

Student Health in a Time of Covid !

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I purchased a crystal ball recently on Amazon! (who knew!). It makes a pretty decoration in my office and is easily decontaminated with a Covid19-busting surface spray and alcohol wipe. The problem is that it does not seem to work! This is unfortunate because I have frequently been asked to predict the future and more so in these uncertain times. The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic is a new phenomenon in our lives which is new to everyone and has created so much uncertainty. We would all like to have someone advise us on how it is going to affect us; how long it is going to last and to get clear guidance on what we should do about it. So, some of this we can do, based on what we know about infectious diseases; what has happened in previous epidemics and pandemics, and what we have learnt since the start of this pandemic. However, there is a lot we still have to learn and many questions that remain unanswered ~ indeed if someone gives definitive predictions on what will come to pass I would suggest you treat these predictions with a degree caution as I doubt if their crystal ball works any better than mine!

I write this blog by way of advice for students at University during a time of Covid-19. It is my hope that it helps students to weigh up their experiences at this time and use this understanding to set the best course possible during this academic year. It constitutes my personal opinions, but these are based on my experiences as a GP looking after a university population, as well as my knowledge on mental health and physical health care for a student population. I will talk briefly about the issue of prevention and treatment of covid-19 but I want to focus on holistic health during this "new normal". In other words, what I feel you need to consider to remain well, in the broadest sense, and achieve your goals during your time at university. Unfortunately, we must face the fact that your student experience during this academic year will be different to that which, as a student, you would have experienced last year or in previous years. This will mean differences in the academic and social life you will experience. This will also be new territory for the academic and support staff at the university which may mean that things are not as clear cut as you would like because, in a sense, everyone is learning and shaping things as they go along! Of course, a lot of discussion and planning has happened since April/May in anticipation of the new academic term starting in the autumn but the plans are not tried and tested until the term begins and will need to adapt going forwards depending on how effective they are proving to be. These plans may also be significantly affected, if not changed completely, if there are further surges of the Covid19 infection! Inevitably all this will be a source of anxiety and it is probably little consolation to you to know that you share this anxiety with everyone on campus from lecturer to support staff; from university house-keeping to university doctor! Therefore, let me get down to some thoughts and advice because the better informed and prepared you are the better able you will be able to cope with your anxieties.

Covid19 Infection – Prevention and Treatment

Firstly, there is good news to report here:

- Young adults are much less likely to be seriously ill or die from complications of the virus. To date across the UK, 0.01% of deaths were people under 15, 1% were aged 15-44 and about 75% were over 75. Half of all the people with confirmed coronavirus who were admitted to critical care units in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were 60 and over (at 15 May 2020), and half were younger (according to a research charity) ~ but the majority were over 50 and fewer than 10% were younger than 40.
- Younger adults who became seriously ill tended to have a serious underlying health condition.
- For those who get the “milder disease” it tends to resolve quickly and requires only bedrest, Paracetamol, and a period of self-isolation.
- Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of infection in the UK (252 cases per 100k population compared with UK average of 445 per 100k as of 31 May 2020).
- From start of June (until today 31 July) the daily number of tests that have been positive for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland has been 1% or less. Steps are in place including contact tracing and a tracing app to monitor the situation to try to prevent or at least ameliorate any further wave of Covid-19.
- Northern Ireland is the least populated country in the UK and the population density is half that of the rest of the UK.

There is plenty of useful information online dealing with the prevention and treatment of Covid-19 so I will not elaborate further here other than to recommend you to the University website which will give details of information customised to the University, as well as that of the Public Health Agency [PHA] website (<https://www.publichealth.hcsni.net/covid-19-coronavirus-19-information-public>) for up to date advice. Suffice to say that the three main measures that will remain in force for the foreseeable future will be Social Distancing, enhanced hygiene, and face coverings, all in line with the up to date PHA guidelines. The University will provide supportive self-isolation measures if this is needed and, of course, medical advice and treatment can be accessed through the National Health Service via being registered with a GP.

Student Life in the “New Normal” and how to stay well.

