

Blog by Sabina Goranova, 3rd year BA Communication Studies

Looking after #1



Well, its that time of year again. Exams are here and you may not be too keen to go for a walk in the cold weather. Of course, there is also the unprecedented global event that none of us have no experience in navigating. The reality is that a lot of us are struggling to adapt to this temporary life and it is important to know, you are not alone!

As the academic year started, our hot air balloon of excitement of virtually “going back to university” is slowly deflating and showing signs of drifting back to earth. If you are first year back at university, I salute you for persevering as this is not what you were hoping for. For those continuing this year, like me, you are probably feeling like you have been suddenly torn out of your routine and comfort zone of campus life and parachuted into the middle of a jungle in a surreal survivor-type gameshow.

But, getting back to our hot-air balloon scenario, it may be drifting closer to the ground, however, we need to remember something. We are humans. In the words of evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, of the billions of species in existence since the birth of our planet, humans are the only ones to have acquired higher intelligence to be able to sustain a civilization ¹. The problem with our complex nervous system and everything that makes us human is what makes us the most vulnerable when we are isolated in time of crisis.



However, it also makes us highly innovative, resilient and we can in fact find a way to fix the hot air balloon, if not completely by ourselves, then definitely with help of others.

This month I want to share with you some key insights and coping strategies. And who better to speak with than Scott Pope from the Student Counselling & Development and Raven Lovering from Learning Skills Services (LSS). Throughout both conversations, I felt that they knew exactly how I was feeling (and I am sure the rest of the student and staff population also).



Firstly, it's fair to say that this time of year is generally difficult with pressures of exams, shorter days, and holidays. Of course, this year, is more of a challenge with the added stress of uncertainty, finances, job security, health and of course - isolation. Despite the seemingly long time now since we have all been at home, Raven pointed out that in fact it has only been less than a year and because of the abrupt transition, we are still in the process of adjusting. It is important to adjust our expectations accordingly because everything is outside of our norm. Being off campus and away from our established student community physically adds to this feeling of isolation and stress. Raven's tips for maintaining a sense of connection is simply reaching out to another person in your class or that one friend you always say hi to on campus with a simple phone call. Another way of maintaining that connection and curbing isolation is picking one thing that interests you whether it is language, video gaming or a book club. Most of these clubs still meet on a regular basis. Scott explains that this kind of simple contact with someone you have a shared experience with can dramatically reduce stress levels.



The other big stress felt by all is Zoom and online learning fatigue. Sitting in front of a computer for lectures, readings as well as socialising is a far cry from the variety of interactions we had on campus like in person lectures, tutorials, library and social spaces. Scott's top tips were to switch off the camera and listen instead whilst taking notes and go for a walk, even around the block three times a day. Whilst on this walk focus on other objects around you to help reduce strain on the eyes and to regulate the breathing. Even standing up every 20 minutes and doing simple squats can help promote blood

and oxygen distribution throughout the body and boost the brain function. Raven stresses that even if we think online is easier because of no commuting, there is distinct lack of a buffer compared to in person lectures. The accountability for checking up on announcements, going through readings (with minimal guidance) as well as completing work falls to the student who also becomes the teacher.

Taking regular breaks seems difficult but even a couple of minutes away will help clear the mind and even a small change like changing rooms in which you study or the position of the desk can help you feel like you are changing scenery.



Breathe in

Breathe out

Scott Pope runs live Mindful

Meditation sessions on Zoom throughout the month (see below for details*), explains how meditation and breathing can help.

Meditation helps reduce cognitive stress by focusing your mind into your “calm zone”. By slowing down and meditating, even a few minutes, you can centre and focus your thoughts. You can then recognize the thoughts that pull you away from the “calm” state. The act of refocusing strengthens the part of the brain that can be applied to studies also. If you are unable to make a live session, there are three audio meditations that can be found here on the YU Counselling [website](#).



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Another way of reducing stress is by getting help and homing in on your study skills. Anxiety can be greatly reduced through knowing how to approach long readings or exam prep, in the most time efficient way. Raven explains how the [LSS Peers](#) can help with time management, critical thinking and other essential skills. The drop-in hours and workshops are open to all and are particularly useful for first year students. If you attend a

workshop and need further guidance, you can then book a 1-to-1 peer academic coaching session. The Exam Prep workshop is happening on Wednesday 2nd December 5-6pm (to register go to: <https://www.yorku.ca/sld/event/exam-prep-9>)

I want to say thank you to Scott and Raven for taking time out to speak with me. I am focusing on taking those mini walking breaks and trying a few visualisation exercises to help focus on my calm space and positive things. So, to end on a high note (pardon the pun), I hope that these skills and resources can help us all guide our hot air balloons to a softer landing!



*Visit ACMAPS events page for full list of workshops regular events such as Mindful Meditation and Café Hour where you can drop in and talk about your needs and exchange ideas with other mature students as well as our Peer Mentors. The December schedule is out now:

<https://acmaps.info.yorku.ca/events/>

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Mayr, Ernst. "Does It Pay to Acquire High Intelligence?" Perspectives in biology and medicine 37.3 (1994): 337–338. Web.

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