



Workshop 5: Academic Pressure



U OK? is a series of workshops, co-produced with students. They aim to support student mental health through the transition out of further education, into higher education, the world of work and training.

Each workshop is led by two student facilitators, Mental Health Ambassadors.



ACADEMIC PRESSURE WORKSHOP

The purpose of this workshop is to explore how academic pressure can impact mental health, to discuss healthy study habits and learn from each other.

You're not expected to have all the answers, but to help start the conversation that will get them thinking about how to manage their mental health, and to signpost to where they can go for support should they need it.

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Timings

We give you an indicative timing for each activity. You might find this needs adjusting slightly as you prepare. We suggest an optional task that you can run if you have time. If you don't have time, skip the optional task and move on to Reflection & Close.

How to do it

The instructions for each activity are split into steps, which you should either: DO (handing things out, putting up slides), SAY (the key messages and instructions for the activity) or ASK (prompt questions to extend the discussion or gauge understanding).



Discussion based
activity



Activity



Break

Notes and troubleshooting

We provide extra information that may be helpful when you're running the activity, such as adaptations you could make, considerations about managing the class, or key preparations for the lesson.

Read the lesson plan in advance

As part of your preparation, you should read the lesson plan in full.

You'll need to decide with your co-Mental Health Ambassador who will deliver each section of the lesson.

It's not a script:

The session plan provides sentence examples, but it's not a word-for-word script that you can simply read out. It may be helpful to make key notes about what you're going to say but avoid writing full sentences.

Try and practice beforehand so you feel more confident and less likely to read from the page.

Workshop aims

- ✓ To explore the impact of academic pressure on mental health.
- ✓ To learn about concepts such as perfectionism and brain fog, and how working smart rather than working more, can mitigate stress and panic.
- ✓ To explore and share tips and tricks for more effective studying.
To empower students with resources and tools to enhance their own mental health and support others.
- ✓ To hear personal experiences about how to access support on campus, how to navigate conversations with tutors, and how to get out of the habit of comparing yourself to others.

Resources you will need

In Person:

- ✓ Video link
- ✓ Quotes resource
- ✓ Flipchart paper
- ✓ Pens and paper
- ✓ Signposting resource

Online:

- ✓ Video link
- ✓ Quotes resources
- ✓ Jamboard
- ✓ Signposting resources

Preparation Checklist

- ✓ Meet with co-facilitator(s) and decide who will run each section
- ✓ Check you can access all resource materials
- ✓ Make sure you have the Zoom link for the call (if delivering online)
- ✓ Read the session in full



TIMETABLE



M	T	W	T	F	S	S

Workshop Duration: 2 hours

Introduction

- Icebreaker
- Welcome
- Ground rules

20 mins

Stress and Pressure

- The body
- Roots
- Manifestations of stress

50 mins

Break

10 mins

Studying

OPTIONAL

- Positive and negative habits
- Getting support

25 mins

Reflection and Close

15 mins



INTRODUCTION

Welcome
5 minutes



HOW TO DO IT

SAY:

Thank the group for attending, explain that yourself and your other MHAs will be facilitating this workshop.

If comfortable sharing, tell the group why you are passionate about mental health.

EXPLAIN:

- Mental health is something we all have, and we all have pressures that impact it in different ways. Some of these pressures increase or change when we transition from further education to higher education, employment or training. This workshop aims to explore what some of these pressures are, and what we can do about them



INTRODUCTION

Ice-breaker
10 minutes



HOW TO DO IT

SAY:

Explain that you will spend a few minutes on introductions and learning a little about each other.

ASK:

Starting with MHAs, ask everyone to share their;

- Name, pronouns (if comfortable) and course
- Finish the sentence, "the world would be a better place with more...."

VARIATIONS:

You can also swap the icebreaker out for one of your own or use one of the alternatives on page 19



INTRODUCTION

Ground rules

5 minutes

HOW TO DO IT

SAY:

"To make sure we get the most out of this session, together we will create a list of ground rules"



ASK:

Ask everyone to share rules that would help them feel safe, supported and get the most out of the session. Examples include;

- Treating each other with respect
- Not interrupting
- No phones



DO:

Add "be aware of triggers" if it is not mentioned by participants, and explain:

- That talking about mental health can be very personal and sensitive
- That you want everyone to feel free and open to share, but they should consider how it might make others in the group feel.
- If it could be triggering but it is something they would like or feel like they need support with, they should message one of the MHAs who will be able to signpost them to the appropriate person or organisation.



VARIATIONS:

You can create this list by asking people to call out, or anonymously using post-it notes or online using the jamboard



STRESS AND PRESSURE

The Body
15 minutes

HOW TO DO IT



SAY:

We are going to spend some time exploring stress and how our body responds to it.

