**Student Counsellor Magazine**

**January 2022**

**Text Only Version**

**A note from Jyles, Interim CEO**

Welcome to our first Student Magazine of 2022. The pandemic has had a real impact on students with the need to hold classes online. I hope that this year we will see a return to in-the-room learning and placements.

This edition is packed full of great articles and resources to help you on your journey. We really encourage all students, whether members of the NCS or another Membership Body, to share their stories and articles. In this edition we include three great pieces from NCS Student Members. Samia Shafiq, has written an article – “The Botox Reality-Check” which explores self-image. Matthew Geary looks at ritual in therapy, and Giedre Dian looks at finding one’s voice.

MNCS Accredited Member Melanie Bambridge shares her thoughts on her journey from being a student to becoming a qualified counsellor. In this edition you will find lots of resources to help you as you progress through your studies. There are log sheets to keep track of your supervision and client (placement) hours, a free course on study skills, and an article on how to study effectively.

There are more articles, resources, and giveaways inside…read on to find out.

This magazine is for all counselling students regardless of which membership body you belong to. Please continue to share your articles, thoughts, and ideas about what you would like to see within these pages. Please do get it touch with our wonderful Communication Manager, Elaine: [comms@nationalcounsellingsociety.org](mailto:comms@nationalcounsellingsociety.org)

Jyles Robillard-Day

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**The ‘Botox’ Reality Check!**

**With thanks to Samia Shafiq (NCS Student Member).**

Being a therapist, I have always been interested in understanding the growing changes in society and the reasons for making personal lifestyle changes. This interest has really grown in understanding the ‘Botox' treatment, since in recent times this has been a growing trend. My article explores the interest women take in having Botox, the role of social media apps on the subconscious mind, the internal reasoning for making drastic bodily changes, childhood trauma, and social pressure to conform to beautification.

If I was to interpret from a personal perspective how labelling has an impact on personal lifestyle choices and invoking internal changes at a subconscious level, I would have to travel down memory lane. For me, and with hindsight, this is where it began.

My journey of insecurity started in my youth, just before starting university. If I was to pinpoint it, it developed around the time the events of September 11th occurred. This event triggered the world propaganda against the mass Muslim population, with the daily outbursts of negative news on the mainstream media, constantly dictating to us who and what a Muslim was in the eyes of the Western world. How Muslims were portrayed daily on the media both consciously and subconsciously started to affect my inner realities, self-confidence, self-esteem, and most importantly, self-development as a person. I began to reflect. This wasn’t the mainstream liberal Islam for most of us Muslims.

The media was portraying a marginalised view which we were unaware of. The term jihad to me was the inner self development struggle to control your ego, not the common usage of it in war.

I began to question: how was the media influencing others into their boxed thinking and narrative? On a personal level, my journey went something like this. How could something which was not personally accusing me, Samia, as the perpetrator make me feel so isolated as a Muslim living in the West? I was one of those billions of Muslims who were being targeted by this evil narrative on the media and forced to change how I viewed myself as a person. How do I now appease others’ thoughts on how they were now seeing me? My inner conversation had now become a battle of Truth versus how the media was displaying all Muslims.

The following thoughts ran through my mind: Why are all Muslims being targeted? How are others going to see me now? What if I get discriminated against due to my hijab? What if others think I am religious and a terrorist? As the stigma of being associated with the term “religion” was now, for some reason, being portrayed as being extreme.

The label mainstream media and social media had given to create a difference between moderate, liberal, and religious Muslims had really shaken up my whole identity, as well as many other Muslims, causing us to question our own validity due to the enforced opinions of others about us. This was an eye opener for personal development. I saw that the opinions of others were not due to being fully informed about the ‘Muslim’ group. I had to now question my own purity of intention too and justify and explain it to promote understanding.

I felt it was my duty as a Muslim to question ourselves, so my faith was not tainted. “So how is this topic related to Botox?” I hear you say. Well as explained, we often have mainstream narrative thinking imposed on us. And most of the time being involved in the 9-5 rat race, we barely have time to think for ourselves. The purpose of this article is to equip you with tools to be able to oppose imposed mainstream narratives and embrace your individuality.

One of the trends in recent times I’ve noted, is many social media applications and websites have tried to create and promote a new version of ourselves without us even realising they’re doing this. These “trends” have been pushing on to us how we need to change our physical looks through filters and face changing apps. We are getting retrained to view ourselves and others in a judgemental way, not being happy with how we look, or others look, or even ourselves. Promoting self-validation constantly. Ponder.

Who has sat and questioned the effect these apps, their filters, and their selfies are having on our self-esteem and confidence and on who we have become? Are you one of these people who are now having lots of different types of thoughts in respect of these issues? Are you now questioning your self-image more? Do you feel the need to compare your looks to others? Instead of looking at what you have, do you see and aspire towards what others have instead?

