**Making the most of your mind transcription**

Ros: Welcome to this Counselling Service podcast.

Today we'll be talking about making the most of your mind.

And we'll be suggesting some strategies you can use when you're revising and some suggestions for your exams to help you perform at your best.

I'm Ros, and I work at the library, and I'm joined today by Omar from the Counselling Service and Nandana, who is student here at the University of Manchester.

Hi everyone, would you like to introduce yourselves?

Omar: Hi my name is Omar Sattuar I'm one of the counsellors at the Counselling Service.

Nandana: Thank you Ros. Hi I'm Nandana, I’m a final year under graduate student, studying International Business, Finance and Economics. I’m also a Student Team member here in the Library.

As a student myself, I find the subject of mental health and revising (really interesting), and I’m constantly looking for content to help me with things like exam stress, or just managing myself during finals. So hopefully our conversation will do just that.

Omar: That’s great Nandana. Revision is one of the things, obviously, that we were going to have to do again and again at University, and I don't know about you but whenever I'm faced with something like that, my heart sinks and I think, “Oh my goodness, you know, how am I going to get through all this stuff?”.

And there's a tendency, isn't there, for us to think, “well, I kind of know it, so it should be alright,” and we kind of hope for the best. But actually we could be much more strategic about it.

Nandana: I think definitely because usually during exams, you’re just overwhelmed by the content itself that you just dive straight in, without actually assessing how you need to attack each module – maybe cos they are taught differently, the assessments are different- but you think the effort and time kind of translates into your results, when effective studies also play a very important part.

Omar: Okay, let's look at one of the most important points, which is asking the question, how is it that we learn anything?

And it's through repetition, isn't it? We all take for granted, this thing that we have in English, ‘practice makes perfect’. And we just leave it at that.

But what does that really mean? What we're doing there is going over the same material, over and over again.

And every time we do that, we make a memory network, a network of neurons in our brain that’s a kind of pathway that gets activated every time we go over the same material.

So the more we go for it, the stronger it gets.

So, The other concept that's really pertinent.

We have two types of memory, we’ve got long term memory and we’ve got short term memory.

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Now in short term memory, Nandanana you'll be sitting in your room, you will be aware of the weight of your body on the chair, you will be aware of proprioception that's how far away your cup of coffee years from your hand so you don’t knock it over. All of these things, and you're listening to me so part of your capacity is using some of your working memory. All of these things are using a part of your working memory.

Long term memory, I don't know if this is technically correct, but I think of it like the hard disk on the drive on a computer. And I think that the working memory like by the random access memory, the RAM. So, to get stuff from my working memory into my long term memory, I need to repeat over and over again.

I need to really rehearse that material until I can do it in my sleep. And interestingly, we do do it in our sleep, but we’ll come to that bit later.

So in order it to get this material from our short term memory to our long term memory we need to repeat it lots of times. And what the research shows is that the way in which we repeat it is actually very important.

One way is much more effective than the other. So there's this sort of difference, if you like, between massed repetition, and spaced repetition, so let me just explain that a little bit.

If we cram before an exam. So we just go through the material, over and over and over again in a very short space of time, what the research shows is that we remember it for a very short time.

But if we, if we take time and use Spaced Repetition to rehearse that material, say, I don't know week or two before, but not rehearsing the same material over again.

But one part of it, and then moving on to another, and coming back to the first, then you know mixing it up in that way.

Although we might not remember much in the short term, but in the long term we have a much stronger neural structure built in our long term memory and we can recall that information, much more readily.

Nandana: This is a really good strategy for courses that students may need to use material that they used in first year in their final year. For example like medicine, or science-related courses but because we need to know everything that they know at the end of the course as well. So instead of studying at the end )(of the course), studying space in a spaced repetition sort of way.

So, how do you think we can implement this long term strategy for open book exams?

Omar: If we are revising for an open book exam, we do need to have a kind of general map of the territory. We do need to know what it is that might come up and where to go in our notes for that stuff.

And so for example, a lot of people, me included, as an undergraduate, we tend to go through our notes and highlight these words and certain sections.

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And I don't know about you but a lot of the time I thought that if just by doing that somehow it's making me learn it!

Nandana: Right now, I'm highlighting is something that I am guilty of doing as well.

