

## A quick guide to self-care for mentors

Hello there !

My name is Gareth.

I am the eMental Health Project Officer with Health, Counselling and Disability Services. You can get to know me a bit better on my own slightly lame web-page - <https://bit.ly/2HfSgZq>

My role at the university is to give students the tips, techniques and tools required to perform at their best academically. I do this on the assumption that **everyone** studying at university wants to do well, to get good grades, to feel they have learned something valuable in their time here, and be able to apply that knowledge in their life beyond university.



If all has gone to plan, you've just heard from me and two of my colleagues (Maureen and Nicola) talking about mental health and wellbeing, what to do if a mentee discloses mental health concerns and self-care practices. This document is a follow-up to what we talked about in terms of *self-care*.

### What is self-care?

*Self-care is any deliberate activity we do in order to look after or improve our mental or physical health. Over the next few pages I will provide you with a bunch of 'activities' that you can engage in that constitute self-care. A quick search on the internet will also yield a bunch more.*

Self-care is an interesting topic. Not so much because of the actual self-care strategies (they are fairly simple), but more because of the strange tendency of humans to be totally shite at self-care.

There are many reasons for this:

- 1) Sometimes people aren't actually aware of what constitutes self-care. Hopefully by the end of this document, you'll have a better idea.
- 2) Self-care strategies often just sound like 'common sense' so people ignore the fact that the strategies have been empirically demonstrated to help (i.e. supported by research).
- 3) Humans often do not pay attention to their health/mental health until something goes wrong. Then we scurry about trying to fix the problem, and forget we might have been able to prevent it.
- 4) When you are young, your bodies and minds recover quite well. When you are old like me, it is a different story.
- 5) Self-care often involves some sacrifices in the short-term in order to get some medium to longer-term health wellbeing benefits. Humans aren't always very good at this prevention approach.
- 6) When others tell us what we 'should' do, it can trigger a kind of internal rebellion that makes us reject the information.

## Why is self-care important?

Well the obvious answer to that question is that your health and wellbeing improves. However, there is more to it than just that.

1. Self-care is an investment in your future self. Imagine yourself 1, 2, 5 or 10 years down the track. Imagine future 'you' asking current 'you' - 'could you please look after your body and mind, cause I am going to need them in 5 years'. Looking after yourself now is an investment in your future health and functioning.
2. When you are a mentor or a support to another person, you are a role model. Part of being a role model is living the strategies that you recommend to others. I am not saying you need to be a perfect person, but it is good if you are involved with such supportive roles, to have real-life experience of trying to improve you own life and wellbeing. For example, if I didn't take care of myself, would you trust me to give you advice on caring for yourself?
3. When you look after yourself, you are more resilient to the inevitable set-backs of life. Some people call this resilience, or mental toughness.
4. When you look after yourself, you are more productive, and more able to achieve the goals you set yourself.

## Fine then, stop being a know-it-all and just tell me the strategies

😊 Ok.

A few things first though.

I try to base all my recommendations in some kind of evidence. It might be research studies that have shown that the strategy works, or it might be advice from health and mental health professionals who work with students every day.

I do not present these strategies with the expectation that you will do all of them. Instead, I just want you to be aware of the many things that individuals can do to look after themselves. Some of them you are probably doing already. Some of them might be new to you.

Most of these strategies require some degree of practice, persistence and patience. They are not necessarily difficult, but can take a bit of time and effort to implement in an ongoing way in your life. Some will require you to do some additional reading or research to understand the strategy better. I've tried to provide relevant links to content where appropriate.

If this kind of stuff interests you, you can read more on my Student Health and Wellbeing Blog - [www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth](http://www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth) - where I write about self-care, mental fitness and resilience.

If you have any questions about what is written in this document, feel free to get in contact with me below.

Write me - [Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au](mailto:Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au)

Tweet me - @Dr\_Furber

Skype me – search 'eMental Health Project Officer Gareth'

Otherwise, lets get started.....

## Strategy 1 – Build positive emotions

Do you ever feel like you are wired to experience more negative emotions than positive?

If you do, it is not your imagination. There is a potential evolutionary advantage to having a bias towards negative emotions. Those ancestors of ours who were more sensitive to threat and danger were more likely to survive and procreate.

The problem is this negative bias can be debilitating when the threats to us have changed from lions, tigers and starvation, to daily stressors like talking in public, exams or rejection on social media.

