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**How to promote student self-confidence**

##### Fear and positive thinking

Study impacts upon the whole person for the human being is made up of mind and body, of effect and affect. Often ‘affect’ feels inappropriate in the academic, primarily cognitive, context and thus students feel that they ought to ignore or repress their feelings, especially negative ones. Obviously in terms of affect, we hope that students will feel excited, stimulated and challenged – but we must be aware that they might be horrified, terrified and demotivated. Ironically, the push for the repression of negative feelings can lead to an increase in their power rather than a decrease, in students becoming more subject to the occult practices of education rather than in mastering them. In this discussion we are going to cover fear and what we fear, why we experience low self-esteem and fear and what can be done to overcome our fears.

###### **Fear and What We Fear**

We are frightened of many things. We are frightened of ageing, disease and death, typically we are all frightened of change, of the new. Change makes us uncomfortable – and it is not just major change that discomforts. Students are often frightened of entering the library, of reading an academic text, of giving that first presentation. We can be frightened of anything and everything, and while fear may be perfectly natural and normal, it can make life – especially student life – really difficult. For while there might be some things in life that you can choose to avoid – you really do not have to bungee jump if you are frightened of heights – the majority of things that we fear as students **do** have to be engaged with.

###### **Why we Experience Fear and Low Self-Esteem**

It can be argued that the fear response is the body’s way of telling us that something is not for us, that there are too many risks involved – after all, it is rather silly to bungee jump. But if people avoided everything that they feared they would undertake nothing at all. Remember, to become a student is actually to embrace change, and change does involve risk – risk to one’s sense of self, to one’s identity – as well as fear of failure, of looking, sounding and feeling like a fool. While nobody actually enjoys these feelings, in an educational context if you avoid what you fear as a student, then you definitely will not succeed. It can help if we try to understand how low self-esteem and fear originate or operate in our society.

Sociologists might argue that in an unequal society members of underprivileged groups suffer low self-esteem as part of social conditioning; it is an internalisation of the views that society holds of them. Further, fear and low self-esteem can have an inhibiting effect on the ‘lower orders’ that serves the interests of the ruling class, for it is easier to oppress people with low aspiration and who you can despise for their own sense of inferiority (Leathwood, 2003).

Evolutionary psychologists (such as Baron-Cohen, 1997) argue that fear, anxiety and even depression are a legacy of evolution. When an animal is on unfamiliar territory it is in danger of its life, hence a fear response is a survival mechanism. Unfortunately, as human beings we also have consciousness and consequently an awareness of our own fear that can inhibit us in ways that would never be true of an animal.

Popular psychologists (Jeffers, 1987) argue that fear and low self-esteem are taught to us by our primary caregivers – ‘mind how you go’, ‘be careful’, ‘don’t do that, it’s dangerous’. When people say these things to us they are often just expressing their fears (‘I don’t want anything bad to happen to you’) but what we hear and internalise is that they do not have faith in us, that they think we are inadequate. Once internalised this negative self-perception can be extremely inhibiting preventing us from undertaking challenges or embracing risk.

Even economists have a say in this area – the non-stop pushing of pensions and insurance policies implies that there are ways of eliminating risk and making the world a totally safe and controllable space. But to be human is to constantly move into unfamiliar territory, to embrace risk. The more we focus on avoiding risk the more we are dehumanising ourselves. And the more we listen to our fears, the more we will focus on our inadequacies – and the less we are likely to do. This can be especially negative for the student who has so many new things to face, so many new challenges to embrace. If these changes are only viewed as problems and opportunities to fail then it becomes even more difficult to positively embrace education. This has a further consequence when studying if we consider the role of ‘mistakes’ in the learning process.