Many questions race through ones’ mind. Do you feel unfulfilled even though you have made all these prized bodily changes? Do you still feel insecure within? Do you feel the pressure to change yourself physically, to fulfil the expectation that these filters have set for you? Do you feel low self-worth like you’re not good-looking enough, not in the best shape, not with the best life, not confident or out there enough? Or maybe you’re ‘out there’, but your self-esteem is now based on how many likes you are given on each selfie or post on your social media account?

Stop. Ask yourself. What are these “passing thoughts” you’re beginning to be inclined towards? Why are you being driven by these ‘thoughts’ which are now settling into your minds? Why have you accepted these thoughts as yours? Self-reflect.

Understand. Making decisions due to insecurities leads to regrets later. Are these decisions due to vanity, insecurity, or appraisal? Question yourself before you commit to your thoughts. Will you still be wanting more changes later but remain unhappy with those changes? I’m asking you to question your passing thoughts prior to committing to them.

I relate my advice to a recent personal example I experienced below. A few months ago, I was sat with my friends. I asked one of them the reasons behind her Botox treatment, and why she had been unhappy with how she looked. As discussed, there is always something going on within oneself, which then impacts them later to make certain lifestyle choices or changes. My friend discussed that all these filter apps encouraged her to see how much better she could look if her skin was flawless, her lips bigger, her eyes wider. Besides, everyone else was doing it, so she also felt she wanted to conform.

Although my version of this conversation is a summary for our readers, this was in fact a deep conversation on how social norms impact us individually in society today. These impulsive thoughts to conform, she later rationalised, meant she had acted on an impulsive decision, without having questioned what was going on within her. She had now acted on those ‘racing’ thoughts in her head, only to realise now that the Botox in her lips had not fulfilled her insecurity to feel better. She now wanted to go back to how she was. Her previous need to ‘fit in’ now made her question if this had been the right choice for her.

It’s important to make informed decisions and not act on every thought, prior to diving into any action I learnt. This shows that, like many people, she was pulled in by social media influencers. This then dictated her own passing thoughts and developed reasoning to her mind for the changes she made at the time for her actions. But, like most of us, did she sit to question what was really going on inside herself before dedicating herself to the action. Always think before you leap. We learn that prevention is better than cure.

Social media nowadays plays a huge role in how we see ourselves and others. We need to acknowledge that these are some powerful influences attacking our subconscious mind. There is a bombardment of information out there, dictating what our norms should be. We need to try to make informed lifestyle choices as explained before.

Other influences in respect of certain decision making relate back to our childhoods. Some of this relates to the belief system we have carried on about ourselves; the expectations of such beliefs and the negative words said to us during our lives causing us to feel low within ourselves. If these are not dealt with regularly and are parked, then our decision making can be influenced by the previous traumas we carry within us. If my friend had questioned a little deeper instead of following her passing thoughts which she regretted later, she would have come to realise that the inner conversations she has been having with herself had been very negative.

Try to deal with some of your childhood experiences here. Go back and try to imagine certain experiences happening in your childhood and what you took away from them. Thoughts include:

* **I am not good enough**
* **I am ugly**
* **I am not clever**
* **I shouldn’t be loved and made to feel secure**
* **I am not talented**
* **I deserve to be lonely**

Now imagine your subconscious mind replaying these words, since these events took place. So, you have spoken to your inner self in this critical way for how many years, putting yourself down internally but at the same time putting up a front of confidence. If you now voice these feelings out loud, how do you feel? Now imagine, how have you made yourself feel for all these years?

I’m hoping this is a self-help article for you to take something positive away with you. From now on please try to be present in yourself daily. And apply the following thought process to your life. Where have you, in your life, misunderstood your passing thoughts?

As explained, a part of your passing thoughts is based on the belief system you have carried from your childhood experiences. Instead of dealing with the root cause of these thoughts, you have instead followed your thoughts, carried out the action and your still not happy with your self-image. On the face you may justify your actions, but internally you know you have something deeper that needs to be dealt with.

When your self-esteem increases, you come to realise and be content in your own self-worth. Other distractions will now not affect your self-image. You may have initially thought your way to self-contentment was to make these quick bodily changes but had done these for all the wrong reasons. Your heart knows that understanding a cleaner, purer inner self opinion, will lead you to more fulfilling life decisions. And you questioning and challenging your passing thoughts, according to sound values and belief systems, will help you to make positive life choices.

**With thanks to Samia Shafiq (Holistic Well-being Therapist, Hypnotherapist & Mind-Set Coach).**

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- Your placement experiences

- Your experience as an NCS Student Member

- Your specialist subject(s) of interest

- Books you would recommend to other student counsellors

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[Client Hours Log](https://nationalcounsellingsociety.org/assets/uploads/docs/Client-Hours-Log.pdf)

**Ritual and Therapy: ‘To be redeemed from fire by fire’**

**With thanks to Matthew Geary (Student Counsellor), for this article.**

Ritual is an ancient, universal, and fundamental aspect of human experience. It is a determined mode of action that partakes of the sacred and the profane, and it includes all manner of secular and religious phenomena.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes ritual as ‘a ritual act or ceremonial observance . . . an action or series of actions regularly or habitually repeated’. The therapeutic value of rituals for individuals and the greater community, especially rites of affliction, passage, life-crisis, and transition, have long been recognised and practised.