For years, psychologists have focused on giving people strategies to deal with unrelenting negative feelings like depression, anxiety, anger (see Strategy 2 below), but it is just as valid to teach people how to generate positive feelings such as awe, compassion, connection, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, kindness, optimism and self-compassion.

I've got two basic recommendations if you want to bring more positive emotion into your life:

- 1) Subscribe to the *Greater Good In Action* website (<https://ggia.berkeley.edu/#>) and try their evidence-based strategies for building positive emotions in your life. Examples include things like gratitude journals, random acts of kindness, different types of meditation and noticing nature. At first glance these kinds of exercises can sound trite and superficial, but many of these exercises work by focusing your attention on powerful concepts and ideas. So I suggest giving a couple of them a go before passing judgement.
- 2) Plan enjoyable activities. It might sound a bit obvious, but the science supports the deliberate planning of enjoyable and valued activities in treating depression and anxiety. Enjoyable events put us back in contact with naturally reinforcing and pleasurable situations, which can be a powerful antidote to the avoidance and withdrawal that characterises mental illness. See [this article](#) for a more in-depth explanation. Remember, what is enjoyable for one person, is not necessarily enjoyable for another. Pick activities that **you** find enjoyable.



### **Note for mentors:**

*You can easily share these strategies with mentees. On the Greater Good In Action website you will find over 50 exercises focused on building positive emotions.*

## Strategy 2 – Learn to manage challenging emotions

Experiencing negative or unpleasant feelings is perfectly normal.

Like any other emotion, unpleasant emotions like fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt are useful information we can use to guide our behaviour. For example, if I have treated a friend badly, feelings of guilt can remind me to make amends.

It is however easy to be trapped in negative and unpleasant feelings. Feelings of anxiety or self-doubt can lead us to retreat from the world, which then causes more anxiety and self-doubt because the likelihood of being around good people or having good experiences decreases.

Often people do not reach out for help or assistance for these feelings, until they have been struggling with them for a long time. My recommendation is to get in as early as you can, if you find you have been feeling funky for a while.

Whilst many of the self-care ideas in this document will likely help with managing difficult emotions, you can also address these kinds of feelings directly with a type of therapy called – CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy).

CBT is a popular and well-evidenced form of therapy that looks at modifying difficult feelings and emotions through understanding the thoughts and beliefs that underpin them. For example, we can understand some types of social anxiety, as arising from beliefs people hold about being judged negatively by others.

CBT is a very structured type of therapy which makes it well suited to delivery through internet based programs. This means you can experiment with the therapy on your phone, laptop or desktop, without having to visit a therapist.

We are lucky in Australia that there are some excellent online CBT resources.

Try <https://mindspot.org.au/> for anxiety, depression, chronic pain

Try <https://www.mentalhealthonline.org.au/> for anxiety, depression, stress

Try <https://thiswayup.org.au/> for anxiety, depression, OCD, panic, pain, PTSD, insomnia (note: there is a fee of \$59 for some courses)

Try <https://moodgym.com.au/> for anxiety and depression

Other similar types of online therapy resources can be found through <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>

If you are struggling to find a suitable online CBT resource, get in contact with me ([Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au](mailto:Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au)) and I can give you some assistance.

### **Note for mentors:**

If you suspect your mentee is struggling with mental health issues, you might want to refer them to some of the youth focused sites like <https://au.reachout.com/>, <https://www.headspace.org.au/>, <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens>



### Strategy 3 – Develop self-awareness and understanding

We each have our own unique set of personality characteristics, experiences, interests, tendencies, obsessions and quirks.

Self-awareness is about having a good understanding of these different parts of ourselves. Sometimes we call it 'insight'.

Self-awareness/ insight helps us identify situations that play to our strengths, but similarly situations that activate our weaknesses. This allows us to make better decisions, but also prepare ahead of time for situations that will be challenging for us.

Self-awareness is typically achieved through self-reflection – that is, taking the time to reflect on our behaviour, thoughts and feelings in different scenarios.