I think it takes a bit of learning to actually understand that because we do much except that you're focused at that point of time, but then you're not really taking anything into your brain.

Omar: Yeah, yeah, you're absolutely right, Nandana.

It's almost like a hyperlink, but to make the hyperlink work. I've got to test myself. I've got to say, “Okay, this this word that I've highlighted, what does that mean?”

Ros: It's like the prep work you do before you start to revise, right?

Omar: Absolutely

Nandana: I think we also tend to do it because it's more comfortable than things like active recall, because you don't have to face the fact that probably you don't remember things.

Omar: That brings me nicely to this other point I wanted to bring to your attention, which was about familiarity that we can create with our know so you know for many years after finishing my degree I could still remember some of my lecture notes and I could still remember oh yes that subject was on the top left hand part of that page in my notes. What it actually meant, I probably couldn't tell you. So that that very interesting is called. That process is called Einstellung and it's to do with the familiarity. You look at that bit and think, “Oh yeah, I know it” and of course you don't, unless you test yourself.

This continual testing is one of the main points I want to make in this podcast. That if we really want to learn, we have to test ourselves over and over again.

Ros: We’re going to move on to group work now, which isn't something I really associate with revision.

Omar: Do you find that it's easier for you to work in a group or is it harder?

Nandana: In certain situations I have found that it’s really helpful. In terms of… if we want to go through a lot of papers and we divide the work, and then we explain to each other. It takes considerably less time for me to actually listen to somebody talk about a paper that for me to read it by myself, you know, a 45 page paper.

So, I think, in certain situations it’s definitely helped me, but at the same time I also find that for certain modules I like to be by myself and figure it out by myself, before I'm comfortable in a good situation.

Omar: Yeah, so it can work both ways can’t it? But that was a very, very important observation. That when we have to explain something to somebody else we're already processing, we're already recalling that stuff from our memory, and then putting it into words.

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So it's a really good strategy for testing yourself. And for testing your actual comprehension of the material. So, you know, if there are.

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If you can, every time you read something you read a paper, or you read a section of your notes, or you know, even in non academic life you go to the film you see a play you read a book, can you then explain the main points of that material to a 10 year old? Can you say, what are the five most important things about what I've just read, because that's an excellent way of learning.

And of course, every time we retrieve a memory, in order to explain to somebody, we are adding to that memory, enriching it, we're making connections with new stuff that we've learned, so that when we put it back – the technical term is reconsolidation - back into long term memory, it's actually changed.

So every time we retrieve a memory, we change it. It’s interesting to think about that.

Ros: And I like the idea of gathering together like a few friends that you have on the same course, because you can spend, I don’t know, like half an hour revising and then have a half an hour

‘Let me explain this concept to you because you don't you don't understand it’, and they can do the same with you. And that then solidifies it, or hopefully helps to solidify it, in your memory.

Nandana: I think it's actually happens for students, even unknowingly. When they have friends from different courses, if they have some interesting concept that they've, you know, learned.

I have had memories of me explaining things in finance or economics to my friends who do neuroscience and they do the same for me. And weirdly I can still remember things that they have explained and the things that I have explained, more clearly because I remember doing it.

As Omar said, I retrieved it out of my memory and have spoken about it so it's much more clear.

Omar: I’m sure you’ve found, as I have Nandana, actually, is quite alarming at times because you think you know something, and you start you've explained it, and then, I don't know, Ros asks me a question about it and I think. “Right. How do I answer that question?” And it really makes you think.

Nandana: Most definitely I think especially for students who don't do the same course as you, they will ask you, very blunt questions. They're very actually focused on the core of the concept. And then you’re just like, I have been studying this for four years, how can I not explain this?! So then you’re forced to actually think about it by yourself. So it does help you.

Omar: So that brings up again, very important concepts one I've mentioned already, ‘Einstellung’, this familiarity that we have with our material.

And the other one is to do with blind spots. And so, you know, I will be able to see your blind spots, you know, and shine a light on them and make you explain that, or to just highlight the fact that we need to find out what's missing material.

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And that's just normal that's the way we all have our blind spots, because in our life experience we build up chunks of knowledge and we build up a library of chunks of knowledge.

And, you know, they're not the same. So, one of the great things about sitting with somebody else to study is that I've now got access to a whole new library.

