

Maintaining your mental health & wellbeing while studying

**A 'how to' guide
for students**

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What to expect from this guide

Everyone faces personal challenges at some point in their lives.

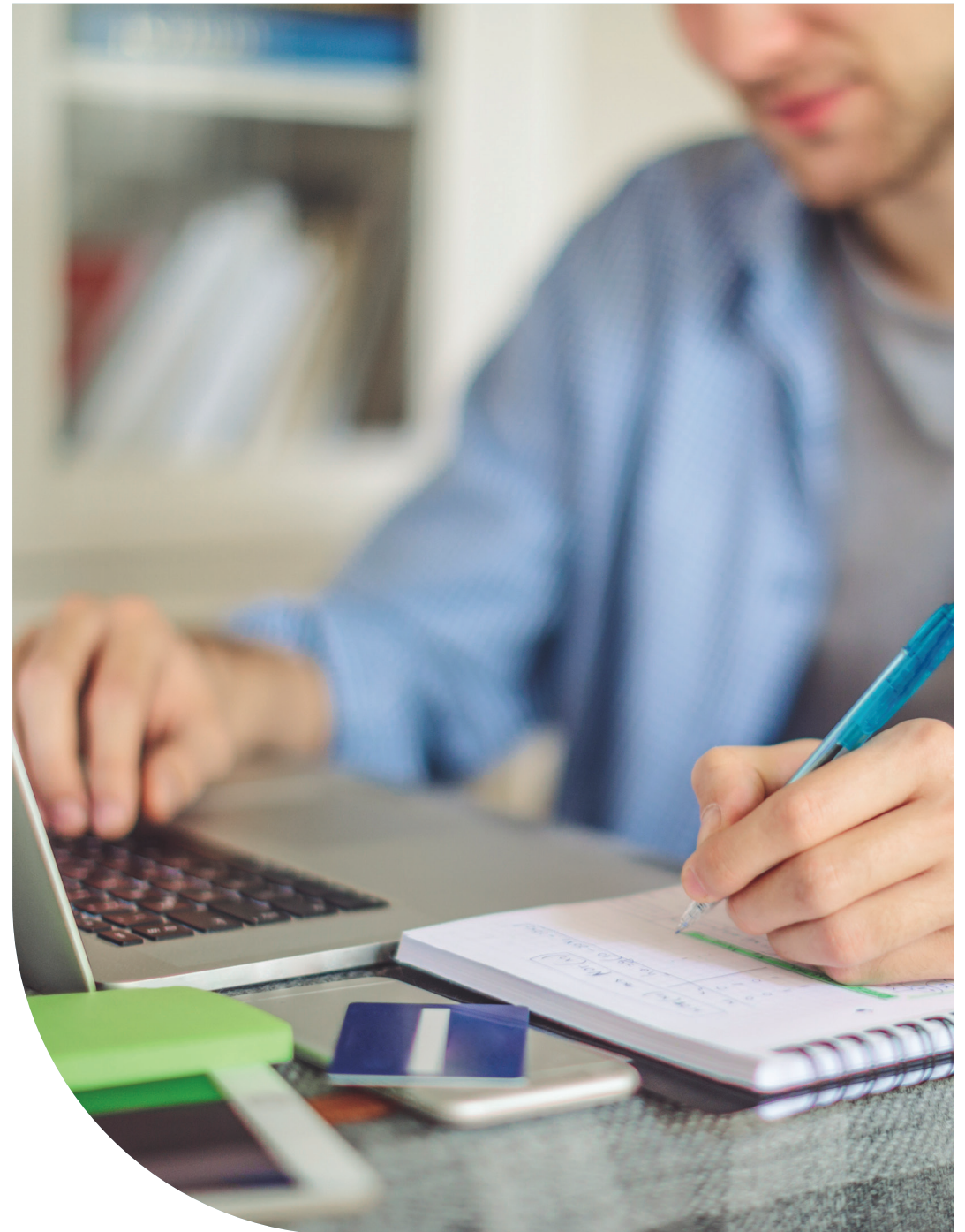
And unfortunately, real life doesn't go on 'pause' just because you're studying.

Perhaps it's the loss of a loved one, a relationship breakup or financial stress. Or maybe your mental health is suffering for no obvious reason. It doesn't always take a big event to make us feel overwhelmed, sad or anxious.

Whatever challenges you're facing, it might be difficult to keep up with your coursework, meet deadlines and perform in your assessments.

