

KAREN FOLEY: Hi. And welcome back to Student Connections. In this session, I'm joined by Troy Cooper. And the title of this particular slot is, setting realistic expectations. This is a subject I really wanted to look at because I teach at the OU and so many of my students come along and say, well, I just want to do my best. I just want to do as well as I possibly can. And then they'll get 75% and they'll be horrendously disappointed. And I'll say, well, actually, that's a really good mark. You should be really proud of yourself.

And so I thought it might be useful, especially because there are so many new students out here, to have a talk about this. It's a very big subject. Why do you think it's important, Troy, this whole idea? Do you think students do think about things in this sort of context-- like manage their expectations? Or do you think their trying to be better and better with every TMA?

TROY COOPER: Yes. I just think in life, generally, we're not good at managing our expectations and quite often they're related about a set of assumptions that we make about ourselves, and other people, and the way things are. We just don't examine them. We just don't look at them. But we have expectations as a result. And then the expectations are disappointed because they're quite often about what we want, but doesn't actually happen. And then when it doesn't actually happen, that disappointment is just overwhelming. And often, it's too catastrophic.

We just stop what we're doing. We say, well, my expectations were disappointed, I can't do this, or this isn't right for me, or I can't get on with anything, and just withdrawal. And if you had looked at your expectations in the first place and said, actually, what am I hoping for, and what's the basis for that hope, and how realistic is it? Then that situation might never have occurred.

KAREN FOLEY: Because we know that many students studying with the OU are doing this in conjunction with other things. They've got busy lives, families, often work, often there is so much going on. And we've seen from some of our student feedback that the most successful, I guess, in terms of number who are completing, aside from people who are retired, are often people in full time work. So they're slotting all of this in. So this idea of expectations then, how useful is it to actually sit down and think about it?

TROY COOPER: I think at the beginning-- when you first start your module and especially at the beginning of your qualification, sit down, really realistically-- actually talking to somebody will probably help.

Sit down with whoever is your nearest and dearest or your best friend and talk about what you want from studying, what you hope to get out of it, something about what you think the barriers are going to be, and how you're going to cope with them. And then talk about how that actually fits with the first expectations that you were talking about. Because I've had students like yours.

If you say to them, what do you think you'll get on this assignment? They'll say, well, I hope for 90%. And I'll say, yes, I know. I know you hope for 90%, but what do you actually expect? And when students have talked to me about what they actually expect, actually they can tell me what their assignment's going to get it. And they realise, as they talk it through, that they pretty much know. But they've got this other expectations that's related to an unrealistic hope. And that will be a disappointment to them.

And setting expectations and having those hopes is about looking at yourself, looking at your life, all the balances and stresses that there are within it, and making a fairly realistic appraisal of what it's good to expect and what's a bad expectation.

KAREN FOLEY: So there's two real ideas that I'm sensing you're talking about here. One is the expectations, I guess, in terms of overall study. I am an A, or I am a B, or I am a this sort of student. This is my parameters that I would like to be, how I conceptualise myself. And then you're talking about expectations for an individual assignment or piece of work, which may relate to things going on. It may be that you've had a cold, that you've got it in late-- there are various factors going on.

So would your advice be almost to sort of think logically? How much time have I got? What have I got going on? How quickly do I learn? How am I going to do? And what sorts of things am I looking at? And then for each piece of work, there's a different expectation. What sort of advice would you give around those ideas?

TROY COOPER: Well, that's a really good idea, Karen. You probably know, for all the people out there who have studied in level three psychology, the fundamental attribution error in psychology is a very reliable one, that people, when things happen, particularly that are negative, they attribute it to themselves as people rather than attributing it the context around them as the cause for whatever it is.

So you're exactly right there to draw that distinction. Expectations are often about judgments, unfortunately. And expectations, particularly in study, are often set around achievements. And

those can be a whole set of beliefs, that have been formed since you were knee high to a grasshopper, about what kind of person you are, how good you are at things, and so on. And what people often don't do is that thing of looking at this individual time, this piece of work, the pressures on them. It could be often pressures at work. We hear about that, don't we, from students?

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, we do.

TROY COOPER: Or family pressures. A wedding comes up, there's a bereavement, whatever it is. And realising, actually, this is the point at which I adjust my expectation. This is the point at which I may have to go light on the study and I may have to compromise on my standards. I don't throw it all up in the air. I just say, that's life-- as they say. That's what other people say. And I pass over that one and move onto the next stage knowing that that isn't anything about me as an individual. Yes, I think you're exactly right.

