

Re-Orienting Mature Students Back to Campus!

September is here, the humidity is gone, cooler nights are upon us, and the superstore shelves are heaving with back-to-school stationery. If, like me, you can't walk past these sections without some new gel pens and post-its "accidentally" ending up in your basket, then you are definitely feeling that start of year excitement. Whether you have kids who are also going back to school or whether it is just you, you will most likely be experiencing deeper emotions under that excitement. A mix of anxiety, uncertainty, happiness, and pride make for an interesting and confusing combination for us to process. But this is what makes us human. The problem is, when you have such a hotch-potch of emotions all at once, you may be thinking "I am the only one going through this." Well, let me tell you, you are not the only one. Having spoken to mentors and listened to many podcasts on building a resilient mindset, I can assure you that your feelings are valid and real. Just because we are mature students, it doesn't mean that we know all the answers. Especially now, with the added pressure of uncertainty over what the "new normal" will be like, it is vital that we recognise that we have access to resources and support from our university community to overcome these anxieties.

In August, ACMAPS, in collaboration with Learning Skills Services (LSS), hosted a virtual event "Re-Orienting Mature Students Back to Campus". The session was facilitated by ACMAPS Mature Student Peer Mentors **Shani Randhawa** and **Jennifer Tran** and LSS Peer Mentor **Veronica Rocha**. The purpose of the event was to reassure and inform students about what York University is doing to ensure a safe return to campus. Topics covered included looking at anxiety and coping strategies for dealing with it as well as tips for remote learning.

To start us off **Shani** talked about what Anxiety is. To put it briefly, anxiety is a worry and apprehension around uncertainty of future events that can cause us distress. Rather than just evoking feeling of nervousness and worry, anxiety is a combination of many physical and psychological responses. Specifically, speaking on Post-Pandemic Anxiety, this is something that many people are experiencing as we start slowly coming out of the “collective traumatic experience.” This form of anxiety is a type of social anxiety and makes us feel nervous about social situations, what to say/not to say, safety around crowds, keeping your children safe, and being emotionally drained from social interactions. Shani emphasised that this form of anxiety is the result of prolonged social restrictions, and the key message is that it is completely normal to feel this way. It is important to acknowledge that it will get easier in small steps rather than something that will change overnight. She offered 5 coping strategies for dealing with this social anxiety and helping reduce circling thoughts:

1. Prioritise your plans – you don’t need to attend all social engagements and gatherings. Select those events you are comfortable with where you feel comfortable. Work on those you need to acclimatise to first like school and work.
2. Acknowledge & re-focus – give yourself permission to feel the anxiety but re-focus your attention away from endless circles of worry to other things.
3. 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding technique – a way to bring yourself back into the present moment. You focus on 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.
4. Breathing through it – extend the inhale and exhale while breathing such as to the count to 3 slowly.
5. Moving through it – this could be a few minutes away from where you were sitting or gentle exercise to get your body moving before coming back.

To put these fears to rest, it is important to: equip yourself with knowledge (such as resources available); set realistic intentions (it is ok to feel this way); communication (don’t be afraid to communicate or ask questions about what you are comfortable with); empathy (have compassion for how others might be feeling).

Jennifer then went over the [12 Ways York is Welcoming YU Back](#).

These are measure that York University has put together, in line with public health guidelines, to ensure the safety of all university community members as we return to more in-person courses. **Please note the announcements on this site are updated regularly and you should check back for the latest developments.** To summarise these at the time of the event:

Enhanced ventilation & air filtration – hospital grade filtration systems in classrooms and ventilation to allow for better fresh air circulation and purging between classes.

Vaccination – Requirement for all York community members and visitors to campus to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (subject to medical and human rights exemptions, in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations). Several pop-up clinics will be happening to support this drive.

Rapid screening & testing on campus - For the fall, York will offer voluntary testing for asymptomatic members of the York community.

Automated screening & case management – A daily screening tool will need to be completed prior to attending campus.

Physical distancing and plexiglass barriers - York University follows all public health guidance on physical distancing and encourages you to continue to give others their space where possible and avoid congregating indoors.

Monitoring building capacity & campus density - As capacity limits have been relaxed for the Fall term under the latest guidance from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, York continues to monitor the status of the pandemic and will be prepared to follow any new direction from the province.

Hand sanitization & touchless entrances – Regular cleaning and sanitization will take place of all communal areas on campus as well as implementation of touchless sanitizing stations throughout.

Required masks or face coverings - The Fall 2021 guidance, issued by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and Toronto Public Health, mandates the continued requirement for masks and face coverings for indoor spaces. Vending machines will be available if you have forgotten your mask.

Clear signage – health and safety measures such as designated space signage will be implemented throughout campus.

Safe gathering areas - Designated areas for smoking and for eating will be clearly marked on Keele and Glendon campuses. The university requests that, where possible, you eat outdoors or eat solely in designated eating areas.

Required health & safety plans and return to work planning – Each area/division/faculty will have their own workplace safety plan to follow.

Regular community updates – All community members should check their emails for announcements, YU social media channels, Virtual Town Hall meetings as well as the [YU Better Together Website](#) for regular updates.

Victoria Rocha from [LSS](#) then concluded the session with 5 tips for those who will be doing remote learning. These were:

1-Build and keep a routine, even if you are doing asynchronous classes, and personalise a realistic schedule for your lifestyle. Communicate your schedule with your family so they respect this schedule.

2-Creating a comfortable study space is important to ensure you can separate your work/study/family life.

3-Being an active learner is important to succeed as a student because it will allow for better engagement with your course. So, participate where you can in group work, forums, or anything else that is available for your course.

4-Finding your motivation is important. If you lack motivation at any point, reflect on why you chose this course and why it is important to you. And, schedule breaks or other motivators such as snacks to reward yourself after periods of study.

5-Maintaining balance is one of the most important tips. Even when online, trying to stay socially connected is important to maintain healthy energy and motivation. For more tips and learning skills visit their website: <https://www.yorku.ca/sclcd/learning-skills/>

Shani concluded with a couple of resources that are available to support you. [Student Counselling, Health & Well-Being](#) offers workshops such as stress management, change management and is an excellent resource for counselling services. [ACMAPS](#) offers regular Café Hours and Mindful Meditation sessions as well as many other workshops such as Student-Parents Connect and the [Student Peer Mentor program](#) that you can register for.

A recording of the full session can be found [HERE](#). Thank you to the facilitators for this informative session.

Wishing you a successful and safe academic year ahead!

acmaps@yorku.ca
<https://acmaps.info.yorku.ca/events/>
Tel: 416-736-5770
Twitter: @yorkacmaps
Facebook: @YorkACMAPS
Instagram: @acmapsyorku

Sabina Goranova,
Mature Student, 4th year BA (Hons)
Communication and Media Studies