Academic Stress

Introduction to Content Creators

Hi everyone, my name is Gabriella. and I am currently pursuing my Masters in Applied Psychology at Middlesex University, London. I joined StepUp not too long after starting university and it's been a place where I've met such compassionate and empathetic people and was also able to give back to the community.

In India, where I come from, mental wellbeing is a very rare topic of discussion, if at all. I believe that the root of many of the bigger problems faced lies in mental health. There is a gradual shift in mindsets now that the voices of young adults have begun speaking up for mental health. I, myself, have had to relearn a lot of things that were imbibed in my culture and understand that it is okay to not be okay.

Having the opportunity to connect with so many others who may have faced similar challenges and to be able to help them out in my own way is exciting and also reassuring.

Hi all, I am Hamna. I am currently doing my Masters in Gender studies at SOAS university of London. I did my BA in Applied Social Sciences, Community Development and Youth Work from Goldsmiths University of London. My life's motto is to make this world a better, peaceful and a happier place to live in.

I pursued both my degrees as I am very passionate about working in the community, with grassroots organisations that work with marginalised groups of the society especially young people and women. I strongly believe that all of us need help at some point in our lives, and it is okay. Mental health is something that very often gets ignored and is taken lightly especially in a country like Pakistan where I come from, but it is about time that we normalise talking about it. The first step is to practice active listening and being empathetic.

I got super excited when I saw the project step up and joined it ASAP as my personal mental health was also taking a toll on me. Being a part of Step Up with Rethink Mental Illness really helped me understand my own mental health and most importantly be there for others who need help. I have loved every bit of it.

Hiya, I'm Wendy from University College London, currently a Master's student in TESOL. Although I didn't have any previous experience in psychology and understanding mental health, I'm quite intrigued by the idea of helping people live a better life which they should be having without all the anxiety, dreadful thoughts and low mood.

Mental health was not a topic which everyone paid adequate attention to in our educational system. I had very little idea of mental health issues during my studies in China as I was not educated enough of the topic. Having witnessed the puzzles and the stigmatization regarding mental illness, I gradually become aware that there should be some people who stand out and help people around understand that mental illness is just like a physical ailment. There's nothing wrong with having some mental health issues. But it might be dangerous trying to avoid the confrontation with the fear of judgement from others (which is obviously wrong but might be prevalent if no one points it out).

I have been a Step-up Champion for nearly half a year, and most of our time was spent on trainings which were really helpful. It was these workshops that made me realize, that I'm not alone in having some negative thoughts and feeling insecure sometimes. The most intriguing thing to me is the fact that everyone came from different parts in the world, but all share a similar mindset, and the willingness to help. And I genuinely hope that we can become the support of each other.

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Introduction

Today's world, as we know it, has become highly competitive, which in turn, has meant that students are now facing a wealth of academic-related stress, which is stopping them from reaching their academic potential, enjoying their university life and most importantly, being able to manage their mental wellbeing. This is something that will affect the majority of students at one point or another throughout their degree and is particularly heightened during intense periods of the year. In this zine, we will explore why we get stressed and how academic stress differs to normal stress. We will look into the root causes of academic stress and ways in which we can combat it, as well as exploring the BAME student perspective and academic stress in a Covid-19 world. We hope that this zine is of use to you and that you can find ways to balance your academic stress better.

What is Acedemic Stress?

Stress is something that we are all familiar with, in one way or another. It can be defined as being the body's non-specific response to perceived environmental threats and challenges. In university, a large number of students will experience academic-related stress, which means that their body's start to respond specifically to academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive capabilities of the student (Alsulami et al, 2018). It is usually associated with the frustration and fear of the possibility or perception of failure.

Academic stress can affect students both physically and mentally/emotionally and perhaps in ways that you may have never considered before. The physical response that our body goes through when we are stressed is called the 'Fight or Flight' response. It is an evolutionary process that protected our ancestors from danger back when we were hunter-gatherers. Our brains would perceive a threat e.g. a wild bear, and then our bodies would kick start into survival mode by releasing hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, that make us feel more alert and stronger, enabling us to either run away from the threat or fight it. In today's world, we don't have those same threats of being eaten alive by a bear, but we still have the same biological responses. However, nowadays, the threats we perceive in our daily lives are things like sitting an exam.

