

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to *The Student Hub Live*. Well, we're live this time, wasn't that great how I coordinated my outfit, so it was like really like live? I looked at it and I thought, oh, brilliant. It's all coming together really nicely.

I hope you enjoyed that session. I certainly enjoyed being part of it. And we're now going to start talking about mental health for right now. And I'm joined by Mathijs. Welcome to the studio. And thank you for coming along.

This is a subject that's going to be of a lot of interest to people. And we had Cherry Day on from the Disabled Students Group earlier, and we were talking about how there's a lot of support for students with physical disabilities, but often mental disabilities and mental health in fact can be an issue for Open University students, as they can for a lot of the population.

So we'd like to know where you are in the UK right now. And our Wordles aren't working, but some of the points that we wanted to get your feedback on were about deadlines. So if you could think about some of these things and put some things in the chat. Deadlines are really stressful, admitted. What gets you through a week before the TMA's due? So if you can give us some thoughts and tips. And any tutors out there who are engaged in the chat as well, maybe you can think about how you're marking them or maybe some advice for your students.

And also, we wanted to have some golden advice for maintaining well-being during studying. I bet there are loads of tips that you can share with each other. So let us know what they are, how you get through that week before TMA's due, and what is your advice to other people? So put those in the chat.

Sophie and HJ, just checking in with you. How's everything right now?

SOPHIE: Really good.

HJ: I think we're ready and interested in the chat for this session. A lot of people were talking on the way up to this session, weren't they, about how they're looking forward to it and want to find out more, so that's all good.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Now, we've heard from Nursing and Social Care. Now, you very interesting,

because you're from New Zealand. And I guess this is the kiwi.

MATHIJS Ah. Yeah. This is my kiwi here.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah?

MATHIJS I bought it specifically.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: OK.

[CHIRPING]

Oh. That's a - this is what cheers you up?

MATHIJS Yay.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: I think that's great. That's really cute.

MATHIJS It's on my desk at work.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: Because kiwis are, of course, endangered.

MATHIJS Yeah. But this one is a soft toy, so no one needs to worry.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: No kiwis were hurt in the making of this programme, or indeed in the fruit bowl. OK.

So you were working in Auckland at the Department of Psychological Medicine. And now you're in the Department of Health and Social Care. Mental health is a really, really big issue. And we wanted to talk about three things. We can't talk about everything. I know there's some questions about Asperger's syndrome as well, and maybe you can stay in the chat afterwards and see if you can answer any of those.

But we wanted to look at some of the stressors for students, what can and can't be controlled, and I guess try and get some advice from you about what students could do when those stressors happen. So we know stress is there, what can and can't they control?

MATHIJS Yeah. Well, that's a good point. And it's a bit like a *Blue Peter* sort of bit of homework that I did

LUCASSEN: previously.

KAREN FOLEY: Good.

MATHIJS I've done my homework task.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Lovely. This is good.

MATHIJS And I sort of thought about what are some of the things that are common to all students,

LUCASSEN: because stressors, they relate to all students in that we all experience stress and it's a part of our mental health, our mental well-being. And so I sort of started thinking about some of the things that were sort of common. And you've picked up on one of those already, about TMAs. We know that TMAs are going to be stressful. They are sort of time pressured.

So I put that on this board in terms of stressors. I also put money, ill health, technology issues. I mean, I think everyone is going to have a horror story about the time that they thought they'd saved their work and they've lost it, you know? Or they're just about ready to print something off and the printer jams.

And I also picked some there which I think are things that are more about, they're stressors, but they're more sort of amenable to your own management. And one of those being, I guess probably one of the biggest ones is expectations, because I've been watching the sessions. And people are talking already about expectations and some students getting distressed with the mark that they got, say for a TMA or an exam.

And so some people might be really happy with a B or a Pass 2, and other students will be more or less crying themselves to sleep because they didn't want a B. They want a near-perfect.

