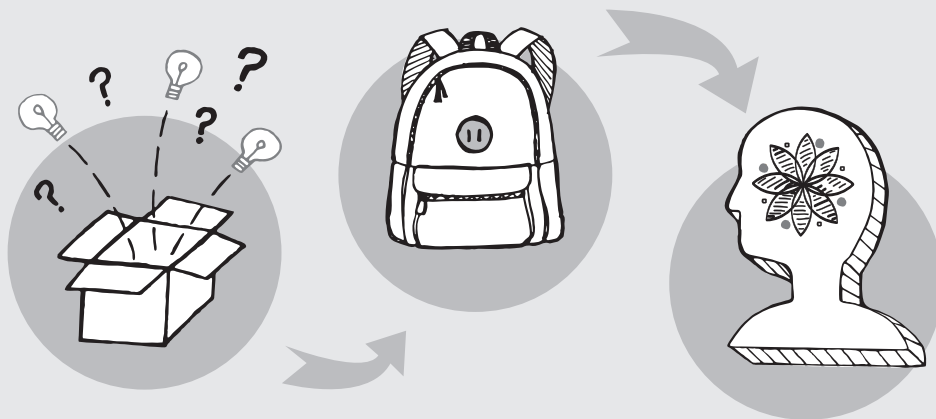


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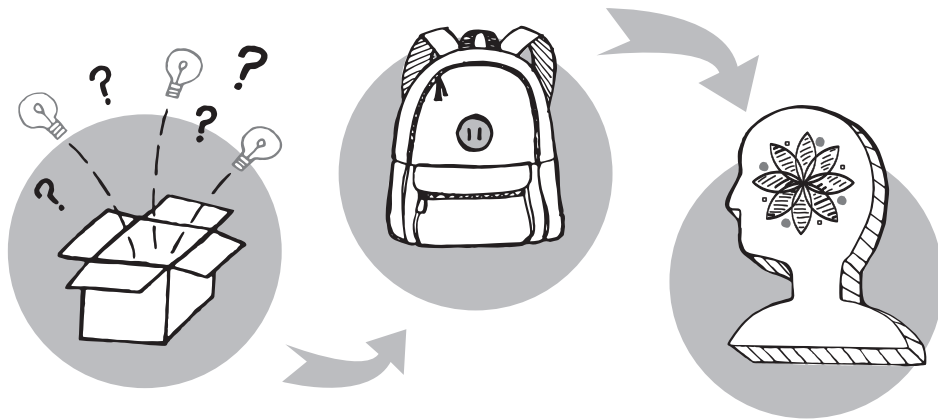
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MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

OFFICIALLY KNACKERED – HOW TO RECHARGE

In Chapter 2, the idea was introduced that you move from being unconsciously incompetent, to consciously incompetent, before becoming consciously competent and then finally unconsciously competent. However, what Chapter 2 did not focus on was how this might affect your mental health and more importantly what you could do to support yourself through your teacher training. Being unconsciously incompetent is glorious; you have no idea of what you do not know, and obviously unconsciously competent is the desired state. However consciously incompetent and consciously competent are difficult stages of your training, made particularly worse if this stage corresponds with the clocks going back and it being dark all time. This can lead trainee teachers to disengage with university sessions, to fall behind with expectations on placement, and then to feel that there is simply no way to get back on track and see the only solution as quitting the course. Therefore, this section is designed to help you when you find yourself in a difficult time in your teacher training, by offering some practical steps that you could take. The advice in this section is not revolutionary and it may be made up of ideas you are already familiar with; however, sometimes just seeing advice written down in an actual book legitimises your ideas and prompts you to actually act on your own advice. Finally, this section also legitimises those difficult times; what you are experiencing is,

for want of a better word, ‘normal’ from time to time. Should you find yourself in what Dr. Seuss (1990) labels a ‘slump’, remember that ‘this too shall pass’. However, should you find that you are worried or that your difficult time is extending for longer than you feel is reasonable then this is the point at which you should really start to seek help.

Let us now look at three basic foundations to ‘self-care’. The foundations are sleep, diet and exercise, and the place to start is sleep.