For instance, Mircea Eliade describes how New Year festivals and rituals are, in fact, ‘a reactualization of the cosmogony, it implies starting time over again at its beginning’ (1987: 81, emphasis in original). Hence, New Year functions as an ‘occasion for “purification”, for the purification of sins, of demons, or merely of a scapegoat’ (82). For Eliade, such rituals heal and enact regeneration of the individual and community through a ritual recitation of the cosmogonic myth and a return to origins and primordial time: ‘the therapeutic purpose of which is to begin life once again, a symbolic rebirth’.

In the Hindu yajna (sacrifice) ceremony, a sacred fire is always lit, and Sanskrit mantras recited as oblations (grains, butter, aromatic woods) are offered to the Gods. These rituals are expected to purify the atmosphere, heal individual afflictions, and restore peace and harmonious relationships within the household and the wider community. Another example in West Africa, the Senegalese Ndeup ritual gathers the whole community and uses dance and drumming to treat depression.

For Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), such results in tribal ritual might be because ritual maps affliction and trauma onto a mythic landscape.

Ritual and shamanism symbolise a person’s physiological and psychological ailments and difficulties and, in doing so, represent, reorganise, and cure them.

In counselling and psychoanalytic theory and therapy, ritual also has significant import with positive and negative connotations.

Indeed, for Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalytic process works in much the same way as tribal ritual, bringing to a conscious level and resolving conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious.

As Al-Krewani (1999), Cole (2011) and Fisher (1999, 2010, 2019) all point out, therapeutic ritual is a powerful means for a client to express thoughts and experiences that are ordinarily inexpressible or beyond words. Ritual is ‘a container, a space in which pain can be worked through in a planned, agreed new way’ (Fisher 2019). It can be a way for the client to take control, transform or end a behaviour, experience or situation that has always blighted them.

To help achieve these aims: the therapist’s function is that of a ‘ritual guide’, assisting the client in planning the ritual, clarifying the focus, and determining whom they need to be accompanied by, before, during and after the ceremony.

Here, we have a co-constructed, managed use of ritual as therapy that evolves the client towards greater meaning, awareness, or a new stage or level of life.

In a more negative psychological sense, ritual is also often ‘the compulsive act or routine, the non-performance of which results in tension and anxiety’ (OED).

In psychiatry, the continuing recurrence of obsessions and compulsions, whose severity causes people significant distress and interferes with social or occupational relationships and functioning, is known as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—a common presenting issue by clients in counselling.

I have lived with OCD all my life, and, at times, I have been severely incapacitated and traumatised by its insistence and rule. Today, it mainly takes the form of persistent, intrusive, unwanted thoughts of a highly distressing nature (this primarily obsessive form of OCD is now regularly referred to as ‘Pure O’). Fortunately, I identify and deal with my OCD much of the time. However, it has taken a lot of therapy and support to understand the condition and develop coping mechanisms.

Sigmund Freud referred to obsessive repetition-compulsion as ‘a travesty, a half comic and half tragic, of a private religion’ (2001: 119). For Freud, the obsessive neurotic carries out rituals as a ‘protective measure’ against the fear of attack or punishment, whose cause is an unconscious sense of guilt. In his view, religious ritual is a more culturally acceptable means of repressing sexual, anti-social and egotistical impulses, preserving the social instinct. In this way, ‘religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis’. But we might ask then: what are we to do about our anxieties, fears, loneliness, and guilt in an age of COVID-19, increasing secularisation and declining religious authority and community?

Recently, a student residential weekend at Poulstone Court, Herefordshire, highlighted to me the many benefits of ritual activity. The weekend partook in various planned and unplanned ritualistic activities.

At the beginning of the residential, there was an assembly of deeply personal items from students to form a mandala, whose importance and transformation in meaning would be reflected upon at the end of the residential. There was impromptu bathing in the River Wye. There was a ceremonial sprint over a rickety bridge crossing the river, which came to symbolise movement, transition, and bravery in the face of fear and adversity. There was also a group fire ceremony. In this ritual, each participant wrote a painful life event or something that they wanted to heal or relinquish psychologically on a piece of paper. On occasion, this trauma, affliction, or difficulty was intergenerational as well as personal. Very often, it was something deeply painful, shameful, upsetting or secret. The person read out what they had written on the paper, and then it would have to be successfully thrown onto the fire so that it visibly went up in flames. Everyone in the group witnessed this act. When the course tutors felt that someone needed more support, the group also vocally joined in helping eradicate the trauma or impediment.

These performative actions reminded me of the esoteric goma: a fire ceremony of purification found in some Buddhist traditions in China, Japan and Tibet. In the goma, prayers for removing sickness, misfortune, and other kinds of tsumi and impurity, are written on wooden sticks and burnt in the fire. The smoke is then offered to various celestial deities in the hope that these misfortunes will be destroyed.