The purpose of sharing this information is to show how our behaviours and actions are often learned responses – sometimes learning how our bodies and our minds work, can make us feel more empowered, and more forgiving of ourselves

ASK:

- Ask the group, “what does stress feel like to you? How does your body react?”
- Discuss responses, note similarities, and share how you feel when stressed.
- Ask if anyone knows why we feel stress. (It can feel like a fairly unhelpful reaction to have!)
- Explain that stress is a reaction our brains evolved to keep us safe.

DO:

Play this video and explain they refer to ‘anxiety’ in this video, the same biological response happens for stress too. (see the info sheet on page 11 for support with this distinction)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp0lpKTWrp4>



Fight Flight Freeze – Anxiety Explained For Teens - YouTube



Watch this video developed by **Anxiety Canada** to learn how **anxiety** keeps us alive, ... **Fight Flight Freeze** ...
25 Mar 2019 · Uploaded by Anxiety Canada

DO:

Lead a discussion about the video

Discussion points:

- Does anyone have any reflections on this so far?
- Were you aware of the brain’s response to stress?
- How does knowing this make you feel?
- Does anything we’ve discussed so far resonate with you?
- Can anyone see how this could apply to academic pressure?



KEY MESSAGES:



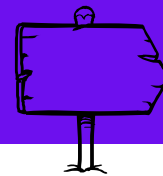
Our body reacting this way to stressful situations is natural. It is not about whether the course of action we chose is right or wrong, but whether it keeps us safe. Sometimes the course of action our brain takes can have an adverse effect on us in the long term, but the primary concern of the brain is to do what's needed for survival in that moment.

When we think of the stress response in the modern world, it is easy to see how this response can be damaging to our mental health.

What's important is recognising what triggers our own stress responses so we can put things in place to support us.

What causes stress to one person isn't necessarily the same as the next person. Take a rollercoaster as an example, for some it will cause genuine stress, whereas for others genuine enjoyment. The rollercoaster itself has not changed but our emotional response to it is different.





INFORMATION ABOUT STRESS AND ANXIETY

The video and following discussion may lead to questions about stress and anxiety. This is some extra information to support MHAs in this discussion should it arise.

Although stress and anxiety share many of the same emotional and physical symptoms – uneasiness, tension, headaches, high blood pressure and loss of sleep – they have different origins.

Generally, stress is a response to an external cause, such as a tight deadline or having an argument with a friend, and subsides once the situation has been resolved. Because stress is caused by external factors, tackling these head-on can help.

Anxiety is a person's specific reaction to stress; its origin is internal. Anxiety is typically characterised by a "persistent feeling of apprehension or dread" in situations that are not actually threatening. Unlike stress, anxiety persists even after a concern has passed.

Feelings of anxiety v. an anxiety disorder

It is possible to experience feelings of anxiety without having an anxiety disorder.

If your symptoms of anxiety meet a certain criteria, your GP may diagnose you with an anxiety disorder. Some common anxiety disorders include:

- Generalised anxiety disorder – feeling anxious or worried most of the time
- Panic disorder – having regular panic attacks, often for no apparent reason
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – having anxiety problems after experiencing a very stressful or frightening event. It can include flashbacks and nightmares
- Social anxiety disorder – a fear or dread of social situations. It's more than just shyness or nerves: it's a fear of being judged by others or being embarrassed or humiliated
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) – having recurring unpleasant thoughts (obsessions) and performing certain routines repetitively to relieve anxiety (compulsions)
- Phobias – an overwhelming fear of a specific object, place, situation or feeling.

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems. Up to one in 20 people in the UK have generalised anxiety disorder. Slightly more women than men are affected, and it's more common in people aged between 35 and 59.

Stress and Pressure



STRESS AND PRESSURE

Roots

10 minutes

HOW TO DO IT



RESOURCE: Flipchart paper (in person)/Jamboard (online)

ASK:

- The group to think of things relating academic success that cause them stress and pressure i.e., exams, coursework, seminars etc.
- Ask them to think about where that stress and pressure originated. Are there any moments that come to mind?
- Put the examples listed below up on flipchart or on the jamboard
- Ask if there are any missing that people can think of and add them to the list
- Ask the group to put a star next to the ones that apply to them
- Lead a discussion around them, some will have lots of stars – ask people to share their reflections

Examples: write up on flipchart or jamboard

Roots of pressure:

- Family expectations / cultural, first generation student
- Friends
- Fear of judgment
- Social media / societal expectations
- Yourself / your own ideas of what you want to achieve
- The education system teaching us to measure our worth in our grades
- Your chosen career
- What's going on in the world (Covid, cost of living crisis)
- Fear of failure

Moments:

- A conversation with a teacher or parent
- A bad grade
- A presentation that went badly
- Getting something wrong in class
- Missing a deadline

SAY:

The sense of pressure we feel is often from a fear of failure, pressure to succeed, or pressure to not let yourself or others down. This pressure manifests itself in different ways. Explain that you are now going to move onto an activity to demonstrate this.

