

Maintaining your wellbeing during COVID-19

**A 'how to' guide
for students**



What to expect from this guide

Remote learning starting to take a toll on your mental health? Are you losing pace with your coursework?

This guide is for you.

In it you will find tips and strategies to protect your health and wellbeing during this difficult time – and the steps you can take to help manage your workload.



Thank you to the following contributors for lending their valued expertise and advice.



Desi Vlahos

Desi is a lecturer for the PLT program at The College of Law. Also a Mental Health First Aid trainer, she provides guidance on how to assist a co-worker who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis.



Andrea Phillips

An Adjunct Lecturer at The College of Law, Andrea is also a mindfulness tutor at Monash University. She holds degrees in Law and Psychology.



Florence Thum

A psychotherapist and lawyer, Florence is a lecturer for the PLT program and for dispute resolution within the Master of Laws (Applied Law) at The College of Law. She is also involved in lecturer training, course design and development, and mentoring – and regularly presents on law and mental health at domestic and international conferences.

Contents

1

How to get the most out of studying at home

2

How to protect your wellbeing during times of heightened stress

3

How to get help if you're struggling with your studies

4

Looking to the future



1. How to get the most out of studying at home

COVID-19 has brought a host of new challenges to everyone – and students are no exception.

Above all, with so much of your learning now online, you're missing out on the many benefits of frequent contact with your lecturers and classmates. You're also likely facing the obstacles of managing your studies in the home environment.

However, it is possible to learn effectively, despite the change in circumstances. Here are our top tips to help you adapt your situation to get the most out of your studies – while keeping your health and wellbeing a priority.



1 Take on a study load that's right for you

Legal professionals tend to present with several common personality traits – with 'perfectionism' being right up there.

So if you too have an innate high-achieving tendency, you may be telling yourself this is the ideal time to ramp up and complete your studies more quickly. After all, there are more restrictions on daily life, which means less socialising and many activities off limits.

However, it's important to maintain self-awareness. Pushing too hard, especially in times of heightened stress (such as a global pandemic), can lead to burnout.

So, make sure you regularly check in with yourself, monitor your own tolerance levels – and take on only what's manageable.

2 Plan your days out

When checking in with yourself, also take stock of your commitments – as well as the amount of time each day you would like to be studying. This will be a good basis to form a daily plan.

This means making sure you're scheduling time for family, paid work and self-care. But also be sure to allow time each day for a healthy dose of procrastination and rumination.

And yes, we're serious about those last points.

Lawyers have a dominant temporal perspective, which is to be future-oriented. This means they're very focused on future outcomes, at the expense of enjoying the 'here and now'.

When you're future-oriented, you can feel tremendous guilt just at the very thought of taking time out. That's why it's important to pre-plan moments to do nothing and give your mind time to rest.

3 Be strategic about how you study

Are you an early bird or a night owl?

This is one of the key factors to consider when determining the structure of your days.

One benefit of studying online is that without set classes on campus, you can schedule your learning around your biological rhythm.

For example, if you're energised in the mornings, this is the perfect time to schedule your high-focus tasks. You can then leave your low-level attention work (such as admin and watching videos) for the afternoons.

It's also important to work in batches and to take regular breaks – at least every 90 minutes or so – to keep your mind fresh and focused.

4 Create an inviting study environment

What should your study space look like?

Research shows the best environments for productivity are clean and tidy, have natural light and are free from visual or noisy distractions.

Importantly, your mental health will benefit greatly from having a space designated just for study. And yes, that means no working from the comfort of your bed. Why? Because you want your brain to associate your bed with sleep, not with being alert and focused. Which leads onto the next point.

5 Set firm and clear boundaries

Although physical boundaries are important, we're now talking about personal ones.

The first boundary to set is the commitment to 'unplug' fully from your study at a consistent point in the day. This is especially important when working from home – as there is a strong pull (especially for perfectionists) to keep working. And this is where your home life can be invaded by constant study or work.

If this has become a problem for you, you may benefit from setting up a ritual each day that signifies to yourself you are ending 'study time' and entering 'home time'; a psychological way of saying 'this is done'.

For example, you may find it helpful to shut down your laptop and put it in a drawer. Or you could be more creative with the process, such as compiling an end of study playlist, or going for a 20-minute walk.

The second boundary you should set is with those around you. Whether you live with housemates or family members, let them know your expectations. This could include no loud music at certain times of the day or letting them know when you will be free to talk with them.

6 Participate and engage in your studies whenever possible

The more you put in, the more you'll get out.

Discussing your course content with others forces your brain to actively process your learning material.

And make sure you give your online classes your full attention. Being in your own home and on your own laptop presents a myriad of distractions. But research consistently shows that multitasking reduces productivity by 40%.

So switch off your phone, close those browser windows – and focus.

7

Socialise with your classmates

With the term 'social distancing' now a part of our everyday vocabulary and lives, we're all missing the benefits that come from interacting with other people.

