

CherWellBeing

Stories of Change and Understanding



[Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects \(Coursera\)](#)

“What are the odds you’d open your refrigerator door and find a zombie in there, knitting socks? The odds are about the same that a touchy-feely, language-oriented person like me would end up as a professor of engineering.” So begins Barbara Oakley’s introduction in her book *A Mind for Numbers* that accompanies this online course. Her story of how she went from hating maths and science to engineering and change inner straitjackets imposed in childhood is fascinating. Meanwhile, the online course gives great advice on how to learn; including tips to avoid procrastination, the importance of both focussed and diffused learning and what happens in our brains when we sleep. Useful in many contexts, whether you’re studying, trying to pick up a new skill or get out of a rut.

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I was terrified of GCSEs, but I survived!

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Different types of anxiety and how it affects us

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STOP, BREATHE & THINK

Stop, Breathe & Think is a great app for explaining thoughts, the brain and meditation

Whether in Year 7 or about to retire, we all have stories of how we have dealt with life’s challenges.

CherWellBeing is a space for us to share them. Here you will find interviews and articles written by staff, students and parents. Stories can be anonymous to allow us to write freely.

The aim is to gradually populate the Wellbeing tab on the school website so that when we are feeling as though no-one understands us or we can’t deal with an illness or difficult situation, we’ll see stories of people who may have dealt with similar experiences, as well as tools and links to help us.

If you would like to contribute or link us to online content that you found helpful, please contact cherwellbeing@cherwell.oxon.sch.uk.

I was terrified of GCSEs But I Survived

This time a year ago, GCSE mocks were coming up for me, and it felt like the end of the world. There were so many subjects, and so many topics within those subjects, and so many key words and formulas and quotes to memorise: it was overwhelming. Every teacher wanted me to prioritise their subject, but I also had to think about which subjects I struggled with, and which ones were most important to me and my future. It was a lot to put on a 16 year old.

As mocks drew closer lunchtimes were spent making revision timetables, cue cards and mind-maps. These were soon thrown aside in favour of panicked cramming: skimming revision guides, desperately trying to trawl through Frankenstein one last time, squeezing in one more practice paper. The mocks loomed over the year group like a heavy cloud of anxiety, and the only solace was that everyone else was going through the same thing (which didn't actually help).

Finally the day came for the first mock. It felt like the apocalypse was right around the corner as we lined up in our rows and filed into the exam room. There were a million worries in my head: what if I hadn't revised enough? What if I didn't understand the question? What if I ran out of time? What if I failed? These worries plagued me throughout all of my mocks, clogging up my head and making it hard to focus. Sometimes my hands shook so I couldn't draw my graphs; sometimes my eyes welled up so I couldn't make out the questions and I had to try and hide my crying from the people sat around me. It was everything that I'd dreaded.

No relief came as we received our results over the next few weeks. If they were good, then I had to work out how to replicate that in my real exams. If they were bad, then I had so much work to do to improve. And no matter what, I was going to have to go through all of this stress again in only a couple of months.

Surely the real thing could only be worse, and that was unthinkable.

However, as GCSEs approached and tensions mounted, somehow things began to improve. The Easter holidays were quite a turning point for me: I'd been dreading them for so long, as I was going on holiday to France for a week and had no idea how I'd find the time to revise without ruining the holiday. But by the time they came, revision had become easier with practice. I could bounce keywords back and forth with my brother as we went on walks, flip through revision cards over lunch with my mum, and recite quotes from Lord of the Flies to my dad before bed. I couldn't have felt more different in these weeks than I had in the weeks running up to my mocks.

When the day of my first GCSE dawned, of course I was nervous. I went to the breakfast revision session at school for a last chance to go over my notes, speak to my teacher, and most importantly joke about how badly I was going to do with my friends to make myself feel better. Going into the exam was definitely scary, but somehow not as scary as the mocks. My first exam didn't go perfectly by any stretch of the imagination. But it didn't feel like the end of the world anymore. Mostly it was a relief to get it over with, and this relief only grew with each new exam. It wasn't the end of the world, but rather the long-awaited end of a very long and tiring but rewarding journey.

Forest
Stay focused
be present



Cherwell Year 13s are using this app on their smartphone to help revise. Set a time e.g. 30 minutes and a tree grows while you study. If you go on your phone, your tree dies. You can grow a forest alone or with friends - a great way to measure revision time and you can also plant real trees.

Laura Goddard (Year 12) interviews Ms Young (Inclusion and Attendance Officer)

What is your role in the school?

I'm not a teacher, my title is Inclusion and Attendance Officer, which means I find suitable education for every child in school; for example alternative curriculum, home tutors, hospital school etc., and the monitoring and improvement of whole school attendance. I am also a Designated Safeguarding Officer.

When students come to you, what are they generally anxious about? Does it differ according to age?

Yes. When they come from their primary school their anxieties are how big the place is, how to find where they are going, timetables etc. It's more about organisation for the first half of the year, then it settles down and they are then less anxious. In Key Stage 3 overall, the anxieties are about things within school: friendships groups, social media (a huge concern) and worrying about keeping up with the work. At Key Stage 4 the anxieties are about social media, keeping up with GCSE work, friendship problems – all to a much higher level. The reasons are the same (as KS3), but these issues become more important to them. At Sixth Form the anxieties are about workload, less so about social media by now, relationship problems, and also their mental health. There are a variety of reasons for this and we deal with them on an individual basis.

