Achieving work/life balance when you are studying.

by Soraya Mir, TAFE Counsellor

We all procrastinate or forget deadlines. I even did it for this article. We note down the due date and then promptly do nothing until we realise it is almost upon us.

Then panic sets in. We do a list of the things we have to do—it’s a big list and each time we look at it, it seems longer as we realise what else needs to go on it to achieve a great grade. Then instead of doing the assessment we do the dishes, clean the house, walk the dog, go for a run, eat some sugary food and have a few coffees and even go the library but the task seems overwhelming despite having a clean house. We might even fall asleep at our desk or in our bedroom, rather than write our assessment.

We seem to have no motivation and question whether we are doing the right course at the right time.

We wonder why others seem able to “Just do it!” Then promptly start scrolling on Facebook, or checking our emails or texting others.

If the due date is almost upon us and there is no way we can read 14 chapters of a book in 2 days, we may give up or suddenly become spurred on to cram as much as we can in

Ironically, in order to study productively, research has found that you have to maintain basic patterns:

1. **Regular sleep** [go to bed at the same time and wake up at the same time—most nights, for an average of between 8 to 10 hours per night; cat naps during the day for no more than 20 minutes at a time]

2. **Regular eating** [eat when you are hungry, which usually means every three/four hours depending on your metabolism]. If you ignore these signals from your body, you can find yourself obsessed with food and either overeating or restricting your eating—neither of which provide a good basis for good concentration and good overall health.

3. **Regular exercise/moving** [2 & 1/2 hours to 5 hours of moderate intensity physical exercise per week (ie exercise with some effort but where you can still converse, for example, brisk walking, swimming, social tennis, dancing) OR 1 & ¾ hours to 2 & ½ hours of vigorous intensity exercise per week (ie exercise which requires more effort and makes you breathe harder, puff and pant (eg aerobics, jogging and competitive sports is what is recommended for 17 to 65 year olds)].

4. **Regular social contact** with supportive friends/family [an important factor in improving mood and feeling positive about yourself—remembering what is important about life]

5. **Regular non-productive (ie non-study) pleasurable activities** [e.g. going to the movies; a concert; hobbies]. These are important to remind us that we are more than our studies and to give our brains a break to think creatively.

So how do you fit study into a schedule, which is filled, with this regular stuff?

One approach is to have different ways of keeping track of when things are due, especially when you have multiple assessments.
Firstly, obtain a large wall planner (one with all the weeks for the year): Put in your due dates for your assignments at least one week before they are actually due in big bold colour & highlighted so it is vivid and then put the actual date in for the actual due date in black or blue pen. Put important dates on this calendar - such as weddings, which you cannot miss. But otherwise do no put too much information on it.

Secondly, print out a week by week calendar with the time slots for the day (eg from 7am to midnight on it): In black or blue pen block off bedtime and getting up and having breakfast time for each day. Block out lunch and dinner times. Block out a time doing one thing that is pleasurable activity during that week. Block out one thing that is going to be your physical exercise for that week (eg getting off the bus one stop further from your destination and walking from there)

On the first day you receive an assessment task, put its due date on your yearly wall planner as stated above then put a note on your week planner as to the smallest first step you could do that day (eg it might be to type out the template cover sheet for submitting the task).

Each day ask yourself these questions:

*What is the smallest step I could take today to improve my health; eat more wisely; enjoy my socialising; add to my assignments; study for my exam?*

Put that small step in your weekly planner at the time you plan to do it that day. Try to make the step as small as possible. When you put it in your planner, think of the step and imagine yourself doing it. When you do the task, tick it off and ask yourself the question: *What is the next smallest task I need to do and put the task in the planner for the next day?* If however, you have allowed more time than you have used for the first task or feel inspired to do more, then do more, knowing that you don’t have to... Then ask yourself the question after you have ticked it off your weekly planner and put that task in for the next day...

Small achievable steps give you confidence, keep you motivated and do not scare you into responding in an anxious way. If a step does make you fear your abilities - break it down further.

If you would like more strategies please come see a TAFE counsellor in the TAFE counselling and career development unit on your campus.