Ep 11 StudyWell_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah [00:00:07] Hello and welcome to our BeWell podcast series. Today we're going to discuss studying effectively, managing our time, and how to get the best out of our learning. Joining me today, we have Wendy Lawrenson, an academic skills advisor at the University, and students Sam Johnson, Godlin Matthew and Megan Dononher. Before we start can we do some quick introductions, so our listeners know who you are and why you volunteered to be part of today's episode.

Wendy [00:00:32] Hello, I'm Wendy Lawrenson from the Student Learning Service. I'm the academic skills advisor for General Strategies and also the science advisor. And I'm here really to try and see if I can pass on some hints and tips covering this particular topic.

Sam [00:00:49] Hi, I'm Sam Johnson. I'm a third-year psychology student and I have studied this topic both academically and personally because I've had a lot of exams and essays and things to write. So hopefully I'm going to be able to pass on some knowledge, both from my own experience and just from the research base.

Megan [00:01:09] Hi, I'm Megan. I'm a third-year English student and I wanted to take part in this because I think it's a great resource. It's something that I personally would use myself because I think everybody could always use some extra advice on how to study more effectively.

Godlin [00:01:22] Hi, I'm Godlin, and I'm a psychology student as well, and I love just being part of the podcast series, I love talking about subjects and learning about other people's experiences and what they do, basically.

Bekah [00:01:38] Brilliant. Thanks guys, and thanks so much for joining me. I'm really looking forward to our discussions today. So being able to organise your time allows you to feel in control and learn more effectively. Good time management can also help to reduce stress and exam anxiety. Do you guys plan your studying each day and how do you prioritise your tasks?

Godlin [00:01:59] I make lists, lists are the way to go for me, like everything I need to do for the day and plan accordingly basically.

Megan [00:02:09] I don't plan daily lists, usually I find it helpful on a Sunday night, that's kind of my reflective day for studying. So I kind of like to visualise everything that I've got going on this week. So I will write a list, and obviously the things that are most urgent, I kind of try and put that top of the list or highlight them and just make it known that they need to be done first, because I'm quite bad for procrastinating. But I do think it's important to plan a balanced schedule and to leave some time for flexibility as well, because things don't always go to plan. So personally, I'm really bad for underestimating how long referencing takes me. So things like that, I always like to kind of take into account when I make my plan for the week.

Sam [00:02:47] I think I can agree with what's been previously said. I like to schedule some time. So like a block of time during the day where I know I won't have major interruptions and little slots within that where I can really focus, and then take some time so I can have a break as well, because I think that's also important because otherwise you

end up just not being productive at all. But within that, I like to have a bit of flexibility to decide kind of what feels right at that time. If I get really into reading something, I might continue researching a particular topic a bit longer, or if I'm in a good flow for writing, then I think having a little bit of adaptability is really useful so that you can respond to that.

Wendy [00:03:26] I agree with what the students are saying, I think they've got some brilliant strategies. I think it's really important that you do have a flexible and achievable schedule and plan for yourself, because, as we're saying, life happens and you may set yourself something to do and then you just don't fancy doing it when you actually come to it. So, having back up is really useful. And I normally recommend to students that they have catch up zones during the week. So if things take longer than normal or what they planned, because as Megan was saying, things happen and we overestimate what we can get done often in the time that is available. So, if we've got catch up zones, it means we can move into those. So I think those are really, really good things. Another thing that I would add in is we all have times during the day when our concentration is better and times when our concentration isn't so good. And it's really worthwhile taking a bit of time to try and identify when they are, because you can be four times more efficient using those times compared with when you're a bit tired. So that's really useful. Quite often students will have something, maybe late morning, maybe something in the afternoon and maybe in the evening. And those are particularly good times. If you've got something a bit more challenging, you can normally tackle those better at those particular points.