Fight or Flight Response

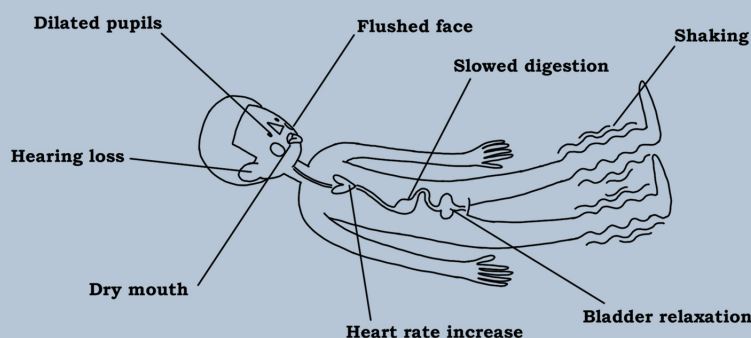**1. Perceived Threat**

Wild animal attack or exam pressure.

2. Brain Processes

Amygdala (emotions and fear) and hypothalamus (nervous system).
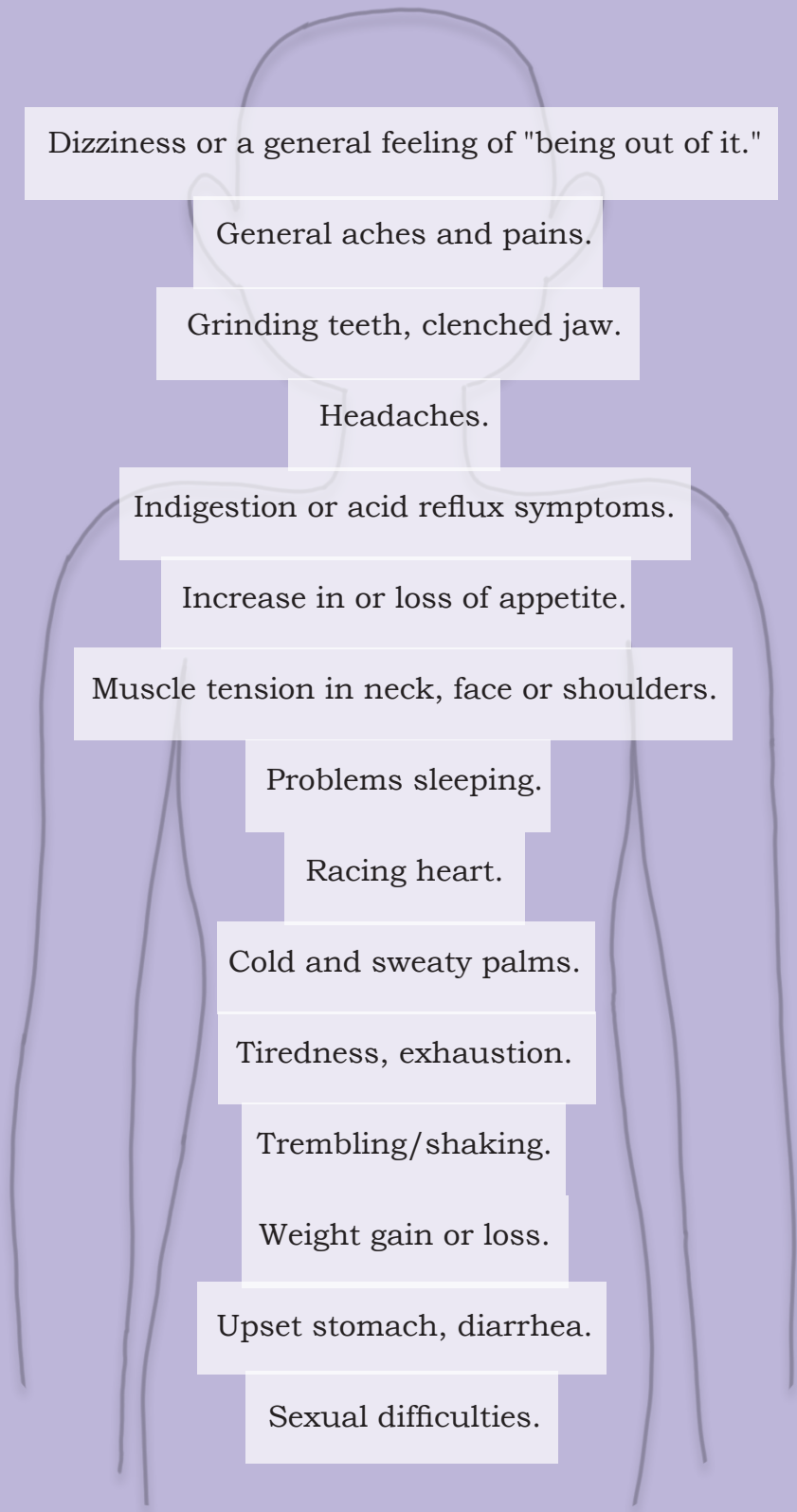
3. Pituitary Gland

Releases cortisol and adrenaline hormones.