How can you tell if someone is suffering from anxiety as opposed to just being anxious about an event, like exams?

What I find is that there is generally an underlying trigger, there's not always a sign. I often rely on members of staff who know that person well or a friend. There will be a noticeable difference in behaviour, for example someone who is bubbly, then becomes withdrawn. Or someone may start not coming into school. They may slip in little comments.... it really does depend on the individual and who is picking up on their anxieties. There is a difference between anxieties – after all they come in many different forms. we all have it, it's about how you manage it. When it comes bursting out – it's when you are not managing it.

What do parents get anxious about? How do you help them?

I work lots with parents; I run parent classes and I work with individual parents. Their concerns are exactly the same (as their children) but from a parental point of view. For example “my child has a problem with her friend,” “my child is spending too much time gaming”, “my child is not following instructions” – all to do with young people pushing boundaries (not about workload).

When students have exam or homework stress, how do you advise them?

Usually we set plans. The Deputy Leaders know them well on a pastoral basis but often they come to me for advice and we set a plan, such as having good routines, eating healthily, telling your tutors you are struggling, and offering as much support as possible, arranging a quiet space to work, setting up groups with friends. And we go by the young person's advice – they often have good ideas.

We get anxious for lots of different reasons, do you get anxious? How do you deal with it?

In my safeguarding role I hold a great deal of information and I am responsible for that and it makes me anxious sometimes. My workload makes me anxious especially if I am holding a lot of safeguarding information. I need to know I have followed all the processes. I worry about the students I work with as I care about them. I love my job, there are so many things I love about it – it makes it all worthwhile. My end goal is to support our students.

“One of the main contributors of anxiety is not knowing. This is especially true if you are the sort of person who tries to predict the future by spending hours over-thinking. It gives you a feeling of control that by ruminating about every eventuality, you've got things covered. The reality is, unless you have a crystal ball that actually works, no one can predict the future.... If you are anxious, I think the best thing to do is focus on gaining knowledge to reduce the fear.”

School's Counsellor Matt Barnard
Full Article is in the School Newsletter Spring 2018

How I Learned To Cope with Anxiety

As a child I went to ten schools. I was always the new girl so I would struggle to fit in, make friends, feel confident. There was teasing of all sorts of things from my name, to my accent, to the fact that I was teacher's pet; always the Goodie Two Shoes sitting at the front and asking all the questions. This was partly because I related to the teachers whereas I had trouble relating to my peers. I never understood the rules of socialisation. When I was young I thought it was just me, but I have learnt that I'm not alone.

I felt that I had no history with the other children, so I didn't know or understand the rules associated with their friendships. They already had their friendships established and so trying to fit into that or become part of that, I found incredibly difficult or impossible. And children can be so cruel. At each new school it would be harder because the friendship groups were that much more established and I was terrified of saying the wrong thing, of being criticised, of being judged. I hated being commented on, to stand out in any way. I was terrified of what other people thought of me. I didn't want people to think badly of me. I didn't want to upset or offend anyone. I became incredibly anxious about doing the right thing, but I didn't know what the right thing was.

You know how some kids run up to you in the playground and say, 'Hi, I'm so and so, come and play?' I never had the confidence to do that, to put myself forward. The teachers were very friendly, supportive and kind and liked me, but didn't help with the social side. In fact they probably made it

worse because they were nice to me, which the other children resented.

I kept struggling and trying to fit in, but it didn't work. It wasn't until I was accepting of the situation and focussed more on being comfortable in myself and who I was, that I was able to relax and then connect with people. So by caring for myself and finding a certain amount of comfort and acceptance in sitting in the library and reading at lunchtime and not struggling, that friends were found and connections made; partly in the classroom and partly in the library. I wasn't so scared anymore. I was still anxious, and I always will be, but it wasn't such a life or death situation when someone would make an overture to come and join them for lunch, so I could be more relaxed, and able to communicate with people more easily, whereas when you're highly anxious and self-critical, you can't. It happened partly because I was getting older. It took a bit of time to realise that you don't have to fit in or socialise as others think you should, that you don't need to be the same way as everybody else. We're all different.

As awful as it can feel when you're in that moment or that time, I'd say it's important to know that you're not alone, you're not the only one who struggles with social connections or anxiety and that, with time, maturity, and self-acceptance and confidence, making those connections will become easier. A side note to those people who don't suffer from social anxiety is to be aware that there are those of us who do, so I would ask you to be patient with us and to offer a little bit of kindness and support.

Quiet people have many talents to share in this loud world. Below is **A Manifesto for Introverts** from Susan Cain's book *Quiet Power: Growing Up As an Introvert in a World that Can't Stop Talking* aimed at teenagers. Or find out more from her first book *Quiet* or website quietrev.com to be inspired.

- 1 A quiet temperament is a hidden superpower.
- 2 There's a word for 'people who are in their heads too much': thinkers.
- 3 Most great ideas spring from solitude.
- 4 You can stretch like a rubber band. You can do anything an extrovert can do, including stepping into the spotlight. There will always be time for quiet later.
- 5 But even though you'll need to stretch on occasion you should return to your true self when you're done.
- 6 Two or three close friends means more than a hundred acquaintances (though acquaintances are great too).
- 7 Introverts and extroverts are yin and yang - we love and need each other.
- 8 It's OK to cross the room to avoid making small talk.
- 9 You don't need to be a cheerleader to lead. Just ask Mahatma Gandhi.
- 10 Speaking of Gandhi, he said: "In a gentle way, you can shake the world."