday.

Julie McLennan [00:06:45] How are you getting on with your time management?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:06:48] I'm pretty much finished with it, I think, because I have really nothing else to do, but all the assignments, I do find myself doing them over a longer period of time rather than a short period of time, which I think produces a better end result almost.

Julie McLennan [00:07:08] So do you think that has helped your productivity, just having the extra time, whereas if you were maybe on campus, you might have gone and had a coffee with someone after a lecture or gone for a walk? Do you feel as though the time working from home has given you more time to write your essay?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:07:26] I think I find, I'm kind of chipping away at more and I can I focus more on the quality of my writing because I'm taking more time to do than and just trying to bash it out. I'm able to research what I'm saying more and be able to have better arguments because I'm taking more time to research and think about them, especially because one of the essays we've got we've known about for a whole month. So you've kind of had that whole time as well as a dip into other projects, take little breaks because a month is a long time to work on something. So it's good to take breaks from one project and go into another, do something there and then come back.

Julie McLennan [00:08:05] And have you been doing this all alone or have you been setting up interactions with fellow students and speaking to them and bouncing ideas off of other students, or have you solely done it yourself?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:08:15] I think I've mainly done like the essays and reports by myself, but something about our year, we're not afraid to ask questions of each other, especially like, you know, you would ask them in person, in class. You know, we've got like a group chat going so if one person has a question, everybody can kind of chip in for the answer and you can kind of work and develop the answer as a group.

Bekah Walker [00:08:41] Yeah, I think that's actually really important because I think one of the things, if I was a student I would personally be struggling with is, you know, if you're in a lecture or, you know, you're in one of your tutorials and you're maybe a little bit stressed and, you know, you kind of get the same vibe off your classmates, what you're sitting together, or you maybe come out of your class and you're like, oh, I have no idea what they were talking about. Whereas at home you potentially maybe feeling a little bit alone in the I'm the only one that doesn't actually know what you're talking about and you feel that you are the only person that stressed. Whereas I feel like that is actually probably what's missing with being at home is you're not united and the stress potentially as such because you feel alone, you're at home.

Michael Walker [00:09:24] Yeah, I agree that it is definitely good to have people in the same boat. In a way like someone who can empathize with you.

Julie McLennan [00:09:32] But again, sometimes comes to the person's individual personality because you two may feel confident enough to put a message on WhatsApp or Teams to say I'm really struggling, I don't understand. That's where the next person is going to be stressed and also maybe has anxiety and maybe confidence issues that they don't feel confident enough to ask questions so for students in that situation we do have websites and tools in place to deal with our stress management. So we do have like self-help guides on the counselling web page that they can have a look. There is mood Zone, they can go on and have a look at that. And also, The Desk, which is an Australian based website that can go on there and get support.

Bekah Walker [00:10:20] Yeah, I think it is really important to remember that there is a lot of resources out there to help us if we are struggling. And it's really important to flag this and remember that, that you're not alone. I think personally, for me, I'm finding work being at home every day that my workplace, and my chillout space is kind of all blended in

together. And it can be really hard to find the right kind of study-life or work-life balance. And I guess taking time to prioritize self-care every day to avoid a burn out is really, really important. Is that anything that you guys particularly do when you're feeling pressured or stressed to kind of just stop, take notice and recharge your batteries.

Julie McLennan [00:11:07] I got a puppy during lockdown. So if I'm getting stressed, I just thought, right, go get the lead, let's go for a walk. And I do find even just five minutes walk around the house or around the field at the back of my house it does fairly improve. You feel fresh and motivated again when you come back.

Sam May [00:11:27] And I completely agree. Again, I have two dogs, so I'm constantly walking them. They are amazing, not everybody can get a dog right now, I completely understand but they are fantastic because I take my mind off everything. They do something stupid like roll in fox poo and it takes my mind off of everything. But just walking, just physically moving, getting up from the desk is really crucial. I have found, as you mentioned at the beginning back pain and I'm just sitting and I'm just trying to work, but nothing's coming out. If I stand up and move, it makes a huge difference to my sense of what I'm doing, my prioritization. And you've mentioned the need to take regular breaks. And I think that's important that we don't kick ourselves for taking a break or feel guilty for doing it, because that's how the mind learns. It needs to stop reading to be able to process what you've just read and learnt. Some of my greatest creative moments have been when I'm doing things like reading a comic book or something that's completely unacademic and somehow it suddenly fits into place. So I would say to be kind to each other and not to get upset if you haven't quite done everything you expected to do that day. Be realistic. We're all struggling and don't give yourself a kick. Just think, right tomorrow is going to be different.