Stress and Pressure



STRESS AND PRESSURE

Manifestations of stress

25 minutes



HOW TO DO IT

RESOURCE: Quotes resource and optional powerpoint

DO:

- Split the group into pairs.
- Hand out a page of the quotes resource to each pair (or share in the chat and assign a page to each group), ask them to read and discuss;
 - how that person might be feeling
 - whether any of these experiences resonate with them, and if so, when
- Bring the pairs back together and ask them to share what they discussed.
- Reveal that these quotes are all about real conditions and states of mind linked to stress and are surprisingly common.
 - 1st quote on each page: Perfectionism
 - 2nd quote on each page: Brain fog
 - 3rd quote on each page: Shame
 - 4th quote on each page: Maths anxiety
- Show the definitions on screen and read through them one by one (on the next page)

SAY:

Explain that having a label for a way you are feeling can be really helpful, as can knowing that others feel the same way. Talking about our shared experiences of difficult feelings can help us to not feel like there's something wrong with us, and make it easier for us to reach out when we need to.

ONLINE VARIATION:

Send link to the quotes resource and send into breakout spaces

DEFINITIONS

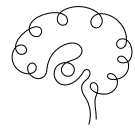
Perfectionism:

Being a perfectionist isn't always about having high standards, it can be experienced as feeling so overwhelmed by thoughts of not being good enough that you struggle to complete anything, or to use your time effectively. You might procrastinate or put off starting a task because you're worried about not being able to do it well.



Brain Fog:

Brain fog is a kind of mental fuzziness related to anxiety and some physical health conditions. It might feel like the world is moving faster than you can keep up with, you might struggle to put thoughts together, feel "out of it", find it difficult to concentrate or remember what you were doing. When someone asks what you had for dinner last night, you might struggle to remember, and when someone asks what you want for dinner, you might struggle to think of an answer.



Shame:

Shame is the sensation we feel in the pit of our stomach when it seems we have no safe haven away from the judgmental gaze of others. We feel small and bad about ourselves and wish we could vanish. It's different to guilt, because it's not associated to one thing you might feel you did wrong – it's when you feel that your whole self is wrong. It can give you low self-esteem, and make you sensitive to criticism.



Maths anxiety:

Maths anxiety is the panic, helplessness, paralysis and mental disorganisation that happens when you're asked to solve a maths problem on the spot. It might make you feel sick, confused, or frustrated, and your heart might start racing. You might experience it even if you have no other experience of anxiety outside of maths settings. Around a quarter of people experience this feeling.





BREAK
10 minutes

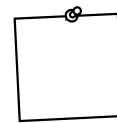


STUDYING
Positive and negative habits
20 minutes

OPTIONAL

HOW TO DO IT

RESOURCE: Post-it notes (in person/Jamboard (online))



ASK:

If anyone considers their mental health in the ways they choose to study or revise, or if it doesn't come into it at all.

As MHAs, share your own personal experiences of a new academic challenge and adapting to the standard that's required at your institution.

- How did you cope with all of the independent study time?
- How did it affect your mental health?
- Did or do you have any unhealthy study habits that negatively affected your mental health?

DO:

- Hand out post it notes to everyone
- Ask everyone to write 3 post it notes of positive techniques and strategies they use when studying or to manage stress linked to studying (examples and talking points on the next page)
- Ask everyone to write down 3 negative techniques they sometimes find themselves using (examples and talking points on the next page)
- Ask everyone to stick their positives on one section of wall and negatives on another
- The facilitator should go through the post-its with the group and engage them in discussion, questioning why some techniques work and others do not, seeing who agrees and disagrees - this should be an opportunity for them to learn from each other and from you.

ONLINE VARIATION:
Use a jamboard



Examples of positive

Positive techniques help manage or relieve feelings of stress and pressure.