Therefore, as life as a student will be different this year, what do you need to consider in order to make the most of your student experience in the new normal? Obviously, your goal in coming to University at this time is to get a good qualification and, likely as not, you have concerns about how this may be affected by the pandemic. (You are possibly more worried about this than you are about actually catching Covid-19!). I know the University is determined to make the learning experience as good as possible (and quite possibly, maybe bits of this experience will be better than the previous formats!) But you want and expect more out of going to university than simply getting the grades and you probably have other concerns of the implications of coronavirus on your student experience. This is only natural and is being felt by all your peers both at your chosen university and for students more generally. University life is often a great opportunity to try new hobbies and sports (or simply carry on those sports you already participate in), as well as the opportunity to meet new people from many and varied backgrounds and cultures, as well as developing new interests. Whilst things will inevitably be different this year it is still important that you get as much as you can out of the student experience. Think what your goals will be for this year and not just from an academic perspective (although that too is important!) Not everything you would wish to achieve

may be possible during the pandemic, but it helps to make plans and to be able to adapt those plans in light of current and developing circumstances.

Remote Study (Academic Achievement)

Inevitably much more of the teaching will be done remotely. This will mean you working more from home, whether that be in student accommodation, private rented accommodation or back in your family home. Many people in “white-collar” jobs are already working remotely (including university staff) and it is not without its difficulties! Hopefully, any IT issues can be fairly easily sorted but the whole ethos of working or studying from home needs consideration. Work-life balance is important, and you should set clear demarcations between work [study] and life [beyond study]! It is important to set a routine ~ so the first thing to do is to get dressed as if you were going out to university and do not be tempted to spend the day in your pyjamas! Have set timetabling for you studies during which time you avoid distractions including phone calls, texting and social media! If you find you can only concentrate for 30 or 40 minutes then take appropriate comfort breaks but be careful that the breaks do not become stretched (which is very likely if you use these breaks to read social media messages or play games on your computer or phone!). It is a good idea to create a workspace for you study with all you need at hand to study in order to keep focused. You also need to consider whether studying in a living room or kitchen in shared accommodation, including your own family home, will work, as you are likely to have many more distractions! (Personally, I always avoided studying in my bedroom which meant using the library when I lived in halls of residence or private flats. This also allowed a clear demarcation between studying and not studying!) Do take regular breaks including adequate meal breaks and when you reach the end of your allocated study time stop; switch off and pursue some extracurricular activities be that contacting friends (old and new), playing music, going to the gym or whatever! Do not sit in a trance when you should be working nor be a slave to the PC when you should be enjoying downtime! (There is much to consider about how best to approach the actual process of online video learning which I imagine will be covered by your teachers. You do need to get into the right frame of mind ~ it can be all too easy to be distracted! The process of concentrating on virtual teaching is also surprisingly tiring!) Try to avoid constant snacking while you study and watch your caffeine quota (and obviously no smoking!). Ensuring a good sleep pattern is also particularly important. Try and establish a good night-time routine with a usual bedtime and switch off your PC/Laptop and close your books a good hour at least before going to bed. Make sure your electronic gizmos do not ping or flash during you allocated sleep period and resist switching back on after you have retired for the night.

Remote working can be quite isolating! For some workers it has resulted in perhaps days when they have not had any actual human contact. On the other hand, if you are at home with family, perhaps with younger siblings you may not get the peace you need to study! All these challenges need dealt with. Additionally, we often learn from our physical interactions with others so consider taking advantage of any chance to do group study. There will be some opportunities for face-to-face learning but do not hesitate to ask questions when you need to rather than leaving unanswered questions to fester! (I’m sure this will all be covered in much more detail by the University and will evolve further as it becomes a much more routine process in teaching!)

Physical Fitness

Physical fitness is always an important element of student life. Within this heading I would include good diet and a healthy respect for your body, as well as, your actual fitness. Additionally, if you do have a condition like asthma or diabetes then optimising control of these conditions is also vitally

important. These messages apply in normal times, but their importance is amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic!

