

Pathways Podcast – Season Three, Episode Seven

Managing Anxiety in Exam Season

00:00 Adam

Hi everyone, and welcome to this next instalment of the Warwick Chemistry Pathways Podcast. In this episode, talking about exam wellbeing and the resources that are available to students who may require some support through the busy exam season ahead. Joining me today is Tom Ritchie and University Wellbeing Advisor, Sarah Parkinson. Hi both.

00:24 Sarah

Hi.

00:25 Tom

Hi everyone.

00:26 Adam

So, Sarah, welcome to the podcast. Thank you. Could we start by you telling us a little bit more about yourself, what your role is in wellbeing and what kind of service that you offer the students?

00:35 Sarah

Yeah, sure. So, I'm one of a team of wellbeing advisors and we're based within wellbeing and student support. So that's a central service. At the last count, I think there's nine of us. So, we are all health and social care professionals and we've all worked in and around the higher education sector for some time and we're made up of social workers, occupational therapists, C B T therapists as well.

So, it's a kind of, it's a multidisciplinary team and we tend to be the first point of contact for students who want to access any of the wellbeing support services. So, we are the people that students will meet, when they first come into the service and which is through a brief consult so students can come along for a brief consultation to talk to us about any practical or emotional issues, that they might be experiencing. And it's our role to find out a bit more about what students need. Provide initial advice and sign posting, or perhaps refer on for appointment or to one of our other services.

So, in terms of what those other services might be we have a disability services team, a therapy team. We also have mental health nurses as well. And our sexual and domestic abuse advisor. So it could be that we direct you to services outside of the uni. It just depends on what you need. So, in order to come and talk to us, there's no need to book an appointment, just come along. Either come online or in person at Senate House between 10 and 3 every working day. So that's kind of one, that's one side of what we do. We do also for one-to-one sessions, and our focus is very much about working with students to identify really practical strategies to help manage any practical or emotional issues that they might be experiencing.

Also, not just, here for when things go wrong. So, we also deliver skill sessions, and we carry out outreach work as well within departments. And our aim is to really help students to develop the skills that they need to take care of, of their own wellbeing. Not just while they're at uni, but also beyond as well.

So obviously students come to uni to gain their qualifications and enjoy everything that that uni has to offer, but it's also a really good time to learn how to manage things like your own wellbeing, stress and anxiety. How to manage low mood, cope with, , all those things that, that life throws at us. And yeah, it's, it's a great time to, to learn about those things while you're here and we are here to help you to do that.

03:18 Tom

Yeah. Thank you, Sarah. I think it's, it's really interesting to hear about what the university has to offer, and I think one of the things that we really try to do in chemistry is, there's a lot of discussion. We had an email actually come in today about what are you doing on, on World Mental Health Day on the, the ninth of, of March and Adam and I kind of looked at each other and said, we don't have anything specific for that day, but actually we look at our program and we've kind of extended that across the year.

So, we, we listed everything that we've done and I think we are, we are really pleased that in chemistry we've tried to put on a lot of different events and initiatives that help students with mental health and wellbeing. You know, ranging from sessions to help them get used to. What these exams are going to be.

We know that's a big issue for our students currently, and we've got more of that to come to an, you know, animal therapy sessions that we've run at to pumpkin carving and kind of everything in between. And, and I think we, we've really tried to take that approach of that, that mental health and wellbeing. It's, it's about that kind of wider experience as well, and that everything contributes.

04:18 Adam

Thanks both. That's really interesting. Thanks for taking the time to explain what you do. I'm just thinking in your experience, could you talk about what you've found to be the main stressors that students face and are there any techniques or anything that students do can do to help manage their stress?

04:34 Sarah

Sure. Yes. Hopefully university is a really positive experience, for students. But like anything, it does come with its stress. So, when we're

thinking about the student stress, the most obvious stress is around deadlines, assessments, managing academic workloads, but there's also lots of other factors of university life.