Bekah Walker [00:13:00] Yeah, I definitely feel that I do my most creative thinking when I go out for a walk, I take time away from my desk if I am feeling overwhelmed with the amount of tasks I've got to do. My deadlines are approaching. It might sound strange, but actually taking time away from your desk is so much more helpful than sitting in one spot kind of trying to stress about what you're doing. Sometimes going out for that walk really is just even if it is for half an hour or 15 minutes round the block, I really find that you've just taken yourself away from that situation and put things into perspective and you can come back and feel a little bit more revitalized and re-focused. And, you know, I can feel a little bit more motivated that way.

Nicole Blanchflower [00:13:49] I think it's really interesting about like I got a Fitbit recently and it vibrates at ten to the hour every hour to try and motivate you to get up and do two hundred and fifty steps minimum an hour to do. It's like, OK, so I got two hundred fifty to go and so I maybe take a walk round my house or maybe up and down the street. I find that really helps because you don't realize how fast an hour goes, especially if you're in the middle of something and you think I will just wait until the next hour then I'll go take a walk and then you're like, oh, it is next hour. But that kind of constant reminder I'm feeling really helps.

Julie McLennan [00:14:28] Have you set yourself up a challenge with friends to try and keep your friends motivated as well and having like a competition?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:14:38] Not so much yet, I'm the only one with a Fitbit so far, but I would definitely recommend I mean, this was inexpensive from online.

Julie McLennan [00:14:50] If students don't have a fitbit, but they can also just use their phones. There's other ways to count your steps. But my friends and I do that and it's a great motivation, it does get me out the house and evening because someone will take a screenshot and they've done like 9000 steps. And I'm like sitting at 500 and it's like I have not moved from my desk today. Let's get out.

Sam May [00:15:14] I have a cheap version of a Fitbit and it's so cheap that it just registers me walking when I just wave my hand. So I managed to do apparently 10000 steps by stroking my dog. So, yeah, it's very amusing. [Laughing]

Julie McLennan [00:15:30] So have either of you been in lockdown isolation and not allowed to leave your accommodation?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:15:37] No, fortunately, but my boyfriend, he lived in a shared flat just before lockdown. And it was one of the situations where it was like, if somebody in the house had, like a cough or something, you could not go out and it is still that kind of situation now. So I didn't get to see him for about two weeks before lockdown and then lockdown hit and then we couldn't see each other full stop. So that, I felt, was a very kind of stressful situation and I just got my wisdom teeth out. So that was also another extra stress. And it was just a very stressed time because it went from someone that I was seeing every day, to someone I can't see anymore.

Julie McLennan [00:16:16] Did that bring down your mood? I mean, did you feel that that had an impact on your studies as well?

Nicole Blanchflower [00:16:21] Oh, yeah, one hundred percent. Because, having time with him was like it was like a cool down, and relaxing but because I was sitting at home just constantly think about exams, OK, this is cancelled. Now the whole new exam structure is like this. I was just kind of very much getting in my head because I had I had no time to just relax.

Bekah Walker [00:16:45] Yeah, and another thing that I, I find that really helps me be productive is I really, swear by a proper sleep schedule, like trying to go to bed at the same time and getting up at the same time every day really helps. You know, it helps with your body clock as well as being motivated. Also a good night's sleep is does wonders for your brain and helps with being productive. You know, if you're tired, then of course you're going to be a little bit slower at your computer. Definitely for me that is a big thing. Michael, is there anything that you do in your daily routine that kind of sets you up and helps you get motivated for the day?

Michael Walker [00:17:29] Yeah, I like to exercise at the gym. I get to up at the same time every day, to the gym, make breakfast and at my desk by ten. It sets you up well, where if I do what I did today, I don't go to the gym, then, yeah, I just feel tired, sluggish, really unmotivated.

Bekah Walker [00:17:48] Yeah. It makes such a difference. It does. And I definitely find exactly the same if I don't get up and exercise in the morning, I'm actually often in a bad mood as well. And then that doesn't help your productivity, all around your mood just feels a low.

Julie McLennan [00:18:03] I find I get dressed for work, I was still putting on, you know, the dress trousers, the blouse, do my hair and sit because I found the days, I was dressed

more casually I wouldn't go out for a walk at lunchtime because I wasn't dressed. So I find getting up in the morning and going for a walk, having a shower, get dressed, sitting down at nine o'clock for work made me feel I could be productive for the whole day.

Bekah Walker [00:18:31] It's a little bit more normal that as well, isn't it? Trying to just keep again is going all back to that structured and routine just kind of helps set up your day correctly and everyone does. And what works for some might not work for others. So it's just important that if whatever you are doing and it works for you, then that's fantastic, then that's great. Everyone can do different things. That's why we're all different and we'll all have times where it's challenging. Or you might kind of have a really productive day one day and the next day you're not as productive. And it can be really hard not to beat yourself up on those unproductive days. But sometimes the best thing you can do is switch off. I'll start again tomorrow. Tomorrow is a new day. It's really hard to try not to just beat yourself up.