Eating healthily means eating a good balance of foods with a good daily quota of fresh fruit and vegetables (at least 5 portions per day) best spread over three mealtimes. It also means watching your intake of convenience foods and high-sugar containing foods. It is well recognised that many students put on several kilogrammes of weight in their first year at university (which is often supplemented in subsequent years). Furthermore, alcohol is also high in calories, so another reason to limit its intake! (More about alcohol in the next section!). The management of weight and body mass index is also relevant to covid-19 (The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control says 73% of critically ill patients with Covid-19 in Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands are obese. Britain long described as “the fat man of Europe” also has the highest number of Covid-19 deaths in Europe!)

Physical fitness includes aerobic fitness (cardiovascular activities such as running, swimming, cycling); anaerobic fitness (lifting free weights, weights machines and elements of circuit training such as squats and lunges); flexibility training (for example stretches, Yoga and Pilates) and Balance & Control (which might include elements of gymnastics, archery, fencing and Tai Chi). All these aspects of your fitness should be considered as all have their merits in enhancing your well-being (although I am not expecting you to join up for classes in every sporting category!) It is undoubtedly the case that being physically fit gives greater energy levels, boosts your immune system, controls your blood sugar levels and improves your sleep patterns. It has also been proven to help prevent and even effectively treat milder episodes of depression and helps in the control of anxiety. Being physically fit is also associated with better control of asthma and diabetes and also reduces the risk of musculoskeletal problems such as backache. One of your goals this year should be to get that bit fitter, or stronger, or more flexible or hone your balance and precision.

Given that you will be spending more of your time with remote learning it would be worth considering work-out routines for home, as well as joining fitness classes or a sporting pursuit both for fitness and social interaction.

Psychological Well-being

All the five elements are important but perhaps, at this time of turmoil because of Covid-19, some emphasis needs to be put on psychological well-being. The first and most important thing to say is that it is okay to be anxious. Many freshers will secretly admit to anxiety any new academic year and this is likely to reach another level this year because of the unprecedented circumstances. Many returning student will also be feeling more anxious than they may otherwise have been. There may be many facets to this anxiety. There may be the anxiety of catching Covid-19; of the effects of the pandemic on your studies or grades; financial concerns particularly if you rely on a part-time job to help fund your time at university; concerns for family back home in relation to Covid-19 and its aftermath. Possibly any or all of these will be set on top of general anxiety or a history of depression.

It is important to accept that you will be anxious for the time-being, at least until there is more certainty about how things are shaping up. (I do not say “until Covid-19 is gone” because we may have to learn to live with Covid-19 for quite some time before we get the better of it!). Anxiety could be compared to fire ~ a small controlled fire is good; it keeps you warm; provides you with light at night and it helps fend off wild animals. A big fire that is out of your control is potentially harmful and can burn you and destroy the things around you. In the same way a little controlled anxiety is beneficial ~ it keeps you aware and safe from infections and other dangers; it sharpens your

alertness for presentations and examinations, and it helps with important negotiations and securing important relationships. However, too much anxiety, out of your control can consume you and wreck your aspirations and plans. The secret is to acknowledge some anxiety as a baseline and gain control of it so that it does less damage. But not unlike a bush fire it needs constant attention and dampening down! Ways to help controlling you anxiety include adopting structured work schedules with regular breaks and the right balance between study and downtime; making sure you have a good bedtime routine and getting adequate sleep; planned physical activity whether that be in a gym, sporting activities with others or simply brisk walks and perhaps developing techniques such as deep breathing exercises and mindful meditation (and, if you are thinking of this, you need to practice these techniques and do them regularly for them to be effective). Find something you can devote attention to that you find enjoyable, even engrossing, that can act as a distraction which might include a hobby, playing a musical instrument or even volunteering! (It also helps if you find your studies engrossing but that is not always going to be the case!) Of course, the other important measure in controlling your anxiety is talking about it! It helps to confide with trusted family or friends but also speaking to the academic staff can be extremely helpful. Furthermore, the University has a comprehensive student support network that is there to help. And, of course, if necessary, there is your GP as well as the services he or she can access through the National Health Service and support groups. Very occasionally medication may be indicated but for most cases of anxiety the non-pharmacological management regimes are usually more appropriate.