There are a few ways you can go about this:

- 1) *Deep and meaningful conversations with friends and family* – Once you get past 'small talk', conversations with friends and family can be a powerful avenue through to better self-understanding. Talking aloud about your experiences, fears and hopes gives you a different perspective on yourself. Furthermore, how your friends and family respond to you is further data to help you understand yourself.
- 2) *Counselling* – Sometimes we do not feel comfortable talking about sensitive issues with friends and family. When this is the case, spending time talking about yourself with a [professional counsellor](#) or therapist can provide a similar, but more confidential experience.
- 3) *Meditation* – there are many types of meditation, but the act of regularly creating a quiet space in which you reflect on your thoughts, feelings and experiences is a pathway to better self-understanding. During meditation, it is possible to become aware of thoughts and feelings that have otherwise been working below your normal level of consciousness. Try this [app](#).
- 4) *Expressive writing* – keeping a journal, or writing regularly about yourself and your experiences is a way to process your life in more depth. In addition, you get a permanent but private record of your thoughts and feelings that you can refer back to later.
- 5) *Regularly trying out new things* – One of the simplest ways to learn more about yourself is to put yourself in new and challenging situations. Take up a new hobby or sport, join a group, try to learn a new skill, visit a place you have never been before, or talk to someone you have never talked to before. Watching how you respond in new situations gives you clues to who you are, your strengths and your triggers.



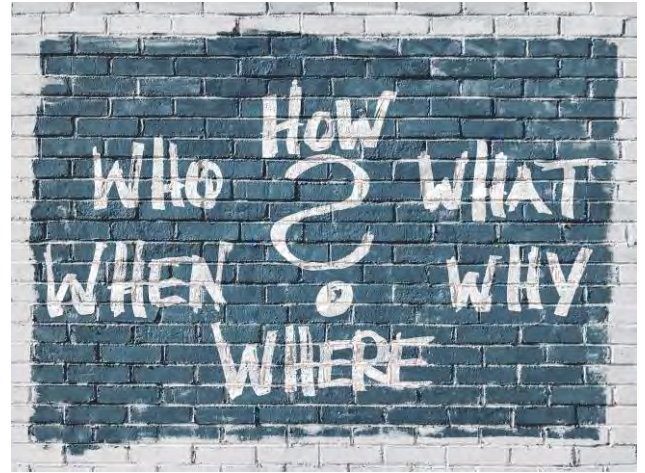
#### **Note for mentors:**

*Being a mentor is as much a process of self-discovery as it is about helping your mentee. You'll learn a lot about yourself in the process. Because of this it can be valuable to get your own mentor, or someone you trust who can talk to about your experiences and what you are learning about yourself.*

## Strategy 4 – Search for meaning, purpose and identity

Whilst self-awareness and understanding involves an understanding of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, there is also the question of who we want to be to others. What contribution do we want to make to the world?

Some people know when they are a child what they want to be in life: a doctor, marine biologist, or a no-good layabout. For others it takes a bit longer to work out who or what they want to be.



Having meaning or purpose in life helps us in a number of ways. It helps us focus our time on things that are meaningful to us. It helps buffer against stress, if we know we are working towards something meaningful. It helps us to communicate to others who we are and what we like.

I've [written previously](#) about how to derive meaning from your studies. In short, there are things you can do to develop more meaning and purpose in your life:

- 1) *Have more fun* – Fun and meaning are interconnected. Finding situations and activities that you find fun and engaging, gives you clues to where you can find meaning. For example, if you enjoy working outside, then being close to nature might be part of what gives your life meaning.
- 2) *Be around people* – Even if you are an introvert, social interaction is a critical component of feeling like you belong. Look for people and groups where you feel you belong.
- 3) *Start thinking about what contribution you want to make to the world* – What legacy would you like to leave this world? What role would you like play in the 'bigger picture', that is, in the lives of others. It is never too early, or too late to think about what you want your contribution to the world to be.
- 4) *Set goals* – we derive meaning from being able to conceptualise and carry out our own ideas. Setting goals is the first part of that process. Have a look at the series I have started on '[becoming a behaviour change expert](#)'. The first post is about setting goals.
- 5) *Set up habits and routines* – Life is naturally a bit chaotic, so establishing routine and order amongst that chaos helps you make sense of the world, and understand better your place in it. Your routine may be very different from that of other people, but as long as it fits and works for you, it is a good routine.

### **Note for mentors:**

*If focusing on your 'meaning in life' seems a bit intense, try starting with the habits and routines part first. It is easier to implement healthy habits and pleasurable activities if you schedule your day and include time for self-care.*

## Strategy 5 – build and maintain supportive relationships

It is very hard to get things done in life without other people and loneliness is very hazardous to your health and wellbeing.

In contrast, having strong relationships and a sense of belonging (to family, friends, clubs, or work) are powerful health boosts.