Sam [00:04:58] I just want to come in on that as well, yeah, this is absolutely very true, it's supported by some research if you look at chronotypes, which is essentially where different people have different natural bodily states at different times. So depending on your metabolism and when you're most awake will depend on when you're focused. So just because your friend is either up at nine and in the library studying or staying awake till 12 and getting up late, but doing really late evening sessions, whatever works for you, don't feel pressured to follow other people's example. Find a time that works for you, where you feel comfortable and stick with that.

Megan [00:05:37] Yeah, I was just going to say exactly the same thing. I think some people are inherently more productive at certain times of the day. So I think it's really important to identify that and work around natural productivity as opposed to, you know, following a very structured routine. I think it's very easy to say to someone you could wake up very early tomorrow morning and be very productive. But, you know, that would work for me because personally, I would consider myself a morning person, wouldn't necessarily work for everybody. So the whole you know, the one size fits all doesn't really apply for productivity. And studying as well.

Bekah [00:06:11] Yeah, I think that's super interesting and I really like the idea of the catch-up zone. I'm definitely really guilty of setting myself a bunch of tasks for the week. I mean, I'm going to be so productive. I'm going to do all of this. And I often underestimate how long it will take me to do these things. So catch up zones is something that I'm actually going to impart into my working day, now that you mentioned that, I think that's some really, really great advice. I'm definitely one for using lists and prioritising it that way. You know, at the top of my list, this is my closest deadline and this is what I'm going to work on and I plan in my diary as well what I am going to do for the day. I find that really, really helpful. And on one of my other podcasts, one of the other girls I was speaking to, she also recommended putting in her diary when she was going to sleep and when she was going to eat, just because it's really easy to kind of forget about those things and see them as tasks. And they're obviously really, really important when we are studying, it's

really important that we're fueling our bodies effectively and efficiently with the correct nutrients and also getting a proper night's sleep, really, you know, because we've all kind of chatted about being productive at certain times of the day but without a good night's sleep, you're really going to struggle to find that time of your day where you are more productive because you're so tired. And I think sometimes it can be really difficult to get into your studies because there can be so much distractions, especially when we're all at home just now, whether it be your phone going off and notifications or there's maybe just something a little bit more interesting on the television that you want to watch. And some people say that they kind of thrive under pressure and they need that tight deadline to help them to get their head in the game. Is that something that any of you guys can relate to? And if so, how have you overcome that?

Sam [00:08:05] I think one thing that's really worth focusing on is, yes, you absolutely need to take care of yourself first, and by doing so, you are helping your studies more. So making sure that you get some good sleep is incredibly important and if possible, if that's a routine, you can establish a nice sleep cycle and that you have plenty of time to settle down before you get to bed. Sleep is also incredibly important for memory. It's actually a time where you're consolidating all of your short term memories that you've learnt throughout the day and really making sure that that goes into long term memory and you'll then be able to use it in exams and things. So I know it's really tempting to cut on your sleep if you're very stressed and studying for something, but it will pay off significantly if you just focus on making sure you have a good sleep schedule and then things that you're learning will actually stay in your head better. So definitely go for that and just generally take care of yourself. Get out when you need to. Don't forget to go for walks and exercise a bit. Again, that can help cognition staying, you know, making sure you have good nutrition and that you're eating properly. All these factors are the first thing to take care of. And if you're in a good place, then you will learn a lot better. So never forget to take care of yourself.

Wendy [00:09:20] I agree with everything Sam said, that's something that I talk about in a lot of my workshops is that the number one study strategy anybody ever has is sleep, that if we have good quality sleep, then every other strategy that you use, you will be much more efficient and effective. So the sleep is really important. It also affects you the following day. So if you've had a good night's sleep, it helps the memory from the previous day, but also it means you'll have more focus and concentration the following day. So sleep is your number one. And often some are saying it's the thing that can often go by the board, working until three o'clock in the morning and basically upsetting all our rhythms and so on. So I think that's really important. And I also agree that it's very important to have the correct nutrients with food, but also keep yourself hydrated with fluids. And I know it sounds funny, but actually having plenty of fluids makes you go to the bathroom and if you go to the bathroom, you are getting up, you're walking around and you're moving. And I often say to students that you could spend 50 percent of your time studying actually at a desk. But the other 50 percent, you need to be moving around in some way or another. So that could be creating posters on the wall. It could be going for a walk and listening to a podcast or listening back to something. And that factors in with the exercise as well. Studies are showing that exercise after studying seems to help with memory and retention of information. So, yes, lots of helpful things from Sam, there.