SLEEP

If you are worried, you may find that you start to experience issues with your sleep. You may find it difficult to fall asleep with an overactive mind or to stay asleep during the night as you are worrying. However, just as worries can cause sleep issues, so too can lack of sleep contribute to feelings of anxiety and low mood. It can be a difficult trap to extract yourself from. Everyone has different levels of sleep that they need. However, lack of sleep does mean that you will experience difficulty maintaining concentration and lack motivation, two essential skills required for teacher training. Sleeplessness may also cause you to feel listless and irritable, which if you worked in isolation in a computer booth may be tolerable but when faced with thirty pupils all day might just be a step too far. So what can you do to improve your sleep?

One of the things you can do is ensure that your bedroom is a quiet, dark, distraction-free room. Do not take work into your bedroom, eat in your bedroom or be on your phone. Your brain has to associate your bedroom with switching off. The phone suggestion in this list may have caused some surprise, but the last thing you need before bed is the blue light from a phone screen or the entire world at your fingertips. Your brain cannot distinguish between ‘fight and flight’ responses for real actual threats and similar anxiety-inducing responses to conflicting posts or ideas on the Internet. Nor do you need minute-by-minute trauma-inducing news delivered to your bedside. Do your amygdala (part of your brain which can run away with you emotionally) a favour, turn your phone on to silent and try disengaging with it at least thirty minutes to one hour before bed. Try to keep your bedroom slightly cooler than the rest of the house and have a warm bath/shower before bed. Research shows that the drop in body temperature after a warm bath/shower can promote sleep.

You should also try to limit your caffeine intake. We all know that caffeine is a teacher’s friend, but try to limit your caffeine intake during the daytime and maybe switch to decaffeinated in the afternoon, as this is a stimulant. It is the same with nicotine, so try to limit smoking before you go to bed. Alcohol, used in moderation, can help you to fall asleep. However, please note

that alcohol is a depressant and can also affect the quality of the sleep that you get when you do drift off. Therefore, you would be better swapping that wine for an alternative and keeping it as a treat, rather than a sleeping aid/working-week crutch because in the long term this will do you more harm than good.

Try as much as possible to keep to a routine. By setting a regular sleep schedule, your body can get into a pattern and know when to 'expect' sleep. This means having a dedicated time for working when you get home from school, but also ensuring that work does not spill out of this time. Occasionally of course, this may happen, but most of the time you should try to block off time for working and time to relax before you go to bed. Fitness trackers, smart watches, etc. can be useful in reminding you about this and helping to track what sleep you actual get versus what you think you get.

When rushing between placement, university and family commitments it can be difficult for you to have time to really consider what is troubling you. Keep your post-it notes with you, and if you have a quiet five minutes try to put your phone down so you are not distracted, and really think about how you are feeling. Jot down any issues or worries you might have. Then when you have a little longer you can consider these as discussed above. This means that you can start to address your worries as they arise rather than letting them build up. Furthermore, if you are slightly anxious it can be tempting to put off considering what is bothering you, only really beginning to do this once the feelings become 'too much'. Better to do this earlier rather than later and then things will not get on top of you. Hopefully, this means that when you do get into bed to go to sleep you have already considered the issues which were bothering you, allowing you to go straight to sleep. However, should you find you are troubled by other concerns, keep a notepad by you bed, note them down and deal with them in the morning.

If the dealing with worries strategy as outlined above does not appeal to you, why not invest in some Guatemalan worry dolls. There are about five to seven little people in the box, and the idea is you tell each of them one of your worries as you get into bed. This is a great technique as you can only have five to seven worries so it forces you to consider what is really bothering you. And then you have to verbalise your worries, succinctly to 'another'. The simple trick of vocalising what is worrying you is such a powerful tool, as it gets the worry out of the darkness of your mind and into the open. They always seem much less 'big' when out. Then you place the dolls under your pillow and they deal with your issues for you while you sleep.

Find time in your day, even if it is only five minutes, to try to relax. You are probably thinking that is not possible. But you should have five minutes breathing space in a day. You need to recharge and regroup, to ensure that

you can ‘go the distance’. A teacher training course is a marathon, not a sprint. Learning how to ‘future proof’ yourself for the difficult times is especially important when on a busy teacher training course, otherwise one day your head will simply explode. OK, that last bit is not entirely true. Nevertheless, consider if you constantly run any kind of motor without turning it off – how long it would last? It would get too hot, too quickly and an auto stop function would kick in. You too need to prioritise yourself (self-care again). The speed and quality of the work that you get through and produce when rested and well is considerably more and better than when you are ‘swimming through treacle’. Sometimes, you have to take time, to make time. Don’t believe me? That’s OK, then maybe consider the work of researchers in this area such as Wendy Suzuki and Joseph LeDoux to name two at the University of Oxford Mindfulness Centre, and then reassess your judgement. You are of course quite right to be a little sceptical of the term mindfulness, as it seems to have been ‘hijacked’ by the wellness industry and attached to pretty much everything and anything.