While creating connections with your classmates is more challenging online, it's not impossible.

The discussion forums for your various class groups at The College of Law are a smart place to start. Join, contribute, initiate.

From there, consider signing up to or creating a social media group specifically for you and your study peers. Some of our students have reported great success in networking with classmates via WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

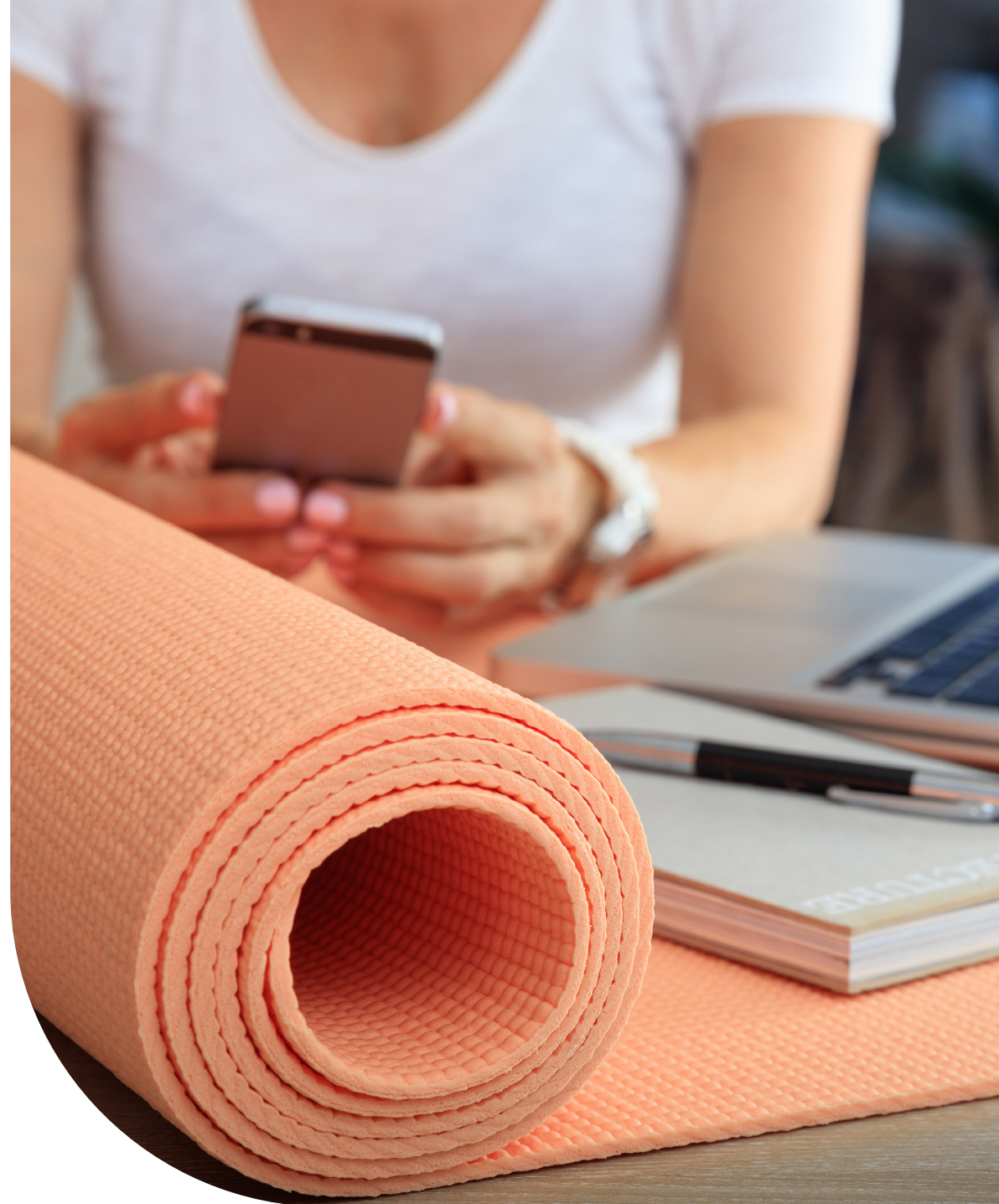


2. How to protect your wellbeing during times of heightened stress

The events of 2020 have impacted everyone's wellbeing in a wide range of ways.

And while it's understandable to feel overwhelmed and stressed more than usual, it's important that you're not experiencing these feelings all or most of the time.

Here are some strategies to help you actively maintain your wellbeing and keep those negative emotions in check.



1 Shift your mentality

You may not have realised this, but throughout your Bachelor of Laws, you were taught to foster a pessimistic mindset. This is not 'the glass is half empty' type of pessimism. But rather, a clear and consistent message to see issues as 'permanent, pervasive and uncontrollable' – which is prudent when it comes to law.

In a legal setting, this mentality helps you assess and rectify problems. But when it comes to your personal life, it isn't helpful to your wellbeing at all.

