

Mental Health and Student Engagement – A Personal Account

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Going to university is a daunting prospect for many students. Moving away from home, family and friends, can leave many people feeling worried and isolated. Personally, moving from the countryside to the city, knowing no one, and being separated from my closest friends and family has been a struggle to get used to. I understand that many students face a wide range of problems, some of which are extremely challenging. However, I can only write about my own experiences and the challenges I faced as a first year combined honours student.

Combined honours students face particular hurdles to social integration, compared to single honours students. We are not surrounded by the same peers every day, going to the same lectures together. This means we have less opportunity to integrate with course and subject peers. Those people doing the same subject have the opportunity to form friendship groups quickly and easily, as they spend a lot of time together. Whereas, combined honours students take different subjects, and a range of modules and don't spend all their time with one set of peers. I became increasingly nervous to approach people. Although I made a friend in one of my subjects, I found it very difficult to just go up to people and start talking to them. I became too shy to go to any subject and course society socials. After around two weeks, I felt, everyone had developed their own friendship groups. This started to make me feel alone. Like an odd part that didn't quite fit in anywhere. This loneliness began to manifest itself, gradually, into a fear of social situations.

Social anxiety is a vicious circle. Being scared to do something leads you to lose confidence in yourself to do anymore activities, which then leads you to spend more time alone, giving you even less confidence. I got into this circle and I found it very difficult to get out of. Sometimes simple things become difficult to do. At times, I skipped lectures, because I didn't want to be the girl sitting on her own in the lecture theatre. Other times I would get worried or anxious in the middle of lectures and feel everyone's eyes on me. When, in fact, nobody really cared. Sometimes I felt the same way when I walked through town. If someone laughed, they were laughing at me and there was something wrong about me. It all seems so silly now, to think these things. But at the time, it was all very real and this struggle to make course mates had developed into a much bigger problem.

I threw myself into my studies as a distraction from the way I was feeling. I spent many hours in the library, even at weekends, to try to make myself feel productive and fulfilled. However,

this did not help my grades. My brain began to feel saturated with information, just a few weeks into term and I couldn't take anything in properly. I began to struggle with my academic work, particularly psychology. Because I only had one thing occupying my life, the rest of my time was spent over-thinking and worrying about the tiniest things in my life. I focussed on everything that I felt was going wrong. Getting behind on reading, missing lectures, not wanting to see my friends, being on my own all the time. I didn't have much else to fill my life with, so everything became like a huge obstacle to overcome. The circle of social anxiety got worse, leaving me more isolated from any form of student engagement and making me feel increasingly alienated and powerless.

I have painted a very lonely picture of my first year at Newcastle University. But it wasn't completely like that. I had made some friends in fresher's week who, when things became difficult for me, kept trying to encourage me to do things. I did go out with them, but I always took a lot of persuading. At one time, I remember one of my friends talking to me for an hour, to get me to just go to the comedy club! Although this did help me have slightly more faith in myself, I still struggled on a daily basis.

Eventually, I got fed up of feeling like this. Always worried and anxious that I would make a fool of myself whenever I went out to see friends or go to lectures. I decided to seek help from student wellbeing. I began counselling through emails, as I was too worried to go and have face to face counselling. I also did this because I find it a lot easier to put my feelings down on paper, rather than into words. I have had professional help before, and I am so glad that I decided to ask for help professionally on more than one occasion. I think I needed the build-up of advice, contrasting perspectives and reminding that the way I was thinking wasn't right. I had to start reasoning with myself whenever I got anxious or worried. I had to force myself to see that the way I was thinking wasn't reflecting the world around me.

I took an active decision towards the end of my first year that I wouldn't let opportunities pass me by anymore. I would do things that scared me because it was good for me to challenge myself. I had to work hard, every day to change the way I thought and saw the world and the people in it. When an opportunity came for me to be a PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) advisor, I knew I had to take it. By May, I was only just starting to get over my social anxiety. This is really where my recovery began. I was so nervous for the interview. But one thing that struck me was that I was being interviewed by students, not staff members. They probably understood how I felt and although I was still scared, it did put me at ease slightly. They were so friendly and it wasn't what I expected the interview to be like. When I got a few things wrong, I was not made to feel stupid. I was made to feel like I had a skill that needed to be developed. My confidence began to grow after I found out I would be on the PASS team.