Physical Reactions

Dilated pupils

Flushed face

Slowed digestion

Shaking

Hearing loss

Dry mouth

Heart rate increase

Bladder relaxation

Whilst stress is a normal thing to experience and can actually help your productivity in small amounts, experiencing high levels of stress over a long period of time can have an impact on you both mentally and physically. It can wear down your body's natural defences, leading to a variety of physical symptoms, including the following:

Dizziness or a general feeling of "being out of it."

General aches and pains.

Grinding teeth, clenched jaw.

Headaches.

Indigestion or acid reflux symptoms.

Increase in or loss of appetite.

Muscle tension in neck, face or shoulders.

Problems sleeping.

Racing heart.

Cold and sweaty palms.

Tiredness, exhaustion.

Trembling/shaking.

Weight gain or loss.

Upset stomach, diarrhea.

Sexual difficulties.

Why Do We Feel Academic Stress?

## Origins and root causes

Stress is a natural feeling to help you confront challenging situations. In small amounts it can be good. The right amount of stress will push us to work hard and do our best, such as during exams. Sometimes we may feel more efficient writing our assignment a week before its submission as the due date serves as the stir to push us to perform better. However, when the amounts get too much which go beyond the level we could undertake, the stress will make us suffer and cause a lot of problems. It can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, which can also in return affect our academic performance.

Many factors can result in excessive academic stress:

● A lack of organisation and time-management can result in the chaos in prioritizing the tasks to do, leaving too many things unfinished

● Too little 'downtime' can also affect our ability to work effectively.

● Being pushed to study without any time for entertainment leaves us overwhelmed and experience even more stress.

● Transitioning into a totally new environment (especially for international students)

● A lack of support and motivation

● Poor sleep schedule

● Extensive course loads

● Dealing with long examination periods

● Lack of physical exercise
(which gets worse during exam period)
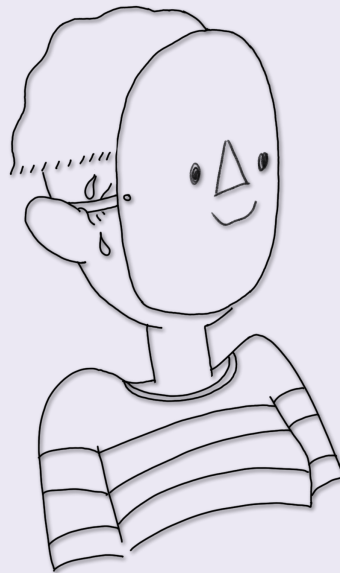
Imposter syndrome

One factor that I'd like to introduce separately is the imposter syndrome which most students might encounter during their academic journey. Frequently happening to students in renowned institutes, imposter syndrome indicates a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. Those 'Imposters' suffer from chronic self-doubt that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence. This generates thoughts which make you feel like a fraud. You don't feel like you know what you're doing or that you're adequate for the tasks you will be given. As a result, you feel like you're wearing a mask and wonder when people will figure out you aren't good enough for where you have been. These thoughts can destroy our confidence and drain ourselves out when we shouldn't have to.

Dealing With Academic Stress in Different Ways

Telling myself it will be okay

I attribute a lot of the stress I feel to academics. I've been a student almost all my life and performing well academically has always been a priority to me. Usually, I use the stress that I feel to propel myself toward achieving my goals which could be to submit well-researched assignments on time or study harder for a particularly tough exam. Yet, there are often moments when this does not suffice. I often compare myself to my classmates or peers and feel anxious if I'm not on the same page as them. While I am aware that this is not constructive and everybody moves at their own pace, it concerns me when I feel like I'm lagging behind on something.

Recently, I was stressed because my dissertation process was delayed because of the pandemic. I was aware that this delay was not my fault as COVID-19 spares no one's deadlines and I was dependent on feedback from my supervisor who was swamped with their own work. Still, I could not fall asleep on some days, worrying about this. Finally, I tried to think positive thoughts to calm myself down and more often than not, this helped me. Sometimes I even spoke out loud and told myself that it would be okay because it was a difficult situation for everyone and I had access to any help I needed be it from lecturers, the university as a whole, and even from friends and family.