Navigating new social and academic environments, managing finances, there's all the extracurricular stuff as well. The students do. There're internships for some students, they're juggling family responsibilities. But for other students it's, it's being away from home that they find stressful. So it can be that sometimes in life you are doing exactly what you want to be doing, but it's still pretty stressful.

And there's also the stress as well that we tend to place on ourselves. So it's not just the external stresses, but it's our own internal stresses as well. So that's things like wanting to be perfect, not wanting to fail, being university liked. Sometimes we can set ourselves really unreasonably high expectations and those can also be a source of stress in terms of managing stress.

I think the first thing is really to be aware of stress and take notice of it. So fundamentally, when we talk about stress and being stressed, what I think we're really talking about is when the demands on us, the pressures that are on us, outweigh our resources. And a good starting point is to recognize how our stress can affect us.

There's a really well evidence link between stress and productivity. So, it's not possible for us to. all stress from our life, but at times of, of really low stress that can correlate with low productivity. And it might be because we're on vacation or we're resting, which is totally fine, but when we're not under much stress, we, we tend to have, fairly low productivity.

And sometimes, if we're under low stress and we're not being challenged, we can be bored, or we've got little incentive to work. So, it's, it can be a negative thing. So, in, in life, what we want is really to have just the right amount of stress. Let's say we feel challenged, but not overwhelmed. And this tends to be where we are really working at our optimal effectiveness. And we're feeling really focused. But what can

happen is that, if we're under too much pressure, we can start to struggle. We find it difficult to focus and our productivity drops. And ultimately, if we don't change things and make some adjustments, we can then tip over into burnout, which is where we feel really overwhelmed and, and like we can't, we can't do the things we need to do.

Being aware of this and checking in with ourselves to see what our stress levels are like from time to time, is a really important thing to do because when we're consistently stressed, it can be really difficult to see our own stress, stress rationally. And this can start to look like where we are working longer and longer hours, cause our productivity productivity's dropping.

So, we're trying to compensate, whereas what we really need to do to be more productive is to reduce our stress. Release it. So, then we can go back to, to feeling kind of okay and functioning well. So that would be, I suppose, my first tip, actually think about stress, think about where you are, recognize it when it starts to happen.

And if you find yourself, as I say, long, unproductive hours. Question is, is this because I'm, I'm really stressed. In fact, I need to do less. Also recognizing that your stress levels arising before they escalate is a really important skill, and for most of us, we don't go from being calm and relaxed to incredibly stressed overnight and there's usually signs that our stress levels are rising and, that we're not doing the things perhaps, that we would normally do to, to help with our stress. So, it tends to be things like, we might have stopped doing stuff that we normally do, like playing sports, seeing friends, doing hobbies, doing things like smoking, drinking excessively, eating too many biscuits, can also be a sign as well that are, that our stress levels are rising. So really watching out for those signs. If, if you, they sometimes creep up on us. We don't realize they're happening. But again, it's part of, it's part of checking in and managing your stress.

So, the next tip would also be taking care of yourself. These are all the things that we know we should do, but we don't always do. So, eating

regularly, sleeping, taking exercise, taking time out to relax. These are the key foundation things that we need to do, but they're also the things that tend to slip when we're really busy and lot of stress, and that's when we can get into a, a real cycle of stress. It can be helpful if you're struggling to actually look at those things and think, okay, is there anything that needs adjusting? So next trust tip would be not overcommitting yourself and learning to say no. So learning to say no is really a really useful technique in life. And it's one that I think a lot of I don't know about you, but I think a lot of us find it quite difficult, but it's, it's really good for establishing healthy boundaries, I would say. And it does give others the clarity, about what they can expect from you. And it also, when you say no to things that are unreasonable, it does also, increase the value of when you say yes.

So it might be something that you need to recognize. You find it hard to say no. It's something that you can work on. Another really practical strategy, that students. Often report works well in terms of managing stress is, is scheduling your time and, and using a, a planner to break down and schedule tasks.

