

How to prepare yourself psychologically for work placements

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How to prepare yourself psychologically for work placements (V7)

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 in this blog post: <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/13/the-emental-health-project-officer/>



My role at the university is to give students the tips, techniques and tools required to perform at their best academically, whilst also looking after their health and wellbeing. 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.

One area where we consistently see students experience challenges is work placements. This is because work placements are inherently psychologically demanding.

You have to:

- Understand and adapt to the culture of a workplace;
- Make significant changes in your routine to accommodate the work hours;
- Change your behaviour and dress habits to conform to the workplace;
- Find the extra stamina required to achieve work-related projects or even last through a standard 9-5 day;
- Deal with a larger range of people and therefore more complex and varied personalities, skills, education, expectations, attitudes and behaviours;
- Come to terms with the reality that mistakes and failures on work placements can have significant consequences;
- Adjust to the fact that the realities of working in your field are more complex than what you've been learning at university;
- Adapt to the pressure of showing career progression;
- Find a way of balancing the work placement with your other responsibilities (e.g. work, family, study, social);
- Adapt to the pressure of needing to build a good CV in order to be competitive in the job market.



Then there are the unique challenges of **clinical placements, like those in hospitals**:

- Meeting and working with people who are suffering or struggling with their health/mental health
- Feeling out of your depth in helping someone
- Trying to apply the theory you've learned to more complex human interactions
- Being in a hospital or health-service setting
- Working in collaboration with other health professionals

On the surface, 'psychologically demanding' sounds like a bad thing, but it isn't. It is mostly good.

Psychologically demanding means you are working at the edge of your capabilities. This is where a lot of the best learning happens.

Think of work placements like a little mini-marathon for your mind. Tough to complete, but very rewarding when you do. In fact, work placements can be **amazing opportunities**. You will get to know what it is like to work in your chosen field. You will meet people that might become future employers, collaborators or mentors. You will get a glimpse of your life beyond your studies.

But whether a placement ends up being a positive or negative experience will depend on how you prepare for and adapt to these demands. **You** have the capacity to shift the experience of your placements from challenge to opportunity.

The purpose of this handout is to give you some insights into how to do this. These insights have been generated from what we know about the psychology of wellbeing and productivity, as well as from the experiences of past students.

Let's start with a quick consideration of what it means to prepare oneself psychologically.



What do you mean by “preparing yourself psychologically”?

If you were an elite athlete and you were preparing yourself for a competition, there would be a number of things that you would do to prepare your body.

- You would eat well, ensuring you had the right nutrients and energy sources to compete at your highest level.
- You would train regularly, both in terms of general fitness, but also the specific skills necessary for your sport.
- You would get plenty of rest and sleep to ensure that your body was given the time to recover and heal and get strong.
- Your day would be very well organised to ensure appropriate time was allocated to training, nutrition and rest.

During the competition itself, you would (where possible) continue to do these things, so you were operating at your best and maintaining the routines

When we talk about “preparing yourself psychologically”, we are talking about a very similar concept, except that you are preparing your **mind** to be ready for the psychological challenges of a new work/study environment.

In many ways the preparation is similar. For example, nutrition, exercise and sleep are key factors in determining your psychological health. But there are other things as well you can do to prepare your mind for your work placement.

In this document, we’ve outlined 14 things to think about in relation to your placement. Some of them relate to things to do **in the lead-up** to placement. Some refer to things to do **during** placement. And finally, some refer to things to do towards the end or **after** your placement is finished.

They’re all essentially premised on the one basic idea. **That preparation and planning are the foundation of both resilience and success.** When we plan for challenges ahead, we are more resilient when they happen. When we plan for opportunities ahead, we are more likely to take full advantage of those opportunities.



The 14 areas outlined in this document reflect what we think are some of the key areas to be mindful of as you navigate your placement. They are as follows:

1. *Know what to expect*
2. *Clarify what you want to get out of the placement and put things in place to make that happen*
3. *Clarify what kind of impression you want to leave at the workplace*
4. *Get your own health and wellbeing in check*
5. *Routines – timetabling and self-care*
6. *Portraying competence*
7. *Plan for challenging emotions to arise*
8. *The importance of communication and feedback*
9. *Notice and name perfectionism*
10. *Self-reflection*
11. *Finding meaning and purpose, even in a placement that isn't your interest area*
12. *Networking*
13. *Take the time to self-reflect on what skills you are developing on placement (work skills for the future)*
14. *Ask yourself if this is a job you can imagine yourself doing*

So sit back, grab a cold (or warm) beverage and spend 40 minutes with me exploring ways to make your upcoming work placement a good experience. And if you think that is a long time to devote to this document and preparing for placement, keep in mind that you'll probably spend 90,000+ hours working over your lifetime, so this is a relatively small investment in getting off to a good start.

