

Student Hub: Stress, Structure, Sanity and the Importance of a Little Self-Care #2

Back in December 2019 we heard from two Student members who were well on their way to winning at life – juggling work, study, hobbies and even managing to hang onto some semblance of a social life. Seemingly miraculous, right?! Certainly impressive.

But how many of you read about the three jobs, the entrepreneurial start-ups and the mammoth list of extra curriculums and thought:

- *“Yeah, alright, but you don’t have kids! You don’t know what sleep deprivation is! I dream of five hours sleep a night!”*
- *“You think undergrad is hard? Wait until you’re trying to adult and do a PhD!”*
- *“You guys don’t know the meaning of stress! I’m so stressed out over being stressed out that I can’t even remember why I’m stressed out... And it’s stressing me out!”*

Sound familiar? If that was you, well, we got you. Or Matt and Naveed do at any rate. They’re somehow managing it all. Literally all of it. All at once. And they’re here to help, so buckle in.

Matt Wainhouse MCIEEM

Matt is precariously balancing his full-time PhD studies in fungal ecology at Cardiff University with part-time consultancy work, something that vaguely resembles a social life... and a new-born baby.

1. Treat it like a 9-5. The temptation is to get in late, leave very late, work the weekends, and take *ad hoc* days off when you feel like it. My advice is: get in for 9am leave at 5pm. Don’t take work home with you and don’t work the weekends (though this is easier said than done). For PhD students – plan your annual leave – you need days off!
2. Know your support network. Studying can be stressful and the amount of work competing for your attention can be overwhelming. Make sure you know who to ask for help. Talking about how you feel is cathartic, so find people that will listen – family, friend, old man on the bus. Check your university’s well-being service if you don’t feel you have anyone to turn to.
3. Have a life outside of it. Student is not your identity. It can certainly feel like it with pound-a-pint and discounted rail fares, but there’s more to you than three years at university. Find something else you’re passionate about.
4. Make time for your passion.

Naveed Bhatti

Naveed is a mature PhD student, based at the University of Aberdeen, balancing his time between writing up his thesis and home life in Inverness. His project is to develop monitoring tools for conservation priority species, with a focus on lichens in Scotland and other sessile taxa. His work involves woodland ecology, statistical methods for population ecology, occupancy modelling and Bayesian analysis.

1. Make sure you look after yourself. You’re no use to anyone if you’re run down, so even if it seems selfish at times, you have to look after number one. Eat healthily, sleep well and make time to exercise – especially walking, which is great for thinking! You may feel you don’t have time for all that self-care, but what you *really* don’t have time for is getting ill!
2. Keep connected with others. That means socialising and not thinking or talking about work *at all*. It’s so easy to become a hermit when you’re up against it all the time, but social connections with friends and family are essential for your mental health, for your productivity and because, when you emerge, blinking, into the daylight at the end of the studying tunnel, it’d be really nice to have someone to celebrate with! And on the flip side, when you *absolutely must* talk about work, it can be really helpful to discuss your research problems with others. A problem shared...
3. And lastly, remember it’s a marathon and not a sprint – just keep nibbling away! Your to-do list may seem gargantuan, but you’ll get there if you take it one day at a time.

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