However, be reassured that what you're feeling is normal.

In this guide you will find tips and strategies to protect your mental health and wellbeing during this difficult time – and the steps you can take to help manage your workload.



**Thank you to the following contributors for
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1. How to manage your studies during a difficult time

When managing stress in your personal life, it's normal to feel so distracted that you're fighting to concentrate on anything. A compromised mental state can 'eclipse' all else, making it feel like nothing (including studying) matters.

These feelings are valid, and it's important you grant yourself the time and space to process what's happening and how you're feeling.

With that in mind, getting back into your normal life and routine – as much as is possible – is a key step towards getting your mental health back on even keel.

Given studying may feel more difficult than usual for you right now, in this section we outline our top tips to help hone your focus to get the most out of your studies. And importantly, to do so while keeping your health and wellbeing a priority.



1

Take on a study load that's right for you

If you're finding studying overwhelming right now, the first question to ask yourself is, "Is my study load right?"

Legal professionals tend to present with several common personality traits – with 'perfectionism' being right up there.

So if you too have an innate high-achieving tendency, you may have taken on a course load that's simply too demanding at the moment.

Pushing too hard, especially in times of heightened stress, can lead to burnout.

So, make sure you regularly check in with yourself, monitor your own tolerance levels – and if needed, adjust your course load.

2

Plan your days out

When checking in with yourself, think about the amount of time you would like to be studying each day – and how this needs to balance around your other commitments. This will be a good basis to form a daily plan.

You may need to spend more time with loved ones, at medical appointments or on self-care.

Also be sure to allow time each day for a healthy dose of procrastination and rumination.

And yes, we're serious about that last point.

Lawyers have a dominant temporal perspective, which is to be future-oriented. This means they're very focused on future outcomes, at the expense of enjoying the 'here and now'.

When you're future-oriented, you can feel tremendous guilt just at the very thought of taking time out. That's why it's important to pre-plan moments to do nothing and give your mind time to rest.

3

Be strategic about how you study

Are you an early bird or a night owl?

This is one of the key factors to consider when determining the structure of your days.

For example, if you're energised in the mornings, this is the perfect time to schedule your high-focus tasks. You can then leave your low-level attention work (such as admin and watching videos) for the afternoons.

It's also important to work in batches and to take regular breaks – at least every 90 minutes or so – to keep your mind fresh and focused.

4

Create an inviting study environment

What should your study space look like?

Research shows the best environments for productivity are clean and tidy, have natural light and are free from visual or noisy distractions.

Importantly, your mental health will benefit greatly from having a space designated just for study. And yes, that means no working from the comfort of your bed. Why? Because you want your brain to associate your bed with sleep, not with being alert and focused. Which leads onto the next point.

5

Set firm and clear boundaries

Although physical boundaries are important, we're now talking about personal ones.

The first boundary to set is the commitment to 'unplug' fully from your study at a consistent point in the day. This is especially important when working from home – as there is a strong pull (especially for perfectionists) to keep working. And this is where your home life can be invaded by constant study or work.

If this has become a problem for you, you may benefit from setting up a ritual each day that signifies to yourself you are ending 'study time' and entering 'home time'; a psychological way of saying 'this is done'.

For example, you may find it helpful to shut down your laptop and put it in a drawer. Or you could be more creative with the process, such as compiling an end of study playlist, or going for a 20-minute walk.

The second boundary you should set is with those around you. Whether you live with housemates or family members, let them know your expectations. This could include no loud music at certain times of the day or letting them know when you will be free to talk with them.

6

Ditch the distractions

If there's a lot going on in your life, it may be tempting to complete 'quick' personal tasks that are niggling at you during your planned study time.

Perhaps it's making a phone call, sending an email or paying a bill.

However, research shows that after a distraction, it takes on average 23 minutes to return to our previous task with the same focus.

And as for trying to take on other tasks while studying? Not good news either. Multitasking reduces your overall productivity by a whopping 40%.

If your mind is racing with all the things you need to do when you're trying to study, you may benefit from creating a 'to do' list. Use it to write down all the non-study-related tasks that you think of.

This helps get the worries out of your head and onto paper, letting your mind focus on the task at hand.

7

Socialise with your classmates

Thanks to 2020, the term 'social distancing' is now a part of our everyday vocabulary and lives. Even with some normality returning to Australia, it's still likely that your course is mostly being delivered online.