Let's get started.....

1. Know what to expect

Most topics I've come across do orientation sessions, where they talk to students about to go on placement about what to expect whilst on placement.

Attendance at these sessions and paying close attention to what is presented is important. Remember that the topic/course coordinators running these sessions have probably helped hundreds of students make the most of their placement experience. They know the pitfalls and the opportunities and can give you the heads-up on what is expected.

Having clear and accurate expectations of the placement experience will influence what you get from it. A common source of distress for people is when their expectations are out of alignment with reality. For example, the student who expects they will be able to work 20 hours a week AND do placement, will experience distress when they discover that isn't as easy as they thought. A student who thinks they already know most of what will be taught on placement gets a rude shock when they discover there is lots they don't know or can't do.



Generally, I find an attitude of intellectual humility is a good starting point in terms of expectations. Expect that the placement will be cognitively challenging, that you won't know it all, that you won't be good at everything and that you'll need to play close attention to your supervisor in terms of what you need to learn.

This doesn't mean you can't have positive expectations as well (see next point), but temper them with the attitude that 'this might work out differently to how I think it will'. I remember wasting one of my clinical placements because I arrogantly thought I knew better than my supervisor. Don't be a douche like I was.

2. Clarify what you want to get out of the placement and put things in place to make that happen

If your goals for your placement are just "to get through it" then you are selling yourself short. You are also sending yourself the signal that 'getting through it' is the best you can do. Maybe that is the case, but I doubt it. My guess is you have ample talent and ability to make your placement more than a chore.

So, take a bit of time to think about what you hope to get out of your placement and write those down as goals.

If you struggle to think of goals, here are some of the most common things student want to get out of their placements.

- **To learn something or develop new skills** – kinda obvious I realise, but still worth articulating. What do you want to learn? Why? How do you see yourself using that knowledge or those skills?

- **To see if they've made the right choice** – put simply, work placements are an opportunity to see whether your chosen degree is a pathway into jobs that interest you.
- **To help people** – a great part of any placement is that you are likely to be involved in making a discernible difference to people's lives.
- **An opportunity to lead a project on their own** – with your studies, you are mostly doing work required of you by your lecturers. On placement, you might get the opportunity to create and lead a project of your own. Does this interest you? What kind of project would you like to take a leading role in?
- **Have fun** – just because it is work, doesn't mean it can't be enjoyable and energising. Some students enjoy the comradery of the workplace and look to get that on their placement. What do you enjoy about the workplace?
- **To feel more connected to their degree** – experiencing what it is like to work in your field can help you connect more closely to your studies. If you enjoy the work, then it helps motivate you to connect at a deeper level with your studies.
- **To expand their social network** – the phrase 'it is not what you know, it is who you know' definitely has merit. When you build connections with people, you open up new opportunities. You might meet someone on your placement that becomes a future employer/collaborator/colleague.
- **To learn more about themselves** – putting yourself in new and novel situations gives you insights into your personality, your strengths, areas you can work on, preferences and desires. It is often through work placements that students clarify their personal and professional goals.
- **To get some specific real-world achievements** – handing in assignments or completing exams doesn't always give us a sense of achievement, as it feels disconnected from the real world. Achievements on work placements however can feel more real and valuable.
- **Chance to be creative** – creativity and innovation are key aspects of work life. Work placements give you the chance to bring something new and unique into the world. A place to manifest ideas that haven't yet found a home in your studies.
- **An understanding of how workplaces operate** - A better understanding of the kind of work in the area, to feel more in control and predictable
- **To feel good about themselves** – when we successfully adapt to a new situation, it fills us with a sense of self-worth, that then provides some of the momentum required to continue to push ourselves into new situations.

What do you want to get out of your placement?

Having identified what you want to get out of your placement, you then need to think about what you might put in place to make that happen.