Ros: That’s a lovely way of thinking of it.

We always associate revision with being on your own and sitting in a library with, you know, at a desk with a pile of books or with your laptop or whatever and you're on your own. So, I think it can be a more social activity.

Nandana: I think, in the US it's much more common to have study groups.

But, as in the UK, I found that when I watched movies when I was in India, and it was something very common to see that in different classes in law school or med school, to have study groups for each module and they used to go over outlines together, or revise material together, and here (in the UK), that concept is a bit foreign. I think, if implemented rightly, it can be very effective. I think some lecturers do promote it in certain modules. I used to have these voluntary group assignments that you could do with a certain group. And I actually ended up performing really well for that essay question that was being practice over time.

You get a lot of new insights into topics and you work together, so you can produce a much better draft than you can do by yourself. Arguably.

Ros: So the next part of our podcast is talking about negative thoughts and procrastination and how we can avoid them or tackle them as they come up.

Omar: I wish we could avoid negative thoughts! It's just human isn't it? You sit down and you’re revising for something and you think, “oh, I don't know this, as well as I should know it.”

And you know we can get beset by by negative thoughts such that we just we just leave. We just leave that material and we go off and the next thing we know we're down in the kitchen making a cup of coffee, or we're on YouTube or something.

Do you find that Nandana? Do you find that you procrastinate?

Nandana: Absolutely. I have a years of experience with very, very chronic procrastination, you could call it. Because I think it works both ways for me…

Because if I don't know a particular module, I'm not confident that much, I tend to leave it. And at the same time for modules that have been working really hard towards, the idea that you could not do well in it, sort of turns into fear, which then turns into procrastination.

Omar: That’s such a good way of putting it, that those fears can just enter the come us if we let them. A very common thing that people find when they're trying to revise is that they get stuck, you get to a point where you think “this is getting nowhere”.

A good thing to do at that point is to interleave your work, so leave that subject and do a bit of something else, and then come back to that later. You'll find that you're able to do it a little bit better, because of a process, well, because of a factor that has to do with the way that our minds work, we have two modes of work, diffuse and focused, and I’ll tell you a little bit more about that later.

Omar: I want to tell you about an experiment that I always remember when I'm struggling with procrastination, because it's such a lovely little experiment and it really makes the point.

The experiment has resulted in a lot of work on mindsets and this is very pertinent to procrastination and also to perfectionism. So, in this experiment, there were two parts to this experiment, part one and part two, with two groups is primary school children Group A and Group B. And the researchers gave Group A and Group B some very simple addition and subtraction some things like eight minus three and four plus seven, well within their capacity to solve. And after 10 minutes or so, when the children had done the experiment, the researchers went and they gave feedback to each group. They said to group A, “Nandana, you've done so well you've answered all of these questions correctly, you bright bright girl You're a very clever girl”, and then for Group B, they gave slightly different feedback they said, “Nandana, you've done so well you've answered all the questions correctly, you must have worked so hard to do that. Well done for all your effort”

So slightly different feedback.

Now in part two of the experiment what they did was, they gave some questions that were slightly outside of that capacity that they haven't been taught this material yet - maybe it was like long division or something.

Well, the results were very different.

For group A, as soon as they saw that they couldn't do it they just put their pens down, because they now had a reputation to upkeep. “I’m good at arithmetic. If I can’t do this, I’m not even going to engage with it”. But group B, they were saying, “Oh please Miss, if we could have a little bit more time, I’m sure we could do this”.

Now, completely different mindset created just by the simple experiment. The first group, group A we can think of as a “be good mindset”. This is a sort of idea that if I can't do it that tells me something about me, I'm not good enough.

With Group B has what we can think of as a “get better mindset”. It’s a growth model.

If I can't do it, it says nothing about me, it just makes me aware that there's a gap in my knowledge. I need to fill that gap.

Okay.

If you think that the point at which you leave your work, I think, quite a lot of the time it's because of this mindset problem, you’re suddenly thinking, “I don't know how to do this.”

Instead of thinking, “oh that's funny I didn't know how to do this, what can I do to fill this gap?”

Nandana: I think we try to, as students, when we get good marks for certain modules. We, we think, “okay this is great. I've worked so hard for this.” And then when we are faced with exams and assignments are grouped together and you think, “Oh my god, this is so much. I don't think I'll be able to do it.” It’s very personal when you should actually think about it in they way that, “I just have to fill my gap of knowledge”. As you said, or I just have to work better at that.