Michael Walker [00:19:20] Yeah, that's why I find, I turn computer off, switch off, go downstairs to relax, and get ready for bed.

Bekah Walker [00:19:32] Yeah, I think it's really important in terms of your work-life-study balance that you have a set designated switch off time, that's me for the day because it can be so easy as I've got nothing else to do so I'll just, you know, sit at my computer and try and do stuff. Because to be honest, probably after eight o'clock, you're probably not going to get much more done. And you can work on that five hundred words within half an hour in the morning, but in the evening it might take you two or three hours as such.

Sam May [00:20:00] I think it's really important as a lecturer, I'm seeing my classes online and virtually, and some students are putting on their cameras and you can see them lying in their beds, in their pajamas. And when we're all working and trying to live from home, when there's no demarcation between work and playtime, then I think it's really helpful to get dressed, to kind of go, this is my work hours, I'm in my work clothes. It psychologically gives you that demarcation between work and play. And by all means, as soon as you've finished doing your work, change straight into your pajamas at four o'clock in the afternoon if that's what works for you. But it's really important to get up and get dressed and go, right, I'm at work because if you stay in your pajamas, it's really easy to have a pajama day to put on the telly and watch daytime TV and miss your meetings because you're too busy watching *Frazier*, which some of my students have done. And without that physical demarcation, we need a bit of mental space to kind of go this is work and this isn't because I know I'm lucky I've got a spare room I've turned into an office. But for many students, you're working and living in one tiny room and just sort of getting dressed and then getting back into your pajamas to signal that's the end of my working day can be really helpful. And allow me to work better through your working day and then enjoy your evening.

Bekah Walker [00:21:33] Yeah, absolutely. I actually heard a couple of weeks ago that one of my colleagues said that at the end of the day, they kind of go out and walk around the block and then come back home like, I'm home from work or I'm home from uni as such, and that kind of just signals that is the end of the day, I'm now on all my chill time and it might seem silly, but that kind of ritual can really help, particularly with like the work-life balance and keep in your social life and study life separate.

Julie McLennan [00:22:05] I was also going to say for students that are parents and having to juggle a student life and being a parent, trying to make a structure and trying study like during the day. So when the children do come home at half past three, they're

not just seeing working around their children. You know, it's trying to juggle being a parent and working at the same time.

Bekah Walker [00:22:32] For sure we've definitely got we've got a lot of resources at the University and we've got a lot of support, and AUSA has got a lot of societies and clubs that people can join, too. And if you are struggling and maybe feeling a little bit isolated, maybe not really feeling like a student as you have in the past, I would really recommend you join one of the clubs or societies and just making connections with people that you've got something in common with which is actually separate from your university kind of studying life. It can be quite isolating at home. And I guess that would, you know, help with the isolation. If you are struggling and need someone to talk to, we also have the Togetherall Service, which is free for all university staff and students to log in with their university emails to speak to other students from across the country who might be feeling the same way. It can be really good just to chat about how you're how you're feeling if you are struggling, because there is support out there and you're not alone. It's a very difficult time and I mean, exams this year as well are different it's not peak exam season. It's kind of all year kind of trickling stress if you've got these ongoing assessments, not just everything at once. So I think it can be quite hard as well for students to adapt to that as well. So it's important to highlight that and address that. That is it is OK to feel a little bit stressed, but you're not alone and there is resources out there and we've got people to help you if you need it.

Julie McLennan [00:24:18] I'm just going to say, if you are struggling you've got the counselling services that are available. All you need to do is email counselling@abdn.ac.uk and arrange an appointment. And you can do that by Microsoft Teams or by telephone. And you can also get in contact with the student support services team. They can you drop an email and again, we can do a Microsoft Office Teams meeting or we can give you a call. There's always someone at the other end of the telephone ready to speak to you. If students are on campus, they've got the student residents assistance there waiting to help them as well. So they are available from 6pm at night, to 6am in the morning.

Bekah Walker [00:24:58] Yeah, there's always someone there if you need to talk or even if you're just bored, just give someone a call. They'll always be grateful to have a chat. You don't have to even be stressed at all.

Julie McLennan [00:25:10] And the chaplaincy have their virtual open days as well. So they're always there ready to support students as well.

Bekah Walker [00:25:18] Thank you, Julie, that's really helpful. Well, thank you all so much for joining me today and sharing your experiences. I really appreciate it. All the resources that we've kind of talked about in the episode today, I will share them in the comments. So finally, thank you to our listeners for listening. I hope you've enjoyed the episode. Take care and I'll see you next time.

Voiceover [00:25:52] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.