

# Studying with Purpose



Australian Institute of  
Professional Counsellors



A 'Living with Purpose' Companion Guide for Students

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YOUR FIRST CHOICE FOR A CAREER IN COUNSELLING

First Edition, September 2018

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# Introduction

This guide is a companion for the *Living with Purpose* guide that has been specifically designed for our Vocational Education and Training (VET) students.

We have used our understanding of our students and the issues they commonly face to develop a resource that will help you get started, progress steadily, and get the most out of your studies, as well as help you deal with the challenges that come up for students from time to time. Throughout this guide, you will learn how to link your purpose and values to your studies; find out how the skills and strategies you learned through *Living with Purpose* can help you complete your course; and learn how you can apply these and other skills to the stressors and challenges that students commonly face.

We know that students sometimes find it hard to know where to start (or where to re-start) their education; how to find motivation when it appears to have slipped away; and how to manage stressors, whether those that are study-related or those that appear in the varied and often complex lives of our students. Through this guide, you will develop strategies to plan your path forward; take care of yourself; manage your time; intervene when worries and self-doubt appear; and deal with common student stressors such as feeling isolated and juggling responsibilities.

Our students come from a wide range of backgrounds, and with a variety of other things in their lives beyond study. Many come to us long after school or other post-school studies have been completed, and have to re-learn many of the strategies for effective study, as well as significantly changing their day-to-day life as they re-engage in education. For those making the transition from school to VET study, this requires taking more responsibility for the management of their own study process than they may have been used to in a more structured educational environment with teachers, timetables, and assessment deadlines. Some of our students are studying by distance because they live in remote areas (or even overseas!). Others need the flexibility we provide in order to fit study in around their activities, family responsibilities, work, health issues, or other commitments. Whatever has brought you to study with us, we will help you set yourself up for success, plan effectively, manage your time and tasks, and know where to go and what to do when you encounter challenges.

While it is tempting to read about a good idea and think, "Great! I'll do that later/tomorrow/first thing Monday morning!" we are much more likely to get these things done if we do so straight away. And of course, the only way for these skills and strategies to be effective is to put them into action. As you work through this guide you will find activities relating to the concepts and skills discussed. Make sure you take the time to complete each activity before moving on – this will help you embed the knowledge and make use of it. In some cases, the activities will help you plan what you will do when things get challenging – having a plan in advance (and knowing where you have recorded it!) will make dealing with these issues as they arise significantly easier.

Our goal is to help you connect with your hopes and purpose, feel energised and enthusiastic about your future as a student, and build towards your vision for work and life beyond your time with us. We wish you the best of luck!

# Bringing Values and Purpose to Study

In the first section of *Living with Purpose*, we focussed on your identity and values, and how these can inform the decisions you make. Here, we apply these considerations directly to your studies to help you identify the reasons why you have made this commitment and how it connects to who you are and what matters to you.

It will be helpful to keep this ‘big picture’ in mind as you build and maintain your motivation for study, as well as helping you stay on track when distractions, competing priorities, and challenges arise. More importantly, you will focus on developing a sense of your purpose for study, whether related to studying itself or what you hope to achieve as a result of your studies. You will also reflect on how studying and applying what you learn will help you enact your values. As you do so, you can connect your studies to your broader purpose, and the development of a meaningful, satisfying life.

## Why Study? Developing a Study Purpose

In studying with us, you are working towards a qualification in the human services field. You will have a reason for having chosen this area in which to develop your knowledge and skills. That reason probably has something to do with your identity and values, and perhaps a sense of purpose. Naturally, we cannot tell you what the meaning behind your choice to study in your chosen area is, so let’s start with an activity.

### Activity 1.1: A Purpose for Study

You probably already have a few ideas about why you are studying (something lead you to enrol, after all). Nonetheless, spend a few minutes thinking about the reasons you are here, and write answers to the following questions.

1	What is it that you are hoping to learn?
2	How are you hoping to apply what you are learning?

In general, our students are learning new information and skills because they hope to build or change their career; if this fits for you, write down exactly what kind of work you would like to do as a result of your studies, or the other professional changes you want to see. If there are other reasons you are studying – interest, self-development, or skill-building, for example – write down the specifics.

# Optional Activity: Personal Mission Statement

Many organisations have mission statements, which explain what they are doing and why. You might think about your hopes for applying what you have learned through your studies as a mission statement. Consider writing a mission statement for your studies. Just a sentence or two will suffice, although you are welcome to write more if you choose. Follow the simple steps below.