Do you think it's good to have separation between yourself as a person whose abilities determine your mark, but rather your effort and your hard work?

Omar: Absolutely, I think what we shouldn't do is try to ignore these feelings. Feelings are a normal part of life. You might be working and you think, “Oh, this is not going well today,” you know, we start out this kind of self critical thing in your mind.

Just notice it.

There'll be times when it's sufficient to notice it, and then you can just continue plowing on through the work, and it will be okay. There'll be other times when it is really overwhelming.

And at that point, just leave the work, go and do something else.

Another way of tackling this is to say, “Okay, I'm not getting very far with this particular piece of work.” Now, all of you have more than one piece of work, it’s not school anymore, you've got five or six things on the go.

So, just start work on another subject, do a little bit of work on that and then go back to the first one.

That brings up that thing I was telling you about before, chunks of knowledge and building up a library of chunks of knowledge. We also have two modes of functioning in the main one is focus mode, the other one is diffuse mode.

And when we are in diffuse mode the mind is kind of wondering freely around these different chunks of knowledge. And it's a very creative space that's a very creative place to be.

If you think of creativity as the juxtaposition of two things that don't normally sit together. When your mind is roaming around all these different chunks of knowledge, that's exactly what it's doing.

It's, it's putting things together that don't normally sit together so it's a very creative place. You might have found that experience of writing. You’ve got an essay to write and you're working on the first draft, and you write a really great first paragraph. It's brilliant, and you read it you think, “wow! that's perfect.” You know, and then some time later, you realise you haven't done anything else. You've just been editing that first paragraph, and it's shining and brilliant first paragraph, but there's nothing else. So what's happened is your mind this switched from diffuse mode, which came up with the first paragraph, and it's gone into focus mode, which is when the mind goes into one chunk of knowledge. In that case in that example that chunk of knowledge maybe to do with editing.

Ros: Yeah, if you find that you do that. Something that I tend to do which has its own negative connotations, but if you're somebody who focuses like strongly on one particular paragraph… I tend to write the entire thing, even if one paragraph is just nonsense about what I intend to write about.

And then I have the feeling, I've actually finished it all it means now is editing and of course I'm lying to myself because that editing is essentially writing the entire thing!

But if I've written it and I can say, “I've saved this document now, it's still need to edit a lot of it, it's the first draft but the first draft is done,” and you've got over the hump of actually having done that first draft.

If you're somebody who likes to get everything perfect, and that can be a really good way of getting past that.

Omar: That's a really good idea Ros, and something that will help you to achieve that, to get that first draft down however tacky however, you know, dishevelled it is.

what's going to help you to do that, is something called the Pomedoro technique.

Now, I know many of you will have heard about the Pomedoro technique, but just very briefly.

It is a way of just getting the work done, and not saying you're necessarily going to enjoy doing work. If you do, congratulations! But it's a way of getting that first draft done. And what it entails is taking care of all the things that you'd normally interrupt you.

So for example, it might mean turning off the internet or leaving your phone and other room or something, so that you can do your routine response to that interruption. Because you're sitting there and working and then a friend puts a Facebook notification up or something, and there's so many things that can distract us. So, find a quiet place to work, turn off the internet, do whatever it takes so that you can't make your routine response, and then chop up your working period into chunks.

Now, the classic Pomedoro technique says 20 minutes of work and five minute break.

This doesn't work for some people. Sometimes that's too short a time. I personally use 50 minutes and 10 minutes.

Do whatever works for you but with this one caveat:

If you think you can work for 40 minutes, make it 35.

If you think you can work for 20 minutes, make it 15. Make it so that you're going to succeed. So that you make it easy for yourself, and you clock up successes, and what you'll find is that you get through the work.

Now whenever I told this to people and they come back, and I say “Well, how it go?” and they say something like, “well it worked at the beginning, and then it stopped,” and then I grill them about it, “Why did it stop?”, “Well, it’s because I stopped doing the technique.”

It won’t work unless you keep doing the technique!

Ros: But you’re talking about me, Omar!