Megan [00:11:11] I think going back to needing that pressure to kind of get more work done and be productive, I think I'm definitely guilty of that and it's not something I usually admit. But I think sometimes I work better when I have that little bit of extra pressure. You know, the deadline is creeping up, but I think saying that it can also be quite damaging and

dangerous for mental health as well, you know, because that then leads to a lot of frustration and guilt if we don't manage to get everything done and obviously stress and anxiety inducing as well. And I think that, you know, sometimes the students talk about this a lot is experiencing a burnout. And I don't think sometimes we realise we are going through that until it's too late and we are very overwhelmed with stress. So I think that recognising your limits and taking regular breaks can be just as effective as intense study periods. I think that's glamorised quite a lot as well. It shouldn't be been. I think we need to start prioritising sleep and eating properly just as much as being productive and getting work done.

Bekah [00:12:05] Absolutely, I completely agree with everything you've just said there Megan, like, wow, like I definitely work to deadlines. I think you do need that little bit of pressure to kind of give you that kick to sometimes get something done. If you think I can do it tomorrow, I can do it tomorrow, then suddenly you can't put it off. And there's definitely positives and negatives of both, you know, like you say, the pressure and you can get really stressed and then possibly you're not producing your best work as well because you've maybe not had time to proof read that essay or something. But I've now tried to kind of change the way that I'm working and set myself more achievable goals each day. So whether that be I'm going to write an introduction, and it's got to be achievable if I say I'm going to write a full essay, that isn't going to happen, I'm going to feel disappointed at the end of the day that I've not achieved what I wanted to do. But if it's I'm going to do my introduction, then I'm going to do my paragraph or whatever section then I can feel happy. And if I manage to go over and above that, then brilliant. But obviously, I've got to have the time management correct that if I want to do that myself, those small, achievable goals, I guess you need to be more prepared in advance because you can't do that if your deadline's tomorrow and you've not started till that day. And definitely I'm a big, big believer in getting out and getting some exercise. It really, really helps to not only reduce your stress, but induce like creative thinking. And, you know, you're getting away from your computer screen, all the digital fatigue and stuff you know, the stress of just sitting at your computer, getting out, maybe doing a little bit of exercise. It doesn't have to be vigorous. I simply can't just be a walk in nature for ten, fifteen minutes. It doesn't have to be much at all. But really, just getting out there and taking regular breaks will really help your motivation and productivity.

Godlin [00:13:58] I think time management skills are really important because in my flat I live with seven people, so there's a lot of distraction. So what I like to do is I like to treat University like a nine to five job. I just go to library and then just do that and then come back and then have my catch up time and basically go on a walk with my friends. And that's just easier to do. And it's like easy to plan out what goals I can achieve.

Wendy [00:14:26] I think plans are really good because they give your goals and challenges a home, and if you've got a home for them and you've written it down, you're more likely to actually do it. So the psychologists amongst us will be able to say that it's trying to get the brain from well, that's something I can do, to actually I will do it, to I am actually doing it. And if we can make those goals and challenges small enough, it sort of lowers the barrier to motivation. So any big task, if we can break them down into smaller ones that are more achievable, we're more likely to say, oh that's something I can do. A big essay can often feel really overwhelming and therefore we keep putting it off. But if we can say, right, I'm just going to look at this particular aspect and break it down into small bite sized chunks, the barrier to actually starting it is reduced. But the other factor that's really important is rewards, and often we will reward ourself at the very end, you know, because it's going to be I get an A1 in my essay, which as much as it would be really nice