At the end of our time at Poulstone Court, and even more so after leaving the location, many attendees testified to having felt that something within them had shifted. Many also spoke about the communal nature of the rituals, which enhanced the sense of individual empowerment, strength, and healing. Despite struggling mentally at the start of the residential, I, too, felt invigorated, calmer, less troubled by my thoughts, serene even: ‘To be redeemed from fire by fire,’ as T. S. Eliot eloquently puts it in Little Gidding. Although different cultures, traditions, religions, and persons take varying approaches to ritual, many of these are formulated and performed to establish social cohesion and heal individual psychological imbalances and impurities.

My experience at Poulstone Court has emphasised the vital importance of ritual for individual and communal health and well-being. It has also highlighted the very absence of positive, therapeutic ritual in my own life. Contemporary writers, such as Casper Ter Kuile (2020), are now promoting the discovery of new modes of observance and ritual that can produce healing, meaning and a sense of a spiritual life. As a student counsellor in training,

I believe therapy has an essential role in rejuvenating and creating innovative secular ritual practices.

This is something that I had not considered thoroughly before but which I intend to explore further in my counselling work. Practitioners might draw on traditional and religious ritual practices, such as fire or water sermons (as at Poulstone). We can work collaboratively with clients to design rituals that cater to an individual or group trauma or requirement. We might act as ritual guides accompanying our clients through their fires and rainstorms. In an increasingly secular, isolated, and isolating society, the need for ritual might be greater than ever. Now might be the time to return to our most archaic form of therapy.

**Special Interview with Privacy4**

In this video, National Counselling Society CEO Meg Moss interviews Cath Knibbs & Gary Hibberd from Privacy4, to discuss how the organisation came together and to answer common question topics relating to confidentiality, including: GDPR, ICO registration, keeping case notes, email encryption, privacy notices and more.

[Watch the video](https://youtu.be/RCFzkplxkmE)

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**Thoughts from an NCS Accredited Member**

**With thanks to Melanie Bambridge (MNCS Accred) for sharing her journey with us.**

I decided to train with Chrysalis Courses as they sounded like they offered a more holistic training package and because I could train at weekends and still work in my job as a hairdresser.

I loved my three years of training. At times it was very challenging and essay writing was hard! I sometimes thought that I'd throw the towel in.

My tutors were excellent and were passionate about students having their own therapy and doing the internal work to be the best Counsellors we could be for our clients. I've been practicing for 6 years now. I work in private practice.

I say to everyone that the training gives us the foundations and it's all of the research and CPD post training that enriches us as therapists.

It is so important to achieve our CPD requirements and more. We never stop learning. Therapy and neuroscience is constantly advancing.

The first three years of training are the beginning of a wonderful, rewarding occupation which is a privilege every single day.

**Facing Forgiving and Finding a Voice**

**With thanks to Giedre Dian (NCS Student Member) for this article.**

Recently, I had the opportunity to re-watch ‘Little Voice’; a lovely 1998 musical-drama, directed by Mark Herman, based on the play of Jim Cartwright. It explores LV- Little Voice – Laura Hoff (Jane Horrocks). A devoted daughter of a posthumous vinyl seller, LV became recluse and dedicated herself to listening to her father’s collection of classic albums of great singers such as: Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, Billie Holyday, Merlyn Monroe, and Gracie Fields. The plot pictures LV being commercially noticed by agent Ray Say (Michael Caine), and LV’s special relationship with Billy (Ewan McGregor), all with a colourful, selfish, and greedy mother Mari Hoff (Brenda Blethyn). The main point of the film is to showcase the hidden singing talent of LV, though it may be in a questionable way.

The film introduces us all to an important point along the therapeutic process: to find our voice. In the case of LV, it was her singing talent. For you, it could be something else. I was having tea in a garden centre café when a friend mentioned her poem writing and how by reading them again, she could clearly identify her mood according to each poem. That was the second call for me to write this article. Along the therapeutic process, it is relevant to support clients to find their voice, to see them identify themselves with what makes them happy.

Are you a giver or a receiver? Nothing gives me more pleasure than to give. Being a giver may be a way to express ourselves. Some people like drawing, others writing, others develop a photo diary with their memories. Others still need some time to discover their hidden inner voice that makes them whole, complete, happy, and fulfilled.

When I was in primary school, I drew a scenery picture where the sky was pink. I felt so accomplished and happy. Then my art teacher told me, “There is no such thing as a pink sky. Skies are blue”. I felt that the comment was restrictive and unnecessary. At the end of the day, we can make the sky whatever colour we want in our creative minds.

Retrospectively, I feel sorry for her. At the time, I said something along the lines of, “Well, my sky is pink and it’s happy”.

Why should we even neglect the grey skies of rain, which bring goodness to the soil and allow us to have our own comforts?