The primary thing is to let your placement supervisor know about your goals. Chat with them in the early days of your placement and share what you've been thinking about what you'd like to get out of the placement. That might help them set up relevant experiences for you whilst on placement. For example, if you let them know you are keen to get some tangible achievements whilst on placement (e.g. build something), they might be able to connect you with people in the team that are building stuff.

But also be mindful of asking the supervisor (and other staff) how you could be of assistance to them. What kinds of projects or activities would it be really helpful to them if you worked on? Showing this willingness to help is a powerful relationship builder and many of the good aspects of workplaces (fun, creativity, innovation) come from high quality relationships within the workforce. Work hard to help the team achieve their goals, and they will work harder to help you achieve yours.

Finally, consider doing the self-reflection exercises outlined in #10 and 13 of this document. These will get you to reflect on what you are learning and help you develop clarity about your degree, area of study, interests and goals. Don't worry if you discover that, in fact, the work is not to your liking. This is valuable information about who you are and what you want to do with your life. However, don't use not liking the placement as an excuse to slack off. Leaving a good impression is a powerful skill to learn. That brings me to the next section.....



3. Clarify what kind of impression you want to leave at the workplace

I'd like you to try this simple thought experiment.

"I want you to imagine it is your final day on placement. You are packing up your stuff, getting ready to leave. You are saying farewell to everyone and thanking them for the opportunity. You leave the workplace, get into your car and drive home.

With you gone, the team all get together to talk about you. They are sharing their experiences of having you at the workplace, with the intention of making a decision about whether to have other students on placement and also consider what experiences to give those students.

How do you want the team to talk about you? What things would you like them to be saying? Would you like them to be sharing positive stories about you, or complaining about you? Would you like them to be excitedly preparing for the next student, or regretting taking one on in the first place?"

My guess is you want the team to remember you fondly.

What do you need to do to make this happen?

To be honest, the formula isn't that complex.

- Be on time
- Dress appropriately and neatly
- Listen to your supervisor about expected behaviour in the workplace and follow their advice clearly
- Show interest – ask questions and actually listen and take notes of the answers
- Show a willingness to learn and develop
- If staff collect together for lunch or other events, join in
- Let people know a little bit about you and what you are studying and what you hope to get out of the placement
- Ask people what they are working on, and whether you can be of any assistance to them
- Show gratitude towards those providing you the opportunity
- Keep your supervisor informed of your progress on key projects
- Be honest if you lack knowledge or skill in a particular area but demonstrate a willingness to correct those deficits

Note: You are **not** expected to be perfect on a work placement. On the contrary, the expectation is you are there to learn and get better. Supervisors know that you are there to grow your skillset and they want to help you do this. Therefore, being perfect isn't the goal. Rather it is showing that you are willing and capable of improving and getting better, based on the advice and mentorship provided by your supervisor and the team in which you work.

4. Get your own health and wellbeing in check

Modern workplaces are far more accepting of the fact that people bring with them all sorts of personal challenges such as physical and mental health disorders and disability.

However, it is your responsibility to ensure that:

- Any physical or mental health conditions that you have are being appropriately treated and managed. This means connecting with your primary treatment providers before the placement starts and ensuring your treatment plans are up-to-date.
- Any conditions or disabilities you have that will have specific implications on your ability to engage with the work have been disclosed. Start with your internal placement supervisor or speak to a Disability Advisor to learn more (<https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/disability>).
- That you are engaging in a reasonable degree of self-care before and during your placement (next section).

It is sensible to make the assumption that the stress of work placements can exacerbate existing conditions. Knowing this ahead of time, you can put some things in place to limit the negative impacts. This includes the points above, but also the self-care principles in the following section.

There is a term 'fit for placement' that is used by education providers to consider whether a student is physically and mentally healthy enough to go on placement.



It is important to note that having a health or mental health problem does not automatically render you unfit for placement. If the condition is well managed and you are capable of carrying out the roles of your placement, then the condition is somewhat irrelevant. You can absolutely be 'fit for placement' even if you have a health or mental health condition.

Where students generally run into trouble is when their health is not well managed, they are afraid to tell anyone because of fears of repercussions, so then they try to hide the impairments they are experiencing. They go onto placement, having not informed anyone of their struggles, and then find themselves distressed and unable to do the work. This puts them at risk as well as the people they are seeing on placement (constituting an ethical problem).