to get, the likelihood of that happening is perhaps not that high. But what we should be doing is rewarding ourselves not just for completing the actual big task or even each of the many stages. We should be rewarding ourselves for starting. And that is really important. So the fact that I've started it, I'm going to do something that rewards the fact that I've started and this reinforces this positive behaviour. So rewards are really important. What that reward will be will be up to you. And going back to the to-do list, it could be not just having a point where you're going to eat and when you're going to sleep, which are really important, but may be really factoring in those times when you are going to check your messages, see what people are saying on WhatsApp or Twitter or whatever it is. But you factor that in because otherwise you will be wanting to think about that. I put my phone on aeroplane mode or actually have it in a completely different room for the time that I'm actually working. And 30 minutes or an hour, it's not a big thing to be able to say. Right. I'm going to put it out of the way to allow myself a bit of focus and concentration and avoid distractions. So I think that's important as well.

Megan [00:17:06] I just wanted to go back to what Godlin was saying about going to the library to study, so I think it's really important when planning because a lot of people prefer studying in a consistent place. You know, people identify one place where they're the most focused. One thing I've struggled with a lot during lockdown is having to work in the same space where I'm supposed to be relaxing and socialising. I think it's very hard to switch off from your phone and work emails and things when you're in the same space. So I think that's one thing I miss a lot, is spending some time in the library and then perhaps going to a cafe, because sometimes I like conversational background noise or sometimes absolute silence. Space is really important to consider as well when you're planning your study schedule.

Sam [00:17:50] Yeah, absolutely. The context is really important and finding somewhere that works for you and also having that be reliable is actually really beneficial for learning. So, again, there's a term in memory called context reinstatement. And what that is, is essentially it's easier to recall information if you were in a similar environment when you learnt it. So if you've ever listen to a podcast, say, well, going for a walk, if you walk along that same route, you might discover that suddenly the things that you were listening to come flooding back. And that's context reinstatement. That's the cues that are all in the environment around you. So if you are working somewhere consistently, you will start to pick that up and that will help you remember. And then if you are testing yourself, writing an assignment or doing an exam in that situation as well, it will again kind of help that memory come back. So that is another way you can just make your revising a little bit more effective. And to what Wendy said, yeah, don't be results orientated. It seems really simple, but if you were entirely focusing on what your results are, you're going to neglect the process. And that's really important. So do make sure to reward yourself and focus on what are you actually doing each day that contributes to it, because ultimately there is an element of chance in which questions come up and just how things turn out, and what the marking is like. So focusing on the things that are entirely in your control, the process, the day by day and making that as good as possible is really key.

Wendy [00:19:22] Yes, I agree with that. I often say to students that actually it's the process or the journey that you take that's actually the important part, the steps that you progress through and that the essay will happen anyway, and you will submit on time. So it's those miniature steps that are the important things, not the actual big thing at the end, and also with Sam and the idea of actually being in the same place. It can also be helpful to be somewhere different because you remember it because it was a bit more odd and because you were somewhere else. There's a technique that we cover in the Memory

Tricks Workshop, which is called the journey technique, which is similar, and where you use the same route and each week maybe you want to focus on a different aspect and you sort of say right between this lamp post and the next lamp post, as I'm walking along, I'll try and remember these three key facts. And by doing that several times a week, it really helps to reinforce it. It links in with the old Roman Villa Technique that certain objects and doorknobs and traffic lights and things like that, they can be associated with various facts and ideas. And so I think that's a really good thing to be aware of.

Bekah [00:20:49] I think that's such an interesting perspective and something that I feel like will really help a lot of our listeners, if they are kind of struggling. It's quite often when we've got, like study tips being shared that they can be quite similar. And obviously there is the importance of the balanced diet and the sleep and exercise. All these things come as a package to how we can learn. But ultimately, it's kind of these processes which people are often looking for support like retaining that information. So I think it's really important to have that perspective. And you can feel, as students and as human beings in general, actually, it can feel really hard sometimes to constantly be on top of things. And you might feel like you're continually chasing your tail. So kind of just on that. Do you guys have any helpful study tips, or have you come across any resources when you've been studying that have helped you to feel more in control of your learning?

