Balancing Study, Life and Play

Podcast

Work-Life Balance is a common issue for students, but often it’s not looked at closely to see how it can be managed successfully. People think they should just be able to manage their life without considering this as a particular skill. Once you leave school, your life isn’t structured by anyone except you. Many things compete for your time … study, your job, relationships, recreational activities, family. At uni, as a general rule, students are encouraged to do 2 hours of private study for every contact hour of their course.

Most students also have a job to support themselves, so just consider realistically WHAT proportion of time can be spent working in relation to your class attendance and private study. Maybe the most helpful way to talk about this is for me to introduce you to one of my clients, TIM, who was concerned about being excluded from his course because he was failing. Tim had already changed courses because he failed all his subjects in the first semester he enrolled in. He found that he was quite distracted by university life and the relative freedoms it entailed. It was fun and easier to hang out with friends rather than to go to classes, and as no-one commented on whether he was there or not. Initially there were no repercussions for him academically.

This made it even harder to stay motivated. He was now failing in his second semester as well, and became worried that he was falling into a pattern which would ultimately mean he would not be able to successfully complete his course and graduate from University. I asked Tim what the blocks were in preventing him from studying effectively. What could he identify as the barriers to success?

TIM: Well, I guess I didn’t attend all my classes for a start. Now I make sure I go to every class this semester. BUT I’m a bit worried about how I’ll handle the assessment and do all the reading. I don’t know what to actually DO and WHEN to do it. When I get home after classes, all the study I have to do seems like a huge pile in my head. I don’t know where to begin, so I put it off. Then I feel like a failure and think: “What’s the point?”

LIZ: Right …so it sounds like an important step would be to learn some time management techniques to help organize that big, unmanageable pile into logical, smaller tasks that are actually achievable. Starting to achieve some outcomes for yourself will encourage you to feel it is possible to succeed. The first step could be to get a semester planner and mark in when all the assignments are due and when the exam period takes place. Then you can work backwards from these deadlines to work out when you need to start working on your assignments and preparing for your exams. Does that sound useful?

TIM: Yeah, I guess so. It would help to get an idea of what really needs to be done for each semester.

LIZ: Mmm….and then you can go on to develop a more detailed study plan which you can set out at the beginning of each week. Look at what times you have available for study. There may be spaces during the day you hadn’t thought could be used for study…free periods before tutes or after lectures provide valuable times for study.

TIM: Yeah I could probably do some study at work too. In my job I can read when it’s not busy.

LIZ: Great…another useful thing is a task list as many students carry around an unstructured list in their heads, but don’t write it down for easy reference and prioritization. You can list all of the things required to do for each subject in that week including chapters you are required to read, preparation for assignments and upcoming exams. Once you have your weekly TASK LIST it’s important to break down this list so that each task is written out as a series of steps required to complete the task. This means that the big pile of work doesn’t seem so daunting anymore because it’s broken down into manageable parts to do each day.

TIM: Ok. Maybe it would seem more manageable like that.

LIZ: So what else, apart from these organizational strategies actually prevents you studying?

TIM: Hmmmm... There just never seems to be enough time for everything when I work 30 hours a week to pay my expenses. I feel like I’m on a treadmill sometimes. That’s the reason I like to chill out with friends instead of going to classes.
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LIZ: It's not unusual to feel like this Tim, have you thought about working fewer hours during term time and maybe increasing your earning capacity in the holidays? Remember the proportion of 2 hrs of study per class hour and look at how many hours you are working.

TIM: I suppose I could talk to my boss and see what she says.

LIZ: Great idea.

TIM: Still I can't seem to get myself motivated in the time I have. Sometimes I just hate doing a particular task...it rates up there with going to the dentist or cleaning out the fridge! I just don't really want to do it.

LIZ: Is there any way you can make it more enjoyable? Maybe try doing a task you don't want to do first, while you have more energy and reward yourself after you've finished it. Often it helps to have another student nearby for encouragement and to keep you on track!

