**Enjoying the roller coaster - how to be a resilient student**

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Like many things in life, including roller-coasters, completing a graduate or postgraduate degree can be both enjoyable and scary. Building resilience means that you will enjoy the highs and protect yourself from over-reacting to, and speeding your recovery from, the lows.

Such lows could include:

- Exams
- Public speaking
- Pressure to write reports/theses/papers
- Pressure to finish within the allotted time
- Financial stress
- Loneliness
- Disagreements with supervisors
- Issues with work/life balance

**So, how can we build up resilience?**

There are many different ways in which each of us can build up our resilience. These can be grouped as:

1. **Keeping fit**
2. **Eating well**
3. **Looking after our mind, emotions and spirit**

All three are equally important and overwhelming evidence has shown that the brain and the body influence each other. In addition, there is mounting evidence that all three factors can change your genes for the better.

Apart from the links in groups 1 and 2 above, this guide will focus mainly on the third component: the mind

**How do I look after my mind?**

You can look after your mind using a number of different techniques, a few of which are outlined below.

**Mindfulness** is the act of focusing your awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. It is simple to learn and practice, and needs no specialized equipment or mantra. The MCRI runs regular mindfulness sessions; see their [intranet](#) for details. More mindfulness resources can be found [here](#).

**Meditation** in a broad sense involves turning the mind and attention inward and focusing on a single thought, image, object or feeling. It can take a number of different forms and may or may not involve
mantras. The RCH has a Prayer and Meditation Space that provides a welcoming sanctuary for silence, prayer, contemplation or meditation for people of all religious traditions or none. Dr Nathalie Martinek (nathalie.martinek@mcri.edu.au) runs guided meditation sessions and teaches techniques that can be used at work. Contact Nathalie for more details.

**Prayer:** Yes, praying is another kind of mindfulness or meditation. The RCH Prayer and Meditation Space has areas set aside for multi-faith prayer sessions. You can also contact your local religious or spiritual centre for more information.

**Knowing when to stress.** There are times during studies where you will encounter some level of stress and to use that as motivation, for example when you are giving a talk. But then there are times when you are stressing yourself unnecessarily, e.g. stressing about whether you will submit your thesis in three years at the beginning of your PhD, stressing about having papers rejected when you are putting together figures. Think: “what kind of stress is this? and is it healthy?”

**Plan your work to reduce stress.** Follow the 7 Ps adage from the British Army: Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance. And pressure (make that 8 Ps).

Other resources for looking after your mind can be found at Smiling Mind, Beyond Blue and Sane Australia.

**Recognising the lows**

A mental illness is a health problem that significantly affects how a person thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. Such illnesses include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders and personality disorders. They are caused by a combination of genetics, stress at home or work, and may be exacerbated by substance use, for example alcohol or drugs.

Each year, a quarter of all those of student age (18-24) will experience mental illness and a third of all people in this age group will have had an episode of mental illness by the age of 25.

Two-thirds of those with a mental illness do not access any treatment.

Over 4 million students, or 5% of the total student population, have terminated their course due to mental illness.

You are not alone. Act now.

**Treatment**

If you think you have a mental illness, there are a number of ways that can seek help

**Immediate help:**

- Pick up the phone and call one of the following:
  - Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636
  - Sane Australia on 1800 18 7263
  - Samaritans on 13 52 47
- **Lifeline Australia** on 13 11 14

- Have a web-based chat or email with one of the following:
  - **Beyond Blue**
  - **Sane Australia**
  - **Samaritans**
  - **Lifeline**

**Help from those around you**

Talk to **fellow students**. Most will be in the same boat and those more experienced students should be able to pass on some great advice.

Talk to your **supervisor, mentor or colleagues**. A mentor is a useful contact to set up – ideally they are not connected with your immediate work group and can provide independent advice.

Speak to your **GP**: there are a number of [Medicare-covered mental health services](#) you can use. See also the Australian Dept. of Health web sites [here](#) and [here](#).

Seek resources from **within your place of work**. Locally we have the following:

**MCRI**

**MCRI** provides an Employee Assistance Program (EAP, see the MCRI intranet policy [here](#)), which provides confidential and professional assistance to staff through Davidson Trahaire Corpsych. The fundamental aim is early identification, referral and resolution of personal and work-related problems before they become serious. Staff get 6 free sessions, which can be over the phone or face to face. Appointments and enquiries via Trahaire Corpsych Office on 1300 360 364 or via online via [http://www.eapdirect.com.au](http://www.eapdirect.com.au). Contact **MCRI human resources** for a username and password.

MCRI's **Student Administrator** is here to support all students at the Institute.

**University of Melbourne**

**University of Melbourne Counselling and Psychological Services** Includes a guide for students with a mental illness. Call them on 8344 6972 or visit them at Level 2, 138 Cardigan Street Carlton. Their office is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday.
Individual counselling
Information and self-help resources

Other resources and further reading

The Thesis Whisperer runs a free online course called “Free How to survive your PhD”. See also their blogs on PhD detachment, PhD Grief and How to survive a mid-PhD crisis.

Thedesk: a free online program aimed at providing Australian tertiary students with strategies and skills for success and wellbeing during their time at university or TAFE.

Information for secondary schools and tertiary students from BeyondBlue

Headspace (“Is it just me?”) is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation. We help young people who are going through a tough time.

Smiling Mind: is a unique web and App-based program developed by a team of psychologists with expertise in youth and adolescent therapy.

Apps and websites that can complement treatment. See also “Ten apps to help beat the blues”

More, helpful contacts and websites

University Student Mental Health: the Australian Context – Australian Medical Students’ Association A report.

Great, short article on “Professional resilience”