Sam [00:21:46] So absolutely. A few things that I'd say. Well, firstly, we actually had a lecturer until recently called Emily Norton and one of her big study topics was pedagogy and how to best learn, and learning strategies or lecture recordings and how to use those. And those are really interesting. So one clear thing is to be active in your learning. So you may think that, okay, rereading over your notes for the fiftieth time is making it sink in, but it's really not. And if you're just sitting there with notes or a highlighter, you would be much better to put your notes away, cover them up, see if you can write down everything that's in them, see if you can express it clearly and concisely. Try and teach it to someone else, you know, put it on flashcards and test yourself as to what everything is. But actually having that recall where you're not just looking over it and you can kind of fool yourself into thinking that you know it all already, but you actually have to retrieve that information. You actually have to put it down in something that's slightly similar to the kind of context you're going to see in an exam. And one of the things I would say is space practice is so much better than last practice. There's a wealth of evidence on this. If you are going to learn something, it is better to do a little bit over a long time than it is to do one big clump where you just focus. You get a lot more interference that way, whereas each time you come back to it, you're reconsolidating and reconsolidating and you're learning will be much better for it. So if you are going to schedule learning, it's better to do, you know, 20 minutes a day over a few weeks than it is to do a whole, you know, two afternoons, two days before the exam.

Godlin [00:23:32] Yeah, I completely agree with that. One of the resources that I like to use is from the University actually, is called Achieve. And there are examples of reports and what's included in a report and there's loads of things in there. And when I'm just unsure about a new assignment there's like guidelines and markings and schemes in there, which I find really helpful. Just when you've done your report, just look over it all and think have I included that, or have I missed anything out?

Sam [00:23:58] Yeah, if you're going to write to a test, then make sure that, you know, the learning outcomes or what's to be included, what's going to be marked in the sections that you're supposed to have and just go back and tick box, check that off at the end, because that will be the marking scene that often your markers will have. And so it will be very

obvious if you're missing something. And just take five minutes to check through that you have included all of these things and that they're fairly well signposted can really help.

Wendy [00:24:22] Okay, well, it's nice to hear from Godlin that someone's using our resources, but it's really good that people are accessing them and finding them useful. So thank you very much for that, Godlin. So within Achieve, or Achieve plus, we've got a load of resources, including 20 top tips for motivation and study. And picking up on what Sam was saying, I'm a real advocate of active learning and that we need to personalise the information. I would say I would have to Wendyfy it because the information that's presented has come from somebody else's brain. And I've got to actually go through that process. And so I do a little cycle that's covering quite a few things. And it's basically, first of all, what do I know about this? What's my current knowledge? What do I need or want to learn or what gaps have I got? How am I going to do that? What strategy am I going to use? And then checking, what have I learnt? What do I now know that I didn't know before? And that's part of the active learning cycle. So that you are trying to make sure that what you're doing is interactive. It's encouraging you and making connections with the information. So that's a really good thing to think about, know, want, how, learnt. And that sort of thing is used in a lot of the handouts, the 20 top tips and creating planners and various other things. Just picking on the other thing was what I call short focused, little often. And that's what we should be thinking about, is keep our study session short, but focus on a specific aspect, something tangible that we can work on. So we're doing little bits, but we're doing lots of them. And that sort of fits in with what Sam was saying about we're better doing several shorter sessions rather than trying to do one big thing and doing it over a longer period of time. It allows the brain to create connections and links and assimilate the information. So he made a good point there.

Megan [00:26:29] I was just going to follow on from what Sam was saying about the active studying as well. I found that really helpful when I had to memorise a lot of theory and things like that for exams. I think that was my one of my struggles for coming to university because I do English now. So I don't really have exams and my biggest challenge of the week is kind of setting very specific time allocations for reading and then doing the studying as well. But I definitely agree with that point. I think if you can explain something to somebody else, I think that just is one of the most effective ways of studying.