TIM: Yeah I hate studying alone in my flat….I find it much easier to just hang out and play computer games.

LIZ: Well, let's think about your study habits and needs, because if you know yourself, the situations you work best in, and the way you learn best, then you can plan for tailor made study. Ask yourself "what's my concentration span like?", "is it different with different subjects or the time of day?"

Where do you best work and what conditions enhance you ability to learn?
Have a think about what your major time wasters are and look at how you use them to avoid unpleasant study tasks.
What regular commitments do you have with work, time out with friends, internet use, sport?
They are ALL important. The trick is in the Balance!

TIM: I guess that when I'm with my friends, I don't want to miss out on the fun by going off on my own to study or to lectures. I feel guilty if I don't go but I want to be flexible enough to hang out with my friends.

LIZ: Yes….many students find this bind when they are not studying, the logic being "any time I'm not studying is wasted time". But your brain needs a rest after concentrating, just as your legs need a rest after running. You do need relaxation and concentration. It's just about the right balance. Schedule in your recreation times so you don't feel like you are missing out.

TIM: Something else that seems to stop me getting on with study is that I feel like I might not do a good job. I'd rather not do an assignment than do it badly ....

LIZ: Mmmm….perfectionism can get in the way of submitting assignments …but what is the perfect assignment? Ask yourself "What level of performance on the task would I expect from a friend?". Be kind to yourself.

(LIZ) Tim was motivated to change his study habits and get more out of his course. I wondered what effect those “I should do it perfectly” type thoughts or the “What’s the point and I’m a failure” thoughts were having on Tim’s motivation. So in our next session we worked on helping Tim to counter the effects of his negative thinking by asking himself “What is the evidence of that?” and, “Is this is productive to think this way?”

Tackling Tim’s inner voice or “self talk” was a key factor in addressing the difficulties he was having managing time and the panic he associated with the demand of study. By learning to challenge his thinking, Tim was freed up to get on with tasks without being paralysed by his fears and doubts.

The next time I saw Tim he was looking much happier.
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LIZ: So how has it been?

TIM: Great! I feel so much more in control. I’ve cut back a bit on the hours I work but mainly I’m using the time I have more efficiently. I go to all my lectures and tutes. Actually, I go to Uni an hour or two before my classes and study which I do in the Uni café because I like the background noise. I use my spare time between lectures to summarize lecture notes and plan assessment tasks. And I’ve organized regular weekly social events with my friends, just a few nights a week where we catch up at the pub or play sport. That way I have something to look forward to and I don’t feel I’m missing out.

LIZ: That’s great Tim, Well done.

TIM: Thanks. I guess what’s changed the most is that I feel I’m being easier on myself. Instead of saying “I’m going to fail” or “This won’t be good enough, I tell myself: “I’m going to do my best” or “I’ll survive even if I don’t do well in this particular essay.” It’s weird but by taking away the pressure to be perfect, I seem to get more done!

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(LIZ): Tim’s academic performance improved considerably over the rest of the semester but what was most important was that he was a lot happier and more confident.

When you really look at it …if you are enrolled at Uni, the purpose of being here is to study, so this is a priority. HOWEVER, you study best if you are organized and have a healthy balance of different aspects of life like exercise, social life, job, enough sleep, and a balanced diet.

Tim had already decided to commit to attend all his classes which was a good start. He also used strategies to plan his academic work on a daily, weekly and semester basis. This allowed him to see on paper that is was possible to achieve good outcomes. He also used strategies to counter the negative thinking he fell into as a result of previous failures. His academic self esteem was gradually restored when he began to hand in assessments on time after planning them successfully. When his results showed that he had put the time I profitably, he felt encouraged and motivated to continue with more of the same. He felt he had more agency in his own life and it showed in his results.

Thanks for listening to this pod-cast. I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP Website, on the Counselling Service website and on the Study and Learning Centre and of course , you are always welcome to attend a workshop or come and speak to a counsellor or learning adviser in person.