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## Helping students cope – lessons from the pandemic.

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As a positive psychologist, I have had a special interest with students' experience of stress – both those external factors that are perceived as a challenge or a threat, such as assignment demands, deadlines, transitioning to university and building social and academic relationships; and those psychological factors, such as coping style and personality, drawn on to manage those demands and which ultimately impact on wellbeing. This, in turn, has been operationalized through a multiple of indices, from measures of mental health; to life and course satisfaction; anxiety and happiness.

Most research looking at stress uses measures that broadly ask you to what degree you are distressed (e.g. the Perceived Stress Scale, Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1994) but the relationship between stress and performance is more often curvilinear – students need a certain level of stress to perform at their optimum. The stress associated with achievement is called eustress (Gibbons, 2008) and is missed by those more traditional scales. If stress demands are rated as minor or are perceived as 'far off' (the deadline is a month away not three days away) the student may lack drive and struggle to shake off that ogre, procrastination. Too much stress or anxiety can inhibit performance too as students feel overwhelmed, perhaps by mounting academic demands, looming deadlines and balancing social and university life.

The most widely used measure of the student experience is the National Student Survey (NSS) and all final year students are invited to complete it between January and March. Many universities will amend this survey and invite their students not yet in their final year to complete it as a barometer of student satisfaction. Around 4.5 million students complete the NSS each year. I have modified the NSS, replacing the Likert scale with a hassle and uplifting scale. Students rate the factors measured (e.g. teaching demands, university support) once in terms of the extent to which they contribute as a 'hassle' and again as an 'uplift'. This allows me to capture those experiences associated with distress and, importantly, those associated with enhanced performance and eustress.

Intervening between external experiences of stress and its impact on wellbeing are a range of coping styles and influences on coping, such as support control, self-efficacy and personality. Consistent with the broad literature in health psychology, support and control are powerful buffers. The more students rate support as an uplift the more it is associated with optimum performance and wellbeing (Gibbons, 2015). However, during the pandemic, support (from peers, tutors and the wider university) was not predictive as an uplift but as a hassle (Gibbons, 2021, 2022). The period of remote and virtual learning was a steep learning curve for students and educators and this finding suggests there was scope for both parties to make adjustments to create a more effective learning environment. This result also reflected the broader disappointment students experienced during the pandemic, deprived of the usual university and socially-based in-person contacts (how many of you, like me noticed that palpable spring in the step of our returning students after the pandemic!).

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, some found a formula and I detail this in two studies, one available in the latest issue of the [IETI](#). To whet your appetite, students high on conscientiousness and control were much more likely to interpret stress demands as opportunities to achieve. The control measure was learnt not dispositional control, that is, those students who developed key study skills early performed better. Conscientiousness is a marker of effort and this is better executed where students have honed study skills early. Most courses cover a range of study skills but I would ask if you are doing this early enough, and, more importantly, are you teaching it and assessing it in a way that means students are actually demonstrating those skills (on literature searching, on correctly referencing, on developing coherent academic arguments) *before* they have to submit an assignment? The earlier we can empower our students with these skills, the more their effort will bear fruit and their coping will improve as they grow in context control. As universities look to a new post-pandemic norm, some of the teaching adaptations used during the pandemic will remain, such as in-person and virtual learning and there is scope to increase meaningful support in these learning environments. A salutary lesson to come out of the pandemic for educators, is the need to incorporate stress management initiatives into student induction initiatives and not just in important peer support networking but in the range of cognitive strategies associated with effective student coping – such as, for example, in hardiness (Maddi, 2008), optimism, defensive optimism (Seligman 2008, Gibbons, 2022), and, for those high in anxiety, defensive pessimism (Gibbons, 2021).



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