Whilst we can't compel students to disclose concerns about their health and wellbeing, we can say that the short-term uncomfortable consequences of doing so (e.g. having to withdraw from a placement, having to delay studies, having to seek treatment, having to self-notify to AHPRA [selected degrees only], having to get special supports implemented at the workplace) are much preferable to the longer-term consequences of not disclosing (i.e. putting self and others at risk, getting notified to AHPRA [selected degrees only], failing a degree, having an untreated health condition).

To initiate a conversation about your health and its possible impacts on your placement, make an appointment to chat with one of our GPs - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/health>

Preferably do this before your placement starts.

5. Healthy routines and self-care

Self-care is such an important topic, that we have a whole separate document dedicated to it. You can access it here: <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/11/09/self-care-mega-guide/>

A simple way to think about self-care is “*do I have good habits and routines set up, across the different aspects of my life, that provide me the necessary support, rest and rejuvenation necessary to do well at my studies/placement?*”

This means good habits and routines in place in relation to sleep, nutrition, physical activity, study habits, emotional health, self-reflection, work/finances, rest, socialising and recreation.

Now you might read that and feel a bit overwhelmed, and that would be perfectly normal. I too get a bit overwhelmed at times trying to ensure I am making healthy choices and decisions in each of these areas.

But your starting point is to simply make one or two small changes to your daily routine that frees up some mental energy that can be used to focus on the task at hand – in this case, your placement. Whenever our work or study is challenging, it helps to have the other aspects of our life in good order.

For example, you might change your bedtime to get a little extra sleep each night. You might do some meal prep to reduce time spent preparing or accessing meals. You might ride your bike to placement to get your exercise whilst transporting yourself at the same time.

Remember, small changes that help free up some mental space.

If it helps, use our Work Placement Scheduler (included as Appendix) to break up your workday and also as a reminder to include healthy activities as well.

6. Portraying competence

It is hypothesised that one of the core psychological needs we have as humans is to feel competent (see ‘self-determination theory’). We want to be good at stuff, have mastery over topics important to us, and have that capability visible to others.

Students heading out on placement are no exception. They want to do a good job and show off what they’ve learned and can do.

I’ve observed (as have many placement supervisors) that students often expect themselves to get everything right on placement, that this is the sign of competence.

However, portraying competence when you are still in the active learning phase is more about showing the following:

- *Respect for supervisor and workplace*: basically, show up on time, dress appropriately, listen closely and be polite.
- *Preparation*: make sure you’ve done the relevant readings and preparation for work tasks ahead of time.

- *Willingness to learn*: supervisors don't expect you to know everything or be able to do everything, but they do expect you to show a willingness and effort to learn.
- *Willingness to confront areas of low skill*: you will discover on placement that there are some areas of practice where you aren't as good at others. Supervisors are looking for you to willingly confront these weak points to target them for improvement.
- *Having another go when something doesn't go quite right*: failure is a part of the placement experience, so try not to take it too personally when it happens. Focus instead on what you can do next time to lessen the likelihood of it happening again.
- *Listening closely to supervisor and translating their advice into practice*: it is wise to start with the assumption that your supervisor is better at the job than you are, and that taking the time to listen and learn from them is your best bet for accelerated skill development. Competence isn't about being a 'know-it-all', it is about using the placement opportunity to accelerate your learning.

7. Plan for challenging emotions

New and challenging situations elicit many feelings and thoughts. Some of them are welcome (e.g. curiosity, excitement, positive apprehension). Some of them are less welcome (e.g. anxiety, anger, frustration).

It is safe to bet that at some point during a placement you'll experience some of the less welcome feelings/emotions.



How we interpret those feelings is important.

For example, if a student on an education placement experiences anxiety when they step in front of the class, they might interpret this as evidence they shouldn't be teaching. However, a supervisor might simply interpret that as the usual nerves of first-time teaching.

The key takeaway message here is to not jump to conclusions about emotions/feelings you experience during the placement. Instead, bring them up in discussions with your supervisor. They'll help you interpret those feelings more accurately.

8. Importance of communication and feedback

There will be multiple situations during your placement that will test your communication skills. This will include situations with clients and situations with colleagues.

I wish there was a default, fall-back method that guaranteed good outcomes in all communication situations but it isn't quite that simple.