1	Identify what you want to do – your purpose for study.
2	Write how you will do it – what knowledge, strengths, capacities, qualities or skills you will use to achieve the purpose for which you are studying.

## Identity, Values and Study

As you know from *Living with Purpose*, what we do is often influenced by how we see ourselves (our self-identity) and the values that matter to us. Some students are influenced by an important event or individual, and are inspired by this to pursue a particular field of work; others are studying to develop in a role or position they already hold, and which is important to them; some study a given area because they are interested in it, or want to develop insight, knowledge, or a skill-set; and still others believe they have traits or qualities that will suit them to a particular type of work or other activity. What does your choice of course to study, and how you hope to apply what you have learned, say about who you are? Does it reflect aspects of your identity that matter to you? Is it connected to your sense of ethics, your community, your traits or interests?

## Activity 1.2: Identity and Study

1	<p>Consider the aspects of identity that you encountered in <i>Living with Purpose</i>. Which of these connect with what you have chosen to study and why you have chosen it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⊕ Cultural affiliation and ethnic background</li><li>⊕ Place of birth or affiliation with country or region</li><li>⊕ Family, relationships, and roles</li><li>⊕ Age or generation</li><li>⊕ Gender identity or sexual orientation</li><li>⊕ Important experiences</li><li>⊕ Education, occupation, and community roles</li><li>⊕ Interests, likes and dislikes, or activities</li><li>⊕ Traits, strengths, and qualities</li><li>⊕ Values, beliefs, and ethics</li></ul>
2	<p>List each aspect that you identify as relevant either to your studies or to what you hope to do as a result of your studies.</p>
3	<p>In a few words, explain how each aspect is relevant to your studies or study purpose.</p>

Our values can also guide the course of study or work that we choose, as well as how we go about studying. From *Living with Purpose*, you are already familiar with several values that are particularly important to you – let's now apply these to your studies.

## Activity: 1.3 Values in Study

1	List five or six values that are important to you and are relevant to your studies or the purpose you hope to achieve through your studies. These might be values you hope to enact through studying itself or through what you will go on to do as a result of your studies.
2	Many organisations have a value statement, which specifies the values that guide their work. Write a brief values statement for your studies now: include a list of the values that are important for your studies or purpose for studying, and how you will enact them through your studies and beyond.