KAREN FOLEY: So at lot of this, I guess, is then thinking about where you want to be, what's happening, and what implications that might have. I'm just conscious that we're really talking about grades-- well, I am, I suppose. And expectations can be about other things as well as just pure grades. It might be, I'd really like to figure out how to reference this time, or I'd really like to work on my writing, or I'd really like to read outside all the module material.

When I was a student at the OU, I always used to read outside the module material and I would always be told about it because so much of it is in the books. I appreciate all of this, but I wanted to do something different. And so I used to think, well, if I'm going to do that, I'm going to have to sacrifice some of my grades. So I'm going to get for this sort of parameter of grades, I'm not going to follow it x,y, and z.

And so I guess it's thinking about where you want to-- what you want to your degree for, and what you want your study for, and how much it matters to you. Some bits in the module may matter a lot more than others. You might be really interested in one subject, and not in another, and you might just want to pass that. So what sort of techniques would you say then-- say people do reflect in terms of what they're trying to do and have a little sort of sense check or barometer. Have you got any useful tools the people might be able to think about?

I don't know, maybe at home you've got ideas about how this could work for you? We've been talking about Post-it notes, we've been talking about little checklists of ways to go. Are there any sorts of things that you think, at home, might be a good idea that you could have to pull

yourself back into this? To think, OK, this is what I'm looking at. And for this TMA, what am I trying to do and what am I expecting? So that you can sort of benchmark against that. Have you had any ideas in your teaching that have come up?

TROY COOPER: Well, I always say to people, if you possibly can, keep a small journal. It doesn't have to be every day, but like you say, just sense checking where you've been, what you've been doing, what the pressures are around you, what your goals are, thinking about, reflecting, looking at the writing, what you want to do. Now I think that kind of thing is extremely useful, but quite often students are actually disappointed about other things. And tutors, actually, can be a big area of disappointment. So if you're starting your module, think about what you expect from your tutor-- what you want from your tutor, but what you expect.

And then sense check it. Go on forums, talk to other the students. But also, actually, contact your tutor, and ask them questions, and check how your expectations match theirs. They're quite open to it. They've been teaching quite a while usually. They know a lot of those kinds of anxieties students have. And you can use that kind of resource to continually monitor and evaluate what you're expecting. And actually, probably immediately, a lot of times you might be disappointed. Because disappointment and then just wanting to withdraw-- saying, well, that's it. That's it. Had enough-- that is the key situation you don't want to be in.

KAREN FOLEY: So you've mentioned tutors. And I'm going to go to the social media desk in a minute because I hear there's lots of buzz going on and lots of comments. But before we do that, I just wanted to ask about this idea of tutors and getting them to work with you. What could students do? Can they talk to their tutor about what they're expecting and maybe use that tutor to sort of help them manage those? How can that relationship work for the best of the student? And if they are disappointed when they get their TMA, their tutor marked assignment, back, and they read it, and they say, this tutor doesn't understand me at all or my sheer brilliance here, what can students do then?

TROY COOPER: Well, are you asking me what they can do in terms of managing themselves or what the formal things are that they can do? Because, of course, if they're not happy with a grade, they can go through the appeals process.

KAREN FOLEY: I guess more in terms of working with a tutor, and sense checking, and that sort of idea. We'll be covering a lot of these questions in the student support team session, so do hold fire on any of those questions that are coming through.

TROY COOPER: What you could do with your tutor. So your tutor is a very, very experienced teacher who's been teaching several generations, inverted commas, of students. When they look at a piece of work, they are not judging a student, they are judging a piece of work. So feel happy to get in touch with them and say, actually, this seemed a sheer piece of brilliance to me, why is it missing the mark for you? Why am I disappointing your expectations? And they will tell you. They are quite happy to tell you.

And tutors are very happy to be approached before you do work. They can't read a draft, they mustn't, but they can talk about what the expectations are in terms of assessment very openly. And just use your tutor as a resource. They will not make judgments about you as a person. They, themselves, have been through the education process, which can be very damaging.

Let's be honest. When you put yourself in a position where you're being evaluated on a piece of work, you're feeling vulnerable. Everybody does. And it might be a judgement that you feel is being made about you as a person. They are trained not to make that judgement. So get in touch with them, talk it over. Do it via email because that often provides that little bit of distance that makes it more comfortable, probably. Or a phone call, if you want.

KAREN FOLEY: Perfect. Excellent. Well, there's lots going on on the social media desk and I want to--

[BELL RINGING]

Whoa.

TROY COOPER: Yes?

HJ: Well, it seems that we have some mail.

RACHEL: Wait, we need to do our own My Face.

HJ: Oh, yes. We need to-- for a My Face update, of course.