Nandana: I think I would also fall into that group. I initially when I started using the Pomedoro technique, I started with the classic 25 minutes as well. But then I found myself extending the time, adding 5 or 10 minutes to it because I was so focused on my work, I was pleasantly surprised I was like, “This is crazy. I'm actually focused! I want to get this done within this time and take that break,” . But then after a couple of months, I found that… once I started doing the technique, you do it for four cycles right? You do 30 minutes, four times. I just found myself, sort of, in productivity, rut. As in, I was only working, and it felt like, I was only working. It feels like a cycle.

Do you think that there’s anything that you can do during breaks or something like that, that can help with actually enjoying this process more?

Omar: Yes, definitely. That's a really good point. The temptation is to jump on to social media or usual procrastination activities when you’re in your break. I would counsel against this.

So, don't do that, do something completely different. Walk around your garden, walk around the block.

Why am I saying that? Well, our thoughts and our feelings and our body sensations are all connected. If we change one, we change the other.

That's one good reason why to do something physical during those breaks, it shakes things up.

The other reason to have regular breaks is when we are working on something, and we leave that to go and have a break have a cup of coffee say, or walk around the block. Our mine is still in diffuse mode, and is still working on that material. And when you come back to your desk, you will find the next step you need to take becomes apparent.

And this is why, do you remember before I talked about interleaving your work maybe doing subject A followed by subject C, and then coming back to A, maybe doing a bit of B, and then coming back to C.

When you interleave your work in that way, you're making really the most of your mind, because every time you leave one subject to do another one, part of your diffuse mode is still working on the first one.

So when you come back to it, you're doing better at it than you thought you were.

It's a very uncomfortable thing for some people to do, but it works really well.

Nandana: I think that’s a really interesting concept, because even for subjects that have very complicated theories or complicated material, I find that once I try to figure that out, and then I feel like I'm going nowhere.

And I do something else and come back to it and I’m thinking, “How was this difficult?” and suddenly it is marginally easier. I think that's one of the pitfalls that we have as students is that sometimes we only try to tackle something once

We just say, “oh this is difficult, I'm not going to look at this again”, but looking at it again, actually will help you look at it completely differently.

Omar: I just wanted to add something about the Pomedoro technique. The fact that we’re sandwiching working periods and break period. It's something that it's, you know, unless you're studying neuroscience or something you might not be aware of, which is that the brain itself has a reward centre. And it's mediated by a neurotransmitter called dopamine.

And every time we leave our to go and do something else we get this little shot of dopamine. Now the way that us ordinary mortals will recognize this is that feeling of, “ahh, that’ better.”

You know as you leave your work to go and eat your chocolate muffin, or make your coffee, or whatever it is you do and you procrastinate.

And that's happening every single time we avoid the work, and psychologically that reward is associated with the avoidance of the task.

Now when we do the Pomedoro technique, what we're saying is, I've made a pact with myself that I'm going to work and stick it out for 25 minutes or 15 minutes whatever your chosen period is.

And then I'm going to take a break. And I keep repeating that. Now, what’s the effect of that? Well, I'm still getting my dopamine reward every time I leave my work, but now its associated with the making of at least 25 minutes or 50 minutes of effort.

So it's like I'm hijacking that rewards centre to work for me, instead of against me.

Nandana: I think once you associate the feeling of being happy with your breaks. That feeling of, once your task is done. I feel on days when I finish a task that I was supposed to do. I feel more inclined to do another task and getting it done.

Once you are on the productivity, you on that treadmill you just you want to keep going.

Omar: Yeah, it’s like an upwards, virtuous circle isn't it. Yeah, I would agree.

Once you have a system of rewards, you can say “well if I've done three Pomedoro sessions in the morning, maybe I can take time off for lunch.” You know, for a nice lunch break of an hour rather than 15 minutes or whatever.

If I've done my one to the afternoon, maybe I can have an evening. If I've done two or three days of this maybe I can have the weekend off. So you can make a system of rewards that works for you, but it's a very good point, Nandana.

And Ros mentioned about just getting through that draft, even though half of it is going to have to be rewritten, It still that sense of, “I've done something!”, you know, and it starts to make me feel better.

And then it makes me want to do more, just like you said.

So what is happening here? Now, this is about motivation. And this is a very loaded word, you know, people talk about, “I'm not motivated”., and I want to just say this very clearly, motivation comes from one place in one place only, and it’s from doing. The more that I do, the more motivated I will become, the less that I do, the less motivated, I become.

