



**A DEGREE OF UNCERTAINTY: DISCUSSING THE
ISSUES SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER
EDUCATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
THROUGHOUT MY LAW DEGREE**

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Student's Mental Health and Higher Education: Current Prevalence and Scope

The conversation around mental health has been noticeably growing in contemporary society. A common focus in this area has been the effects that prolonged isolation has had on people during COVID-19, along with a now widespread recognition and calls by many mental health charities to address the reality that suicide is the single biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in this country. Gradually, a more transparent and open dialogue has begun. We are also seeing new policies from those in positions of power, who are acknowledging the matter by taking pragmatic actions to address these concerns. Examples of this include the appointment of Nadine Dorries, the incumbent Minister of State for Mental Health who took office in July during 2019 and more recently, Prince William publicly warning of a 'Mental health catastrophe'² from the effects of the current lockdown on the people of Liverpool. To provide another context, a recently commissioned House of Commons report states that higher education in the UK is also currently suffering from an identical mental health 'Crisis.'³ This is grave warning highlights the wide scope and prevalence of this issue and its serious impact upon day-to-day living for many students.

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² Young S, 'Prince William Warns Of 'Mental Health Catastrophe' From Lockdown' (*The Independent*, 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-mental-health-coronavirus-lockdown-tier-3-liverpool-b1175797.html>> accessed 14 November 2020

³Office for Students (OfS), 'Support for Students with Mental Health Issues in Higher Education in England' (Parliament Briefing Paper 2nd March 2020)

It is estimated that one in four people suffer from a serious mental health problem at some point in their life, either temporarily or permanently, ranging from depression to acute anxiety.⁴ It is fair to say that many pressures relating to academia can exacerbate this issue, such as academic or studying worries, financial stress, entering the competitive job market and the strain on close relationships.

However, when evaluating this statistic, it can also be inferred that positive change is also happening. More students are coming forward to report their struggles and changes to their health. This challenges the traditional British notions of a 'stiff upper lip' approach and the fear of stigmatisation that can exist around vocalising mental health concerns. The mental health of students and the wider public is an issue that pervades every corner of society and does not discriminate based on class, age, gender, or ethnicity. This shows the importance of finding critical solutions to help people overcome obstacles they may face due to their respective mental health condition. Many institutions in the UK are adopting this approach and encouraging people to speak out more often via the internet.

The Personal Difficulties I Faced

Although my own experience is unique, I now realise I am not a unique case. Before commencing my legal studies, I had been diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety during my adolescence. My symptoms are predominant during the winter period of any year which can be characterised as a key indication of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Adjusting to the change of pace from A-Levels to university is a challenge in itself and I think many students will relate to the moments of questioning ourselves during our studies. I have at times during my years faced academic, financial, and external challenges that have left me on the verge of giving up my studies.

⁴Curtis B, 'Why Is There A Mental Health Crisis Today?' (*Sane.org.uk*, 2020) <http://www.sane.org.uk/how_you_can_help/blogging/show_blog/2258> accessed 8 November 2020

This feeling was often exacerbated by late nights feeling detached with deadlines looming over me, whilst doubting if I was on the right path. In a difficult partnership with these challenges, I tried to manage the symptoms of my mental health condition and the obstacles I had to face, such as struggling to concentrate, lack of energy and constant lethargy, at times feeling overwhelmed and close to physical and emotional burnout.

Nevertheless, I must stress that those dark moments were actually significant in my personal development and growth. The most prominent challenges I faced during my studies were primarily in my first year. This is arguably the hardest period of adjustment to university life that a student will experience, when we have to adapt to higher levels of independent responsibility, and the breadth of academic ground to cover can catch us very much off guard.

Personally, the first challenge I faced was to overcome my introversion caused by anxiety. When I was assigned a group work project in which we had to give a presentation in front of other students I felt a deep sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Before I had even entered the room to present on the day, I had already visualised failing and not being able to speak in the spotlight. Needless to say, that internal pressure I put on myself led to me having a panic attack mid-presentation. I was left speechless, with a feeling of dread, not understanding why it was happening and I ended up having to leave the room. I expected to receive harsh criticism and feedback from my lecturer and could visualise the typical fail emblazoned in red ink. Importantly what I did not realise at the time is that it would set off a chain of events that would ultimately lead to me understanding that I had to 'come out of my shell' and develop my self-confidence. This was crucial if I wanted to be able to deal with future presentations in a rational manner.

My disorder is characterised by persistent self-doubt and it was a 'eureka' moment for me when something challenged the negative mind-set I had created regarding failing in my studies. Following the difficult presentation where I felt unable to stay in the room, I received messages from my fellow

students of genuine understanding and support for giving it my best effort. Furthermore, when I read the feedback from the lecturer, I found that I had passed the presentation. Written at the bottom (not in red but in blue) was praise for what I managed to present up until that point and an invitation to have a discussion with the lecturer. Both the feedback and the later chat were transformative, as they challenged my anxious and self-critical thought patterns.

