How to prepare yourself mentally for work placements (V2)

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.

I try to base all my recommendations in some kind of evidence. It might be research studies that have shown that the technique/tool works, or it might be advice from health and mental health professionals who work with students every day. Occasionally, it might be lessons that I’ve learned in my own life (not the best evidence, but still maybe useful at times).

Over the next few pages, you will find a collection of strategies you can use to prepare yourself mentally for your work placement.

Many of these strategies apply more broadly to living a healthy and happy life.

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 you can do to enhance your performance at your studies, your work and in other areas of your life. 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. In most cases you will need to do some additional reading or research to understand the strategy better. I’ve tried to provide relevant links to content where appropriate. Building up your mental fitness is similar to building physical fitness. It requires training, dedication and investment of effort.

The rewards in this case are not just a strong body, but a strong mind, capable of tackling the challenges of modern life; information overload, extreme busyness, competing demands, competitive and challenging work environments, and dealing with people.

If this kind of stuff interests you, you can read more on my Student Health and Wellbeing Blog - www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth - where I write about how to build 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
Tweet me - @Dr_Furber
Skype me – search ‘eMental Health Project Officer Gareth’

Otherwise, lets get started.......
What do you mean by “preparing yourself mentally”

If you were an 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.
- During the competition, you would continue to do these things, so you were operating at your best.

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

Why would I want to prepare myself mentally?

Work placements can be challenging. 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 extra stamina 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

Work placements are also 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.

At the risk of sounding like an old man, ‘life is full of these kinds of events’ – challenging but potentially rewarding. Being at your optimal mental fitness will mean being able to take full advantage of the opportunities presented to you, whilst also dealing effectively with the stress that can come with such life changes.

Ok fine then, so how do I do it?

By consciously investing time and energy into one or more strategies that have been shown to improve psychological and mental health.

My job is to tell you which strategies I think are the ones that are most likely to have positive benefits.
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.

In the context of your work placement:

Try some of the ‘Greater Good In Action’ strategies in the lead-up to, and during your placement. Most do not require a lot of time, so could be completed in the morning or the evening.

Although most students describe placements as a very busy time, try to keep at least 1 fun/enjoyable activity in your schedule each week during placement. It might be a social event, or going to the movies, sports training or attending a club/society meeting. Whatever you find enjoyable, try to keep it as part of your schedule.
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 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)

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) and I can give you some assistance.

In the context of your work placement:

If you have a diagnosed mental health condition, ensure that you are getting appropriate treatment leading up to and during your work placement. This will help buffer you against the stresses of the placement.

Online CBT programs can be reasonably time consuming, so consider experimenting with these before your placement starts, so you are familiar with how they work before the busyness of your placement takes over.
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.

In the context of your work placement:

Set aside some time each day, after placement, to reflect on your experiences and what those experiences have taught you about yourself.

What strengths or weaknesses did you identify? How could you use those strengths to make the placement better?

What weaknesses or challenges did you identify and how might you address those weaknesses?
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.

In the context of your work placement:

Try (where possible) to follow the same routine each day of the placement in terms of sleep, food, transport.

Set some goals at the beginning of the placement about what you want to achieve while you are there.

During the placement, ask yourself if the job is something you could imagine yourself doing longer-term (that is, it seems meaningful or engaging in some way).

Try to make the most of the various social interactions you will have as part of the work placement.

Don’t be afraid to have fun as part of the placement (as long as it is within the guidelines of the work setting).
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. 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.**

In the context of your work placement:

- Listen closely to your supervisor and try to accurately gauge what it is they are trying to achieve at the place you are working.
- Talk about the different ways that you can help them achieve their goals.
- Talk about what you hope to get out of the placement. This will help your supervisor understand your personal and professional goals.
- Spend time finding out about the different people that work at the placement. This helps you understand the workplace, but also helps them feel noticed and appreciated.
- Ensure you schedule some time to keep in contact with your friends, fellow students and family during the placement, so you have a space to talk about what you are learning during the placement.
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.

  - 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/](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](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.

**In the context of your work placement:**

*Try to develop and follow a consistent schedule/routine during your work placement. Regular sleep times, scheduled exercise, planned meals. Minimise use of drug and alcohol so that there are no deleterious effects during work placement.*

*A regular routine is linked to better health choices, but also better ability to focus and concentrate during the placement. Establishing and following a routine during your work placement is a simple way to encourage both healthy behaviour, but also minimise the stress of the novel work experience.*
Strategy 7 – Develop the skills for professional success

Many of the same techniques that you can learn to be a better student will help you be a better 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/fixed-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

In the context of your work placement:

Your work placement will include multiple opportunities for learning.

Try where possible to link what you are learning on placement, with what you have learned during your course. For example, “what I saw on placement today was a good example of ……..”. The more effort you make to link together the things you are learning, the better you will remember those things in the long term.

Within limits, ask questions during your placement to help you learn more. It demonstrates interest, plus also helps you learn more.

Spend time with fellow students talking about what you’ve learned on placement. Describing it to others is a good test of whether you’ve understood the concept yourself.
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.

In the context of your work placement:

You might not have much control over your environment during your work placement. However, as best you can see if you can modify the above elements to make it more workable for you. Focus on making it tidy, organised and a little bit personalised.

Also take regular short breaks during the day to get some fresh air, and if possible some exposure to nature. Combine some time in nature with a short lunchtime walk for a midday rejuvenation.
Some miscellaneous recommendations specific to work placements

Ok, so the principles described above are robust principles applicable across many areas and stages of life.

However, you need to also be mindful of what you are going to do ensure the work placements themselves go alright.

When it comes to making placements go well, it is more common sense than science.

Here are 7 things to focus on before, during and immediately after your work placements.

1. Brush up on work etiquette (be on time, dress well, be polite, listen, communicate clearly). It’s amazing how good an impression you can make simply by being on time, dressing neatly, and being respectful.

2. Observe and mimic the work culture where appropriate. Every workplace has its own culture and patterns and rituals. Where possible (and appropriate), adopt and embrace these.

3. Organise ahead of time, catch-up sessions with other students to collectively share your work placement experiences and help each other problem solve difficult situations.

4. Set aside personal reflection time, either on a daily or weekly basis, to reflect on questions about your placement. You might just do this in your head, or write down the answers for future reference.
   - a. What have you learned?
   - b. What have you found difficult?/What have you found easy?
   - c. What topic areas do you need to study further?
   - d. How have you found the experience of the job?

5. Focus and minimise. During the period of the work placement, try to make it, as much as possible, your main focus and priority. Don’t pack too many other extra-curricular activities during the same period of time. Minimising distractions will help you focus on making full use of the placement.

6. Look after yourself. It is amazing what focusing on getting good sleep, eating well and staying physically active will do for your ability to get through the work placement in good health. Resist if possible the use of alcohol to ‘unwind’ at the end of the day.

7. Talk to the course coordinator if any problems arise on placement. The sooner you highlight them, the easier it is (typically) to address them.
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? 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**

**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