While creating connections with your classmates is more challenging in the virtual world, it's not impossible. Connecting with your peers will help you stay interested and focused on your studies.

What's more, human connection is vital during time of heightened stress – so making the effort to build relationship with your classmates may pay off double-fold.

The discussion forums for your various class groups are a smart place to start. Join, contribute, initiate.

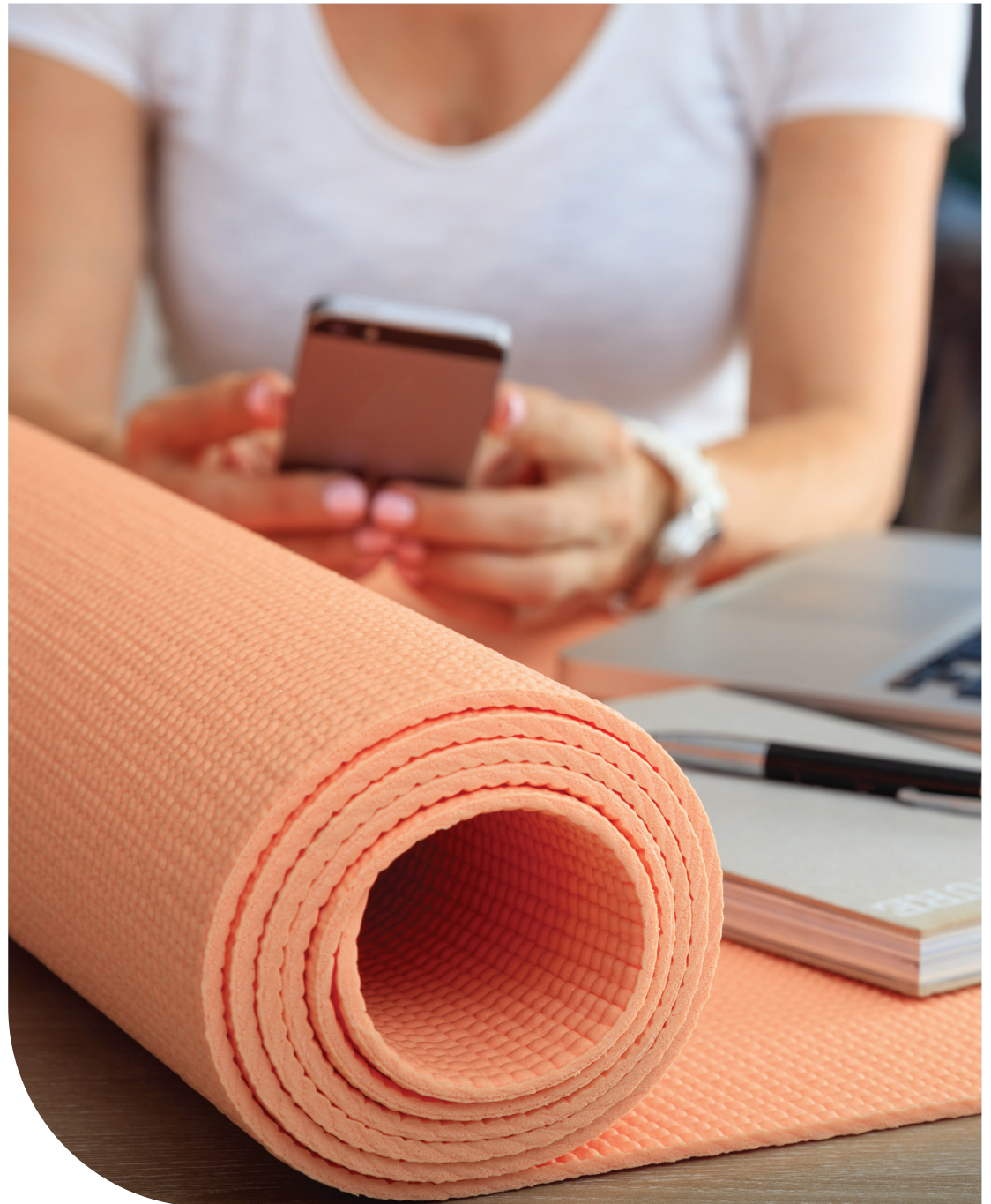
From there, you might consider signing up to or creating a social media group specifically for you and your peers. Some of our students have reported great success in networking with classmates via WhatsApp and Facebook groups.