And again, this is one of, one of those things that we, we've probably heard before and advice that people have given us, but we, we don't always follow. But in fact, scheduling stuff rather than having a big amorphous pile of things that you have to get through can really help you to feel more in control.

And help if you're feeling overwhelmed as well. And it's important to schedule things that are outside of work, so times when you're going to relax, times when you're going to switch off, as well. And I think that's what we, the feedback that we sometimes get is that people worry if their schedule slips. It makes them feel like they failed and they just throw the whole schedule out. But having a schedule is. Partly about being flexible as well and, and moving things around within that schedule, but that's something that can really. Other things that can help us to, to manage our stress is actually to have our support network. So,

identify who the people are that, that help us to feel less stressed or help us to bear some of our burden and stay connected with them.

So, these might be friends or family, it might be study groups. There's also lots of services at the uni. There's obviously the wellbeing program that you run, you run in your department. A lot of those are really, really fantastic opportunities. I think as well to, to learn more about managing your stress and also just allowing yourself to have some time out and do things that are fun and help you to meet other people.

The final tip that I would, I would give you as well is really not having to be perfect and recognizing when you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself. I think we we're already used to being measured and in terms of things like, you know, exam results. And it's not surprising that we do set ourselves targets and compare ourselves to other people. But again, that's something to be aware of that a lot of the time when we are putting ourselves under this kind of pressure is actually really unhelpful. So, I think the, the, the message is that stress is unavoidable and in some ways it can be quite good for us. But if actually starts to get in the way of what we need to do or we want to do, that's perhaps time to make some adjustments.

12:57 Tom

I think that's really interesting because as someone who's in their thirties and listening, listening to a lot of what you just said, I'm still not very good at that. I still hold myself to too high standard. I still don't say no, you know, I focus on, you know, I let myself get stressed and I think what's really interesting and, and almost useful for students to know as well is that you are not going to figure this out in your twenties. It takes a lot of time and a lot of practice to be able to really come to manage your stress. You, you think that you are going to have it all figured out, but it's always quite difficult to, to, you know, to, to, to, to get to that point. So, thank you.

13:34 Adam

So, I think it's really important that we can resonate with the advice that we're giving because I recognize a lot of what you've said and being, being in my forties and being a working professional, I'm like, you know what? Actually, there's a lot of things in this toolkit that apply past university and that you need to apply in the workplace as well in order to succeed, because we do hold ourselves to account. We have high standards. We, we still think, we still search for perfectionism. So, it's really important that we know and have those tools to equip as past university into, into kind of working life, that they still have a place and still have a value. It's not something that goes away, and it is a, it's a marathon, not a sprint. I guess finding the solutions to a lot of these, a lot of these issue.

14:17 Sarah

Yeah, I mean, I think that's absolutely right, and I don't know if we ever get to a stage in our lives when we think I've got this absolutely sorted, but, what I hope that people can do well while they're at uni is start to learn these techniques and there are techniques and strategies and not learn them the hard way. And I think what you said, As well, applying, applying things in the workplace taking care of your wellbeing, and that includes things like managing stress, managing your anxiety is a really important professional skill and I think what you find in the workplace is that most people are really well qualified for their jobs. They've been through interviews, they're keen, they want to do well, but what too often gets in the way is actually managing their stress. And that can be really what, what prevents them from, from working at their best and also from enjoying themselves, you know, and having, Having a, a good work-life balance.

The other thing that I'll just add to that is that I think this is a particular, risk in some ways for people who are really bright and really hardworking and have really high standards. All those things are

fantastic. It's, it's great and it, it gets you to where you, you want to, you want to be, but it can sometimes make you susceptible to placing excessively high standards on.

15:36 Tom

I agree everything you're saying, I'm sitting here just going, yeah, I do that.

15:41 Adam

I feel incredibly seen is all I'll say at this point.

15:45 Tom

Yeah. I think one of the most important things for me in terms of dealing with stress is having a really strong network around you. So, if we talk about it in a work context, Adam, I hope it's okay to say, but I think you and I are each other's support network at work, we, we, we talk every day.