I can tell you however that there are a few things that clients and supervisors alike consistently appreciate:

- Taking the time to listen to what they say before jumping in with your viewpoint

- Taking notes with the intention of remembering what they've said
- Asking questions to better understand what it is they are saying or trying to communicate
- Summarising what they've said to show that you've understood their viewpoint and perspective
- Asking them whether your summary of the information they've given you is correct
- Asking permission before offering a contradictory or different point of view

There are also things that clients and supervisors consistently dislike:

- Being challenged in their views before you've really taken the time to listen and understand their point of view
- If your attention is actually focused on something else (e.g. mobile phone)
- Interrupting them whilst they are trying to formulate their view or argument
- Forgetting personal or important information that they've given you

I also like these basic principles of communication - <https://effectiviology.com/principles-of-effective-communication/>

They are particularly helpful to consider when trying to explain complex concepts in a simple way.

Don't worry if your initial communications efforts with clients feel a bit strained or awkward. Even in a psychology degree where we did lots of counselling and communication training, it still felt kinda weird when we were seeing clients for the first time. Your head is swimming with information and you're desperately trying to say something smart or come across as capable.

Just remember to **listen**. It is strange how much of a lost art form this is.

And on the topic of Feedback.....

In your dealings with supervisors and other staff you will get feedback.

Very roughly, there are two types of feedback – motivational and correctional (there are more, but simplifying it down to 2 helps).

Motivational feedback tends to focus on what you've done well. It is generally positive in nature. The purpose of it is to keep you focused on your task. The best time to deliver motivational feedback is usually when someone is just learning how to do something. Receiving motivational feedback encourages us to stick with the task and keep learning. We give a lot of motivational feedback to young children, even when they are doing a task poorly, because we want them to stick with the task.

Correctional feedback tends to focus on what we've not done so well. It comes across as more critical. The purpose of correctional feedback is to refine a person's skill in a given area. Correctional feedback is most effectively used with people who have already learned the basics of a skill and are looking to develop further. Correctional feedback helps us get better at something.

Not surprisingly, people mostly prefer getting motivational feedback vs correctional feedback.



However, correctional feedback is ultimately better in terms of making you better at the job. If someone is giving you correctional feedback, then they have already ascertained that you have a basic skillset in the area and are ready to learn more advanced skills. Keep in mind though that to be effective, correctional feedback needs to be specific about what you need to change. Just being told you got it wrong is of no use unless you are giving clear guidance on how to make it right.

Ideally, on placement you'll get a mixture of both - encouragement to keep you interested in the job and correction and instruction to make you better at it. If you feel like the balance is a bit out of whack, let your supervisor know. Maybe you feel like you need a little more encouragement ("please tell me what things I am doing well") or maybe you actually want some more critical evaluation ("I need to know what I can do to improve"). It is perfectly OK to ask for the kind of feedback that will keep you learning at your best.

The other really important aspect of feedback is ensuring that it operates as a full cycle. What do I mean by that?

Feedback is most useful, when we can take that feedback, practice applying it in the relevant situation and experiencing the benefits gained from taking on that feedback.

So if your supervisor gives you feedback about a particular task, you will need to apply that feedback the next time you do that task, and then evaluate if the feedback helped you.

If the feedback you are being given is not actionable (i.e. you don't know how to translate it into practice), then you need to ask your supervisor to explain it further. It is OK to do this. As supervisors we sometimes give feedback that is too vague or imprecise. It is OK to ask us to provide more detail.

9. Notice and name perfectionism



Many students tend towards being a little on the perfectionistic side. Namely, they set very high (sometimes unachievable) standards for themselves, and then feel bad about themselves if they don't meet those standards.

For some, perfectionism will rear its head in the early years of their study. It will manifest as struggling to make decisions, reassurance seeking, excessive organising, giving up easily, procrastinating, not knowing when to stop, constant checking, slowness, avoiding situations in which they might fail. These students often get referred to counselling services or psychological programs in order to address their perfectionism. If this sounds like you and you've slipped through the cracks so far – this might not be a bad starting point - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Overcoming-Perfectionism-scientifically-behavioural-techniques/dp/1845297423> co-authored by Flinders' very own Professor Tracey Wade.

For some, perfectionism doesn't really make a grand appearance until their placements. This is because some students harness their high standards to perform well on assignments and exams. However, when they get out to the workforce (which is very different from assignments and exams), they suddenly find they can't control things as well as they have been. They find the applied (rather than theoretical) part of the work more unpredictable, and their sense of competence is challenged.