I think the confusion sometimes arises, because in our language we tend to mix up motivation with inspiration. I don’t know where that comes from! But motivation comes from doing.

Nandana: I think that's a really good point because we always thing of motivation as getting to that desired result and wanting that particular, maybe a grade, or, you know, a certain sort of comments from your tutors or anything like that, and then you strive in your brain thinking, “I want to achieve that.”

But then, as you said, it comes from actually doing the task. So you think I want that result but I don't know the effort and you feel scared about it so you don't do it and then you feel less motivation to do it.

Ros: This is really about revision but I've recently, during lockdown, taken up sewing. And I think part of the enjoyment that I have to learn to get from the thing is, it's about the process as well. So yeah, you might not be achieving the goal, and maybe you've messed up a question, so for me if I messed up so in a button hole or whatever. That's annoying, and I'm gonna have to be think how I do the thing, but the process itself is is enjoyable and you have to find a way of finding that process enjoyable, and not necessarily only thinking of it in a positive way, you're allowed to be annoyed

about something if you mess it up. But it's okay that it's happened, and you can find some positives or find some enjoyment in the whole process of it and I think that's a really important mindset to get into. I'm not saying I've achieved it. But I'm trying to remember it every time.

Omar: I'm really glad you brought that up this difference between process and product. You know I've mentioned this word perfectionism. Perhaps I ought to explain it.

Perfectionism in a psychological sense is the setting of unrelentingly high standards, and then attaching my self worth to the achievement of those standards.

And the reason I mentioned it, and explain it in this way is because perfectionism is very, very closely allied to procrastination.

Procrastination always follows perfectionism. It doesn't always work the other way around. But if you're a perfectionist, you will be procrastinating.

Now why am I saying this in the context of product and process? Because what perfectionism does is it forces me over time - I don't realise it usually until it's too late – but I'm looking only at the end result. I'm looking for that finished article that I've spent the last few weeks sewing. I’m forgetting all about the process, the actual doing of it. Now let's take a step back and say, Why did I choose this course? Why did I come to university? What is it that interests me about this? And then we start to get a little bit of balance back into our lives because hopefully your course really intrigued you. It made you curious, you were excited about it, and you were engaged with what you were doing.

And over time, this lovely relationship, like a bad love affair, turns into something. Your work becomes demanding, controlling, pressurizing, and you feel horrible about the whole thing. You want to just lock it in a drawer and forget about it.

When that happens, I want you to remind yourself. What is it that interests me about this. And then we get back into the process. Leave the product, it will take care of itself.

Nandana: I think I have a very recent example, that pretty much sums up what Omar was saying. Our first semester exams are over now. And marks are starting to come out and I'm actually really guilty of trying to be… you know, setting unrealistic expectations for myself and putting that kind of pressure (on myself).

Like, for a particular module that I did, it was really interesting. I've actually never had a module like that.

And it was, it was a hard course, and I knew that I did put a lot of effort in it, and the marks, although it is good. It's not to the standard that I set up. I feel horrible about it, but I'm trying to bring myself to the mindset that I learned a lot from that. And I will definitely use the knowledge that I've gained from this module, in my career. So, you know, you have to check up on yourself, you have to talk to yourself, when these things happen to actually bring us up to the present.

Omar: Yeah… Do you find that, Nandana, the way that we talk to ourselves can change so rapidly, you know, according to what we're doing, like if I'm in the wrong mindset – like we spoke about earlier, if I’m in that ‘be good’ mindset, that suddenly I’m faced with something that looks insurmountable problems. And then I start to talk to myself in a very harsh way.

Nandana: Most definitely. I think the way I talked to myself, if someone else heard it, they wouldn’t be okay with it! You’re so hard and you don't even realize how hard you're on yourself, until somebody else points it out to you. And I think it's very important that you’re kind to yourself, especially knowing that, how much effort you put into things. Or actually how far you’ve gotten at from the start of Uni life until your final year, maybe. And not taking these as wins, you always take things like marks and your end results as wins, but the learning process itself is the actual experience that you paid all this money to come to university for, actually. You know, the mark is just a byproduct of that.