Being organised can go a long way

I have never been an outstanding student, or a high achiever in academia my whole life. It was actually a surprise for me that I got offers from university. But when it comes to dealing with academic stress, I have to be proactive. I will however admit that I do not finish my work a few days in advance, but I am sure to start it at least 3/4 weeks before my work is due. Firstly, because I am a slow reader. Secondly, when I do read, I have to read a text a number of times to make sense of it. Hence, starting work on time is really helpful for me, and most importantly knowing my deadlines, readings, and course structures from the very beginning and giving myself additional deadlines has always had better results.

If I fail to do it on time, my instincts start telling me I can't do it anymore, then there is no going back as I start to panic. I usually try to give myself enough time to send my work to a friend to proofread and get feedback when I am having second thoughts. It has been a learning process, but I've finally realized that my grades and those of my counterparts do not define me or my abilities or capabilities. Moreover, 'SUPPORT' i.e. seeking out help from lecturers, my peers by admitting that I am struggling, and working alongside my peers in the libraries, having actual breakdowns, breaking down readings and essay questions has helped me the most in my academic journey. However, last but not least, what has always helped me the most is BELIEVING IN MYSELF and telling myself repeatedly that I CAN DO IT, that too by pulling off all-nighters in my room in peace and quiet.

Just Do It

 As for me, academic stress is something which has always haunted me ever since I started my school. As a person who procrastinates a lot, especially with schoolwork, I've been suffering with a lot of stress and anxiety (as well as lack of sleep) from coursework. Leaving the most difficult task until the last minute will always take a mental and physical toll on our health. The sudden irritability and a tendency to be snappy with others, as well as the pimples and shadows around the eyes can always be good indicators for me. This stress and anxiety becomes an issue when you realise that it has impacted your studies and mental state but you are finding it really hard to get rid of. And then, you may start the vicious circle of procrastinating and regretting (just as I do). It's like a wild beast which always creeps in the shadow when our tasks are still far from the due date, and without realising, we can become overwhelmed by its sudden appearance.

With a rather rich experience of academic stress, I have lessons to offer which I learnt along the way. The first one popping into my head is JUST DO IT. I always find myself rather efficient in learning when I finally push myself to concentrate on what I should do. Instead of mourning about how much I do not want to do my assignment, I would take a deep breath, get rid of all the websites and any distraction which can draw my attention away for the first hours and just try to concentrate. I know it can be hard if you are stuck at home, to force yourself to study when your body and mind simply resist it. Take a 10-minute walk around or do some stretches to relax your mind and muscles. Preparing for exams or assignments are important but keeping a balance between it and our wellbeing is also crucial. Otherwise, speak out to your friends or families. Although doing that could not help me magically finish my assignment, it releases much anxiety just through saying that tension out loud and it helps me relax myself in order to face what I should do again.

The Balancing Act

Life is a balancing act, and particularly during university there's a lot of academic-related stressors that can impact you, for instance exams, assessment periods and keeping up with lectures. Often, we feel there isn't enough time to 'balance' out these stressors with nice and positive things – especially during intense periods of the academic year – but it is so important to do so, to look after your mental wellbeing and avoid burn out.

A nice way to visualise it is like a set of scales: when something stressful happens, what do you actively do to offset that stress? Do you like to spend some time alone, recharging your batteries? Or catching up with a friend for dinner? Do you like to work out or do some yoga and meditation? You might find baking or watching Netflix relaxing after a long day. We are all unique, so what we do to offset stress will look differently for each of us – the important thing is remembering to take the time to relax and balance your stressors.

If you are struggling with academic stress, try to map out what your usual week looks like. Then think about how often you are spending time to offset your stress – where in your days can you fit in time to relax? Remember that your offset activities don't have to be time consuming, they can just look like taking the scenic route home or catching up with a friend for lunch.

