

# COFFEE WITH CAROLINE

Salford Academic Dr. Caroline Topham sat down with Marjana Khan to answer some well-being-related questions.

Have more well-being questions you want to ask Caroline?

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## How can I effectively balance my time and prioritise tasks while facing personal challenges?

I am the kind of person who likes working to deadlines, so I need a deadline to motivate me. I often structure my week around things that must happen this week but also look ahead to the future and make sure that I am planning enough time to complete upcoming tasks.

I use my Outlook Calendar, not just to show when I have meetings or taught sessions but also to block out sections of time to work on specific tasks. My days will have a set of blocked-out wedges of time, for instance, 'I'm going to spend an hour on preparing a lecture,' or 'I'm going to spend 2 hours on preparing a piece of writing for something', and I try and stick to it as much as I can. Sometimes things happen that throw your plans off course, and it helps to be flexible and not get too anxious when things do not go to your perfect plan. Having a plan is good, but so is being able to accept changes and be flexible.

With multiple deadlines, I try to be strict with my time. 'I have only got an hour for this. That is all the time that I have.'

It must be as good as it can be in an hour, and then I must move on to the next thing.' Working like that takes practice because often we like getting things done perfectly and when you are busy, you cannot do that, it just needs to be good enough. Sticking to setting times for working on things and not agonizing over things being perfect is the way that I handle the workload, but we are all different so find what works for you.

## How can I deal with conflicts and disagreements with people in group projects?

It helps to know that everyone responds differently. Some people want to jump straight in and get their point of view across and fight for their opinion, other people will withdraw and find conflict difficult and seem not engaged in it at all. An effective way to manage this is to find a way for each person to contribute to the discussion on how to resolve it, including those who just want to avoid conflict. Everyone has their own way of coping and there is no right or wrong way of doing that. The key is, to find a way for everyone to feel like they have had their say.



My next piece of advice would be to let a bit of time pass for the emotions to cool down before you propose a plan of action. When people get into an agitated and stressed state, it is difficult for people to take feedback. It can be difficult for people to think logically when they are feeling very emotional so try finding a way for everybody to have their say in a way that is not going to fuel the conflict more. Try talking to people individually and then leaving a bit of time for people to cool off before proposing a plan of action.

It is challenging, but a valuable experience because that is how it can be in the workplace. I would be curious about why that person is not contributing; it might be that there is something going on in their life that you are not aware of and that they do not feel comfortable sharing. My first question would be, 'Are you OK? Is something going on because I notice you are not completing the tasks you agreed to and wonder if you need support?' By taking a compassionate view to start with, hopefully, they would respond well. If not, then it comes down to the fact that this person is not contributing. We need the work to be done as a group. From the individual's perspective, you want a good mark for this piece of work so it can be frustrating, and you may need to take more control and responsibility for the work than you originally wanted to. There is usually a reason someone is not doing what they say they are doing, so trying to find the underlying cause of that might be a productive way to move forward as a group.

### **What advice do you have for someone struggling to decide between careers?**

It is an exciting position that you find yourself in when you graduate from university with so many options ahead of you, but it can be daunting as well. How to know what to choose? Some have a very clear goal in mind, for others it comes down to trial and error. If you have the chance to try, through work experience or placements, try a particular role. If that is not possible, try to speak to people that work in those jobs and find out what their day looks like, how they spend their time. Does it sound like something you would enjoy? Use career websites like Prospects.com and do your research to find out what that role entails.

There will be some obvious things that stand out, e.g., if you are a people person, going into a very solitary laboratory-based position might not be for you. You might want to do something a bit more person-facing, like being a Physician Associate. Think about what you enjoy about the university, do you love being in the lab? Where do you get pleasure from your studies? It is normal to go through those periods where you are just like 'I'm sick of this, I want it to be over,' especially with years of long training and decades of studying. It is about finding joy in the process. What are the little things that make your days happier and worthwhile?

