LEARN TO GET ORGANISED

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)
Being well organised can help you to perform well academically and can also enable you to have the time to enjoy a full and rich university experience. There are a number of factors that can contribute to being disorganized, stressed, and/or handing assignments in late. These can include the influence of motivation, perfectionism, procrastination, poor time management skills and/or other financial or emotional worries.

These pages address each of these factors in turn and will provide you with some very practical ideas for getting yourself well organised.
WHY AREN’T I ORGANIZED?

There are a number of factors that can contribute to being disorganized, stressed, and/or getting assignments in late. These are all discussed in detail below and include the following:

– Motivational issues
– Perfectionism
– Procrastination and thinking
– Time management
– Other worries

ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS SELF-HELP QUIZ

Give yourself a score from 1 to 5 beside each question.
1=strongly disagree, 3=not sure if you agree or disagree, 5=strongly agree

Of course these factors can interact with each other and often result in procrastination. For most people that means work doesn’t get done on time!

Exercise: Which one of these factors are most relevant for you? Try this quick quiz.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>I usually don’t put off starting my work</td>
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<td>I spend enough time planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>I usually get my uni work submitted on time</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t get distracted frequently by other people’s cries, needs or requests</td>
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<td>I have a plan for the future that will get me where I want to go</td>
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<td>I am generally not “stressed out” about life</td>
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<td>My friends/family are people who support me in getting work done</td>
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<td>I feel on top of my uni work</td>
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<td>I am happy at times to submit work that is just “good enough”</td>
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<td>I rarely forget things, such as appointments, bills, everyday chores</td>
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<td>I have set myself specific academic goals</td>
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<td>I take enough time off to relax and unwind</td>
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<td>I don’t get easily distracted</td>
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<tr>
<td>My friends and/or family are people who value study</td>
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<td>I try my hardest at study most of the time</td>
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<td>I don’t put things off until the last minute</td>
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<tr>
<td>I believe that what I’m studying will help me to find a satisfying career</td>
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<td>Having a plan and “to do” list gives me a sense of relief rather than a feeling of being oppressed by all the things I have to do</td>
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<tr>
<td>I set myself a “plan of action” to get my work done</td>
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Now look at the items which you scored as 1 or 2. Are there any themes or patterns emerging? If so, what are they?
MOTIVATIONAL ISSUES

You have to choose to do it! This might sound pretty basic but is really quite important. Consider all the reasons that you are enrolled at uni. If on the balance of things, staying at uni and finishing your course is the better option for you, then be clear that you are deciding to complete your studies and that means choosing to do assessment work. Of course, that doesn’t mean you have to enjoy every single assessment or assignment! It does mean being prepared to do the tough or boring stuff in the service of your goals, dreams and decision to finish your uni degree. You might think about it in the following way. Wouldn’t you choose to take out the garbage at home in the service of having your house be a nice place to live in?

Even when you are clear about your decision to be at uni - and you might be very enthusiastic about your choice – motivation to study still needs to be nurtured so that it can carry you through the tough and stressful times. That means balancing study with other parts of life – like having fun! For example, you might get involved with activities on campus or pay attention to other meaningful aspects of your life like sport, friends, hobbies, etc. Having a good balance between study and recreation is good stress management and in fact you can't have good time management without good stress management.

It also often happens that you might decide to complete a degree even if its not exactly want you want to do. If that is the case, it is even more important that you carefully nurture your motivation to study. It is about building quality and reward into your life because right now is the only time you really have...it is a gift...that's why its called The Present!

Exercise:
Review your current work/study balance
- If you are studying too little, review your reasons for being at uni... have you actually committed yourself to completing your course? Try out this decisional balance sheet.
- If you are studying too much or not enjoying your course what are the things that you could do to help you nurture your motivation and choice to complete your study? Make a list of these activities.

Exercise: Are you a perfectionist?
Take the perfectionist test to find out.

WHAT PERFECTIONISM IS NOT
Perfectionism is not the same as the valuing excellence. Of course, working to do as well as you can is important. Where perfectionism is maladaptive is in its inflexibility. Perfectionism does not allow you to adjust your efforts according to differing demands or needs. It also does not allow you the freedom to pay attention to other aspects of life outside of your achievements or marks.

Exercise: Take this opportunity to think about what else might be important to you
What are you charging your life with? What do you value? How much attention are you paying to the things that are important to you?

DOWNLOAD THE BATTERIES EXERCISE
For more hints about how to push back at perfectionism, read the tips for Time Management below and see our Learn To Manage Perfectionism ebook.

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism involves setting yourself unrealistically high expectations or standards. When caught up by perfectionism your whole self worth/self-esteem gets equated with your marks and much of the joy of learning gets drowned by the fear of not doing well enough. Perfectionism impacts on emotional well-being. Believing that others will value you only if you are “perfect” is associated with depression. Demanding perfection from yourself also makes you vulnerable to psychological problems/disorders when stressed.

Paradoxically, the demand for perfection can also impede performance. Perfectionism often leads to procrastination because you are fearful that your work won’t be good enough. This fear can make it really difficult to start assessments. Perfectionists will often hand work in late – or not at all – rather than hand in something they think is “less than perfect”.

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Procrastination is about delaying. Delaying may be about not having the skill to do the work, little interest in the work, worry about failure or wanting to get it perfect. This information will focus on how you say to yourself feeds delaying.

