

THE UNIVERSITY YEARS

University was one of the biggest culture shocks I've ever experienced. I went from being overly controlled and regimented at school to suddenly being handed the reins of power. Living away from home, being expected to organise my own timetable, no formal introductions to classmates... From all rules to no rules - talk about whiplash! All of my closest friends from home were now scattered across the country. I had to start from scratch.

Once again, I was told by my careers advisor, 'University will



be your finest years. You'll make friends for life and develop into a well-rounded adult.' What she failed to tell me was that I'd be really poor and was expected to live in squalor and be constantly full of energy and 'ultra-fun' in order to fit in. Now to be clear, I love a good night out. Drinking cocktails, chatting with friends and, more importantly, dancing! (Seriously, I'll tear up any dance floor.) But even at the age of 18 I couldn't do this every night - I was knackered! I found the university social scene to be really challenging. There was so much pressure to be relevant and interesting. Having one-night stands, staying up for two days straight and taking cocaine were the norm. I did none of these things, so I was very much out of my depth.



Alcohol and caffeine

One evening I found this magical substance that suppressed all of my anxiety and made me feel super-confident. Naturally, I'm talking about alcohol. It was a miracle. Finally I had found my cure! After a few drinks of liquid courage I was a different person. I could talk to strangers, relax and be 'normal' for a few hours. If only that was the end of the story, huh? Me and my bottle of wine rode off into the sunset together. Alas, while alcohol provides short-term relief



from anxiety, it is not a long-term solution because...well, there's a catch, right? That's life!

I became reliant on it to help me get through social events and even started having a drink before I went out. (Don't worry, this isn't the part where I tell you that I became an alcoholic, and spent three years clutching a bottle of vodka in the gutter.)

I really wanted to believe that alcohol was the answer to all my anxiety problems because it had such an immediate positive effect. Whenever I read an article suggesting that alcohol made things worse, I didn't believe it. Surely it was just the government's way to stop students from binge drinking?

However, by the time I reached 23, I couldn't ignore the signs any more. Too much booze DOES in fact increase anxiety symptoms. First of all, it makes your brain lazy and reduces its ability to cope with stress. I mean, if you have a miracle cure, why not use it for everything? Your brain never has to face fear alone again. This is certainly not a good habit to get into. Your brain is your most valued tool and should be kept strong.

Hangovers are the main area of destruction. Many young adults (including me back then) don't realise that hangovers not only affect you physically (being sick, headaches and generally wishing you were dead);

they also have a massive impact on your emotions and mental health. Everybody gets that feeling of self-loathing the day after a heavy drinking session, but if you suffer from anxiety then it's likely to be much worse. Alcohol messes with the serotonin levels and other hormones in the brain. Remember how important serotonin is from Chapters 1 and 2? Well drinking essentially f**ks it up, particularly as the alcohol starts to wear off. I found that I was staying in bed all day with hangovers and I felt miserable. Alcohol also heightened my sense of paranoia - and believe me that's something that didn't need a boost! I would obsess about the previous night's events. Had I made a fool of myself? Why wasn't my friend texting me back? I began checking social media sites, furiously scanning for any embarrassing photos.

Alcohol also makes you crave foods that are really bad for you. Sugar, salt and saturated fats are among the biggest culprits. We know they're bad for the body, but large amounts of such foods are bad for the brain, too. An excess of sugar can cause an adrenalin spike.

Hangovers make you feel tired, which leads me nicely on to the next substance I discovered: caffeine. Again, what a miracle bitter dark liquid! If wine chilled me out, then coffee hyped me up. I could go to lectures wide awake after four hours' rest and



write essays when I should've been sleeping. I took Pro Plus and drank Red Bull too when I really needed a boost. Looking back now, I cringe - what a stupid cow I was! I'm sure that this is fairly obvious, but just to clarify: **RED FLAG ONE:** caffeine is a stimulant that affects the central nervous system. **RED FLAG TWO:** caffeine increases the amount of adrenalin in the body. It's essentially like pouring fuel onto a fire. One cup is OK, five is not! Twenty minutes later, when you find yourself shaking with a pounding heart, trust me it's the caffeine.

TIP: Alcohol and caffeine are fine. I'd be a hypocrite if I said that I didn't indulge. The key word to remember is 'MODERATION'. It's true that alcohol can take the edge of nerves. But too much will only deplete your serotonin levels and increase your anxiety symptoms the following day.