Making and maintaining relationships with people can be hard work. Like anything though, building positive relationships is a set of skills that can be learned.



One way to think of relationships is as an opportunity for mutual assistance in achieving goals.

- *Try and help others achieve their goals.* Listen to them and try to understand what they are trying to achieve in their life and their work. Where possible, and where you think you have the skills, help them achieve those goals. This is particularly relevant to your work as a mentor. The types of support you can provide include:
  - *Emotional support (e.g. a space for them to express how they are feeling)*
  - *Tangible support (e.g. financial assistance or help with a task)*
  - *Informational support (e.g. advice)*
  - *Companionship (e.g. friendship and helping them feel they belong)*
- *Talk about your own life and work goals.* This will help draw people to you who believe they can help you achieve your goals. We are naturally drawn to people who we can see have purpose and direction.

Keep in mind that many friendships and relationships start through mutual interests, so pursuing hobbies or joining clubs or volunteering are good starting points for meeting people that might ultimately become friends. [FUSA is your place if you want to find clubs and societies at Flinders.](#)

### **Note for mentors:**

*In your role as a mentor, you are providing a critical type of social support for your mentee. This will benefit them and you. However, make sure you have your own social supports in place so you can experience the same benefits as your mentee.*

## Strategy 6 – Care for your body

The healthier your body, the healthier your mind.

You can improve your physical **and** mental health through attention to diet, physical activity, sleep and drug/ alcohol use.

Research studies are increasingly showing that lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity and sleep play **as big a role** in our mental health as they do in our physical health.



- Diet – Google ‘Mediterranean diet’ or ‘DASH Diet’ – both of which have been shown to improve both physical and mental health outcomes. There is a lot of misinformation about diet floating around. Unless there are specific medical reasons for you to follow a restricted diet (e.g. low FODMAP for IBS) the two eating plans above are probably your best bet.
- Physical activity – <https://bit.ly/2vr65OZ> - Australian physical activity guidelines
  - Minimum - 150 mins of moderate, 75 mins of vigorous per week
  - Ideal - 300 minutes moderate, 150 minutes vigorous
  - Break up periods of sitting as often as possible (e.g. move every 40 minutes)
  - Strengthening activities on at least 2 days every week (i.e. weights, resistance exercises, body weight exercises like pushups)
- Sleep - <https://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/> - this site has many fact sheets on multiple sleep topics. But for the average person:
  - 7-9 hours
  - Regular times – i.e. consistent bedtime and wake time
  - Relax for an hour before bed
  - Minimise distractions in bed (cue rude jokes)
  - Get sunlight during the day, preferably early. An early morning walk takes care of this + physical activity.
- I hate to break it to you but there is no ‘healthy’ level of alcohol or drug use (with exception of prescription drugs for specific conditions). Follow drinking guidelines to minimise damage from alcohol intake - <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-topics/alcohol-guidelines> - but keep in mind these guidelines are almost out of date and should be replaced soon.

### **Note for mentors:**

*Caring for your body is a powerful way to improve both your physical health, but also your mental health. This is a good thing to know when talking to young people (e.g. your mentees) about their mental health. Specifically, that sleep, physical activity and diet can be used to improve their mental health.*



## Strategy 7 – Develop the skills for professional success

Ok, so this one is a little out of left field in terms of self-care strategies but it is based on the idea of setting yourself up for success.

Basically, this is about setting yourself up with the skills that will make you a good student, and also a good worker.

For example, overcoming procrastination, improving attention and focus, and using evidence-based learning strategies will help you both as a student, but also as a future employee.



I've written a fair bit about [procrastination](#) on the blog, including [providing a workbook](#) for tackling procrastination.

I've also talked about [evidence-based study tips](#) that help you learn information more effectively.

Although we spend a lot of time studying, we don't necessarily spend time learning **how to study**. Take the time to familiarise yourself with the strategies used by expert learners and teachers – <https://www.slrc.org.au/resources/pen-principles/>

In addition to the strategies you can use to be a better learner, the attitude you adopt towards learning and success is also important. Where possible adopt a 'growth mindset'. Such a mindset emphasises persistence, adaptation and willingness to learn as superior to innate talent. I've spoken about this on the blog before - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/10/fixd-vs-growth-mindsets/>

Finally, it is important to note that things like concentration, attention, focus and motivation are influenced by the other lifestyle choices that you make. For example, the strategies included under 'Strategy 6 – Care for your body' will have a positive impact on your productivity and performance. Take sleep for example - <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/benefits-of-sleep/learning-memory>

### **Note for mentors:**

*Working with high school students means you might find yourself giving advice on how to study more effectively. If you know the strategies well, you can better support your mentee. I think understanding about growth mindsets is also valuable when talking with mentees about the skills required for academic success; namely, that whilst ability is important, so is the willingness to work hard, learn from failure and keep trying.*

## Strategy 8 – Modify your environment

Sometimes we forget that the environments we live and work in have a strong impact on our wellbeing.