As stated, arranging downtime, and meeting up with friends (including newly acquired friends at uni.) is very therapeutic. Hopefully, as we are moving further out of lockdown, this will involve being able to enjoy more of the social outlets we are used to. Certainly, for some that will include partaking in some alcohol. Whilst alcohol can be a common part of our social culture and is enjoyable to many, it can also become a source of problems is not handled with care. It can lead to physical injuries if taken to excess and can have a depressive effect on mood. Prolonged excessive drinking will also have health implications as well as threatening academic achievements and friendships. The message is – if you choose to drink alcohol, drink sensibly and never as a means to “cure” anxiety or low mood!

A lot of what applies to anxiety also applies to depression and, sometimes, it can be hard to differentiate between the two. Thankfully, a lot of the advice for anxiety also applies to depression and will help deal with the milder end of depression. If you feel things are worse than that, then that is the time to discuss the issues with student support services and/or your GP.

Social Engagement

Social engagement is a major component of the student experience and achieving good social engagement is a key factor in student health and well-being. Human beings are social animals, but we are also individual in our behaviours so the right amount of social engagement for one student will not necessarily be the same for the next. There is no ideal template! But social isolation will have an adverse effect on psychological well-being and may also impact on academic achievement. In normal times many new students find they have an abundance of social engagement (often too much in the early days of university). But others can find it hard to adapt and assimilate into campus life. Getting the social engagement balance right for yourself, ideally as soon as possible into your university life, can significantly enhance the student experience and make your time at university as successful as possible.

This year, with social distancing and remote learning there are added challenges to social engagement. Furthermore, social engagement is obviously a group thing so the effectiveness of the

student group engagement effects the very campus environment. However, there may also be different opportunities in the new regime to explore and certainly we are all getting better at “virtual” social engagement! I believe the very soul of the university will depend on how well we do social engagement in the new normal!

Meaningfulness

I do not intend to delve too deeply into philosophy, but I will venture that a happy life is a meaningful life! Even in the worst of times if you feel your life has meaning then you can better bear the discomforts that you have to endure. If life is a meaningless drudgery, then it is easy to see how you would become lethargic and depressed. The good news is that by coming to university your life is full of meaning. You are pursuing a chosen career plan, you are broadening your horizons, you are learning new skills and you are meeting new and diverse acquaintances. It is generally a positive experience. Of course, it is not without its difficulties and uncertainties and for some other life experiences will also impinge on their experiences as a student. The anxieties associated with Covid-19 and its aftermath will shape all our lives but should not be allowed to make your student experience less meaningful. When embarking on your university life take time to live life meaningfully! Be aware of the opportunities offered and make the most of the meaningful moments and relationships. The pursuit of happiness is a reasonable goal but aim also for a sense of purpose and achievement. A life with any pleasure would be miserable but pleasure without purpose will inevitably be short-lived and possibly replaced by the sense of loss, lethargy, or disgruntlement. Furthermore, fostering a sense of gratitude can be greatly beneficial and even the act of volunteering to help others can significantly enhance your own personal sense of well-being. It is also undoubtedly the case that if you find your studies interesting and meaningful with an obvious sense of purpose you are much more likely to achieve higher accolades in your studies and your career, as well as truly enjoying the student experience!

Going to university is a fundamentally important life choice. It will be life-enhancing and fortify you for life beyond, regardless of your ultimate career choice. To make the most of the experience I would maintain you should make plans and set goals and think beyond just goals relating to your chosen field of study. Covid-19 will, without a doubt, colour your experience in the year ahead, and, if we are being honest, is something we would all rather have avoided, and feel is detrimental to the student experience. However, this too will pass. The aim now is to be a successful student in the fullest sense and make even more of the student experience.

(And I think I'll put the crystal ball on Ebay!)

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