The learning environment may also play a part in the fear factor. Human beings do learn by trial and error. If the learning environment feels over-threatening, the student will not want to make mistakes and open themselves up to criticism: they may give up rather than reveal their mistakes to hostile scrutiny. The lesson we can learn as academics is to make the learning environment a safe one for **all** our students: a space for trial and error, for learning from mistakes – and we must reassure students that we have done so. The students have to realise that they will get things wrong – quite often – but if they work to learn from these experiences they will learn more.

***What can be done to Overcome Fear and Build Self-Confidence?***

We have argued that fear, while often uncomfortable, is a perfectly natural and normal response to life and to new and unfamiliar experiences. We are now going to take a leaf out of the self-help book in order to argue that it is possible to reframe fear and thus change our response to it. We will move on to discuss how to take responsibility for our lives, change a negative vocabulary, make positive friends and utilise affirmations.

###### **Reframing Fear**

Kipling said that the only thing to fear was fear itself. We argue that fear is unavoidable – what we can change is our response to fear. Here are some new ways to look at fear – see if they help (**you and**) your students.

**Fear is good:** Fear is a wonderful indicator that we are doing new things, moving into new areas and undertaking new challenges. In this way fear is a good thing, it means that we are still growing, we are still alive. Arguably, if we are not experiencing some element of fear it means that we are stagnating – we are dying inside. Try to see fear as an indicator of growth and welcome it – celebrate the fact that life still holds opportunity for you.

**Fear affects everyone:** One problem for students is that they tend to think that everyone else is OK, that they are the only ones feeling frightened and looking foolish. Obviously this is not true: if Cohen is to be believed, everyone feels fear when embracing the new. Sometimes just realising that everyone else is also frightened can take the stigma out of our fear. Instead of a fear response proving once and for all that we are either inadequate or a coward we can relax in the realisation that it just means that we are as human as everybody else.

**The only way to get rid of the fear of something is to do it – quickly:** Most people know this clich´e to be true. The only way to overcome a fear is to do that which we fear – and the quicker the better. Students can spend months worrying about that presentation – and then it is over in five minutes. The months of worry have just served to make the task harder.

**It’s easier to face fear than to live with fear:** It really is easier to deal with fear rather than to live with it. Every time we allow fear to prevent us from undertaking something it is as if we are conspiring against ourselves to make the world a worse place. So if engaging in something that you fear, tell yourself you have actually chosen the easier option.

**It takes practice:** Reframing fear in the ways detailed above may not come naturally to your students. However, they will find that with practice they will be able to face fear differently, and this will help them embrace the challenges of being a student.

###### **Taking responsibility for our lives**

We have argued above that students can experience lack of selfconfidence and low self-esteem as a result of an unequal society and the social pressures under which they operate. While this is true, this can be read as a way of disempowering students and confirming them in a victim status. This is not a helpful place for anyone to be. While neither nature nor society are fair, it is not enough for the student to sit back and say well it’s not my fault. To be able to move forward the student must be able to look at any situation in which they find themselves and work out just how they can take control of it – or how they can move forward. For if they just think ‘it’s not my fault’ they stay trapped – if it is their responsibility then they can make things happen.

As a student, it may not be their fault that they are not as academically inducted as the Oxbridge undergraduate, it may not be their fault that their professor thinks of them as a Mickey Mouse student . . . but there will be something that they can do to improve their own chances within the situation in which they find themselves if they get used to thinking of themselves as in charge of:

their decisions

their actions

their state of mind

the amount of effort that they put in

getting work in on time

getting good grades . . . etc.

If those things matter, students can take steps to make them happen. Of course we, as academics, can facilitate this by making our forms, processes and criteria clear. We can operate successful and empowering induction and HE orientation programmes, we can scaffold student learning in our seminars and we can operate and work with learning development facilities.

###### **A positive vocabulary can help**

The difficult sentence exercise above can reveal to people just how they normally respond to (academic) challenges. When first responses to situations tend to the negative this will often be reflected in the language typically used. Work is always hard, tough and difficult – metaphors of struggle, tunnelling, searching and suffering might all be used. If such a student thinks about an assignment it will be in terms of the amount of effort they will have to put in and the unending struggle that they will have to endure rather than in terms of the excitement, the challenge – the glorious frisson of fear.