In the subsequent meeting my lecturer reassured me that with some self-awareness work and simple management techniques, I could overcome my presentation anxiety. She advised me that first-year presentations were designed to help students gain confidence for the second year, when the Dispute Resolution Skills module would require me to present to a group again. This would be the opportune time for me to show that I could progress and utilise the feedback. Most importantly what struck me in this meeting was the fact that she did not write me off. She had genuine faith that I could develop that much-needed confidence and overcome the barrier I had created in my head, before entering the presentation room in future assignments. Previously in my education I had never received such mature and rational informal care from any staff member. I realised that at university the staff truly value what you bring to the table. Needless to say, when the second-year presentations began, the initial dread crept up on me. However, I recalled the feedback from my first year about taking a calm and collected approach, whilst ignoring internal monologue, and ended up performing well in Dispute Resolution Skills. We had to present arguments for our clients in a road traffic accident case in front of two lecturers regarding liability and the quantum of damages. I was delighted to receive a high grade and had a genuine feeling of winning the battle with the doubt and anxiety that had previously ruled me. My advice to students is, do not be afraid to ask for support, if the idea of speaking in front of class fills you with fear. Overcoming this with the help of the staff feels like such a personal achievement that it is worth the initial anxiety and self-doubt. Asking for help can help us grow academically and personally.

Unforeseen Circumstances and the Impact on Studying

Another challenge during my studies was dealing with the pressure of juggling exams and coursework. I also suffered a bereavement during this time which impacted on my ability to concentrate and apply my studies. I realised that despite the hours of revision I had dedicated, I could not face the prospect of exams during this period. Ultimately, I neglected my emotional wellbeing which is common with depressive behaviour. I decided to apply for extenuating circumstances in order to sit my exam during the summer. I felt discouraged; the negative voice rationalising that I was not cut out for this. I often try to appear stoic, to avoid having to express my discomfort. However, it is crucial to accept this when a bereavement happens, as we need time to grieve. Sometimes we must focus on nothing but ourselves, rather than trying to ignore our mental health and appear fine on the surface. During this time, I expressed doubt about continuing my studies, but I received support from my mentor, who told me that things would get better and reminded me that I had the intellectual ability and needed to persist with challenging myself. Summer came and I sat the exam, with the desire to demonstrate that all the faith that my lecturer had put into me was not for a lost cause. I did succeed and realised how limiting and exhausting berating myself had been all year. Being kind to yourself during your studies is a vital tool for progress. Self-criticism should be limited to reflection, something that helps us to grow, not prevent us from moving forward.

Juggling Mental Health and Studies: What Worked for Me

Addressing the 'elephant in the room' is crucial when it comes to self-help. This can often be the most difficult part of analysing how you have been dealing with the balance between mental health and university life. I often asked myself whether I was looking after myself enough to help me manage my studies. It is naïve to think you can work at your best level if you do not make self-care paramount. Regular exercise is one of the most effective ways of boosting serotonin. I saw a dramatic change in my mood, in conjunction with eating healthier and getting plenty of rest, as well as an overall boost in

my ability to concentrate. Looking after myself in these simple ways allowed me to apply myself to my studies more effectively. My grades were the proof, as my second-class marks became firsts.

Embarking on the law degree in general helped with overcoming certain aspects of my mental health. The practical nature and structure of a law degree requires you to participate in many 'real life' situations that will force you out of introverted thought patterns common in some disorders. This is demonstrated best in the way lecturers teach in a Socratic manner, requiring you to critically analyse a case out loud and unexpectedly in packed lecture theatres. Extra-curricular organisations such as the Student Law Society put on events that encourage its members to network with professionals, helping to create more self-confidence in those who may struggle to be sociable.

A law programme teaches you time-management, if this is a limitation you possess. This played a key role in helping me to compartmentalise my irrational worries. Try to form a routine and stick to it, as I learned when faced with the need to revise for EU Law and Tort Law and write a 10,000-word Work Based Learning report over 4 weeks. It is a three-year course for a reason; and with the increase in work intensity each year, time management has allowed me to cope with larger workloads, whilst developing resilience and compartmentalising less important things, which is a key life skill to develop.

Motivation is also vital to success. I had to combat my own lack of motivation to get up and work and realised that I had to try to avoid isolating myself and creating too many lonely hours. I forced myself to apply for a job at the Student Union working as a bar person. This part-time position helped me to make new friends and allowed me to save money for a holiday in Italy, which was a reward to myself in recognition of the hard work and obstacles that I had managed to overcome. This fits well with the importance of self-care; always recognise and reward your achievements, no matter how minor you may think they are.

Conclusion

I hope this article has provided some insight into my personal experiences in higher education. I chose to base my report on my battles with mental health, in the hope that it may encourage more students to speak about your own mental health and importantly, to seek help if you are struggling. If the current pandemic has taught us anything, it is that self-isolation has major detrimental effects on your physical health and mental wellbeing, and we should be supporting and seeking help from each other more than ever before.

Another key thing I learned from my undergraduate experience is that my personal growth has blossomed from the feedback and reassurance from teachers and my peers. We learn best when we are open to new ways to develop ourselves, and not to hide from things we fear. It would also be a disservice not to mention the person that encouraged me to write about this issue openly. I received continued support from my personal tutor Lisa Deblasio, who looked past the hurdles I had erected and helped me see what I could achieve. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the other lecturers in the law school, who have made all three years an enjoyable learning experience.

Reading other reports written by my fellow students in previous issues of the *Plymouth Law Review*, a common denominator exists. We have all had our own personal challenges to get to the position we are in now, and to end up pursuing our passions by studying law is clearly something we all treasure. Law often has a reputation for being competitive, where 'only the best succeed' but I have noticed through working with the law clinic that there is a strong ethos of community that underpins a lot of the legal work that exists within the school.

New students who may be finding the current situation difficult should aim to develop coping mechanisms to tend their mental and emotional wellbeing. As time goes on you should look forward to independence, self-motivation and develop emotional resilience to weather the storms of study and personal

growth. I can only reiterate how studying Law has helped me to adjust more effectively to these challenges regarding my mental health. I now look forward to further study on the Legal Practice Course at the University of Exeter and am ready to embrace this new stage with the strengths I have developed from studying Law at Plymouth.