We share how things are going, we share frustrations, we share wins, and I, you know, my own advice from my own experience would be try to have that network of either people who are going through the same things or on the course or just friends and family and others who you can have that moment of, do you know what today didn't go so well and I'm just going to vent for a few seconds because it just, that helps when you can do that with people. And I think there's that sense, I think a lot of the time, you are the only one feeling it. And actually, everyone feels it in a different way. And it's okay to talk about it and okay to share. And I think it's, it's just important for people to realize that they're not alone, you know, amongst friendship groups and family. But also, again, just taking it back to We are Chemistry as I always tend to do. The whole point of We are Chemistry is that kind of consistent weekly we are here,

come and talk to us, come, and let us know how it's going and, and that, you know, I, I think works out quite well. But yeah, just to really remind our listeners of that,

You are not alone in this. You know, the majority of us would've been through a similar set of experiences before and we're happy to talk about it and share advice and, and, you know, not formal advice. Probably very careful to say that, but to share our own kind of advice and then be able to sign, post you on to extra support if it's needed.

17:17 Adam

Thank you both. That's really useful. I know we have exams coming up and there's lots of anxiety amongst our student community. Is there any, guidance or advice you can offer to those heading into exam season?

17:28 Sarah

Yeah, I think when we're, when we're under a lot of pressure, like when we've got exams coming up, that can be a time when we actually stop taking care of ourselves and stop doing the stuff that we normally do, which keeps us feeling okay and functioning well.

So, it's really easy during exam time and the, the run up to exam time to just focus. on work and, I think that would be a key piece of advice that I would give students. Obviously, your exams are your priority at the current time, but do other stuff as well keep, keep that stress managed. What content happen is that when we're feeling consistently stressed, our brain starts to perceive that we're under threat and our flight or fight anxiety response is triggered.

So, if we, we are not relieving our stress, we can then, Become more anxious and that isn't brilliant for when we're studying and we want to do well in exams, it's perfectly natural and normal to feel anxious before exams. And most people will experience that. But when it gets to the stage where it's actually impacting on our ability to study and our

performance, that's when we need to think about it and, and make some changes.

So, what I would suggest, with exams is keep doing the stuff that you would normally do, seeing friends playing sport, prioritize your sleep. Particularly sleep sleep's really important for our memory and it's also having a key role in preparing our brains to absorb new information. So, it's, it's really important to study, so don't be tempted to stay up all night working prior, prioritize your sleep.

The chances are that you'll perform better in your exam than if you'd, if you'd stayed up all night trying to cram more information in when you should be sleeping. We've talked about scheduling. and I think as the, as you approach exams as well, that is a time when scheduling is really helpful. Cause it does, does happen to be less overwhelmed.

And it's particularly important, to have a time when you stop working as well. Give yourself some time to wind down. We see lots of students who struggle to sleep before exams and part of it is that they'll be working. one o'clock in the morning, then they'll try to sleep immediately. But you are too wired really to switch off and go to sleep.

So, allow yourself some time. This is, this stuff isn't going to detract from your work, from your studies. It's really essential that you do it to, to be working at your best. The other thing that I would suggest is that you actually practice managing your anxiety response, so, when you start to feel anxious, and for a lot of us, anxiety can be manifest itself as anxious thoughts unhelpful.

We tend to catastrophize about things that might happen. We can also get physical symptoms of anxiety as well. So, butterflies must, stomachs increased, increased, heart rates. It's really helpful to practice things like breathing exercises. positive self-talk to help to switch that anxiety response off on it when it happens, and that's really useful, particularly when you are in an exam.

What. don't want to do is listen too much to the voice in your head which says, I can't do this. I haven't studied enough. I should have stayed

up till five o'clock in the morning studying, because those things just tend to make us feel more frightened, more anxious, and they get in the way of that higher level thinking that we want to pull out for the exam.