- Lecture
- Exams
- Coursework
- Job

- Socialising
- Relaxation
- Exercise
- Cooking

15 Activities That Could Help Your Academic Stress
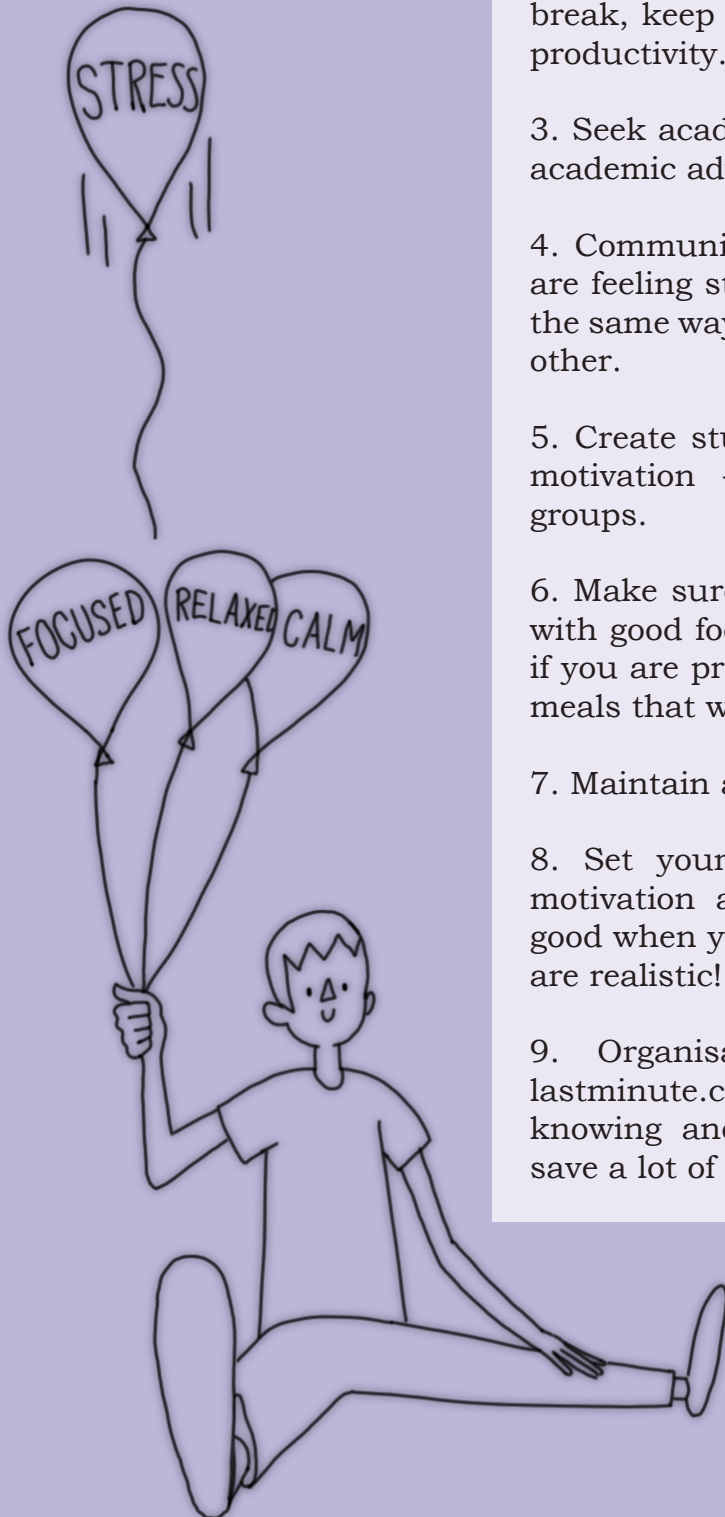
1. Make timetables – structuring your day can help your productivity.

2. Take regular breaks – give your mind a break, keep your body fuelled and improve your productivity.

3. Seek academic support if you are struggling – academic advisors, course reps, unions.

4. Communicate and reach out to others if you are feeling stressed. Your friends/peers may feel the same way and you can mutually support each other.

5. Create study groups for mutual support and motivation – Zoom, video calling, Whatsapp groups.

6. Make sure you are keeping your body fuelled with good food – cooking can be a destressor, or if you are pressed for time then try cooking bulk meals that will keep you going all week.

7. Maintain a good sleeping pattern.

8. Set yourself goals – they can boost your motivation and confidence and make you feel good when you achieve them but make sure they are realistic!

9. Organisation is underrated! Not being lastminute.com, instead being proactive and knowing and planning for your deadlines can save a lot of stress.

10. Taking days off - if you are physically and mentally tired, taking time out to recharge is key in maintaining your mental wellbeing. Even during intense periods of the year, rest is essential!

11. Gradually expose yourself to work that you are stressed about. Start with the tasks that are the easiest to complete. As your confidence increases, try a harder task.

12. Exercise is important! Even if it is just taking a walk, keeping the body moving can improve productivity and ease stress.