On the plus side this means we can influence our wellbeing and productivity by modifying the environments in which we study, work and play.

So what sort of modifications should you make to your study spaces?



1. Make it *physically comfortable* – e.g. good chair, decent lighting, some airflow, sensible temperature and low levels of noise.
2. Make it *functional*, that is, with easy access to the things you need to study – books, internet connection, healthy snacks and hydration.
3. Make it *low distraction* – remove or minimise those things that are likely to distract you such as your phone, conversations of other people, visual distractions.
4. Remove *clutter* – it is normal to make a bit of a mess whilst you are working with papers and books, but seek to declutter your study space as best as possible, and restore it neatly at the end of a study session. People vary in the level of clutter they can tolerate, but most studies find excessive clutter is associated with poorer productivity and wellbeing.
5. Make it *uniquely you* – give your study space a bit of your own personal identity by decorating with items that capture your personality. These items can give you inspiration.

The other big environmental influence on wellbeing is the degree of exposure to nature you get on a daily basis. This includes exposure to trees, parks, animals, sky and waterways.

One of the reasons I love working at Flinders is because the Bedford Park campus has wonderful garden and park spaces, which can be very rejuvenating, even after just a few minutes each day.

There are a number of theories as to why exposure to nature is associated with wellbeing. These range from evolutionary theories that posit we have an intimate connection with nature based on millions of years of close connection to nature, to the more simple fact that we often go outside to engage in healthy behaviours (e.g. exercise). Whatever the mechanism, many studies support wellbeing arising from increased time in nature, especially when it is contrasted to spending significant time indoors or in urban environments.

### **Note for mentors:**

*Setting up our environment for success is a strategy that is often ignored. This includes your study spaces, but also where you go for relaxation and rejuvenation. This can also make for a very interesting topic to discuss with mentees.*

## What if you find that you are not coping?

No matter how prepared we try to be, sometimes things can get on top of us. Many students are reluctant to ask for help thinking they have to deal with problems on their own, not ask for help and simply “tough it out”.

On the contrary, course coordinators, counsellors and the university as a whole much prefer it if students reach out for help if they are struggling. Catching issues early typically means easier solutions.

Think about how you would feel if your mentee was struggling, but didn't want to trouble you with it. You might say to them that talking about this stuff earlier, rather than later, can help with finding solutions quicker.

How do you know if you are not coping? I totally stole this list from a website that I can no longer remember.

- Mental
  - Trouble thinking clearly
  - Memory problems
  - Can't concentrate
  - Low attention span
  - Poor judgement
  - Anxious or racing thoughts
  - Constant worrying
- Emotional
  - Moodiness
  - Easily upset or hurt
  - Irritability or short temper
  - Agitation, unable to relax or keep still
  - Feeling overwhelmed
  - Sense of loneliness and isolation
  - Depression or general unhappiness
- Physical
  - Tightness in muscles
  - Aches and pains
  - Headaches, trembling, sweating
  - Nausea, dizziness
  - Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
  - Loss of appetite
  - Lack of sleep, dreams, nightmares
- Behavioural
  - Eating more or less
  - Sleeping too much or too little
  - Isolating yourself from others
  - Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
  - Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
  - Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing).

If you suspect you are not coping, contact Health, Counselling and Disability Services -

[http://flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/healthandcounselling\\_home.cfm](http://flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/healthandcounselling_home.cfm) - We provide free access to GP's, counsellors and Disability Advisors.

GP's for all medical related matters

Counsellors for help with mental health, psychological and academic issues. Also can talk to counsellors about challenges you are experiencing in the mentor/mentee relationship

Disability Advisors for help with getting adjustments due to physical or psychiatric disabilities.

## Questions

Have you got questions?

Did you read this handout and have no idea what I was talking about?

Do you have specific self-care topics that you want to know more about, that would help you with your studies or mentor role?

Email them directly to me – [Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au](mailto:Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au)