Of course, we can have pink skies. We can paint our skies in a way that makes us and others happy. The beauty of art is the limitless boundaries it entails.

Art takes us to places yet to be named or defined. It has the power and energy to make others happy and find their own meaning. If it didn’t, art galleries would always be empty. We know they are not; we go there, for nurturing, for inspiration, or even merely for wandering.

‘The Book of Forgiving’, written by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu, explores the healing powers of forgiveness and the long process it may take. I agree with them when said it seems there is no end to the human capacity for healing, and that we are all broken in our own way. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again, in forgiving ourselves.

It’s doesn’t matter which route we take in the healing process; the only thing that will remain is our thoughts and what we decide to share with others.

The contemporary philosopher Alain De Botton explores love as a skill to be learnt, so he created ‘The School of Life’, published in more than 10 countries. John Norcross, in his book ‘Psychotherapy Relationships that Work’ (2002), explores the therapeutic alliance and relevance of this process. Jung had explored the archetypes and the hero became a communal image of each and every story we live, read, and dream.

We can learn and master love! We are all doers, fighting our own and collective battle on a daily basis.

Racheal Remen MD, in her book ‘Kitchen Table Wisdom’, says that listening creates a holy silence, and that when you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the first time. I fully agree.

I conclude this article with an open invitation, to the kind readers of this piece. Yes, you dear being reading right now, find your voice, do your thing, find your channel, and share graciously with others. There are people out there waiting to take their flight to freedom, to find their own voice, and share something meaningful with us. Be brave, even if at the beginning it’s just for the sake of others.

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**Study Strategies for Mature Students**

**With thanks to** [**thestudyspace.com**](https://www.thestudyspace.com/page/study-strategies-for-mature-students/)**.**

Returning to education can be a substantial change, particularly if you haven't studied at university level before. You may have more personal commitments than some of the other students around you, and it may have been a long time since you last studied. You will have a different, possibly wider, perspective to draw on and will find support is available if you need it.

**Being a mature student**

It may seem like light years since you left school. So even though you're excited at the prospect of returning to education, you may be starting to feel anxious.

Take comfort. Your tutors will be very glad to see you because mature students generally work harder than everyone else. You've also got experience of life that has broadened your outlook. It doesn't matter what you've been doing since you were 16. Whatever it was, it will have made you a more rounded person. Your tutors will respect that.

As a mature student, there are particular areas of undergraduate life that you might need to address particularly, as your maturity and previous experience provide you with special challenges and opportunities.

**Seminar**

1. Do not wait for others to speak out: the tutor may be relying on you to get the ball rolling.

2. Your past experience and study will enrich seminars, so use it as it becomes relevant.

3. If you are concerned about saying too much and taking over your seminar group, discuss this with your tutor rather than keeping quiet.

4. Your fellow students will not view you as different from them as long as you respect their views and join in as their equal.

5. If you have not had a chance to prepare well for a seminar, avoid the temptation to miss it: you will still have something to contribute.

**Networking**

1. Do not abandon the instinct for networking that you will have developed in your working life: you will find it invaluable at university.

2. Try not to wait until an outside speaker or interesting lecturer offers you an email address or contact number: make the first contact.

3. If you are working in a group, be the one to organise contact lists. Undergraduates often forget to do this until it is inconveniently late.

4. Networking outside your immediate department or school will be useful to you if you decide to alter your degree profile at a later stage.

5. Remember that your professional contacts will still be useful to you, either during your degree or once you have graduated, so try to maintain some external networks.

**Socialising**

1. Make sure that you allow yourself some free time to socialise - it can make all the difference in helping you to feel a part of the life of your university.

2. Socialising does not have to be expensive or confined to the evening: lunchtime can be a useful chance to wind down off campus or as part of a revision group.

3. If you are unsure about breaking into a socialising group, try joining one of the many undergraduate groups that you will have seen advertised in your Students' Union.

4. Seminar groups work well together during revision sessions, so try to keep up some contact with your various seminar groups.

5. Socialising need not be elaborate. If you are short of time (or cash), meeting up for just half an hour before a seminar or lecture can be a great support.

**Mature Student’s Groups**

1. Find yours! They can be poorly publicised, but exist in most universities.

2. Mature students' groups tend to give you as much as you are prepared to put into them, so be ready to get involved. Some people find any organised group off putting. Do not feel pressurised into joining a mature students' group - you are a student first, mature second.

3. Explore the full range of services provided by your mature students' group. Can they help with finances, accommodation or study skills, for example?

4. If you are using your group as a social base, try to attend other social events as well, so that you do not begin to feel defined entirely by your age.

**Time Management**

1. You are used to managing your time, so have confidence in yourself and your abilities.

2. Use time management techniques (lists, working patterns, rest breaks etc.) that have worked for you in the past: they will also apply to your life as an undergraduate.

3. Even if some younger undergraduates manage to look as if they do little more than drink coffee, they have their own demands on time, so try not to let yourself assume that your time is more pressurised than theirs.