KAREN FOLEY: Or they wanted just something better. Maybe they didn't even have an expectation, but they're just not happy with it for whatever reason. And those unquantifiable aspects can almost be harder to deal with than going, I've been really gunning for an 85 and I got an 82. Therefore, I'm disappointed. What if you don't know those expectations or just, I want to do better?

MATHIJS Yeah. Well, and I think, and I don't want to sort of dismiss the person that's crying about the B

LUCASSEN: grade, because I think I've done it before.

KAREN FOLEY: I'd be delighted.

MATHIJS Yeah. And so I think it is about those expectations. And one of the other things is people's

LUCASSEN: expectations or their perceived expectations of others. So they'll set up really high expectations for themselves, but they might also feel like if they're not doing as well as they'd hoped that they're letting someone else down, a family member down. And that can be really tough, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Or what about their tutor? How many people worry about that side of things, like oh, my tutor's going to be so disappointed in me because I did really well last time, therefore -

MATHIJS Yeah.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MATHIJS Yeah.

LUCASSEN:

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Unhelpful thoughts, I like that. We were talking earlier with Anne, who was from the Department of Social Work. And she was saying one of the things that we think about is, is this helpful right now? And a lot of thoughts aren't helpful, are they?

MATHIJS No. And I think it's the things too in terms of I guess those negative cognitions that we might

LUCASSEN: have, there's a really nice clip at the moment here at the Open University, a story about Ruth and she becomes a maths teacher. And she says, you know, I thought I was stupid. I thought I was thick.

And it's a really nice clip, because it talks about how she overcame that through her journey here at the OU. But I think lots of people have those sorts of negative thoughts about themselves. You know, they'll think, oh, I haven't done well on that TMA, or they've read a paper that they're supposed to as part of the coursework and they're not really understanding it. And then they might start having these unhelpful thoughts that they're stupid or they're not trying hard enough, those sort of things.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. So this board here, you've got clearly stressors that can be controlled and stressors that can't, which I guess is the point of it. I mean, there are not many stressors there. I was

thinking, if only life were that simple in terms of some of these things. But they are the key categories, aren't they?

So what do people do about what they can and what they can't control? How would you recommend managing that? And what impact does that have on mental health?

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

I think the stressors have an impact on mental health because they're going to be different for different people. So some people might look at this board and they'll be saying, well, you know, these things don't, some of these things don't really relate to me, but others will really resonate.

So they might find, you know, I've got a dear friend. And she's done a PhD. She's a clinical psychologist. And she's very last-minute, so as much as I've got the point about time management, she doesn't really start sort of coming into her own until the 11th hour. And there'll be students out there that will relate.

KAREN FOLEY:

I relate to that.

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

We could say - yeah. You can manage your time better, it will help you manage your stress and therefore, it'll be better for you. But stressors also can be quite a good thing, because if you didn't have a degree of anxiety, a degree of stress, you'd probably not do your TMA, because you're not worried about it.

KAREN FOLEY:

So some stress is helpful. Stressors are real. They're there. We react to them.

What do we do when I guess the balance between having mental health issues and just being stressed is where that parameter lies, where that boundary lies in terms of going over things, where they become so anxiety-provoking that they interfere I guess? So how do people recognise maybe when the symptoms, the stressors, are actually too much?

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

Well, every person is going to be different. And I guess they're sort of, and we're going to talk a bit about I guess depression and anxiety, and how people would recognise those in themselves. And it's almost like everyone has a different signature. They're going to have a different way in which they'll recognise this.

I guess when, there's the good stress, the bit that you know you need in terms of motivating yourself. I know for myself, I actually quite like to get things organised quite far in advance. And I find that helps dissipate some of the stress. But other people will basically ride the wave

of that stress to help them get through what they need to get through.

I think if you're noticing that it's having a real impact on your functioning and I guess also your sort of enjoyment of life, then that's when I think it's worth getting more support. And a lot of the time, the support people will use is informal.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. OK. There's loads of chat going on, Mathijs, so can we go to the Hot Desk and see what sorts of things people are talking about right now, Sophie and HJ?