If you do find that there are nights that you simply cannot sleep and are wide awake, try getting out of bed. Tempting as it might be to turn on your phone, do not engage with this piece of technology as it is just too stimulating. Instead, undertake another relaxing activity such as reading or listening to music. When you start to feel sleepy again, go back up to bed. Hopefully this will mean that you form positive associations with your bedroom and sleep.

DIET

The next foundation for you to consider is your diet. When you are busy, diet can often be the area of your life that you neglect and you may opt for less than healthy options and there can be fewer healthy places than the average staffroom. This is not to say that you cannot indulge in the odd well-earned treat, but these unhealthy options should be a treat and not the norm. Following an 80/20 rule can be helpful whereby you aim to eat healthily 80 per cent of the time, with the 20 per cent reserved for Friday afternoon after class X following wet break. This is because quite often these quick fixes are high in calories, saturated fat and salt while also being low in the essential nutrients that you need. There is some evidence to suggest that a poor diet can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and that eating well can assist feelings of being well. After all, you are what you eat. Specific nutrients that may be beneficial for anxiety disorders include vitamins such as folate, vitamin B12 and choline; minerals such as magnesium and zinc; omega-3 fatty acids; the amino acid tryptophan (precursor of serotonin); and antioxidants such as

vitamin E, C, carotenoids and flavonoid polyphenolics. If you want a healthy diet, shop around the outside of the supermarket, do not go into the middle aisles. Eat more vegetables than you think you should do, and less sugar than you think you should, and try to cut back on processed food. Try to eat a rainbow diet and drink more water. It really is that simple, but food manufacturers simply would not make so much money out of you if this was the more promoted route. One of the easiest ways to ensure that you eat well at school and at a home is to batch cook. When cooking meals, you could make a little extra, and then freeze these meals. Please make sure you label these frozen meals, to avoid playing meal roulette. With a well-stocked freezer of meals, you can simply grab something in the morning and go.

EXERCISE

The next area to consider is exercise. Exercise has been shown to be really effective in helping to stay feeling mentally well. Of course, it is difficult to manage to complete all your placement work, university work and sort out your family obligations and then still have time for exercise. One of the ways in which you can do this easily is by trying to build it into your day, so it does not become 'just one more thing for you to do'. For example, once or twice a week when you are not returning sets of books back to school, you could try parking ten minutes away from school and building steps into your day. After lunch you could also set aside a little time to go for a walk, or do five minutes skipping in the playground. Not only will the exercise do you good but also simply being outside is good for you, because despite driving cars, living in houses and operating computers a human is still an animal. A combination of effects on the senses provides feelings of wellbeing for people; even just drinking your morning coffee in the garden for fifteen minutes has been shown to have an impact. If you are interested in this, for both you and the children you teach, you might like to research the term *shinrin-yoku*. This is a Japanese term which means 'forest bathing'. In Japan, this is a very common form of preventative health care and it is making inroads in the UK too for adults and children alike. Consider a recent report that stated: '12% of all children (c. 1.3 million) normally never visited the natural environment in the preceding 12 months' (Hunt, Burt and Stewart, 2015: 1). So it might just benefit both you and the children to start getting out more, even if it is just a quick five minutes skipping at lunch or breaktime. Like it or not, you are a role model for the children that you teach. Chances are, if you start this 'challenge', by the end of the week you will most likely be met by a merry band of pupils skipping too. You may be lucky enough that your school is part of

the Daily Mile challenge, whereby pupils run or jog for fifteen minutes, so get your PE kit on and join in.

Setting yourself a challenge with a date in the future is also a good motivator. It does not have to be an Iron Man; you can instead do a 1k fun run, or take part in a sponsored event. The 'Couch to 5k' is a great app to get you up and active in a very progressive manner. But the important step is telling friends you signed up. Being held accountable is very motivating and will help to keep you on track. You may want to do this with others on your course; again research shows this is a successful way of keeping going over time.

