



How to continue to study during the coronavirus outbreak

A Guide for students

(University, college and senior school)

Introduction

Firstly, what qualifies us to give you this advice?

We are a group of Clinical Psychologists. This means we are trained to Doctoral level in Clinical Psychology and are professionally registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. We have years of experience in supporting people to stay motivated while facing really difficult situations.

Control

Coronavirus is currently making most of us feel like a lot of things are out of control. When we feel that things are out of control, we can feel very stressed and anxious. If you have been studying for exams recently either in senior school years or further education such as university in the UK, it is likely at this point that you have been told exams are cancelled for now and your grades will be worked out in as yet undefined ways. Again, this is something that will make people feel stressed and anxious and like things are out of control. There may be a number of other things that feel out of control at the moment such as jobs, finances, the health of ourselves and loved ones. If we focus on all of this then we will feel stressed and anxious.

One of the things you can do to try to feel a bit better about the current situation is to take control of the things you can control. One of the things you can control at the moment is your own studying. This may feel counterintuitive if exams are cancelled but given that we don't currently know what this will mean, it may be helpful to continue studying to keep your skills up so that at the other side of all of this, you will feel prepared to move on with your education.

Sources of information

A quick note on sources of information. It is really important that you get your information on coronavirus and on your education from official sources. There is a lot of speculation and this usually means people sharing their anxieties. If you look at lots of this, you will feel anxious. It is important to stay informed at this time but you can manage this by only looking at official sources and limiting time spent on this. You could set aside a part of the day to keep up on current news and decide on a few sources you want to check. Schools, colleges and universities will provide official information when they have something to share with you. They are extremely busy trying to manage this situation as are a lot of people so it's important now that you trust them and allow the systems to try to manage this and to provide you with information as soon as they can.



What we will cover in this guide

1. Motivation to study
2. Preparation to study
3. Some practicalities and troubleshooting

Motivation to study

We all put things off until later sometimes and struggle with procrastination. This may have been happening before the exams were cancelled and there may be a bit of relief that they are cancelled even if it's mixed with a lot of anxiety about what happens now. At the moment though, there are no exams deadlines to motivate us to study and even more than that, if we are anxious about what's going to happen about the exams now then we may be actively avoiding any study or thought of study because it causes anxiety. There are ways out of all of these vicious cycles, however, and one of the ways is to being motivated. But, how do we do that?

Below are a series of steps to build your motivation but one of the most important things here is that you can't use the steps to avoid studying! We advise that you set a timer and only give yourself five or ten minutes per step. The timer obviously helps with not allowing you to use the strategies to avoid studying for long but the added benefit is that you are practicing some time management skills at the same time. As you know, if you were sitting exams, time management would be key and we need it for lots of things so it can be helpful to have a practice anyway.

Step 1: Write down all the reasons that you want to study.

Take 5 minutes to do this. You may want to think about keeping up so that you won't feel behind when you get back to your studies. You may be moving on to college or university or your first qualified job after this academic year so you want to keep up. You may want to get away from your annoying sibling or have something to do while staying in due to coronavirus. This could be your chance to get ahead or caught up if you want to.

Why they need to be your reasons

Although we've given some examples above, there is evidence that motivation works best if the reasons for doing something are your own. For example, your parents or carers are likely to have lots of reasons why they think you should study right now, but we bet most of you rolled your eyes reading that or felt like it! Your teachers or lecturers will be the same but again may generate a similar response.

Step 2: Now write down the things that get in the way and make it hard to study.

These are your barriers. Remember, you only have 5 minutes to complete this step. One barrier may be time. You may be working or looking after people at this time. One the other hand, you may suddenly have lots of time with many things being closed and people trying to

stay home. Another barrier may be that you can't be bothered or you would rather watch a new box set you have recently discovered.

Step 3: Now write a solution to each barrier.