HJ: Some people are talking about that question about how they do up to the week of the TMA. Lisa says she struggles to get enough sleep and rest in the week before the deadline. I have that same thing. I can be up all night and then so tired.

Alice says she finds that it's a good idea to get ahead rather than behind on your studies, which might be a way of trying to look at the study plan and see how you can fit some more time in to make it a bit less stressful and give yourself some moving space. Shantelle says deadlines are traumatic. I normally waste so much time procrastinating - that's definitely me there - because I want it to be perfect straight away and then have added time pressure, which, procrastination's one of the things. I can't sit down for two minutes without getting up again to do something else, so distracted. So I feel what you are on that one.

And Abby says she's not too worried about the first TMA. I know I'll do mistakes, which when we're all learning, we're all picking up on things and finding out new and feeling our way that does happen. And I like that comment, because I think that's true for all of us, isn't it?

SOPHIE: Yeah. And Lisa said that she struggles when she hears that other people have done well and she has maybe struggled more. And I think there is an element of comparison, even if you are distance learning, you do compare yourself to other people. And if they think they've done very well, but their score's better than yours, how does that make you feel? So I completely understand how Lisa feels with that one.

And Paula asked for some techniques for dealing with unhelpful thinking patterns, and how she can maybe get over, change the way you think, which may help with stress. Is there anything that you can suggest?

MATHIJS
LUCASSEN: Yeah. Well, first, that's a good question. I think one of the things that can be really helpful with the problematic thinking is asking yourself, I think one of the common ones is catastrophising. So people will think about it's going to be catastrophic. I'm going to fail the whole module

because of this result in terms of a TMA. And so then it's sort of using thinking about what is the evidence. If it's the first TMA in a module, chances are that's not going to be the case. And you've got the feedback so you know that you can work towards improving things.

So I guess that's a really common one, the catastrophising. And along that sort of thinking in terms of if there are negative thoughts is looking at the sort of evidence for and against some of these thoughts, especially the ones in terms of you're really thick or you're stupid or those sorts of things. They're common. Then it's sort of like thinking, well, you're managing to get onto a OU course. You've already managed to sort of connect with the tutors. You might not have done a lot before you got here, but actually getting to this point is evidence that you've managed to do quite well.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Julie has made a really, really good point, which is that often we're really harsh on ourselves. And she's saying, you know, would you be so harsh on your daughter? Would you say some of these things to somebody else? And I don't think we would. But somehow it becomes acceptable to really beat ourselves up and have these really high and often unfounded expectations.

So there's a lot going on here and a lot of stuff around TMAs. But I did also want to talk to you about some of the actual mental health problems. In particular, I mean two of the most common ones that Open University students experience is depression and anxiety, in fact, for any of the population also. But sometimes those can really inhibit people from doing things like going to tutorials.

So often a tutor will get somebody on their record saying, I'm really shy, I'm really anxious so I'm not going to come to a tutorial. I'm not going to talk to you. I don't want to, I just want to e-mail or whatever. How do people work with some of those disorders? And how can we enable them to progress with their studies even though they may be very, very debilitating and very real and also very variable?

MATHIJS
LUCASSEN: Well, there's different ways in which people could still engage. So if they're feeling really anxious about going to a face-to-face tutorial, then there's other alternatives. There's usually an online format that they can engage in.

And I think what happens if someone's feeling really anxious is actually avoiding a situation can exacerbate and maintain the anxiety, so even small steps can make a big difference. So it

might be that the person wouldn't have the confidence to fully engage face-to-face, but they can go online. Or you might not feel fully able to engage a lot in the online forums, but you can contribute something, especially if you've sort of thought about what you're going to say first and I guess cut yourself some slack. So not everyone in a forum or in a tutorial is going to say articulate, thoughtful things at all times.

