

# FIT FOR STUDY: RUNNING THE MENTAL MARATHON



## Keeping fit for the mental marathon

Studying at university is a bit like preparing to run a marathon; it helps to be physically and mentally prepared so that you can sustain your fitness for the entire university semester. While athletes may go to great lengths in their preparation to reach peak physical conditions for a marathon, students often prepare in a very different manner:

	What athletes might do	What many students do
<b>Study/work-life balance</b>	Heavily skewed towards being prepared for race day	Heavily skewed towards studying and the need to feel productive in studies.
<b>Sleep</b>	Rest well so that the body can recuperate from training	Cut down on how much sleep they get so that they can get through studying
<b>Exercise</b>	Ensure that the level of exercise is appropriate to training for the race	Cut out exercise altogether so that they can spend time studying
<b>Relaxation</b>	Recharge from time to time; again so that the body can recuperate from training	Can't give themselves permission to relax as they are too stress and feel like they should be studying instead
<b>Diet/nutrition</b>	Ensure that they eat a well-balanced diet designed to optimise their performance Eat at regular intervals Cut down on unhealthy foods, and caffeine	Eat whatever is cheap or easy to prepare (typically lacking nutrients) Can sometimes skip breakfast Use caffeine and sugar to stay awake to study

Keeping fit for the mental marathon of university involves some very simple steps – diet, sleep, exercise, relaxation, and study-life balance. Yes, they are very obvious things that you can do, but time and time again these are the first things that students cut back on when things get stressful.

### Exercise

Research shows that around 50% of female and 30% of male Australian university students do not exercise sufficiently<sup>1</sup>, and in the lead-up to exams students often cut back on exercise or cut it out altogether!

**Why it's important:** Exercise has been shown to be beneficial in stress management<sup>2</sup>. Physical activity is also linked with a lower risk of developing depression, with moderate intensity exercise having a positive impact on mood<sup>3</sup>.

Exercise helps with our mood because it burns up stress hormones, helping us to feel calmer. It also increases serotonin production (which makes us happy)<sup>3</sup>.

**What you can do:** Aim for 30 minutes each day of exercise of moderate intensity (power walking, jogging, cycling)<sup>1</sup>.

As your stress levels increase with exams or with personal circumstances, you may find it helpful to increase the amount of exercise you do. Schedule exercise into your daily routine so that you stick to it.

### Sleep

Students often sacrifice sleep to finish assignments, socialise, cram for exams, or surf the Internet.

**Why it's important:** Depriving yourself of sleep can have very negative consequences for your mood and your ability to study<sup>4</sup>.

Moderate sleep deprivation (of around 20 hours, much the same as when you stay up all night) has been shown to affect speed and accuracy on mental tasks to the same extent as if your blood alcohol level was .05%<sup>5</sup>! So, if you wouldn't drink alcohol before an exam because it affects your ability to be focused, think about the impact that missing out on sleep has.

**What you can do:** While the optimal amount of sleep for each person varies from individual to individual, aim to get sufficient sleep so that you feel refreshed when you wake up. Avoid naps as they disrupt normal sleeping patterns.

## Study-Life balance

A common pattern that we see amongst students is to fill the early weeks of the university semester with lots of social activities, start to panic as the semester progresses when they realise they are not up to date with their studies, and then cut out everything in their life (socialising, eating well, exercising, sleep and relaxation) in order to study for exams. Little wonder that studying at university can sometimes feel like life gets put on hold!

**Why it's important:** A lack of study-life balance can create a lot of stress for students, particularly in the later weeks of the semester. Excessive stress is counterproductive to performance in the mental marathon; it can have a negative impact on concentration and memory. Feeling stressed can also make you feel grumpy, which can then lead to more stress if you argue with others.

**What you can do:** Strike a balance between fulfilling your studies and having a life *throughout* the university semester. This means keeping up to date with lectures and readings even in the early weeks. Remember – it takes the pressure off you as the semester progresses.

In the later weeks of the semester, it is a reality that most students' routine becomes heavily skewed towards studying in the lead up to exams. However, rather than cutting out other aspects of your life, think strategically about where you can cut back or make changes. Importantly, keep those activities that help you to manage stress. For example, if socialising and exercise are vital for your stress management, catch up with friends over a power walk in the park. If relaxing keeps you calm and increases your ability to focus on your studies, turn the phone off and just chill out. Just make sure that you have an outlet for stress in the lead up to exams.

## Diet & Nutrition

Students often have diets that aren't helpful for the mental marathon – many students skip breakfast, do not have a balanced diet, and rely on sugar and caffeine to give them an energy boost. Alcohol and drug use are also prevalent amongst university students; research shows that for university students, around 50% of males and 20% of females drank until they were intoxicated at least once a week, and over two thirds drank at harmful levels<sup>6</sup>.

**Why it's important:** Your body and mind need fuel to run on and you can only get out of them what you put into them. Drinking and taking drugs can have a negative impact on your ability to focus and function; and can also lead to alcohol- or drug-related problems, including unprotected sex.

**What you can do:** Use the Internet to find ways to stick to a balanced diet while on a student budget (see [www.studentcook.co.uk](http://www.studentcook.co.uk)). Tips include cooking in bulk and freezing, and stocking up on foods that keep you full for longer rather than snacking on empty calories<sup>7</sup>. Finally, limit your alcohol and other drug intake to minimise the potential harm to yourself.

## Recommended readings

Greenberg, J. S. (2008). *Comprehensive stress management (10<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Turkington, C. A. (1998). *Stress management for busy people*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

## This handout is based on the following resources:

<sup>1</sup>Leslie, M. H. N., Owen, N., Salmon, J., Bauman, A., Sallis, J. F., & Lo, S. K. (1999). Insufficiently active Australian college students: Perceived personal, social, and environmental influences. *Preventative Medicine*, 28, 20-27.

<sup>2</sup>Jones, F., & Bright, J. (2001). *Stress: Myth, theory, and research*. London: Prentice Hall.

<sup>3</sup>Scully, D., Kremer, J., Meade, M. M., Graham, R., & Dudgeon, K. (1998). Physical exercise and psychological well being: A critical review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 32, 111-120.

<sup>4</sup>Pilcher, J. J., & Huffcutt, A. I. (1996). Effects of sleep deprivation on performance: A meta-analysis. *Sleep*, 19, 318-326.

<sup>5</sup>Williamson, A. M., Feyer, A-M. (2000). Moderate sleep deprivation produces impairments in cognitive and motor performance equivalent to legally prescribed levels of alcohol intoxication. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 57, 649-655.

<sup>6</sup>Roche, A. M., & Watt, K. (1999). Drinking and university students: From celebration to inebriation.

<sup>7</sup><http://student.bmj.com/issues/02/02/education/9.php>