Given that you have just written down your personal barriers, it won't be easy to find solutions to these things. It can be helpful to think what you would advise a friend to do if they were telling you about a barrier they were finding difficult or what they might tell you to do. If it's things like 'can't be bothered' then you can use your list of reasons why you want to study as motivation.

Step 4: Write down all of the skills you have that will be helpful in studying

It's all about you so this is about reflecting on your skills. Apart from helping motivate you to study now, it's not a bad thing to spend some time reflecting on your skills anyway. It's good for building self esteem and you can use it in job applications!

Step 5: Write down all of the experiences you have had of success

This doesn't have to be academic success or anything related to what you are trying to study now. It can be any experience of success. The point is to remember how you felt when you were successful. It's likely to have been a positive experience and these tend to be motivating because we want to feel that way again. It's also about imagining yourself doing well. If you think about the world of sport, champions have their coaches/managers/agents and are very well practiced and good at their sport but many of them also have Sports Psychologists. The job of the Sport Psychologist is to get the athlete mentally prepared for the challenges they are going to face. That's what you're doing here. This is your champions strategy to remember success, want to be successful, work for it and imagine what it will feel like if and when you achieve it.

Preparation to study

In this section we will focus on planning and organisation around studying. In terms of your brain, these are called your executive functions. The part of your brain that manages these is still developing up into your twenties so it can be helpful to practice these skills.

Study timetable

If you are stuck at home due to coronavirus, it is helpful for your mental health to have some routines and a study timetable can be part of this. You can set this out as you like. Here's an example:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
9am-9.30am					
9.30am-10am					
10am-10.30am					

This is not meant to be prescriptive. It doesn't have to be half hour slots, it doesn't have to be weekdays. Things to remember:

- Leave space for a sensible morning routine.
 - Get up, get washed, get dressed, have some breakfast etc. All of this helps with your mental health during this time.
- Leave space for breaks
- Remember to eat, drink and try to have some exercise
 - Your brain needs these things to function properly
- Try to have some days off from studying.
 - Rest and relaxation are an active part of the process allowing your brain to process the information you are trying to put in there.
- Sleep is also crucial.
 - During sleep we file away the information from the day so not getting enough sleep can cancel out all of the good studying you are doing in the day.

Prioritising

1. Think about the subjects you have and the time slots available.
2. Consider which subjects you feel you need a little more time on.
3. Allocate a slot on the timetable for each subject
4. Remember you only have five minutes to make this timetable (ok, maybe 10 but definitely no more than that!!!)
5. Detail – you can be as detailed as you want but you have limited time

Rewards

Rewards can be really motivating but we need to remember a few important things to make them work:

- Do allow yourself rewards for studying but don't take them away if you don't manage the next planned study
 - If the reward is a positive to motivate you, don't make it a negative by taking it away later because it won't then be motivating and the system will fail.
- Rewards need to be something you want but also something that doesn't cause other problems
 - If you decide to have chocolate for your reward and you give yourself 20 opportunities for rewards in a day, you won't feel good at the end!
 - Rewards shouldn't cost. Presents are for special occasions.
 - The best rewards are usually time to do something you like but be aware that if you make this something like a video game or box set, you will need to limit this. It can just become a way of avoiding the studying!
- Timing of rewards
 - This guide is for people of an age range where you should be able to manage waiting for a reward. This means you can decide that you need to do something a number of times before it warrants a reward rather than rewarding yourself every time. It's up to you though because this guide is also for an age range where you can decide for yourself about these things!



Troubleshooting

So, we've talked about motivation and created a study timetable, but what happens when they don't work together like that?

Don't worry, this happens to everyone. Read over your motivation lists to build your motivation and try again.

But what's going to happen about COVID-19, my exam results and my future education/career?

Try to focus on controlling the things you can control and entrust some things to other people. Education professionals are doing everything they can to support you. They want you to do well too! They will provide relevant information as soon as it is available to them. If you feel anxious, take a look at our guides about managing anxiety for some support.