

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. Well, in this session, we're going to talk about staying well, studying well and looking after yourself in your studies, something that is so, so, so important. And to discuss this, I'm joined by Volker Patent, who has worked in higher education and research for over twenty-five years, following his training in occupational psychology at Hertfordshire University.

Now, Volker has an active interest in psychometrics, assessment and development in the workplace. And his primary interests focus on work, society, sustainability, and climate change, and coaching. And he works as a freelance coach and consultant helping individuals to improve their mindset and to create inspiring futures, in addition to his work at the OU. So I'm delighted to be joined by you, Volker. Thank you.

And Madeleine Knightley is a staff tutor in psychology and counselling in the East of England who manages the psychology tutors. And she's familiar with the range of challenges that many students face, and may experience, as a coaching psychologist. So she can offer us tips for developing and maintaining our well-being.

Thank you very much for coming along, both of you, today. So I wonder if we could start by talking about the notion of psychological well-being. Volker, what is it, and why is it important to students?

VOLKER PATENT: So when we hear the term psychological well-being, there's two concepts here. The first is psychological and the second well-being. Normally when we talk about well-being, we do so with the kind of reference to physical health. So really, when you add the term psychological in front of it, it is a slightly different thing to physical health. And really psychological well-being is about two things. The first one is happiness - yay - and optimal effectiveness - yes.

So really, psychological well-being is about people's lives going really well for psychological reasons. And of course, I think it's probably obvious to most people that there's a relationship sometimes between psychological well-being, but also between physical well-being. And probably, everybody who's ever had a cold will know just how their psychological functioning will be affected by that.

So that's psychological well-being. And why is it important, to study? That's a really good question. I just sort of, want to, kind of draw attention to what we're actually seeing in the news at the moment, it's a lot of students in particular, up and down the country who are self-isolating. And that almost certainly may have implications for their psychological well-being, being stuck in a residence, halls of residence, and not being allowed to leave.

And it's those kind of things that actually, are really important to us. We take them for granted a lot. And I suppose what these students up and down the country are experiencing, is actually, some of the things that we take for granted to give us this sense of psychological well-being, actually not happening in their lives at the moment. And I think it's important to draw attention to that, really as a sympathy and empathising with them in a really positive way.

But it is hugely important for purposes of study and being able to get the best performance out of your study, whilst also not being overwhelmed by some of the challenges that studying

also presents. And of course, an important thing for all students, wherever in a day, certainly when I was a student, and people back in the nineteenth century, students are also having fun.

So actually, doing a degree is also about fun, and is also about doing well and performing to the best of your ability. And that's what psychological well-being is really all about.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Volker. So it's this notion, then, about combining feeling good and also functioning effectively. So being happy, as you say, but also getting a lot of stuff done. Madeleine, that's one take on things, but I wonder if we could look at something from a different angle. And positive psychology, is another branch of psychology, they use well-being in a slightly different way. Can you tell us more?

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Yes, yes, absolutely. Well, in positive psychology, well-being is defined not so much as just one thing, but it's comprised of several elements, which interact altogether. So it's about engagement. So, from a student's perspective, it's about engaging with their studies. It's about relationships. So that's the relationship with your tutor, with other students, but also, of course, through relationships within your household or your family.

Positive psychology and well-being in the positive psychology field, relates also to meaning. And that means having some sense of purpose, that the things that you're engaged in have some real meaning for you and that if you engage in things that are meaningful to you, then that will help you to feel better.

It's also about accomplishment and, of course, for students, wanting to accomplish the next TMA, wanting to complete the module to gain their degree. So that's another aspect of it. So in positive psychology, well-being and psychological well-being is a mixture of all of those things.

And that's something that's not fixed. It's something that we can - if we're aware of these different elements, we can take steps to work on them and to ensure that we're engaging with things that are meaningful for us, that we can have positive relationships and relationships that support our engagement with our studies and so on.

So it's not something that's fixed. It's something that we can work on and we can enhance. And, of course, it's really important, especially at this time now, for many students who are taking on a new role as a student with The Open University or elsewhere, of course. But it just means that if you're taking on a new role, you've clearly got your existing roles that were going on, whether that's a partner, a parent, an employee, somewhere else, and trying to dovetail being a student as well into those other roles.

A challenge, but it's something that we can certainly work on and enable people to still feel good about themselves in all those aspects of their well-being.

KAREN FOLEY: See, this is the tricky thing, I guess. Because, if what we're saying is that there's, I guess, this interrelationship between feeling happy in your personal life and then also feeling happy in other areas like study, and maybe things aren't going so well, Madeleine, you mentioned that these things aren't fixed.