RACHEL: Yes. There we go.

HJ: OK. Well, that ding means we've got some mail in the old inbox. Let's have a little look here.

KAREN FOLEY: This world wide web is very clever, isn't it?

HJ: Oh. There's something from a Laura out there. Let's have a little look here. Oh, brilliant. Laura

sent us her selfie to go on the board as well, which we're very please about it.

RACHEL: And where's Laura from?

HJ: Burton on Trent. Where's that?

RACHEL: Somewhere around here, but the size of the--

HJ: So we've got Laura. We'll pop you up here. You've got a very big selfie there, a very prominent position. We're loving that. And, oh-- we got some more mail as well. Do you want to--

RACHEL: Is this for me?

HJ: It's for you. It's addressed to you.

RACHEL: Oh. I never get post. Oh, let's look at this one. Oh, we have a question.

HJ: Oh, brilliant.

RACHEL: We have a question that's come through. And somebody's asked, how do you keep yourself motivated after not doing so well at your module or one of your TMAs?

KAREN FOLEY: Massively lower your expectations. No.

TROY COOPER: Have no expectations, then you'll have-- no. How do you keep yourself motivated? You need to focus on what you enjoy doing in the module and what is interesting to you. You didn't do well on that? There were particular reasons for it. Evaluate it, get somebody to help you do that, your tutor will help you do that, and then move on.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. It's a really hard thing because we put so much effort into things we write. And it's really difficult to actually objectively look at it. And so when you get your mark back and you're disappointed, it can be so tempting to just put it away. But having another look and, again, going back, saying, actually, what was this assignment asking me to do? And really, have I done that? Or have I written something that's absolutely brilliant, but isn't about what I was being assessed on?

And this session, I'm very aware, is about expectations and not about assessment as such, but it is also worth pointing out that there are different times that these things matter. So for new students, a lot of this process-- you go in early, you can often substitution an assignment

on some of the modules. So it doesn't mean that you're not going to get a good degree necessarily. When you're at level three, those grades matter a lot more and that's when, hopefully, you've been working with the feedback. So that's why, I guess, managing expectations, getting a good working relationship with your tutor, and understanding that process of being able to improve-- that's what it's all about, isn't it?

TROY COOPER: Yes, it is. And remember key things like, if you're not interested in something, it's very unlikely that you will do extremely well in it. Interest is key. So if you bomb on a particular part the module that you didn't enjoy, that's probably the reason.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Now I see you've brought a book with you, Troy. And we've only got a minutes left, so I wonder if you could explain why this is an important book to you?

TROY COOPER: Well, this book is *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey. Now he's a tennis coach and I actually picked up that book because I want to be better at tennis and I'm not terribly good. The reason I brought the book with me is because he talks about-- at any level of the tennis game, he says that it's expectations that get in the way of what people can do, their capability. It's not technique, it's not innate talent. It's about what you're thinking about in relation to yourself and what happens when something goes wrong, when it doesn't go the way that you want it to.

And you'll have seen that with all of the great tennis players. And Andy Murray is the most obvious, isn't he? When he goes into one of those-- yelling at himself. And you know that when he's lost it, the next few games are going to go south because he is disappointed with himself and that's not the point at which he will pick up the game. And that's what Timothy talks about. It's about not being disappointed with yourself, but looking at when you are set back and saying, right, why did that happen in terms of what's around me and what supports I had. What were the resources? What were the pressures? I can do better than this, how do I change all those things?

KAREN FOLEY: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much, Troy. That's been really, really useful. And I hope that everyone at home has found this a useful session. So have a think about things, both in terms of your overall study and your individual assignments. Do liaise with your tutor, do sense check things with other people around you as well. And, I guess, what we're sort of saying is that this is a very, very common issue for a lot of people. And so I hope that you found this session really useful. Thank you very much, Troy, for coming along.

We're now going to have a little break. And what we're going to do is we're going to have a little break, breaking the live stream, and we'll show you a couple of videos. So if, in the unlikely event, we go offline, don't worry. Just log back in and we'll be back with you soon. But you'll recognise some people in this video. Holly Jack, and Rachel, and me, actually. We created these videos for the Faculty of Social Sciences for new students.

So for those of you who are out there new and for those of you who aren't, you make up a few tips. We're going to show two videos about where to first and where to then. And this is all about the sort of support that you can get as an OU student from the Faculty of Social Sciences. We'll be back in 10 minutes. Don't forget, we'd love more selfies. Please, send us those to us on Twitter, #SCC15. Or email us connections@open.ac.uk. And we'll pop those up on the board. And we'll be back in 10 minutes from our next session.