EXAMS

In 2015, ChildLine received 34,000 calls from teenagers struggling to cope with exam-related stress (Adams 2015). I can relate to this, and if I'd have known that you could ring someone, then I might've given it a go!

When I was applying for university, it was sold as being the most important thing in the world. So, for

an impressionable and sensitive person like me, this triggered a volume of negative overthinking. I needed to get into university, excel in every class and then get my degree. If I slipped up even once, I wouldn't get my degree, I wouldn't be able to get a job and would end up begging on the street. My parents would be devastated (they never ever mentioned this - I just assumed it) and I would be a shame on the family. That's a lot of pressure to put on oneself!

On top of this, I felt pressure from my school to excel. In assembly the headteacher addressed the final-year students and spoke about the all-important 'league table'. Our school regularly secured a place in the top five positions and he reminded us of our duty to 'do well and not let the school down'. I was very aware that I was expected to achieve my predicted grades and I didn't want to disappoint. After all, schools are a business to a certain extent - the terminology is just different. Sales people have targets to hit and so do teachers. Sales want to attract customers and schools want to attract better students. But where do we draw the line?

At university, learning was a different battleground to anything I'd ever experienced. Revision was hard enough at school, but at least I could ask the teacher for guidance, whereas now I was expected to study completely solo and any direction should come from a library book. Picture this scene:

Lecturer: During this semester we have studied eight topics and the final exam will consist of questions with regard to two of those topics. I would suggest that you revise all eight thoroughly.

Me: Have you seen the paper?

Lecturer: Yes, of course.

Me: Couldn't you narrow it down to maybe four topics? I'm not asking for the questions, of course, but it seems pointless to revise all eight when only two will be in the exam.

Lecturer: I'm surprised you would ask. Any academic would be happy to revise all eight.

Oops, clearly I don't think like an academic! Seriously though, is it me or does that just seem ridiculous?

On top of revision- and essay-related stress I was also afraid to speak up in tutorials, through a fear of looking like an idiot. It's true, I didn't use traditional academic language and I probably asked stupid questions. So I never said a word and spent most of the time worrying about whether the tutor would ask me a question. In reality, I should've thought, 'F**k it, I'm paying a small fortune for this, so I'm going to do and say as I please!' But, as always, the pressure to fit in and look normal got the better of me. Social anxiety thrives in environments where difference is not encouraged.

Getting a good mark in every exam became imperative to me – it was my whole life. I had to prove that I wasn't an idiot, even if it meant memorising books by heart! My legs were physically shaking as I climbed the stairs to the results boards at the end of the first term. (That was a nice touch BTW: let's advertise everyone's results on a board for the whole world to see. Who needs privacy?) I always did well, but the fear and adrenalin wouldn't dissipate for days afterwards. This wasn't a new phenomenon by any means – it happened after my GCSEs and A-levels, too.

If I could go back my younger self, I'd give her some advice on what qualifications actually count for in the wider scheme of things, to help reduce the exam anxiety within! Apologies...these are all geared towards the UK, but I hope if you're not based here you can work out your country's equivalent:

- ✘ *GCSEs*: Don't worry too much as they don't count for anything in the adult world. Just aim for Cs – this will get you into college.
- ✘ *A-levels*: These will get you into university. THAT'S IT. So again, just aim for what you need. If you don't get straight As, it really isn't a big deal in the long run.
- ✘ *Bachelor's degree*: This is when it gets more serious – you're actually paying for your own education now, so don't f**k about. First year

you can afford to just pass, but second and third year are important.

- ✘ *Master's degree:* Seriously, don't f**k about - this is well expensive!

Try your best, but don't drive yourself into the ground. Perspective is an important thing. Sure, it might be embarrassing for a day or two that you didn't get straight As, but in a week it won't matter any more. Value your wellbeing over pride.

Disclaimer: I am not encouraging students to be lazy and reject their educational responsibilities. Education is very important as it's something that we should value. But we should also value our health. It all comes down to finding the right balance.

TIP: Tell someone!

- ✘ If you're really struggling and there's a teacher or professor that you trust, then arrange a meeting to discuss your issues. Maybe you can't bear the idea of giving a presentation in class? Perhaps alternative arrangements can be made. Or perhaps you just need to tell someone how you're feeling.
- ✘ Many universities have designated support groups for students with mental health issues. Peer-to-peer mentoring is on the rise in education, so do some research.