But the thing about anxiety and stress is that we can totally do stuff about it. This is something that we can control. We can't eliminate it, but we can. Get it much more manageable. What I would finally say as well about exams is after you've done your exam, don't dwell on it. It's very rare that we come out of an exam or a situation and we think, wow, I was fantastic.

We are much more likely, and I think this goes for life in general, we are much more likely to focus on things that we wish we'd done differently. We don't tend to spend hours ruminating about all the fantastic things we've done in our lives. It tends to be the things that kind of wish we hadn't done or that we didn't go so well.

And that's just, you know, that's just natural. And we do it more when we're under a lot of stress. So after. Don't think about the exam. Do something else. Go for a walk, chat to mates, allow yourself some time off, and then you'll be better prepared to face the next one.

22:03 Adam

Perfect. Thank you for sharing that. So many useful tips and I can completely relate to the post-mortem feeling as well. We absolutely dwell on the negatives when we should really be focusing on just how much we have actually achieved. That's great. At the start of the podcast, you mentioned that disability services are part of the wellbeing and student services. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about.

22:26 Sarah

Yes. So, if students have a disability, learning difference or a long-term condition, that impacts on their ability to engage with their studies, the

disability service team can put reasonable adjustments in place to help them engage with their course.

So, if students haven't registered with a disability services team, it's a good idea to do that, and they can also put in place reasonable adjustments for exams. There is a deadline for requesting reasonable adjustments if you need them, and that's the 2nd of March at 4:00 PM. It's quite an exact deadline there. But it's best to get in touch earlier, so the sooner the better. If you feel that you're going to need some adjustments to support you in exams, get in touch with them earlier. The disability services team can also support students with adjustments if students are awaiting diagnoses. So, for example, in the case of students who are awaiting a diagnosis of A S D or A D H D, we know how long those diagnoses can take. So, in the meantime, disability services can still put reasonable adjustments in place if they're needed. That's great.

23:38 Adam

Thank you. So, is there anything that wellbeing and student support services are doing? Specifically, on the runup to exams?

23:45 Sarah

The wellbeing website has lots of advice about managing exam stress and anxiety.

And from the Easter vacation we also offer an exam and deadline stress masterclass. So that's a 30-minute online session at 4:30 on Tuesdays and Fridays, and that has lots of tips and strategies for helping to manage exam stress and feel okay and function well through that time. If students have got any specific concerns, again, come, come and talk to us in wellbeing support. As I said, you can access a brief consultation between 10 and 3 Monday to Friday. So we also run a Steps to Wellbeing program, which aims to give you the skills to take care of yourself and your wellbeing while at uni and beyond. So that's a five-week rolling

program, and you can join us online or in person at Senate House, and it covers five key areas.

So, we have managing stress and anxiety. Productivity and work-life balance, boosting low mood, steep relaxation, and managing uncertainty. And those tend to be the themes that we quite often see students with.

24:57 Tom

Yeah, I think that's really interesting. And I've also seen that there's an Understanding Wellbeing module run by IATL, and it's, not for CATs but I know it's something that allows you to kind of engage with your own wellbeing journey and learn a bit more about what tools there are and, and what things you can do to, to feel better and to kind of have a better experience whilst at university and beyond. You know, we've been talking a lot about developing tools and developing skill sets as part of this whole process. Overcoming anxiety. And I think I have seen the module and I just wanted to mention it before we finish. Cause I think it's, it's really interesting this, the Understanding Wellbeing module. We'll put some links actually on the website for it, maybe in the blurb for the podcast if people are interested in it because it goes on the work awards, you know, it's accredited for the here. And I think it's just a really interesting and slightly different way of, of looking at your own wellbeing.

25:49 Adam

Thank you both for your time today. It's been incredibly insightful and, and I know our students will find the information we've chatted about. Really useful, we'll pop the links to wellbeing on our social media and in the next student newsletter as well. So, keep your eyes peeled. Thanks again and we'll see you all again at the next episode. Thank you.

26:05 Sarah

Thank you.

26:06 Tom

Thanks.