- Avoid distractions
 - Giving someone else your phone
 - Using a timer to set short study periods
- Set constructive goals
 - Setting goals that aren't focused on blame.
 - Rather than "I want to stop leaving everything to the last minute" (this insinuates blame on yourself, and once you've done it once, you've failed.) Set goals like, "I want to start structuring my study time by breaking down assignments into one-hour chunks over multiple days" – the goal is that you're trying a new habit rather than stopping a natural behaviour.
 - Be kind to yourself. Have realistic expectations of yourself and remember you are only human.
- Talk to trusted friends/family/professionals
- Using rewards - a cup of tea/ scroll through instagram/ calling a friend when you reach a certain point
- Going for a walk, run or doing exercise
- Listening to white noise or ambient sounds or using study along videos
- Teaching someone else what you have learned
 - Studies have shown that learning information in order to teach it to someone else helps you absorb the information more logically than if you were just studying it for yourself.
- Blurting - writing down everything you can remember about a topic and then compare it to your lecture notes or textbook, it helps you identify exact areas you need to focus on rather than passively rereading large bodies of text
- Hold yourself accountable - asking someone to test you or read through your notes
- Eat well and stay hydrated
- Sleep well
- Working at the time of day you are most productive
- Use different senses to learn - make visual reminders with key info and stick them around your room, voice note a friend with a silly song that reminds you of key info, go for a walk while you listen to a podcast or video about the topic (moving your body instead of sitting still)



Examples of negative

Negative are things that may feel like they help in the short term but do not in the long term and can have a negative impact on your mental health.

- Procrastinating
- Going out for drinks
- Cramming everything just before a deadline
- Staying up all night to get things finished
- Drinking energy drinks
- Consuming junk food
- Not giving yourself any breaks - working until it is finished
- Not seeking help and support



STUDYING

Getting Support
5 minutes

OPTIONAL



HOW TO DO IT

SAY:

Let the group know that there is plenty of support available if their work load or anything else at your institution is impacting their mental health.

Let them know that they will be/have been assigned a personal tutor and this is a good person to start with. Explain that people will have lots of different experiences of the support they have had from their personal tutors.

DO:

MHAs to give a positive example of going to a personal tutor or mentor for support and how they went about it.

MHA to give a less positive example, perhaps a time that their tutor wasn't so helpful and where they found support outside of this avenue.

Most institutions also have a student experience or wellbeing department, explain that additional support can be found here.

SAY:

The signposting resource shared at the end of this workshop will include details of where external support can be found. Hub of Hope is a website that shows you all of the mental health support available in your area.

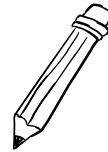
Reflection and Close



REFLECTION AND CLOSE

10 minutes

Reflection: Drawing Activity



HOW TO DO IT

ASK:

Ask everyone to draw something to depict their stresses, their sources of pressure, and the positive strategies they use/are going to use to protect themselves from this pressure. They should label the picture.

For example: a person in the rain:

- The clouds represent the source of pressure
- The rain represents the pressures
- And the umbrella and raincoat are the coping strategies and healthy study habits used to manage the pressures



REFLECTION AND CLOSE

Close

5 minutes



HOW TO DO IT

RESOURCE: Tips and Signposting Handout

DO:

Share the link to the Tips and Signposting Handout and explain that it covers some of the topics we have looked at in the session, and signposts for more information and resources.

DO:

Share the link to the feedback sheet and ask everyone to complete it. The more feedback we have the more we are able to evidence the use and impact of workshops like these, and encourage more institutions to run them. Ask the group to complete the feedback survey before leaving the session.

The link to the feedback survey and a QR code to access it are on the following page.

Feedback is vital to the success and expansion of this project.

<https://linktr.ee/mhfuok?>



ALTERNATIVE ICEBREAKERS



There are suggested icebreakers for each workshop, feel free to swap these out with one of your own, or one of the ideas on this page.

You can add icebreakers into the session to boost energy, after the break can be a good time for this.

High to low

Ask the group organise themselves in order, start off with quick easy ones like height or birthday and then move onto some that involve more conversation, you could even theme them for the workshop you are running.

E.g. for the Academic Pressure Workshop, ask if they thrive under pressure, or prefer more time and preparation to complete an assignment. Ask them to place themselves in order from Less Pressure to Most Pressure.

Desert island

Ask the group what three items you would bring on a deserted island. Then ask them which three items they would bring on an Island paradise. Are they similar or drastically different?

Word Association

Ask everyone in the group to say the first thing that comes to mind when asked the word "health" and again with "wellbeing". Can start off with a less obvious word to encourage creativity e.g. "Tasty"

Visualisation

- If your day/ week was a film/ book/ song, which would it be and why?
- If you or your day/week/life were an animal/ character/ condiment/ meal etc, what would you be and why?

Lucky dip

Everyone in the group has to write out a random word, they then muddle the words up and pick one out at random. They then have to speak about this topic for 30 seconds to one minute. Can be used to represent how social situations might make it difficult for someone to communicate.



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