4. Make a pact with yourself that some things will always matter (getting assessed essays in on time, for example) whilst other things can be allowed to slide into the vacations (completing reading lists, perhaps) if your outside life intrudes into your study time.

5. Make a personalised study timetable and use it as your primary time management tool, to be adapted or followed as your life and work dictate.

**Using Your Own Sources**

1. Keep all of your notes from previous courses or work related exercises and make sure that you have them to hand when you need them.

2. Do not assume that your professional or leisure related sources are irrelevant - they may be useful in individualising your work.

3. If you are unsure about whether to include material from your own sources, ask your tutor rather than abandoning it.

4. Making connections between courses is vital, so decide whether your life experience can help you to do this, even if it is not directly relevant to the assignment you have been given.

5. Despite its importance, try not to preface every seminar comment or essay paragraph with references to your past life. It will be relevant at times, but you are at university to focus on your new future and to face new challenges, rather than retreating into the comfort of your past.

**King's to partner on new study into mental health support for first generation university students**

**With thanks to** [**kcl.ac.uk**](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/kings-to-partner-on-new-study-into-mental-health-support-for-first-generation-university-students)**.**

The Office for Students (OfS) has awarded a grant of over £180,000 for a new collaborative project exploring mental health and wellbeing interventions for students who are first in their families to attend university or who are studying without specific kinds of support from their families, such as estranged or care-experienced students. The study will be led by Institute of Education at St Mary’s University, Twickenham, alongside King’s College London, the University of West London, and the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

The project, which will be co-designed and co-delivered with students and led by a combination of expert HE and mental health professionals, will generate much-needed evidence of what can improve mental health outcomes for this group of students through the provision of a novel transition support package for first-in-family students. This support package will include psychoeducation training, personal skills development, peer-to-peer support initiatives, mental health drop-in sessions, and online resources.

"I am delighted to be joining forces with colleagues from other institutions to support students who are first in their families to attend universities. This initiative, co-designed with students, will deliver interventions to promote the development of skills and behaviours that support their mental health, empowering this group of students to succeed in higher education."

– Dr Patricia Zunszain, Project Lead from King's and Reader in Neuroscience of Mental Health Education

First generation university students, many of whom are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as students who who receive little or no family support, are at increased risk of poor mental health, social isolation, and non-continuation as they make their way through critical transition points in their university careers, such as entering and leaving university and moving between academic years and semester breaks.

Stresses during this period also include adapting to and coping with academic and financial pressures, building new relationships, increasing independence, the contrasts between home and university life, as well as general homesickness, and other aspects of student life.

"This is an innovative project to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of our students even more effectively. We are looking forward to working with our collaborative partners as a joined-up approach between education and health professionals, working closely with students, is the best way to support students on their journey through higher education."

– Professor Anna Lise Gordon, Project Lead and Director of the St Mary’s Institute of Education

The grant is part of a wider OfS project to provide £1million of funding to explore innovative and intersectional approaches to mental health support for students.

The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. Their aim is to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

**How to Study Effectively**

**Written by Paul Penn at** [**psyche.co**](https://psyche.co/guides/how-research-from-psychology-can-help-you-study-effectively?utm_source=Aeon+Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=HTLGI21)**.**

The year was 1993 and, aged 16, I was about to sit my Geography GCSE exam. This was an ‘old school’ style public examination, held in the school’s gymnasium. A stifling odour of floor wax and dust hung heavy in the air. Victorian-era single desks featuring ink wells that had been utterly redundant for about three generations were arranged into rows with unerring precision. The silence was so unnatural and oppressive, it seemed to have a tangible density.

Nonetheless, I had crammed for this exam like a champion and was feeling confident. I took a deep breath, opened my examination booklet and glanced over the first page of questions. A gut-wrenching realisation quickly dawned on me, captured perfectly by a single piece of graffiti etched into the haggard surface of my desk. It read: ‘Oh Sh\*t! There goes college, 1992.’

Clearly, I hadn’t been the only one whose confidence in their exam preparation was misplaced. However, it wouldn’t be until I started teaching psychology some 12 years later that I fully understood why. Here’s the bad news: research from psychology indicates that our ability to accurately monitor and evaluate our level of knowledge or skill (referred to as metacognitive ability) is often flawed. These flaws tend to give us an inflated perception of our knowledge and understanding, encouraging us to persevere with ineffective methods of studying that quietly, but persistently, undermine our efforts to learn. It’s easy to demonstrate this by examining some preferred study practices and considering the misconceptions about learning that they reflect. Let’s kick off things by looking at that perennial favourite: cramming.

"Cramming seeks to stamp things in by intense application immediately before the ordeal. But a thing thus learned can form but few associations."

– from Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals (1899) by William James.