Of course, if you are feeling overwhelmed and tired, finding the energy to overcome this is a Herculean effort. If this is the case for you, you first need to recognise where you are, and by taking this first step you can begin to help yourself. Sit down and make a plan to participate in one exercise session for the week coming and then, irrespective of how you feel, make yourself go and participate. It's always easier if you have a friend going with you, as you'd never want to let them down. Let's be clear though, the most difficult aspect is the going; once there you will be fine and afterwards you'll be proud of yourself with a sense of achievement and some kickass feel-good hormones floating around in you. So do take a minute afterwards to consider how you feel, as you may feel physically better, mentally clearer and proud of yourself for going. You need to remember that feeling for the next time you do not feel like going. Eventually, if you practise doing this it will become a habit.

This section is designed to consider actions you could take and to empower you to support yourself by creating and maintaining firm foundations. The ideas and suggestions above should be considered preventative measures, akin to taking care of your teeth. Hopefully, if you take good care of your teeth, you shouldn't have to see your dentist regularly for treatments. Sure, every now and again you might need a little 'fixing up' but hopefully you avoid the 'major stuff' by being proactive. So try to embed these foundations into your life. They won't prevent you from having difficult times, but they may help you to get back on track. While all trainee teachers might experience peaks and troughs of emotions during training, these troughs will pass. However, if you find yourself stuck in a 'low' which doesn't seem to be showing any signs of passing you should contact your university support services as well as going to see your GP, because sometimes you may need a little more support than you can provide on your own. If you do require further support, it is not a binary choice; you can practise these suggestions alongside treatments that you are recommended.



CHAPTER SUMMARY



- Read more than you think you should; and then read a little more.
- Spend time planning thematically and the writing then takes care of itself.
- Consider how you are teaching: is it engaging? Could it be done in a different way? Why did you choose that approach for that lesson over another?
- Sleep, eat a healthy diet, exercise, repeat. And if you ‘fall off the wagon’ one day, simply get back on the next day. It’s not about practising for sainthood, but consider it more an 80/20 balancing act of healthy approaches versus binge watching box sets, stuffing pizza in your face and guzzling Lambrini.
- By and large, if something is marketed as healthy, it isn’t. An apple or broccoli do not require a huge sticker on them advertising the benefits, and you simply will never see an egg labelled ‘extra protein’. Of course not, that would be bonkers. Genuinely healthy food markets itself.

FURTHER READING

The Detective Dot books by Bright Little Labs.

This series introduces children to basic coding while also having an eye on tackling stereotypes for children and also promoting criticality. This sounds like a horrendously difficult and complex gig to pull off, but they do this very well indeed, and if I were teaching computing these days I would be requesting some Detective Dot books in the library. I know that they are currently looking to develop some curriculum materials for schools, so keep an eye out for these. The Detective Dot books are some of the few books I’ve hungrily read from start to finish, which these days is no mean feat, but I thoroughly enjoyed them.

Morgan, E. (2016) *Anxiety for Beginners*. London: Bluebird.

A personal account of one woman's journey with and into anxiety, in all its forms, as well as the science behind treatments. The book unpicks and gets to grips with what mindfulness actually is and the reasons why it works. The whole book is an interesting read, but the chapter on mindfulness in particular stood out for me. She recommends, if you are interested, searching for key terms MBSR, MT or 'compassion and awareness' (Morgan, 2016: 308) to ensure you find the 'right' kind of mindfulness training.

Meditainment: www.mediament.com

A website that has guided meditations which can link to the Lumi alarm clocks and 'read' to you as you go to sleep. A Lumi alarm clock is much nicer than a 'beep beep beep' in the dark, as it gradually glows lighter and you can set the wake-up tone to something altogether more cheery such as birds singing. Actual Lumi alarm clocks are a little on the expensive side, but in recent years both Aldi and Lidl have brought out their own versions, though these do not link to the guided meditations.

The Best Thing since Sliced Bread? podcast

This BBC Radio 4 podcast looks at the science behind many of the 'wellness industries food' claims. So far with the help of an army of scientists, it has looked at the purported health claims of turmeric, kombucha and vitamin C among others, and in the final considerations of each show, they confirm if the 'super food' is indeed the best thing since sliced bread or if in fact it is all marketing hype.