I would say I fell into that category. I did well in my degree when all I had to do was assignments and exams. I felt competent. But when I went out on placement, suddenly I didn't feel competent anymore. It was much

easier to wrangle paragraphs on a computer screen than it was to change human behaviour. Adapting to the less controllable environment of placements took me a while.

There are a couple of adaptations that we see students go through in this regard:

1. The **avoider**. They just kinda switch off. They don't listen to feedback. They make little attempt to improve. They do the minimum required.
2. The **accepter**. They acknowledge that they've got a fair bit to learn about the job. They note down key challenges. They keep records. They identify areas for improvement. They try to modify their practice, piece by piece. They get disappointed if they do something wrong, but recover quickly and have another go.
3. The **controller**. They try to control every aspect of the placement. They obsess about getting every aspect of the job correct. They criticise themselves for getting anything wrong. They get really down on themselves for making any mistakes.

Admittedly, I think I was a bit on the 'controller' side.

I think you can tell which one we reckon is the best scenario – the accepter. It gets the right balance between acknowledging the need for improvement but also not becoming highly self-critical in the process.

So how do you make yourself more of an 'accepter'?

1. Practice completing tasks to around 80% of what you think is completed, before showing it to someone else. This can help break the pattern of constant checking and revising that people do when trying to get a task 'perfect'.
2. Notice your tendency to focus on what 'is not right' versus 'what is right' with the work you've been doing. Perfectionists get hooked on focusing what they've haven't yet fixed and lose focus on the things they have done well.
3. Notice and name any self-talk that is highly critical ("I am such an idiot", "I should have done better"). Give this self-talk a name and try to catch yourself out using that talk. When you notice yourself being highly self-critical, remember that internal voice is not working in your best interests. Instead, connect with another person (e.g. supervisor) to discuss where you are at with your task.
4. Notice whether your sense of self-worth is connected entirely to your performance in your degree/placement. If this is the only place you are relying on for a sense of self-achievement, then you might like to look at other areas as well: hobbies, social engagement, physical health.

Whilst I am personally a strong believer in setting yourself the goal of continual self-improvement, I think in order for it to be healthy, you should focus on:

- Small improvements at a time.
- Use yourself as the benchmark – i.e. try to be a little bit better than you were previously, rather than an unachievable standard set on the basis of an external benchmark.
- Being self-compassionate – meaning embracing the reality that things won't always go right and that is OK. Human beings don't typically improve in a perfect linear fashion. Human self-improvement is much messier than that.
- Embrace activities that you aren't that good at. It is perfectly OK to suck at something, because with practice and commitment you will be able to get better at it.

10. Self-reflection

To self-reflect means to connect what you are learning or experiencing on your placement to some kinds of insights about you, your life and who you want to be.

Have a meeting go really well? What was your part in why that happened? Is that something you can repeat?

Had a bad day at placement? What is it that happened? Is there anything you can learn about yourself from dissecting how the day unfolded?

As part of your training, you've probably been asked by lecturers to engage in quite a bit of self-reflection. The reason is it helps with learning. You may well be required, as part of your placement, to keep a journal or show evidence of self-reflection.

I encourage you to embrace this process as much as you can. It can be difficult and time-consuming, hence why many students are reluctant to do it, but it has significant medium and long-term value. It is a way to get better at your job but also learn valuable lessons about your own personality, strengths and weaknesses.

If your placement does not already have self-reflection components built in, a simple recommendation is to start a **learning journal**. At the end of the day, write a few brief sentences about what you learned about your work that day, as well as what you learned about yourself. Start the process of linking your experiences to your understanding of yourself.

11. Finding meaning and purpose even in a placement you don't like

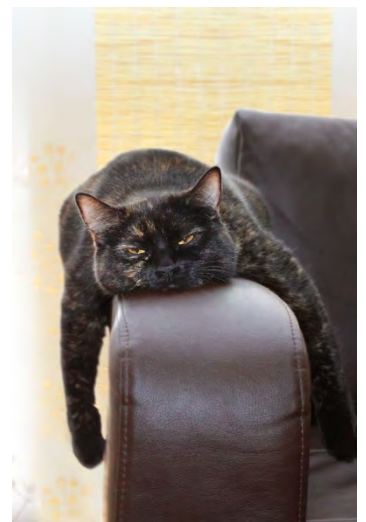
Not every placement you have will be in an area you enjoy or can imagine working in.

Be careful not to dismiss these too quickly in terms of your learning.