2. How to protect your wellbeing in your everyday life

During a difficult life event or period of upheaval, it's understandable to feel overwhelmed and stressed more than usual. However, it's important that you're not experiencing intense feelings of distress and helplessness most or all of the time.

Here are some strategies to help you actively maintain your wellbeing and build your resilience.



1 Shift your mentality

You may not have realised this, but throughout your Bachelor of Laws, you were taught to foster a pessimistic mindset. This is not 'the glass is half empty' type of pessimism. But rather, a clear and consistent message to see issues as 'permanent, pervasive and uncontrollable' – which is prudent when it comes to law.

In a legal setting, this mentality helps you assess and rectify problems. But when it comes to your personal life, it isn't helpful to your wellbeing at all.

The first step to shifting your mentality is being aware when you are in a pessimistic mode or having negative thoughts – and telling your mind to 'stop'.

One possible strategy for fostering a positive mindset is to write a daily gratitude journal. This process strengthens the neural pathways in your brain so that they look for more things to be grateful for.

2 Take some time out

It can be hard to find self-care activities right now. You may be feeling like there's too much on your plate to justify the 'time out'.

However, a vital part of maintaining mental resilience is finding time to unwind. You may just need to get a little creative with your ideas right now. For example:

- Use video-chatting software to do novel activities with friends – such as yoga or games
- Create a playlist of your favourite songs
- Watch an uplifting movie, or revisit a favourite TV series or film
- Bake your favourite dessert – or try a new recipe

3 Find ways to feel purposeful

Given lawyers have a future-focused temporal perspective, they need to immerse themselves in activities that will give them a sense of purpose and achievement.

We've already established the extreme value of giving yourself time to unwind and practise self-care. However, if you're finding yourself listless and purposeless, you may need to engage in tasks that activate the reward pathways in your brain.

Pursuits that allow you to see yourself grow and improve should be your focus.

While the clichéd COVID-19 suggestion to learn a new language might not be a lofty idea when your plate is already full, why not shoot for a smaller milestone? Perhaps you can experiment with a new baking technique or explore a hobby you've always been curious about.

4 Make healthy choices

The best act of self-care you can perform is making healthy choices.

This means choosing food that's nutritious, keeping hydrated, getting fresh air and daily exercise – as well as a regular sleep schedule that includes 7-8 hours' sleep a night.

It can be easy to neglect these elements when you're busy and under pressure. But by taking time for them, you're ensuring you will be more productive and focused in the future.

3. How to get help if you're struggling with your studies

Whatever's happening in your life right now, remember that your mental health and wellbeing is number one.

So if your study load isn't manageable at the moment, we're here to help and plan your next best steps.



STEP 1: **Speak to your lecturer**

As a prudent, hardworking student, it's only natural that you want to excel. This means you may find it hard to acknowledge and accept the reality that you're not coping – to yourself and others.

However, the first step towards getting on top of your workload is chatting to your lecturer about it. Set up a time with them to discuss your situation and how you're feeling. They will be able to provide guidance.

And, if through your conversation with them, you decide you need to change your study plans or workload, they can direct you to discuss your options.

STEP 2: **Change your workload**

If it's clear you need to make a change relating to your studies, you have two options:

1. Transition to part time

If you're a full-time student, switching to part time could be the right move for you.

2. Defer

Depending on your situation, deferral may be an option for you.

STEP 3: **Seek additional support if needed**

Are you facing personal challenges that are making it difficult for you to function normally in other areas of your life?

Some things can't wait. If you need support immediately, you can call the following helplines, 24/7.

- **Lifeline:**
13 11 14
- **Beyond Blue:**
1300 22 46 36



4. Looking to the future

As you decide on your next steps, it's important to keep a long-term focus. This can certainly be easier said than done when your present situation is distressing. However, as much as is possible, avoid making choices that only serve you now.

Research shows that stress can often lead us towards bad decisions. In heightened circumstances, our brain is wired to narrow and simplify our options. For example, you may leap straight towards dropping out of study, rather than considering a reduced course load.

If you're feeling as though you're torn between two extreme decisions, firstly realise that your brain is in reactionary mode, and give yourself time to pause and reflect.

Think about where you want to be in 6 months, 12 months and 5 years, and the choices you need to make to get there.

And remember, the hard work and sacrifices you make now will be worth it down the track.



Contact us

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