We’ve probably all done it at some point. The evening before the big exam, source materials sprawled out on the desk, a stockpile of energy drinks substituting for the intravenous caffeine line that would be so much more efficient (patent pending). Productivity is the order of the day, after all; it’s cramming time. Sure enough, research confirms that cramming is a go-to strategy for many students. However, since the late 19th century, research in psychology has demonstrated that distributing your study time over a number of shorter sessions works better than cramming all the work into one marathon session. This is known as ‘the spacing effect’. It’s one of those rare findings in psychology that goes pretty much uncontested, which makes it even more perplexing that more of us don’t take advantage of it.

Another routine approach to study is to repeatedly reread sources. It’s not difficult to explain why students rely on this approach. If you read a piece of text repeatedly, that text will start to feel familiar. You will likely interpret this feeling of familiarity as progress. Unfortunately, this perception of progress is often illusory. It reflects a failure to consider a vital difference between study and exam conditions: things always seem easy when you have the answers in front of you. Inconveniently, most exams don’t allow you that luxury.

A reliance on passively rereading material when studying also reflects a more fundamental misconception about the nature of memory. We often view memory as being akin to a somewhat unreliable camera; not so much an SLR, more one of those Victorian jobbies – the kind that required 30 minutes of exposure to capture a portrait, during which time the subjects had to remain utterly still or else the photo would be ruined. This reproductive notion of memory lulls us into thinking that successfully remembering a source boils down to the amount of exposure we give it and that interacting with that source will likely only ‘interfere with the shot’. However, thinking of memory as if it worked like a recalcitrant camera is misleading and really unhelpful when you’re studying.

Our memory doesn’t passively reproduce a source: it actively reconstructs it according to our previous knowledge, experience and expectations. To stick with the photographic analogy, the workings of memory are more like the filters on a photo-editing suite than a camera. Using our memory effectively is less about maximising exposure to a new source than figuring out how to use our prior knowledge, experience and expectation filters to integrate that source with what we already know.

As you can see, then, the most common approaches to studying are often not what psychologists would recommend. I’m painfully aware that even when faced with evidence that study methods such as cramming and rereading are relatively ineffective, you’ll probably still harbour an inclination to fall back on these habits. You might argue: ‘Cramming has got me this far, so it can’t be completely ineffectual.’ You’d be right; it isn’t completely ineffectual. However, there are far superior alternatives, especially if your goal is to retain what you’re studying for any length of time. Had I studied properly for my geography exam all those years ago, I might now be able to remember more than just the names of four of the mechanisms of coastal erosion. (Not that this doesn’t make me a blast to sit next to at dinner, you understand.)

So, having identified a few studying approaches that aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, let’s consider some more effective alternatives. The approaches I’m about to advocate are good practice irrespective of what subject you are studying and do not require any prior knowledge of psychology to implement. By making fairly basic changes to the way you study, you can improve your learning, follow the example of high- achieving students, and turn the process of studying from a chore that must be endured into an activity that can be enjoyed.

**What to do**

**Space out your study sessions**

As noted above, it’s better to distribute the time you have available to study over a greater number of shorter sessions than it is to cram your studying into a single marathon session. In thinking about exploiting this ‘spacing effect’ in your own studying, you might wonder whether there is an optimal method of spacing out your study sessions. Is there an ideal number of sessions? Is there an optimal interval between sessions?

The good news is that simple guidelines on scheduling your study sessions are sufficient. In terms of the number of sessions you use, too few is more of a problem than too many. If you have 12 hours to dedicate to a topic, it’s better to study over six two-hour-long sessions than it is to study over a couple of six-hour-long sessions. In terms of the length of intervals between your sessions, research indicates that longer intervals tend to be associated (up to a point) with better retention. However, since studying often takes place in a limited timeframe, you should prioritise the number of sessions over getting the longest possible inter-session intervals.

**Alternate between studying similar topics**

We often believe that it’s best to ‘block’ topics when studying – to allocate a period of time for one topic, and to conclude a review of it before moving on to the next one. However, contemporary research has consistently indicated that alternating between different topics (referred to as ‘interleaving’) can be more effective, especially for topics that are similar in nature and might otherwise be easily conflated.

As an example, if you were learning about psychoactive drugs (for a friend, of course), you’d probably want to look at different classes of drugs: eg, stimulants, depressants and hallucinogens. Broadly speaking, you could deal with these topics in one of two ways: blocking or interleaving. The blocking approach would involve studying each class of drug sequentially; you would conclude your review of stimulants in their entirety before moving on to depressants and then hallucinogens. Alternatively, you could interleave the classes of drugs by organising your studying around categories of information within them. For example, their definitions, exemplars, mechanism of action and profile of psychological effects. Interleaving would involve first looking at a definition for each class of drug, before moving on to an example from each class, followed by their respective mechanisms of action, and then finally their profiles of psychological effects.

Here’s a general rule of thumb you can follow in figuring out whether it might be better to block or interleave your study efforts. Research indicates that interleaving seems to bias your attention towards looking for differences between topics. Therefore, it’s most effective when you’re studying topics that are similar (and require more effort to distinguish from each other). It’s also effective under conditions where you have discretion about assigning information to a category, as might be the case if you were classifying works of art. In contrast, blocking seems to focus your attention on looking for similarities between topics. Therefore, it’s best used for topics that can be easily distinguished and/or when category membership has been predetermined, such as would be the case if you were learning about elements of the periodic table.