It can help if we suggest that students start using language differently:

A problem becomes an opportunity. (To solve a problem we must make something different happen – this is an opportunity for change.)

A disaster becomes a learning experience. (Well, if a problem is an opportunity, a disaster must be a real opportunity – if we can reflect upon it.)

‘If only’ becomes ‘next time’. (We will make mistakes – and instead of lamenting them we can learn from them and note what could be done differently next time.)

Should becomes choice. (So it’s not ‘I should do that essay’ but ‘I choose to do it’ or not.)

Each of these vocabulary shifts is easy to mock but they all embrace a shift in consciousness that will help the student face academic life more positively. Obviously no one can make people shift their perspective – but if the student does want to change, practising using this different language will make a difference.

###### **Positive friends**

One thing that may occur for the ‘changing’ student is that they will encounter derision or resistance from peers and family members. Young students may find that they do not enjoy people viewing them as a swot – and that a studious mien is neither ‘buff’ nor ‘cool’. Older students may find that when inputting effort into their studies they will be expecting family members to help more with chores – this does not always meet with approval. Young and old students may find that they no longer have time for everybody else’s woes and they will not always be at the end of a telephone or ready to stop everything for a chat.

If the student wants to retain contact with friends and family throughout their time as a student they will have to negotiate this change as diplomatically as possible. It is not usually a good thing just to confront everyone around you with the new, positive, in-your-face and self interested person! Gently does it.

Further, it may be useful for students to start making new, positive friends to help them maintain their positive outlook and their energy levels. Negative people drain energy – positive people can excite and stimulate. Encourage students to make positive study partners and to form a positive study group. When encouraging group work in students yourself, you might let them choose their own groups so that they can work with people with whom they feel compatible – suggest that when making this choice they choose someone as positive and motivated as themselves – that is suitably ambiguous.

###### **Affirmations**

Typically we find that this is the topic with which the average academic has the most difficulty. Affirmations are short positive statements that students can use to overcome stress, to build their self-confidence and to generally help themselves.

The initial idea behind the affirmation is to drown out the internalised negative voice that we have grown up with. The ‘you’ll be sorry – you’re too old, too stupid, too fat, too lumpen . . .’ voice that lives in the heart, head and ear of many of us – and the majority of our students. This voice has to be replaced with a positive one of which the most basic is the ‘I can handle it’ (Jeffers, 1987). If students say ‘I can handle it’ whenever they face a difficult situation or when they feel a wave of insecurity or self-doubt flood over them, they will calm down and be able to face things.

From the basic ‘I can cope’ statement, students can move on to develop their own set of affirmations, ones that address the other functions of the affirmation, to energise and boost the self-confidence of the individual. Remind students that affirmations should always be in the present tense and always in the positive, the present tense so that the goal of the affirmation becomes rooted in the now rather than remaining distant and unobtainable, in the positive to emphasise that which is desired rather than that which is being left behind. For example, it would be ‘I am brave’ rather than ‘I will not be afraid.’

It is useful if people write out their affirmations and stick them up around their homes so that the first thing they see in the morning could be ‘it’s a great day’. When brushing their teeth it could be ‘I am wonderful’ and so forth. If encouraging students to use this technique do warn them that it is one that requires maintenance. People find that they use this technique, feel great, decide they don’t need it anymore – and sink back into negative thinking and behaviour. Remind them that they will have had many, many years of practising their bad habits – they need to give the new, positive ones the same chance.

Of course students will have to put in the academic work and effort as well – they cannot just sit confidently chanting affirmations in a corner and expect an essay to write itself. But thinking positively about their ability to write that essay can lead them to discover the steps that need to be taken to research and write an essay – and they may be able to give themselves the time that they need to do the work required. Thus a better essay will be written.