You may on these placements still:

- Meet people that become future collaborators or employers (see networking below);
- Learn lessons about yourself that could only be learned in the context of being bored or disinterested in the work;
- Be alerted to other types of roles that are of more interest to you;
- Learn valuable skills that can be applied in the areas you are interested in.

A while back I wrote an article on how to derive meaning from your studies - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/09/derive-meaning-study/>



The principles in that blog post apply here. Even if the work itself doesn't seem meaningful to you, you can still derive meaning from it through injecting play/fun into the process, looking for social interaction opportunities, thinking about how the task you are doing helps others, setting ambitious goals and turning tasks into routines.

12. Networking

The job I am in now (which I love) arose because of an unrelated meeting 5+ years earlier in which I talked to the team about some work I was doing in my research at the time. I had no idea at the time that the meeting would result in me getting a great job 5+ years later. I learned a valuable lesson in the process, which is to treat just about everyone you meet, in the context of work, as someone you might end up working with years later.

This doesn't mean having to become great friends with everyone you encounter at work, but where possible be generous, polite and interested when you meet and talk to people in a work context. Try to show as many people as possible that you are a desirable employee/collaborator, so that if the opportunity should arise, they will think of you.

Yes, you will definitely meet some people along the way that it will be very hard to like, but the goal isn't to like everyone, rather it is to treat people with respect, so that you don't burn potential connections that could assist you in the future.



13. Transferable work skills

Being on work placement gives you the opportunity to learn what are known as ‘soft’ or ‘transferable’ work skills. These are skills that apply to most work situations and are not attached to any given job/degree.

Transferable skills are HUGELY IMPORTANT. I can’t stress how important it is to develop these skills. They make you a valuable employee across multiple different settings and are critical in helping you shift careers if needed. Here is a list of the most common ones.

Transferable skills description (you can Google any of these terms to find a lot more information about each)

Skillset	Description
<i>Communication, listening skills</i>	Being a good talker and writer. People can understand you. Balanced by good listening skills.
<i>Teamwork</i>	Good at working with others. Skilled at getting better results from working as a team, than simply as individuals.
<i>Problem solving, taking responsibility</i>	Finding solutions when faced with difficulties and setbacks. Taking responsibility when the setbacks are due to your actions.
<i>Initiative and enterprise</i>	Ability to think creatively and make improvements to the way things are done.
<i>Planning and organising</i>	Setting goals and mapping out the steps required to achieve those goals. Working according to timelines and meeting deadlines.
<i>Self-management, self-control</i>	Being able to stay on top of your own work, without requiring excessive supervision.
<i>Learning</i>	A desire and ability to learn and apply new information. Adapting to change.
<i>Using technology</i>	Being proficient in the programs and technology that are used in your workplace.
<i>Commercial awareness</i>	An understanding of the business and industry in which you are in.
<i>Time management</i>	Understanding of the time required to complete tasks, and efficiently allocating time so that you meet deadlines.
<i>Negotiating and persuading, assertiveness, conflict resolution</i>	Ability to settle differences in opinion between parties through collaboration and compromise. Ability to construct persuasive arguments for why things should be done your way.
<i>Leadership</i>	The ability to organise other people to work on a common goal.
<i>Literacy and numeracy</i>	The ability to read, write and work with numbers.
<i>Stress tolerance</i>	Having effective strategies in place to deal with the normal stresses of work.
<i>Integrity</i>	Being honest and having well defined principles that you stick to.
<i>Professionalism</i>	Conducting yourself in an appropriate way in the workplace. Includes dressing appropriately, how you treat people, and being reliable (e.g. on time).
<i>Decision making</i>	Have processes in place to help you make complex decisions.
<i>Interpersonal sensitivity</i>	Being mindful and empathic towards the thoughts, feelings and characteristics of your workmates.
<i>Sense of humour</i>	Being able to see the funny side of things. Making colleagues laugh or smile.
<i>Creativity</i>	Ability to come up with novel solutions to complex problems. Seeing new and different ways of doing business.

One way to track whether you are picking these skills up is to simply document at the end of each placement day, whether you got to utilise or practice any of these skills during the day. You could use something like this or make one for yourself.

Skill practice – What skills did I utilise today?