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Omar: That’s such a good idea to remind yourself of how far you've come. What about you, Ros? Do you find that… you know, have you got any kind of tips and ideas about how we can change that language?

Ros: Yeah, I think sometimes if somebody else heard how you talk to yourself, they wouldn't be happy about it. And in the same way, if I find if I say something to my girlfriend and she'll say, “yeah but if I had this problem, what would you say to me?”. We're always way harder on ourselves than we are with other people. So if you're finding yourself getting into that cycle of, you know, what's the point I'm not very good at this. What would you say to your friends who came to you and said that? That's a really, kind of, easy and quick way of changing your perspective, because obviously it's not going to make the situation any different, but the way that you look at the situation is, is what's important, right? So your perspective on that is, is really important.

Omar: Yeah I like that very much. That's a great idea, think of somebody that you love, you care about. Think how you would speak to them. Hopefully in the kind and encouraging way.

Over time, many of us will have built up some things that we do that help to keep us calm and help to keep our lives in balance and exercise is one of those things.

But exercise has an enormous amount to offer in it improving our capacity to learn, because during exercise, new nerve cells are made. And so it actually has an impact on learning.

Now, I don't want you to get too worried about this, if you're not a person that takes exercise as an important part of your life, because even just doing something like walking around the block is sufficient.

When we get really really stressed, especially academically stressed, the tendency is to throw out of our lives those things, like exercise, and those things that we like to do that, remind us of who we are and then nourish so many different parts of ourselves.

And just become this one-dimensional, goal oriented academic, and that's bad mistake. We need that balance in our lives.

Ros: So you can sleep, making sure that we get the right amount of sleep, or even just a proper sleep schedule is really important.

Omar: Sleep has an enormous impact on our ability to effectively.

Because a lot of important things for learning are happening during sleep. This process that I briefly mentioned before, memory consolidation and reconsolidation. Reconsolidation happens during sleep. Each night we go through about for or five sleep cycles. Each one lasts about 90 to 110 minutes. And in each sleep cycle we have different phases of sleep. In one of these phases, rapid eye movement sleep, the brain is actually processing recent experience. It's making sense of the day before. And what it's doing is, in doing so, what it does is it retrieves stuff from our long term memory and it adds to it and then put it back again.

So, this process of reconsolidation is happening during sleep. So we’re adding to and enriching our memory.

So it's really important to get good sleep. If you find that your sleep cycle has kind of gone out the window, and this very, very frequently happens, especially with this perfectionism.

This perfectionism makes me procrastinate, then I do my work later and later and later for longer longer longer.

And before I know it I'm kind of working through the night and getting hardly any sleep during the day. It just gets completely out of hand.

And the way to tackle that is to increment in small increments, bring back your sleep cycle into a normal kind of routine. So if I'm, you know, routinely going to bed at three o'clock in the morning.

It's no good my saying, “right, I've got to get to grips with this I'm going to go to bed at 10!” It's not gonna work.

You're gonna have to do it, say by 15 minute increments, slowly, gradually. Go to bed at 2.45, then 2.30, then 2.15 each time. When you get used to it, you bring it back closer until you come to a reasonable time.

So sleep is really important, and when I first read that my heart sank because, you know, I've seemed to survive for most of my life on about six hours sleep a night. And I wonder, you know, would things have been easier for me had I slept?

But then, you know, I'm joking because the way to test whether you're getting enough sleep is to check how you are the next day, if you're functioning well the next day, you're getting adequate sleep. If you start noticing that you feel tired, you can’t concentrate, then the chances are, you need to do something about your sleep.

Ros: It's about being honest about whether or not you're functioning properly, as well, you know, you've got to be honest with yourself about that.

Ros: So Omar, tell us how can we help people with negative thoughts and nervousness during exams?

Omar: Yeah, it's a tricky one, there isn’t a simple answer.

I think one thing to bear in mind is that it's no good pretending that you're not frightened, or you’re not anxious.

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We all know that. I mean, it's normal isn’t it? Nobody walks into an exam full of glee thinking. ‘Yeah! I can’t wait!’.

You know, it's an exam is a test and we're always going to be a little bit anxious about tests. So acknowledge it.