So Volker, my question to you, then, is what sort of strategies, what can we do to maybe change some of these things or influence things? In particular, life isn't happy all the time,

necessarily. And we probably aren't in that abundantly happy state all the time. There are these balances and juggles. So what can people do, then, particularly, I guess, when things may not be going the way that they want them to?

VOLKER PATENT: Okay, that's a really good question. One of the ways in which we can view psychological health is as a resource. It's something that by having psychological health, by building up happiness and developing strategies for making life become more smooth, we're actually creating a resource for ourselves so that when a situation comes along that is unexpected - it could be, from a student point of view, getting a bad grade, for example, in assessment, or having some other kind of disruption to your study, possibly.

If you're a single parent and you find your study happens when your children are at school and then all of a sudden, your child becomes ill, you're not going to be doing any study. So those things, they come along. And psychological well-being, in a way, can be thought of as a resource to help you cope with those kind of situations.

A really good example of psychological well-being in action is particularly around assessments. So we know one of the things that students fear a lot are exams or getting bad grades. And so having built some psychological well-being, and in a way acted somewhat proactively in that sense, enables people to be much better prepared, not just in terms of what they know, but to be emotionally prepared, to be prepared in challenging, potentially, their own negative thinking around exams.

So with feedback, I think it's really important, is that when students get grades back from the tutor, usually that comes with a lot of written feedback as well. And so there's two different ways of interpreting feedback, particularly when the feedback is not as positive. One is to think of it just as a failure. And actually, when you start to think about it as a failure, there's a tendency people have, to generalise, to all of their abilities, to all of their performances.

And that generally tends to create a sort of downward spiral in terms of people's confidence and their self-esteem. However, on the other hand, we can look at feedback, particularly when it's negative, as a different thing altogether. So rather than viewing it as a failure, we view it as an opportunity to learn.

And when we do this, something happens. We don't focus on generalising all of those things to every performance we have in the future. But we focus on, okay, so what are the things that I can learn from the situation, build on that, and improve in my performance for subsequent situations? And that's kind of really important, in particular, in really all contexts.

And this is what we mean by mindset. We can either have a fixed mindset, where we think of failure as a fixed thing in our lives, or we can have a growth mindset, which is all about learning how we can change. As Madeleine already suggested, it's not a fixed thing. So psychological well-being is a resource.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, Volker, absolutely. Madeleine, I wonder if you could add to what Volker said. We were talking about assessment earlier, and many students mentioned that they were really scared of assessment, even though they knew that assessment was there to be generally positive and a useful thing. But I wonder if you could give us an example of a time when psychological well-being may help a student make sense of a particular situation when they were studying.

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Yes, yeah, another situation, as I alluded to earlier, is this idea of role contagion, where you're being a student, but you've also got the ongoing roles that you were in before. And it's about ensuring that you acknowledge to yourself and others that when you're studying, that will have an impact on, of course, your life, but maybe on the lives of other people that are in your household.

And to make sure that you make time for discussing the impact that taking on this additional role will have, both on you and on them. So it's important to communicate. People can put in place strategies for maintaining this good sense of well-being by proactively communicating with the people that they live with, or their friends, making sure that you've got somebody around you that is going to be supportive, but making sure that you're also compassionate towards yourself.

Often saying to yourself, what advice would I be giving to a friend or a family member if they were in my situation? And not being harsher on yourself than you would be if you were giving some advice or talking it through with a friend. And I think we're often very hard on ourselves, and we talk to ourselves, or tell ourselves things, that we wouldn't or have expectations of ourselves that we wouldn't have of other people. So I think self-compassion is a really important skill to nurture.

And effective time management strategies, again, involving other people in that, sharing your diary with people, or telling them when you have an assignment that's due, ensuring that they know that you need to set aside some time to work on that and, for example, that you would perhaps really value having some child care taken away from you or just so you've got some freed up time, so that your other family members aren't expecting you to be doing x when you really want to be getting on and doing your - get working on your assignment.

So I think the key thing in all of this is communication, and whether that's actually communicating with your supporters, your friends, your family, or communicating, talking to yourself. Self-talk is really important. And Volker already mentioned some of those things that we can be saying to ourselves that are not really helpful. So, I'm, oh, it always happens to me. I never get a good grade. It's about reflecting on that and just talking to yourself in a much more positive way. So communication, whether it's with other people or with yourself, is really important.

KAREN FOLEY: It's hard, though. I read somewhere that someone had this wonderful quote. It was something like, you're the person who talks to yourself more than any other person does. And actually, we can be so hard on ourselves. I know when I'm studying, I keep having so many negative thoughts. I think, this will never get done. I'm not good at this. People are going to see through me. And I have all of these things.

It can be really, really hard, I think, especially when you're stressed with so much else going on, to be positive about those things. So I guess my experience as a student, I'm still studying. I don't think I'll ever, unfortunately, stop studying. But I'm always doing something, and I always am mindful of those negativities.