It's a particular subject that you like studying, that you can immerse yourself in, or maybe it's the people that you meet at university that you go to the library with and do assignments with? Think of a bigger picture goal but you also need to give yourself other motivations as well like little rewards along the way. I really love going on holiday, who doesn't? Try setting these reward goals e.g. I must get through this month and then have a weekend away or a meal with my best friend. Find ways to motivate yourself daily so you can get through this lengthy period of work that will get you to a bigger goal.

### **Do you have any advice for securing research placements?**

The trick with successful applications is to be able to make a statement about your strengths, but also support it with some kind of evidence. If I were to say, 'I am an excellent communicator,' the kind of thing that people like to say on CVs, someone could read it and think 'OK, but how do I know that?' Or I could say 'I am an excellent communicator; I have been invited to speak at XY and Z external conferences and received positive feedback from the audience.' In the second example, I have given some evidence to support my claim that I am an excellent communicator.

You can also demonstrate my skills in the way that I present my documents, get my grammar and punctuation right, lay out my application and CV nicely, and use good sentence formation.

This is another way that I am evidencing that I am a good written communicator. You might not necessarily have professional experience, but you might have experience in other areas of your life. That is why we have so many opportunities for extracurricular activities here as well, because if you want to talk about your excellent communication skills, you could then talk about the PassionFlash competition, or when you volunteered to lead a group delivering an oral presentation. It is about thinking about how you can evidence what you are saying about your strengths and making it as applicable as possible to the role when it comes to research placements.

Make sure you know about the research, the group, and the supervisor, if relevant. If you make it clear that you have read some of their research, this can make you a more attractive candidate because you have taken the time to understand what it is they are doing and what you are passionate about. Sometimes as academics, we get emails such as 'I'm interested in cancer research; do you have any space in your lab?' It does not stand out. If somebody were to send an email and say 'I am really interested in Cancer Research. I have read your work on medulloblastoma and how certain types of treatments might enhance outcomes for patients and help reduce harmful side effects. I would love to work on this kind of project. Do you have any capacity for a student?', it's a really different experience to receive that kind of email.

### **How can I deal with impostor syndrome?**

Impostor syndrome is a common human experience. People often will go through it at some point in their lives, and often that happens when they are under pressure. What has helped me in the past is sharing those feelings with people around me. 'You're not good enough, you should know how to do this all by yourself'. These kinds of toxic messages that we tell ourselves can become a lot quieter when we share them. I would start with somebody that I trust and care about and just tell them. What you will get back is different from the feedback you are giving yourself.

The more people that you can have the courage to share what you are experiencing with, the more likely you are to get positive feedback because the reality is you would not be at university if you were not capable of being at university. Those facts can sometimes escape us when we are in that stressed state and we are feeling inadequate. The act of sharing your fears can shrink them because you get someone else's perspective instead of just your own, which is distorted and overly negative because often that is sadly how we talk to ourselves. How great would it feel to have your personal tutor say, 'Of course you could do this, look at the marks you got last year, the contributions that you have made, the things that you've learned.' We are all good at different things and cannot be excellent at everything. It is tempting to give yourself a hard time with the things that you are not as good at. It can be helpful to accept that not everybody is brilliant at everything. That is a much more peaceful place to work towards than constantly feeling like you are less than the people around you. I did feel that kind of impostor syndrome and that fear that I was not good enough and I was not clever enough earlier in my life. I tried to do everything on my own, but I enjoy learning as part of a team and a group. I now know after years of experience, that I would have felt more comfortable studying with other people, discussing aspects that I did not understand with them. I would have a lot more out of the experience, but I was so worried about being seen as not good enough that it stopped me from having those conversations and those types of relationships. Now as I am older and wiser, I can accept that there are just some things that I am not so good at and there are other things that I am great at. Comparing yourself to other people is tempting, but it is rarely a beneficial thing to do because we are all so different.