Skillset*	Activity
Communication	
Teamwork	
Problem solving	
Initiative and enterprise	
Planning and organising	
Self-management	
Learning	
Using technology	
Commercial awareness	
Time management	
Negotiating and persuading	
Leadership	
Literacy and numeracy	
Stress tolerance	
Integrity	
Professionalism	
Decision making	
Interpersonal sensitivity	
Creativity	

14. Ask yourself if this is a job you can imagine yourself doing

All of us are trying to find or develop our purpose in life. We want to find work or hobbies or activities or people that give our life meaning.

With a few simple questions, you can use your experiences on work placement to assist in this process of meaning making.

At the end of each day, spend a few minutes considering the following questions:

What did I learn about my field today? Does it make me want to engage more or less with my degree?

What did I learn about myself today? How does this self-knowledge fit with how I see my career unfolding?

What am I grateful for today? Are these experiences something I can expect if I work in this area?

How did what I experience today link with my existing goals for the future? Do I need to update my goals, or have I confirmed them?

What questions about this kind of work could I ask my supervisor?



There is only so much you can do to prepare.....

There is a lot in this document about how to take full advantage of the opportunities inherent in your work placement.

But there is only so much you can do. Your experience of your work placement is a combination of what **you** put into it, but also the workplace itself. All the preparation and self-care in the world might not be enough to withstand a crappy workplace.

The reality is workplaces range from the toxic to the inspirational and you may have little control over picking the workplace for your placement or changing its culture.

If, despite having implemented many of the ideas in this document, you find your work placement to be a negative experience, it might be because of the characteristics of the workplace itself.

If this is the case, you need to a) clearly document your experiences at the work placement (i.e. what is happening) and the b) speak to your internal work placement or course coordinator. They are best situated to help you determine if it is something about the placement that needs to change.



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.

How do you know if you are not coping? Stress symptoms are many and varied.

Remember, short-term stress is actually beneficial. Those nerves you experience before giving a presentation are a normal part of confronting challenging activities.

The problem is when stress becomes either severe or chronic.

Symptoms of stress

- **Physiological (experienced in the body)** – low energy/fatigue, headaches, upset stomach/nausea, aches/pains/tense muscles, chest pain/discomfort, shallow quick breathing, more regular colds/infections, shaking, dry mouth, clenched jaw/teeth grinding, trembling, sweating, dizziness,
- **Psychological/thinking (experienced in the mind)** – trouble concentrating/thinking clearly, forgetful/memory problems, indecisiveness, apathy, hopelessness, negative self-evaluation, worry, racing thoughts, disorganisation, inability to focus, poor judgement, pessimistic, short attention span, nightmares
- **Behavioural (how we act when stressed)** – increased drinking or smoking, poor sleep (too much or too little), distracting activities (gaming/ internet), nervousness, avoiding other people, changes in appetite, procrastination, nail biting, drug use
- **Emotional (how we feel when stressed)** – feeling anxious, out of control, overwhelmed, stressed out, unhappy, angry, irritable, tense, agitated, having difficulty relaxing, moody, easily upset, feeling lonely and isolated, depressed
- **Interpersonal (how we act around other people)** - short-tempered with people, clingy, aggressive, loss of trust

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

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

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 mental health or wellbeing topics that you want to know more about, that would help you with your studies or placements?

Email them directly to me – Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au



If this kind of stuff interests you, you can read more on the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/> - where I talk a lot more about productivity and wellbeing.

You can also explore my writings and stuff on the topic of mental fitness, namely how to train your mind for the purposes of self-improvement – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/03/01/mental-fitness-intro/>

Thanks for reading :)

Appendix - Work placement scheduler

Work placement: _____

Date: _____

Daily Schedule

Time	Activity	To engage in self-care, try to fit some of the following in your schedule
5.30		<p>Eat Healthy https://bit.ly/2DNL298</p> <p>Plenty of Sleep 7-9 hours per night Regular wake and bed times Relax for hour before bed Night mode on phone Sunlight early in the day</p> <p>Physical activity 150 mins of moderate per week as a minimum (22 mins day) – lunchtime walk outside.</p> <p>Green time Time in nature can restore attention and concentration 10-15 minute walk at lunchtime</p> <p>Social Book time with other students/ friends to informally discuss placements</p> <p>Mindfulness meditation Find 10 minutes to do a mindfulness exercise (www.smilingmind.com.au)</p> <p>Journalling Time to reflect on the day, what you learned and what you'd like to ask your supervisor tomorrow</p>
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