So while I can see that those are really useful things, it's tricky to sometimes implement them when you're stressed. So how can, then, when you're stressed, when you're up against a deadline and you're thinking you can't do it, what sort of strategies could you recommend in

terms of, I guess, not snapping out of it, but shifting that focus or reframing the way that you're perceiving something?

VOLKER PATENT: Yes, I think that's a really good point. Around particularly, how can we turn something that might at some level appear to be a negative thing, and how can we create a more positive frame in which we perceive it? I think there are lots of different strategies. And you'll find lots of them searching on the internet, even. Some work better than others.

But I think the point is to really build up things that work for you. So one of the things that - I could talk a little bit about myself. So being a psychologist, I'm certainly not immune at all to having negative self-talk sometimes. And actually, part of the learning has been over the years, how do I deal with that? How do I stop this negative thinking make me procrastinate? That's one of the things that it makes me do. I procrastinate when I feel really negative about something.

And that then has, sort of, consequence. So, one is to understand the process that you're part of. So in a sense, we're all living, to some extent, live in our own heads, and we believe the stuff that our own thoughts are telling us. And one of the greatest ways, in my experience, of getting through that is to learn how to meditate. Just take some time out, ten minutes or twenty minutes. If you already know how to meditate, you know, extend your meditation, or do some yoga. Do something that's not focused on this thing that's causing you all of the negative thinking.

So more recently, I learned how to walk over glowing coals, which is an absolutely amazing way to stop thinking about anything that worries you because you're just focused on walking through the coals into the other end, and you feel an amazing buzz afterwards. So that's what works for me. It might not work for everybody here. Some people don't want to be walking over coals.

I think the thing to do is to find things that work for you that, in a way, take you out of this kind of slightly sort of more mundane dialogue that we've got going on. So sometimes we have this stuff going on that says, oh my God, I'm going to have to do the dishes, or I'm going to have to do this. And quite often the way we - it goes on automatically. And I think the important thing that I've learned, is to really kind of try to pay more attention to what's going on up there. Take a step back from it. Take a breath. And kind of just go like, [DEEP INHALE AND EXHALE].

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely.

VOLKER PATENT: And just relax. So those are really important. Now, the other thing I would say - and I will say it very quickly because I know we don't have a lot of time - is to be really proactive about it. It's build up those psychological resources before you encounter the stress. There are loads of positive psychology exercises that will help you to do that. But, yeah, learn more about this stuff.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful. And you've got some really practical - for those of us who don't want to walk over glowing coals, you've got some lovely worksheets for us. There's a Values in Action and also a Strength Scope resource on the Student Hub Live website. So people can take a look at those and see.

Madeleine, you talked about compassion before. And I wonder if you could suggest any sort of, I guess, practical activities around compassion and kindness that people may be able to pick up on. It's one of the harder things, I find, to do myself.

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Yes. Yes, absolutely. And I think that perhaps writing things down is really a good way of focusing your mind. Volker was just saying about meditating and moving outside of what you're concerned about. But I find that a way of being able to engage with being compassionate towards yourself is to have a daily diary or a journal where you write down things that you have been grateful for, for what has happened that particular day, three particular, three things that have happened to you, just really very small things.

It could just be it was a lovely sunny day. Maybe that you got a good mark for your assignment, or that your friend or child, somebody said something very pleasant to you. Or it could be something much bigger than that, but something that you're really grateful for that happened that day. It could be just three very small things. But to write those things down, and it's the writing down of it that's really important. And not just thinking of it, but actually writing it, writing it down.

This is also an exercise that's called a vortex exercise. So you write down three good things that have happened to you in that day and then think about why it happened and what meaning that has for you, why it was good for you, why you thought that was a good thing, and how you could have more of that in the future. And even if that's just noticing more what a lovely day it is or the birds are singing, whatever - you're not in control of the weather, obviously.

But if you can realise why you found that particular thing to be really good and positive for you, that's really helpful, and how you could have more of that particular thing in future. So it's about looking for, being active in pursuing the things that you enjoy, so trying to make more of the positive things and less of the negative things. We have to deal with the negative things, as Volker has said.

But also, if you can identify what things give you pleasure and perhaps that you are good at, coming back to this idea of strengths that maybe Volker's going to talk about a little bit more, then you can build on doing more of what we like and what we're good at. And by writing it down, too, it really makes a difference, in my opinion and in my experience.

So it's one thing that you can do to help yourself. And in this way, we can appreciate that we have autonomy and control over some of our feelings and that we can actually direct ourselves towards thinking about the good things, the positive things, and taking steps to achieve those, or feel those, things more frequently.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful, Madeleine. Thank you. I'm a big fan of pen and paper myself. I really like that. But I know that some other people like apps and various other things. Volker, are there any apps available that people may find useful? And also, can you tell us a bit about these strengths Madeleine mentions?