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Now what you do next depends on the severity or the degree to anxiety that you're facing. A ‘normal’ level of anxiety, you start noticing your anxiety creeping up. Acknowledge it, say to yourself, okay, this is this is my anxiety because I'm in a test and remind myself what anxiety does is it produces some stress hormones which make my brain actually more mentally normal. So that means I can use this anxiety to help me really do better in this exam.

If I reframe it in that way, I'm teaching myself, these feelings of anxiety, they don't necessarily mean something bad.

I could be preparing for a better experience the next time I take an exam. Having said that, there will be times when your mind just goes blank, and you are just struggling with thing to do that is to really acknowledge again.

Okay, this is my anxiety, and now I'm going to take a few slightly slower slightly deeper breaths.

And then my anxiety will start to reduce, and then maybe I'll tackle another question, come back to this one.

So it's about acknowledging and not running away from that fact.

And it's, it's, it's about managing it sensibly.

Sometimes I can use this anxiety feelings in a different way to actually help me in this exam, and that sometimes it’s going to be a bit too much. And then I have to just take a break, do some other questions come back to that question.

But use deep breathing, that's a really, really good way of calming yourself down.

Ros: Yeah, a lot of this is about perspective, like this, think about any of you know that it's not a nice feeling is it but also nerves are almost exactly the same feeling as excitement.

So, if you can kind of think about just different ways of looking at the exam. That can mean that it's helping you achieve the thing that you've been working for.

If that doesn't create more pressure.

Nandana: I think I do get what Ros is saying, especially when you’ve prepared a lot, and just excited to get it done.

And also, you know, excited to present what you've been learning. But I think there's also a certain point we should add here, which I think is that while stress during the exam time is something that’s normal, if you find that you’ve been having the same sort of feelings in other areas during your life, or it's very common throughout. It might be something different. So, I think the point I’m trying to make is, don’t ignore yourself.

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Especially to the exam time because you're so focused on your goal and you're so focused on your work that you might end up ignoring yourself and how you feel, during or after. So that's really important.

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Ros: Absolutely.

Yeah. Listen to yourself. So during exams Nandana - you talked about it a little bit - I think we sometimes decide to do all the easy questions first and then leave the harder ones for last. Is this technique something that you would advise?

Omar: That's what we're all taught at school isn’t it, make some quick wins and then use the rest of the time for the hard stuff. Now I don't suggest that you do this in the real exam, but I suggest that you do it in a mock exam that you set yourself, try using this concept of diffuse and focus mind.

Do you remember we said that the diffuse mind will keep working on something, even when we we’re working on something else. So, if we take the hard question first, do as much as you could go as far as you can with it, and then go and score some quick wins on the easy questions. Then when

you come back, you might find a little bit more progress. You might make a little bit more progress with the hard one. Because your diffuse mode will still be working on that stuff even when you're doing easy questions.

Try it and see if it makes a difference.

Ros: Was there anything you wanted to say to wrap up?

Omar: One of the things is continual testing of ourselves. The other thing that struck me, especially when we were talking about the technique and then the order in which we answer questions in the exam.

There's a difference between how we feel when we're working, and the results of the work, so that when I'm suggesting that people try chopping and changing what they're working on. I don't know about you, but that to me feels really uncomfortable when I'm doing it. But when I have actually forced myself to do it. The result is much better and I'm able to go back (and see the results). The same thing happens with the Pomedoro technique. I’m in flow, I mean, you know, I'm in the process I'm doing well and then suddenly the break comes. And I think ‘I don't really want to take a break now’, you know, but actually when I forced myself to work in that way the end result is much better. And I find that I have the time to go back and improve my stuff before pressing that submit button.

Those are two things that really struck me in our conversation,they come back again and again. Continual testing to make sure that actually, I’ve learned what I think I've learned.

And then this idea about how it feels might not actually tell us anything about how good the process was.

Ros: It's difficult to get out of the habits that you've built up over time that might not really work, but they’re comfortable. It’s hard to tell the difference between, is working for me, or is it just the familiarity of doing this thing over and over again, which happens when you’re cramming and happens with the highlighting of notes. It’s the familiarity, and as you’re talking about how the brain actually works, familiarity isn’t always a benefit is it? So yeah.

Omar: No

Ros: That was Making the most of your mind, with the Counselling Service at the University of Manchester.

If you want any further resources or information on the topics we discussed in this podcast. You can find links in the show notes. Thanks for listening.