And I loved your point, Karen, about we're often so much harder on ourselves than on other people. And if people applied the criteria about what is a good question or a good contribution to what other people are doing in the same way that they apply it to themselves, I think they'd be more generous to themselves.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. No, absolutely. No, we have this inherent desire to be so critical, don't we? But you know, sometimes these things can be very difficult. And as you say, you can work around them. You can do various things.

But you also mentioned feeling alone and isolated. And you know, I think often we can get into these very negative ways of thinking when we have some of these disorders, to think I'm the only one. This is worse than it maybe physically could be. So we've got different ways of framing our thinking around this. How reassuring do you think it would be for people to know that so many students experience some of these disorders, and that it's actually fairly common?

MATHIJS
LUCASSEN: Yeah. It is fairly common. And I guess it's both depression and anxiety are on a spectrum or a continuum. And people will fluctuate with that as well. They're common, and also it's something that people can often relate to.

But I guess one of the other challenges is it can be unrecognised. So one student may be quite insightful and realise this is part of the challenges that they experience. And someone else might not articulate it in quite that way. And part of their I guess learning journey in the broadest sense, in terms of learning about themselves, is realising that actually maybe they have got some issues with anxiety, but it's taken them a while to realise that.

KAREN FOLEY: So there are these parameters and stressors. And we're coming towards the end of the session. And I wanted to pick up on I guess the kiwi and the Australian idea, because I said to you earlier when we were planning this, there's a lot of self-help out there. And as we all know when we've had depression and anxiety, somebody going, well, just get over it, it's not so bad, duh duh, duh duh is not helpful.

But there are some very useful ways that you can help yourself. And this is a really, really good resource. We'll put this up on the link. HJ can put that up on the chat.

It's beacon.anu.edu.au, which is the Beacon web service. So it's part of a hub of self-help programmes. And this was one that you found particularly helpful. Can you tell us about it?

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

Yeah. So Australia National University has developed Beacon. And they've gone through and they've tested and evaluated a whole series of online resources and therapies that are available to people and critiqued those, because I think what a lot of people do now is they use the net to support them in their recovery. But it's really difficult to find evidence-based programmes and programmes that are effective. And so Beacon actually does that for people. You can go to the website and it will give you an appraisal on lots of different resources across a range of different issues.

KAREN FOLEY:

So who might want to go that?

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

I think anyone that's quite keen to find out about online help. A lot of people will have their informal supports. They might have supports from their GP or primary health care providers. They may have counsellors or other people that are already part of the picture in terms of assisting them. But there'll be those people who won't want face-to-face help, or will want something to supplement what they've already got. And I think Beacon's a really good start for that.

KAREN FOLEY:

And how useful can self-help be when maybe you don't want to do things? Often if you've got depression and anxiety, there can be symptoms like not wanting to get out of bed, not wanting to do things, and getting motivated. So when is self-help a useful tool? Is there a spectrum by which it can be more effective than others?

MATHIJS

LUCASSEN:

I think those sorts of online self-helps are really useful in a stepped care approach, so I guess when people are having sort of mild to moderate issues. But if people are having sort of quite severe issues, I think it can still be a really helpful adjunct to what they've already got.

Part of the work I did for my PhD was on computerised therapy. And a lot of young people involved in our projects said that they might have already had face-to-face therapy, but they found that the e-therapy or the online therapy really complemented the face-to-face work that they'd done.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Mathijs, thank you. That's all we've got time for today, but you've outlined some of the really important things, given us some really helpful resources. Can you hang around a bit in the chat, because I know there's a lot of things that people want to engage with, and a lot of people sharing ideas and support for each other out there as well. So thank you for all of that.

We're going to have a short break now. And then we're going to come back and we've got some people coming to talk about the student consultative process as well. So what we're going to do for that session is we're going to get everyone who wants to talk about that side of things into the breakout room. If you want to hang around and talk about mental health and various aspects around that, then please stay in the main room, or even tea cakes and biscuits, because I think it's coming up to that time of day again. So then please stay in the main room.

But we'll have a quick video break. And we'll be back in about five minutes. Grab yourself a cuppa. See you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]