Wendy [00:27:02] Yes, I think that's really important too Megan. I would say there are these three things, if you can write about it, you can explain it to someone else and you can discuss it usually means you can understand it so that you so apply it. That's the main thing. So if you can explain it and discuss it, write about it and apply it, it's that application stage, it's that one step further, it usually means you can understand it.

Bekah [00:27:34] Great, thanks guys. We have a lot of services available at the University to support our students and we've kind of touched on this already. But Wendy, I wonder, as an academic skills advisor, you can tell our listeners a little bit more about how your team can support students

Wendy [00:27:51] The Student Learning Service actually works with all students from first year right the way through to PhD students across the board. Doesn't matter what subject area they're studying. And we have help for general academic skills. So that's my area. So everything from planning and time management, notetaking, presentation skills, revision exams, all that side of things. We've also got our specialist area on academic writing, which has been touched on already by Godlin with the videos that my colleagues have done. And we all have workshops that work alongside this and also, we have handouts on

this in Achieve and Achieve plus. We've also got help for mathematics with our mathematics support advisor. And we also work with students who've got a specific learning difference, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and so on. So we work on the academic side, which is different to Students Support who are really looking more at the logistical side of putting provisions in place. So we work across the whole of the University. We don't proofread and we can't work with students on work that is prior to submission. But we can work with feedback on pieces that have already been submitted and they've got the grades.

Bekah [00:29:20] Thanks, Wendy, that's really helpful to know, and I think that will be really helpful to some of our listeners. And I just wondered Sam, Megan, Godlin, as students, have you guys used any of our services at the University? And if so, have you found them useful?

Sam [00:29:34] So one thing that I will mention here is I'm dyslexic and I found a lot of the resources for that really useful. And also for that, the assistive technologies can also be a big help. So you can get some through the University and there's just some generally. So if you are really struggling to read 50 papers in a week that you need to go over or something ridiculous, then have a look at things like text to speech functions, because there are a lot of ways that can just help with that. If you struggle with a specific thing, if there's different ways you like to learn and use and have information, then those can be really good. So just make sure to check through the resources and see if there's anything that's useful for you. And if you have a different way of learning, then that's great, because often there are ways to support and facilitate that. And if you can learn in a way that suits you best, then that really will help you.

Godlin [00:30:29] And I've used a resource for feedback as well. Sometimes when lectures give you feedback, it's very vague and you don't understand what they're trying to tell you. So I had booked an appointment last semester just to see about one of my reports because it didn't do as well as I thought. And it was nice to just talk to someone and see what I could get better and what I should do and what I've missed, basically.

Megan [00:30:51] Yeah. I've also used the resource for feedback as well as I think it's one of the most effective ways to progress and to obviously do better, you know, in the next assignment. But also one thing as well as all of those is Student Support is available. I think one thing that I have done in the last year as well is contact my personal tutor, so they're not my tutor for my specific modules, but it's nice to have that kind of consistent reassurance because I think sometimes it can be quite overwhelming when you're constantly changing modules and classes. And so to have one person who is there, who has been there really since the first year, who you can go to if you're struggling or you're overwhelmed with studying. I think that's also very important.

Bekah [00:31:29] Thanks for sharing, guys. That's so nice to hear that you've had some positive experiences using our University support services and they're helping you through your revision and your learning, and progressing in your studies. It's so nice to hear and I hope that some of our listeners that are listening who maybe haven't used any of our services, will have heard your stories and then, you know, tap into that resource as well to help them. And I would just like to end the episode by thanking you guys so much for coming along and chatting today. I've learnt a lot from you guys, although I'm not a student, there is definitely things that I can apply into my working day to help me work more effective and produce more quality work. So I'm definitely going to try some of the kind of processes that you've chatted about today. And again, just thank you so much for

coming on to the episode. And if any of our listeners would like any more information about any of the themes we've discussed today, please visit the University of Aberdeen website and search StudyWell, and you'll find all of the links to the resources that we've discussed in our episode today.

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