13. Yoga can be great for relaxing both the body and the mind.

14. Don't forget about your hobbies and what makes you feel the best – even during exam season.

15. Reward yourself! Remember that you are trying your best and you deserve a little boost every now and then.
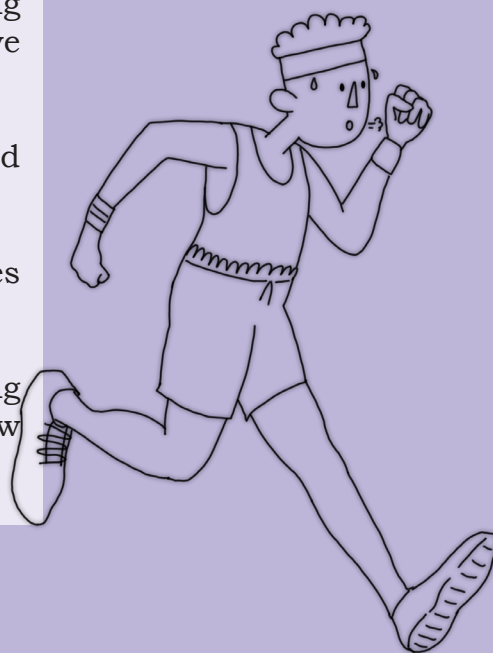
BAME Perspectives on Academic Stress

Academic Pressure from Home

Coming from India, it is very common for parents to put a lot of pressure on their children about their academics. The education system is such that it is highly competitive and there is a marked importance given to engineering and medical school. The exams for these professions involve gruelling training sessions which leaves almost no time for the student to take some time off and recuperate. This system leads to the child putting a lot of pressure on themselves and their self-esteem becomes attached to the grades they receive. This is often internalised, and individuals end up putting a lot of pressure on themselves with regard to studies even in later stages of life. It's often a struggle for me to believe that I am more than the marks I get, and it took me around three years to stop being haunted by bad grades.

The BAME Attainment Gap

Being a woman of colour and also an international Muslim student in the UK has really affected my mental health and has resulted in how I have dealt with academic stress. I have been at the receiving end of both overt and covert forms of racism, including being a victim of a hate crime and having my accent mocked. I experience microaggressions both within and outside of the classroom in my university life, both during my undergraduate and masters. I draw on these experiences to highlight how important they are and how often and easily they get brushed under the carpet, resulting in a wider BAME attainment gap. Most of the time POC (people of colour), especially international students, suffer from imposter syndrome within these spaces, while also being away from home. On top of that - even when necessary - it is hard for POC students like me to seek out help within the university space, as these spaces, too, are not well catered to BAME students. Most higher education institutions in the UK have a very high BAME attainment gap, which is a consequence of the above issues mentioned. English not being our first language, experiencing a cultural shock, most importantly not being able to get the support that you need being away from home - not having friends or family. This turns into a vicious cycle which affects your mental health, and your ability to achieve and be productive.

BAME Imposter Syndrome

As an international student coming from a country where English is not my native language, getting through my course and communicating with others in the UK seems to be even harder. Not being familiar with the criteria of a new education system, trying to fit into everyday life in a new place that is 8 hours behind my home country, and being put into a renowned university where everyone seems to be outstanding in their academic accomplishments, I always wondered, am I good enough to sit here, surrounded by those colleagues and taught by the very professionals whose name I've seen in academic books before.

Academic stress in a Covid-19 world

I was excited to move to London for my master's because apart from it being a beautiful city, I was enthused to be in an academic environment that was significantly different from the one I was used to at home. Six months in, I was finally used to the way things worked, I had moved away from home for the first time and things were moving at a comfortable pace. This is why, like so many others, when the pandemic hit the UK, I was at a loss trying to decide on the next step. Our classes had shifted online, our submissions were suddenly altered to minimise face-to-face contact, even going to university was not recommended. As country borders were closing - I decided to return home like most other international students. Packing was especially stressful because I had to make sure I had all the materials required for my assignments, my notes I took down in class, and so on.

Once I had gotten over the jetlag, I was faced with the task of completing and submitting a major chunk of my assignments; some of which I had not even begun working on. With all the recent frenzy that had just gone down - abruptly moving from one continent to the other - even thinking about assignments was tiring. Even with extensions, I found it challenging to adjust back into my schedule at home - I had gotten used to making the trudge to my university library from my room to work on my assignments. I liked the small nooks I would settle into and how I could get up and look at the books on the shelves. But of course, now, I could only access the library online and I had to work on my assignments from my bed at home.

One of the major setbacks that I faced which also was a source of stress for me is the difficulty in communicating with teachers, with the only option being through email. I had lost the option of physically meeting with them to clear out doubts. I realised that apart from academia, there were a lot of other things that added to my stress. One of my concerns was that I had expected to be in London for a year, living my dream of studying in a foreign land, learning new things, and experiencing a new culture. All of this had been cut short and now I was faced with a pile of assignments for memories.