VOLKER PATENT: Yeah, certainly. So I'll talk about the strengths first. So the idea of human strengths is one of the important ideas in positive psychology, which is, rather than focusing on some pathological aspects of human personality, which a lot of the early psychology quite often did, is we can think of human capabilities in a very positive way.

So everybody has strengths. There's nobody who doesn't have strength. Everybody has strengths. So in the seminal kind of models, there's usually twenty-four different strengths. Some models have different numbers of strengths, so it depends which model you're working with. But examples of strengths might be things like creativity. That's a strength. Some people have that strength. It's something that they know about themselves, and they use that strength to solve problems.

But there's other ways of solving problems. So, for example, you could have a strength, that's now gone out of my memory. But I'm just trying to think what the other - gratitude is another strength, actually, and Madeleine talked about. So we could solve the problem by focusing on gratitude, or focusing on compassion, or focusing on kindness to others, or helping other people. So there's different ways in which we can solve problems that utilise different types of strengths.

So strengths are great to know about because once we've understood what our own strengths are, we can also see areas in which we could develop new strengths as well, that might give us a wider range of ways of solving different types of problems. So in a sense, knowing your strengths and assessing your own strength, then thinking about what areas do you have strength in, and what areas could you develop further, to enable you to solve different types of problems.

So that's kind of very powerful. Now, I think one of the links that we've given you is for the Values in Action Inventory, which I think is free. So do look at that stuff. It's very useful. The other thing you mentioned is apps. So the one that I use the most is called Insight Timer. That's my own app that I use. Sorry, I didn't develop that. It's just an app that I have on my phone.

And I use it for meditation. It's basically a timer that tells me when the meditation starts, when it's in the middle, and when it gets to the end. There's also useful videos you can watch as well, and if you pay, you get additional things.

There's another app called Headspace. Some of you may have your own apps and do share them with each other. It's always good to share these kind of things with other people. So a question is, think about what apps you use already and how do they work for you. What apps do you know other people are using? What can you learn from other people? So yeah, I think that's -

KAREN FOLEY: That's absolutely wonderful. You have given us so much information and advice, Madeleine and Volker. Thank you so much for joining me today. Unfortunately, that's all we've got time for. So it just leaves me to wrap up the show. We've had, well, since ten o'clock this morning, a whole range of guests here.

Thank you so much for tuning in, for sharing your advice and enthusiasm with others. Don't forget that you can look at the Student Hub Live website and add yourself to our mailing list and check out all of the other events that we've got lined up. HJ, how are you doing, and how's everyone at home?

HJ: We're doing really well. We've had a few technical problems, but overall, today it's been absolutely fantastic. We've shared so much, and it's great introduction to see everyone new coming in and to share ideas. Especially, Tala and Eliza have done a fantastic job of helping

me in the chat, sharing all the fantastic things the University has to offer, and showing that we've got a fantastic community here.

But it doesn't just stop here. You can keep in touch with us. We're on Twitter @StudentHubLive. You can email us if there's anything you can think of or want to ask us later on, studenthub@open.ac.uk. And we've got our next events coming up as well. And we'll be hearing from Isabella on time management on Saturday. So I'll definitely be there because I don't think I've got this down quite yet.

But we've talked about a lot of different things that you can use in your study. But if you go on the session page, we've got all the resources listed there. So, if you want to have a look through, maybe get settled into your studies and try some of the things that we've posted there. But we've had a fantastic day. It's been a pleasure being in on the chat, and I'm so thankful. And it's a great start to the academic year.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, HJ, and thank you so much. You're always a superstar. Well, I always used to get really sad closing the show at Student Hub Live because I never wanted to go and I'd always feel so awful having to kick everyone out of the chat when we'd all just got to know each other. But I don't feel like that anymore because I know when our next event is. In fact, it's tomorrow.

That's for the Faculty of Business and Law. So you're very, very welcome to come and join us for some more chat then in the afternoon. And we have lots of other events lined up for you, to support you in the academic year. So, I hope you can join us at an event soon.

Don't forget, if there's anything we haven't covered, drop us an email, studenthub@open.ac.uk. Do subscribe to our mailing list so that we can keep you up-to-date for when we promote new events, which we often do, just before they're going to be released, normally about three weeks beforehand, so you can reserve your ticket at our workshop and also put the dates in the diary when we have our broadcast events.

Thank you to all the production team behind the scenes. It's been a really, really wonderful show. But most of all, thank you to you at home for watching. I hope you've enjoyed it. I hope that you feel part of our wonderful OU community now. Have a wonderful evening, and I'll see you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]