

Master the stress of studying again

With more work and less play, you may find postgraduate study tough compared to your undergraduate days, says **Catherine Hufton**

If you're thinking of embarking on a master's or postgraduate degree, you may find that it's a very different experience to being an undergraduate. A full-time job, family commitments and financial pressures can make the stakes and stress levels feel infinitely higher.

A 2015 survey by the National Union of Students found eight out of 10 students experience mental health issues. Stress and anxiety charity Anxiety UK also found that more than one in 10 people are likely to experience a "disabling anxiety disorder" at some stage in their life.

"Many anxiety disorders begin in childhood and adolescence, and the average time a person waits to seek help is more than 10 years," explains Rachel Piper, policy manager at student mental health charity Student Minds. "This means a lot of university students may have been feeling anxious for quite some time."

Faye Cooper recently completed an MSc in investigative and forensic psychology at Liverpool University, and found that the pressure to succeed was much greater than at undergraduate level.

"Studying for a master's definitely felt different," says Ms Cooper.

"I was 27 when I started and it cost me £7,000, which I paid for myself. I also had to move from Brighton to Liverpool, so I gave up a lot. This placed a lot more pressure on me doing well. I felt a lot of stress at times, and wouldn't have been able to do it without both the financial and emotional support of my fiancé."

Making small compromises has been essential for Sally Widdowfield to complete her dissertation for an MSc in clinical reporting at Canterbury Christchurch University.

She made the changes to try to cope with the constantly differing demands of work and study. "My master's is sponsored by my employer



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so alongside studying, I have had to work full-time in a busy hospital," she explains. "I also did my final four-hour exam while seven months pregnant so it has really been very challenging. I tried to keep my stress levels under control by making some compromises; I'd go to the library straight after work for two to three hours in the week, and my other free

“Manage your stress levels by giving yourself the time to pursue relaxation and your own out-of-study interests

evenings were dedicated to relaxing.” Nicky Lidbetter, chief executive of Anxiety UK, says that these additional pressures and responsibilities are common among older students and need to be considered carefully. “You have to be really organised and manage your time effectively,” she advises. “Control your stress levels by giving yourself the time

STRESS-BUSTING TIPS

Anxiety UK's Nicky Lidbetter gives her top tips on tackling the stress of studying

- It's really important to make time for yourself so that you can relax and switch off.
- Make sure you're eating well. Students are notoriously bad at this, but it's very important to look after yourself when you're under stress.
- Don't drink too much caffeine as this will erode your resilience over time. You don't want to add anything that will artificially increase your adrenaline levels.
- Get a good night's sleep and aim for eight hours. Sleep deprivation puts you at greater risk of developing mental health difficulties.
- Build in time to do things that aren't related to work or study.

For more help:

- Further support for specific mental health difficulties can be found at studentminds.org.uk/further-support
- The award-winning website studentsagainstdepression.org offers guidance, information, and resources for students affected by low mood and depression.

 A photograph of a white paper coffee cup with a green lid and a green logo that says "WASHLY BREWED Coffee". The cup is filled with dark coffee.

where organisations like Anxiety UK can help. "We pride ourselves on delivering alternative therapies that plug the gaps of what's on offer through the NHS," says Ms Lidbetter.

"We have a target of two weeks to get people started with cognitive behavioural therapy, and we deliver a host of other therapies either face-to-face, over the phone, or via web cams. This kind of therapy is flexible and can fit in with childcare or work. Having a conversation on Skype at 10pm, for example, can suit people who might otherwise miss out."

Members of Anxiety UK are offered an annual subscription to Headspace: a user-friendly app that guides you step-by-step through daily mindfulness and meditation exercises.

In addition, it has launched a pilot project with the British Acupuncture Council and offers traditional acupuncture at a reduced rate to members, and other types of support are available via its website.

Student Minds works to empower adults with the knowledge, skills and confidence to look after themselves and their friends at university.

"We offer a national network of support groups for those with a low mood, depression or eating disorders, as well as useful guides on our website," says Ms Piper.

"The best advice we'd give is to visit the university's website or student support service building and find out what help is available. The university counselling service will offer support on issues including stress and family difficulties. This may be offered in groups, one-to-one sessions or self-help resources."

If you're struggling to cope with feelings of anxiety, Ms Lidbetter advises you to look for help.

"Reach out. There's a lot you can do before you seek professional advice, so make sure you know the resources that are available to you. You can contact us for tips and guides to learn more about physical, psychological and emotional symptoms that you may be facing and get support."

For information on coping with stress and anxiety visit studentminds.org.uk or anxietyuk.org.uk

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