I then slowly began to think of the things that I was grateful for. I was back with my family, safe and sound. I have the facilities by which I could concentrate and complete my assignments and furthermore, I could still avail academic support services which would help me work my best on the remaining assignments. I made it a point to check in with myself to see how I was feeling. I tried not to overwork myself if I was not in the right mental space, but I had to remind myself not to let my breaks go on forever. I also realised that the mild distraction that came from the bustle of being home with my parents and brother actually helped me concentrate a bit more when required. All in all, it helps to make time for both your studies as well as allocate separate time to rest and find a balance between the two that work for you as an individual.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR is a deep relaxation technique that can be used to combat stress and anxiety. During the process, you tense a certain muscle/muscle group for a short period of time and then release it again, feeling increased relaxation in your body. You usually work from the lower body (feet, legs, buttocks) to the upper body (ending at your face, chest and abdomen area). This is something that you can do in a quiet place, either lying down or sitting, and should take between 10-20 minutes to complete – depending on how much time you have. Imagery is said to help during the relaxation, for example, imagining that the stress is flowing out of you when you release a muscle.

Steps:

1. Inhale and contract one muscle group (for example your upper thighs) for 5 seconds to 10 seconds

2. Next, exhale and suddenly release the tension in that muscle group.

3. Give yourself 10-20 seconds to relax, and then move on to the next muscle group.

4. While releasing the tension, try to focus on the changes you feel when the muscle group is relaxed.

5. Gradually work your way up the body contracting and relaxing muscle groups.

It's Okay to Be Stressed and to Seek Out Help

It is super important to realise that it is always okay to be stressed. It is important to normalise taking days off (and by taking days off I mean, not being productive and not worrying about the work you have been worrying about and giving yourself a chance to relax properly!). Graduating is like achieving a milestone, it is not easy, and you need to understand that, so it's normal to feel overwhelmed and to seek out help.

We all do have the same number of hours each day, BUT not the same level of responsibilities which is often ignored. Some students are carers, have full-time/part-time jobs, are parents, have disabilities to manage, and are mature students. Most importantly, not every student has a laptop, WIFI, quiet spaces at home or access to libraries, that takes a toll on their mental health and their achievement. It is important to practice self-care, and to be proud of yourself for putting in the minimum or the maximum amount of time and labour. Checking in with ourselves is key. Some days, for some people, in the current world we live in, our degrees can be the last thing on our minds, and it is okay, but it is always okay to let your peers, class representatives, lecturers and the university know and to seek out help.

It is easy to feel like you are sailing alone in your boat and with everything being as uncertain as it is, it's understandable to be weighed down by everything around you. It helps to remember that while we all face our struggles, you are not alone. Everyone is sailing on their own boats in the same ocean. At the same time, your worries are valid and important. Take some time to look around and see that there is always a relatable other, a friendly face and a helping hand. All you have to do is ask and help will come. Step out and find the support when you really need it. There are actually a lot of people trying to provide care and support and they care about you more than you think they do.
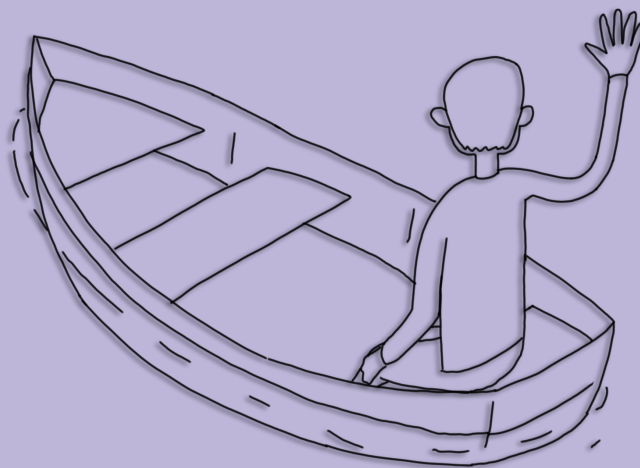
Academic Stress-related Resource Page
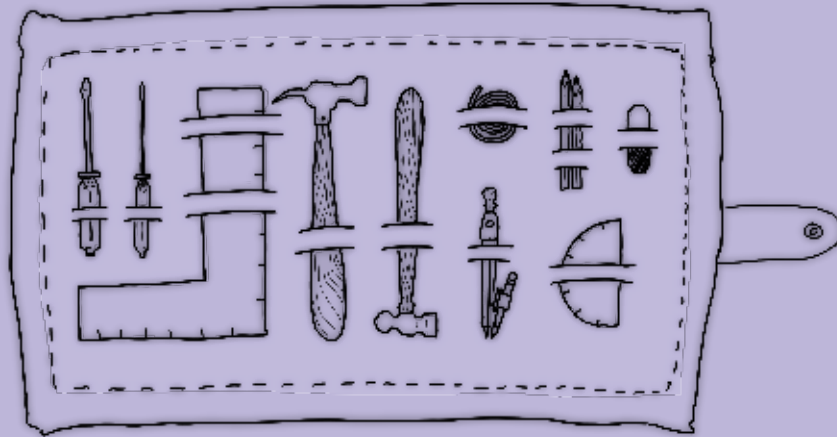
Check out these instagram pages for some extra support on self care, mindfulness and academic stress:

● @selfcareisforeveryone

● @selfcareisapriority

● @positivelypresent

● @thegoodquote

● @thedissertationcoach

● @6amsuccess

● @mindsetofgreatness

If you are more of a podcast person, then try out one of these stress busters:

● Headspace – showing you how to unwind during stressful periods and check in with yourself (they have an app too!)

● The Digital Mindfulness – in today's digital world, they will teach you how to manage all things relating to life online, including how to better organise and divide your work.

Getting Help

In the first instance, we would recommend seeking help through your university's welfare services, as often this is the quickest way to receive psychological help and advice as a student.

Crisis Care

If you or someone you know is experiencing a wellbeing crisis and/or wants to end their life, please contact emergency services (999) or your GP as soon as possible. If you or the person feels they cannot keep themselves safe, stay with someone until help arrives. Please know that there is no right or wrong way to talk about suicidal feelings. The most important thing is to seek support so that you or the person you are concerned about do not have to struggle with those feelings alone. If suicidal feelings become intense or develop into urges and/or plans please seek emergency support as soon as possible.

Talking Therapies

Therapy for common disorders such as depression and anxiety are now widely available across England thanks to the Improving Access to Therapies (IAPT) services. Each borough or locality has its own therapy service which can vary in size, waiting times, and therapeutic options available. The most commonly available therapy is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Most services have a local website where you can look up how to get access to their service. Some require referrals via a GP, whilst others accept self-referrals. *

Mental Health Referrals

Adults aged 18 and over need to access Adult Mental Health Services. Both Adults and CAMHS services provide support for depression, problems with food, self-harm, abuse, violence or anger, bipolar, schizophrenia and anxiety, and more. There are local NHS services around the UK, with teams made up of nurses, therapists, psychologists, support workers and social workers, as well as other professionals. You can refer yourself for an assessment with either service to see what help you could get. We would suggest initially visiting your local GP to see what help can be offered to you there. To find therapies in your local area, please go to http://bit.do/findtherapynhs *

*due to the ongoing situation with Covid-19 referrals may be slower than usual.

There is also a lot of help and support that you can get online:

www.rethink.org
Rethink Mental Illness helps millions of people affected by mental illness by challenging attitudes, changing lives. Website contains A-Z factsheets on conditions, treatments, living with mental illness also information for carers.
Advice line 0300 5000 927 Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4pm

www.thecalmzone.net
CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) is a health promotion charity with the aim of reducing male suicide in the UK. Website contains helpful information and ways to get involved.Helpline 0800 58 58 585pm to midnight, 7 days

www.papyrus-uk.org
Site focused on preventing young suicide with dedicated sections on resources for young people and their friends.
Hopeline UK 0800 0684141 Monday to Friday, 10am to 10pm

www.talktofrank.com
Web-based information as well as an email service and helpline. Website contains A-Z of drugs and advice on what to do if you are worried about a friend.
Helpline 0300 123 6600, 2pm to 6pm

www.lifesigns.org.uk
Site that gives guidance and support around self- harming.

www.nightline.ac.uk/want-to-talk
A confidential listening, support and practical information service for University students You can talk to them about anything – big or small – in complete confidence without judgement.
Call (+44)207 631 01016pm to 8am BST every night of term

www.nopanic.org.uk
No Panic helps people who experience Panic Attacks, Phobias, Obsessive Compulsive Disorders and other related anxiety disorders including those people who are trying to give up Tranquillizers.
Helpline 0844 967 4848, 7 days 10am to 10pm

www.mind.org.uk
Mind is a mental health charity offering both frontline services and online information. A-Z information about mental health and information and support can be found on their website.
Info line 0300 123 3393
Legal Advice line 0300 466 6463

www.samaritans.org
Samaritans provide a helpline for people wanting assistance to talk about issues related to their wellbeing or any other problem troubling them.
Helpline 08457 909090, 24hrs, 7 days a week

https://www.studentminds.org.uk/
The student minds website has a wealth of information and resources about being a student and managing your mental health as well as information if you are concerned about a friend.