My next challenge was a meal, organised by the PASS advisors to help us get to know one another. Now this was something that I knew I couldn't wriggle out of. I couldn't make up a silly excuse not to go, although on the day I felt anxious and if it was anything else I would have avoided it. I would be working with these people soon, so I had to meet them sooner or

later. I was determined to meet everyone, no matter how I felt mentally about it. I did it and it went really well. I didn't have a single embarrassing moment. Not even a small one, which I would have overly focused on in the past. The assumptions I had were slowly being challenged and I saw them to be unrealistic.

I spent my summer in Newcastle trying to get myself feeling better. I emailed charities, to find any voluntary opportunities, I did have a few setbacks, with some organisations either not replying or having no vacancies. Despite this, I started voluntary work at Newcastle Castle and with The Children's Society in August 2016. It was scary to start with, but I had to challenge myself. It kept me occupied, while I was alone in our student house, and gave me a sense of purpose again. Everyone I encountered at both organisations, were so friendly and welcoming. When I have encountered problems they have been so supportive. By the end of the summer I was going to the Castle three or four times a week. When I had days off I gave myself a target to achieve, to do some reading, go for a run or do some shopping. So I met goals and was moving forwards and not letting my over-thinking control me.

Out of the blue I got an email inviting combined students to go to RAISE, I just thought, 'why not?' I wasn't sure if I would enjoy going to a conference, I wasn't really sure what it was all about either. But going to RAISE was one of the best decisions I have made at university. I met a group of students from Newcastle University, which I may not have met otherwise. I met brilliant people from other universities as well. All of them coming from a diverse range of backgrounds and having contrasting perspectives. I began to see the benefits of student engagement through the presentations I saw at RAISE, and I wanted to become part of something within my institution.

Anyone can tell you that extra-curricular activities, through university or charities, are a great thing. It helps you to develop skills, gives you time to relax and take your mind off things. Having something different to do not only makes you more employable, but improves your mental health so much. This academic year, I have been volunteering at Newcastle Castle and with The Children's Society; doing PASS; a work placement; helping staff to develop the new Student Staff Partnership Forum and developing a student-led project for RAISE17. I have a lot going on, and it does make me stressed sometimes. But I needed to do this. I do not get anxious anymore when doing these activities. I do still get anxious when I am invited to social situations with my peers and I do not really have the time to go out with friends, which is the only disadvantage. But the things I am doing give me purpose and fulfilment. I prefer to keep myself busy, as I know it's better for me to be occupied instead of dwelling on my own thoughts.

I personally want to urge you to invest time and resources into reaching students like me, who have struggled to integrate and engage. These are students who want to try, but may lack the confidence to do so. Student engagement has many different meanings. It is engagement in academic work, university programmes, with peers, and with the wider community. Certain types of engagement suit different types of students. Student

engagement programmes are not the only thing that has helped me, however. I have very supportive friends and family, who help me through everything. They have persisted with me when I have been at my worst. I have been given opportunities outside of university, which I love. I now cannot see my life without doing all these things in it. Although, there is extra work with the things I have decided to do, it has helped me to organise my life better. It makes me feel like I'm doing some good and making me more confident in my own abilities. I cannot emphasise enough how thankful I am to those who have given me a chance; to those who created these schemes in the first place; to those who encourage me to keep going with all these things and those who have put up with me when I get stressed and help me to feel better. I am in such a better place than I was last year because of all these reasons.

This article has been difficult to write. I find it difficult to discuss my mental health with even my closest friends. But I felt I needed to write this article to give you an insight into my first year, who had problems integrating and engaging with university life. I have tried my best in this piece to communicate how I used to feel. I also wanted this to be a public thank you, to all the friends, family and staff past and present who have helped me.