**Focus on constructing your own understanding of a topic, not reproducing someone else’s**

Previously, we noted that memory is fundamentally reconstructive, as opposed to reproductive, in nature. If you rely on passively rereading your course materials, you’ll tend to end up using your memory to try to reproduce the author’s understanding of the subject rather than generating your own. So, what is the best catalyst for generating your own understanding of what you read? The answer is to question what you read as you’re reading it. By responding to your own questions, you are forcing yourself to think about how to explain the subject matter in your own words and with reference to your previous knowledge and experience.

You can use an approach called elaborative interrogation to systematically incorporate the process of questioning into your reading. This technique involves annotating your sources with questions that require an explanatory response from you. You can provide this response verbally, initially using your sources for assistance. Do this iteratively with the aim of eventually not needing to consult your sources at all during the process of responding to your questions.

In using elaborative interrogation, try to focus on explanation as much as you can; your aim is to make the information as meaningful to you as possible. Phrasing your questions so they begin with ‘why’ or ‘how’ will help you do this, as will thinking about concrete examples of more abstract concepts. For example, you might annotate this section with the question: ‘Why is responding to your own questions conducive to the reconstructive nature of memory?’

**Make retrieval practice an integral part of your studying**

Given that people often study to prepare for an exam of some kind, it’s ironic that we tend to favour approaches such as rereading over testing our ability to retrieve information from memory (retrieval practice). Testing is not just a way of measuring learning; it can also be a powerful mechanism of learning. This is another one of those findings in psychology that is so robust as to now be considered axiomatic. It’s referred to as the testing effect.

Contrary to how it might feel, both success and failure to retrieve information are helpful for your memory. Both outcomes serve to calibrate confidence in your perception of your knowledge. This is invaluable information in orienting your studying so that it is based on evidence of progress rather than guesswork! When studying, it’s not what you think you know that matters, but rather what you can prove you know. Strange, isn’t it? You probably always thought of tests as your nemesis and studiously tried to avoid them. Yet that whole time, you could have used them as a tool of learning.

You should not make the mistake of dismissing retrieval practice as a cynical exercise in ‘learning to a test’. Its usefulness is not limited to scenarios where you know what questions will be featured in a forthcoming exam. Nor does its effectiveness depend upon congruence between the content or format of your retrieval practice and the exam you eventually take. Furthermore, the benefits of retrieval practice are not simply limited to facts; they also extend to concepts and the transfer of knowledge from one domain to another.

You can incorporate retrieval practice organically into your studying by using the read, recite, review (3R) approach. This involves reading a short passage of text, putting the source to one side and trying to recall the information in your own words, before checking your recall against the source for factual accuracy. You repeat these steps until you are satisfied with your ability to capture the meaning (not words) of the source material in question. If you type out your attempts to recite information from your sources rather than just verbally recall them, you’ll be organically producing notes that capture your understanding of the material.

**Don’t just highlight material, think about it**

By this point you will have gathered that interaction with your sources is important in studying effectively, but you should know that not all types of interaction are created equal. For example, highlighting text is a method that’s widely used by students. Ostensibly, this seems like a perfectly sensible thing to do when studying. Explicitly identifying the most important parts of a source should help focus your attention by filtering out less relevant material and reducing the burden on your memory.

However, the literature on the effectiveness of highlighting makes for unhappy reading, especially if you own a stationery shop. On the rare occasions where a study has shown highlighting to have a positive effect on learning, it’s not been the act of highlighting per se that is behind the effect. Rather, it’s the thinking behind what is being highlighted – why the highlighted information is significant – that counts. Indeed, research indicates that the people who report using highlighting most frequently tend to do it the least effectively and get the least benefit from its use. I know it’s nice to think that a highlighter works like an optical scanner with a direct connection to your long-term memory, but it is no substitute for mentally engaging with the text.

**Key points –** **How to study effectively**

You can’t rely on intuition about how well your studying practices are working for you. Intuitive judgements of learning are often inaccurate and tend to produce an inflated perception of progress.

Avoid defaulting to habitual, passive approaches to studying such as rereading and highlighting sources. These do not take advantage of the reconstructive nature of memory, and make it more tedious and less effective.

Systematic engagement with the meaning of your source material is the key to successful studying.

Rather than cramming your studying into an extended session before the exam, it’s much more effective to distribute the time you have available for studying over a larger number of shorter sessions.

When you are studying similar topics that might be easily confused, it’s a good idea to interleave your studying – to alternate between the topics during your study sessions. This can help you identify the differences between the topics and reduce the chances of them being conflated.

You should view self-testing as an integral part of your studying. One way to do this is the read, recite and review (3R) method: read a section of text, set it aside as you try to recall its content in your own words, and then check your recall, repeating as necessary.

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