**PROCRASTINATION IS A LEARNED HABIT**

Initially, negative thoughts and expectations fuel procrastination and the wasting of valuable time. This results in an avoidance of discomfort and a brief feeling of relief, but soon leads to an increase in unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, guilt, shame and fears. You are then likely to fall into a behavioural trap known as experiential avoidance, which means getting involved in any activity (e.g. chatting to friends on the internet) that allows you to escape or avoid your uncomfortable feelings, bodily sensations, thoughts or memories. Later, when you re-approach the challenging task(s) that you’ve been avoiding, you may rationalize to yourself that you will produce a greater quantity of good work and make up for the time lost earlier. However, these increased pressures can trigger the same negative feelings and thoughts, and the procrastination and avoidance cycle repeats. See Figure 1.

It is also important to be aware of what you tell yourself about studying – or about putting off work! Go to our Learn To Deal With Procrastination ebook for more information on this topic.

Poor time management is of course a common cause of procrastination and of not getting work done on time. Below are some hints for managing your time and being better organised:

1. **CHECK UP ON YOUR MOTIVATION.**
   Remind yourself of your reasons for studying – revisit your motivations, hopes and goals!

2. **PLAN AHEAD!**
   Use a semester planner to make deadlines clear and to provide the “big picture” of busy periods. Use weekly planners to set yourself study sessions and weekly goals. Use daily session “to do” lists to prioritize work.

3. **DRAW UP TIMELINES FOR EACH ASSIGNMENT.**
   Set a start date and a finish date for each of your assignments. The length of the timeline you give each task should be based on how much the assignment is worth - a 10% task should be given less time than a 50% one! This is especially important to pay attention to if you have a tendency for perfectionism (because you probably tend to spend the same amount of time on all your tasks regardless of how much they are worth!).

4. **BREAK EACH ASSIGNMENT INTO SMALLER SUB-TASKS.**
   For example, with an essay the sub-tasks might be i) choose a topic ii) think about the topic iii) research the literature iv) read v) take notes vi) plan your essay vii) write it. Give each sub-task a realistic deadline within your timeline for that assignment. Just focus on one sub-task at a time. This approach can help you “sneak up” on getting the assignment done! It is a bit like climbing Mt Everest. If you stand at the bottom looking up it can be very overwhelming. The best way to get up that mountain is first to get to base camp, then camp 1 and so forth!

5. **SET UP A WEEKLY PLAN.**
   A weekly plan is a bit like a timetable. Cross out all the times that you are not available – travel, lectures, tutes, going to the gym, work shifts, etc., and then the time left over is your available time for study/assessments. Into those slots go the sub-tasks identified for that week by your assessment timelines. Download weekly planner.

6. **ENSURE YOU INCLUDE STUDY/LIFE BALANCE.**
   Remember, you have to nurture your energy to study. Lots of students say “I don’t have time to relax!” The reality is that you don’t have time NOT to relax. Good stress management is good time management because excessive stress impacts on productivity and performance. For example, take a look at the link between stress and memory from the Franklin Institute. Activities that help you unwind, have fun and balance the demands of study need to be built into your weekly routine or plan.

7. **WORK AT TIMES OF THE DAY THAT ARE MOST PRODUCTIVE FOR YOU.**
   Do you work better am or pm? Use this information to help plan what you’ll do in your available study/assignment sessions. Plan to do easiest tasks (eg filling notes) at your least productive times.

8. **ORGANIZE YOUR ENVIRONMENT.**
   Create a simple filing system, have plenty of pens and paper, a comfy chair and good lighting. Make your room or study area tidy and conducive to work in.
9. **ANTICIPATE AND COUNTER POTENTIAL DISTRACTIONS.** Turn off mobile phones, unplug the TV! Set aside specific times during the day to check your emails or Facebook and don’t make them times when you would otherwise be most productive!!!

10. **HAVE CLEAR PRIORITIES FOR EACH STUDY SESSION.** Don’t waste time. Know where to start. Your assessment timelines should show you exactly what the tasks are that need to be done for each of your subjects. Rank the tasks for each session (and don’t just do the low ranking ones!).

11. **ANTICIPATE AND CHALLENGE UNHELPFUL THINKING** such as: “I need some fun first”… “I’m not in the mood, I’ll do it later”… “I’ll do it tomorrow”… “I need to get out and clear my mind first”… “I work better under pressure”… Instead you might tell yourself: “Just make a start - I can fine tune later”, “Be realistic. Don’t aim for perfection!”

12. **TAKE REGULAR AND REJUVENATING BREAKS.** Schedule 5-10 minute breaks every hour. Choose break activities that are a) different from what you are doing (eg. don’t read the newspaper if your eyes are tired); b) are in your control to end quickly (eg. don’t sit in front of the TV and stay for the entire programme!) and c) rejuvenates you; eg. get some fresh air; do stretching or physical exercises; or go for a brisk walk. (From: *Being a More Effective Learner*, Learning Centre, University of Sydney, 2001. p 21.)

13. **REWARD YOURSELF.** Reward yourself when you complete a scheduled session or task. Also give yourself mental encouragement along the way eg: “yeehaa, one chunk down!”, “I CAN get this done”. You can also try a little positive peer pressure to keep you going: eg., tell everyone what you are going to achieve today.

14. **START TO DRAFT EARLY.** Do you look for every bit of research ever written on your subject? If you do, do you EVER use all you find? If this is a trap for you then limit the time allocated to research and leave more time for writing in your assessment timeline plan. Just get started! The biggest mental block in getting an assignment done is usually after the research/reading and before the writing stage. So, typing those first notes, points or sentences often provides a significant emotional and cognitive breakthrough.

15. **ASK FOR HELP.** If you don’t understand what a task involves, ASK a tutor or friend to explain it! If financial, relationship or family problems are getting in the way of study talk with someone about working things out e.g. see someone at the Counselling Service.

Time management tips in PDF format.