The first step to shifting your mentality is being aware when you are in a pessimistic mode or having negative thoughts – and telling your mind to 'stop'.

One possible strategy for fostering a positive mindset is to write a daily gratitude journal. This process strengthens the neural pathways in your brain so that they look for more things to be grateful for.

2 Get creative with self-care

It can be hard to find self-care activities right now. Especially if some of your favourite businesses and activities you would turn to for relaxation are off the cards.

Here are some less-obvious self-care activities you might enjoy:

- Use video-chatting software to do novel activities with friends – such as yoga or games
- Create a playlist of your favourite songs
- Watch an uplifting movie, or revisit a favourite TV series or film
- Bake your favourite dessert – or try a new recipe

3 Find ways to feel purposeful

Given lawyers have a future-focused temporal perspective, they need to immerse themselves in activities that will give them a sense of purpose and achievement.

We've already established the extreme value of giving yourself time to unwind and practise self-care. However, if you're finding yourself listless and purposeless, you may need to engage in tasks that activate the reward pathways in your brain.

Pursuits that allow you to see yourself grow and improve should be your focus.

While the clichéd COVID-19 suggestion to learn a new language might not be a lofty idea when your plate is already full, why not shoot for a smaller milestone? Perhaps you can experiment with a new baking technique or explore a hobby you've always been curious about.

4 Make healthy choices

The best act of self-care you can perform is making healthy choices.

This means choosing food that's nutritious, keeping hydrated, getting fresh air and daily exercise – as well as a regular sleep schedule that includes 7–8 hours' sleep a night.

It can be easy to neglect these elements when you're busy and under pressure. But by taking time for them, you're ensuring you will be more productive and focused in the future.

3. How to get help if you're struggling with your studies

Whatever's happening in your life right now, remember that your mental health and wellbeing is number one.

So if your study load isn't manageable at the moment, we're here to help and plan your next best steps.



STEP 1:

Speak to your lecturer

As a prudent, hardworking student, it's only natural that you want to excel. This means you may find it hard to acknowledge and accept the reality that you're not coping – to yourself and others.

However, the first step towards getting on top of your workload is chatting to your lecturer about it. Set up a time with them to discuss your situation and how you're feeling. They will be able to provide guidance.

And, if through your conversation with them, you decide you need to change your study plans or workload, they can direct you to Student Services to discuss your options.

STEP 2:

Change your workload

If it's clear you need to make a change relating to your studies, you have two options:

1. Transition to part time

If you're a full-time student, switching to part time could be the right move for you.

Dropping down to part time is a simple process. And thanks to The College of Law's rolling intakes, you will still be able to take the course you need once this intake finishes.

2. Defer

Depending on your situation, deferral may be an option for you (fees may apply).

STEP 3:

Seek additional support if needed

Are you facing personal challenges that are making it difficult for you to function normally in other areas of your life?

Academic Matters

Where students feel they are in need of academic counselling, they should in the first instance contact their lecturer to discuss the matter. If the student feels the need to go beyond the lecturer, they should contact the Program Director or the Student Liaison Officer.

Non-academic Matters

Where a student has problems which go beyond his/her enrolment with the College of Law but have the propensity to affect his/her ability to complete the Program, the student should contact the Program Director or the Student Liaison Officer who will, if requested and in appropriate cases, arrange a consultation for the student with a professional counsellor. The College will pay for one such first consultation for the student.

Some things can't wait. If you need support immediately, you can call the following helplines, 24/7.

- **Lifeline: 13 11 14**
- **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 46 36**



Did you know?

If you're a PLT student, you can take an additional nine months to finish your course after your 15-week class period ends. While this is not recommended for students keeping pace with coursework, it is an option for students struggling to meet deadlines due to COVID-19.

4. Looking to the future

You might be feeling uncertain about the future of the legal sector and the jobs available. Yes, this period has been disruptive for certain areas of the law – but exciting changes are happening too.

And even if you've lost work during this time, there are still ways to bolster your skillset to align with future industry demands.

Even before COVID-19 hit, changes have been on the horizon within the legal sector for some time – thanks to digital disruption and changing customer behaviours. The global pandemic has merely acted as an accelerant.

With our industry evolving, there's a wide range of new and exciting opportunities for legal professionals. You have options to carve out a niche or specialty that sets you apart. Skills in technology, marketing and operations will truly thrive in tomorrow's legal sector.

So why not use this time to start building your knowledge in these areas?

There's also never been a better time to build your network. Video conferencing has torn down the barriers of geography – opening opportunities to a global legal community. Start by reaching out to more people on LinkedIn and keeping an eye out for industry webinars.



Contact us

The College of Law wishes you strength during this challenging time – and is here to support you throughout your professional learning life.

Visit collaw.edu.au

Australia

1300 856 111

8am – 5pm (AEST)

Overseas

+61 2 9965 7000

8am – 5pm (AEST)