## The Big Picture

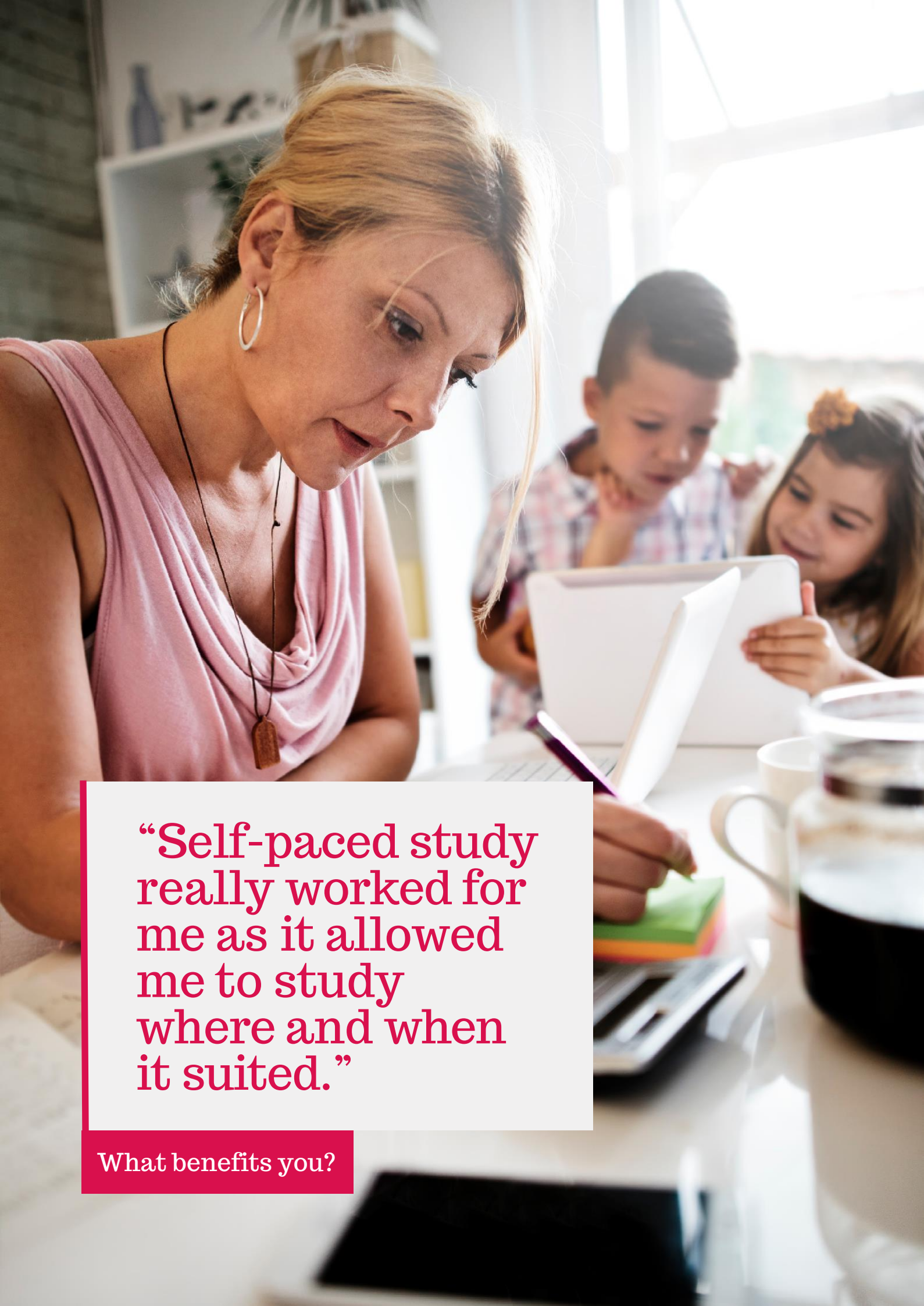
Your course of study will be made up of a multitude of tasks. You will be guided by medium and long-term goals that require planning and dedication over time. However, most of the work of studying will be made up of small, repeated tasks, such as reading, note-taking, and completing assessments; even sitting down to study, planning what you will do during your study session, and re-focussing when something has distracted you are essential tasks. With all the bits and pieces, it can be easy to lose perspective, to lose track of the big picture – this is what is meant by the saying that someone ‘can’t see the forest for the trees’. We get so caught up in our focus on particular details (trees), that we lose the big picture (the forest).

Identifying your purpose for study, and how your identity and values relate to the choice you have made, will help you keep the big picture in mind, and this will help you maintain your motivation as you work through your course. Find ways to remind yourself of the big picture. If you have created documents or images that demonstrate your purpose for study or why studying is important for you, display these somewhere you will notice them; refer back to them if you feel discouraged or unmotivated. The skills that you will learn through the rest of this guide will help you with the detail, as you work towards your big picture purpose.



After her children left home, Donna found that she had some free time on her hands. She also realised that she had been feeling unenthusiastic about her work for some time, and started to consider a change in direction. She put her hand up to volunteer at her local community centre, and quickly became aware of the high rates of financial difficulty among the community members who accessed the centre. Talking to the people who attended, Donna heard stories of unexpected changes that suddenly reduced the financial fortunes of clients, the effects of family breakdown and job losses, and difficulties caused by injury and illness among clients and their families.

Donna decided to start studying a Diploma of Financial Counselling. Having not studied since she left high school over twenty-five years before, Donna had a lot to learn about studying, and some changes in lifestyle to make as she settled into her new course. When she found her motivation to start a study period waning, Donna pictured the community centre clients and reframed the task at hand as a step on the road to being able to offer practical help and guidance to others experiencing similar difficulties.

A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a pink sleeveless top and a necklace, is looking down at a laptop. In the background, two children are playing with a tablet. The scene is set in a bright, modern kitchen or dining area with a white table, a coffee maker, and a cup of coffee.

“Self-paced study really worked for me as it allowed me to study where and when it suited.”

What benefits you?

# Skills for Successful Studies

As an adult learner, you have more flexibility in your approach to learning, and greater responsibility for your learning outcomes, than you would have had at school. You also have a whole range of additional responsibilities and concerns that you need to plan your study around. It is easy to feel overwhelmed at the start of a course or when balancing study with the rest of life feels like a juggling act. Luckily, planning, preparation and goal-setting will help you achieve your study aims and deal with the challenges that arise. Investing some time to work through the activities in this section will save you a significant amount of time going forward, and will make the rest of your course easier. You will also learn a range of techniques for self-management – managing your time, dealing with distractions, and so on – to help you on your way.

## Goal-Setting

Chris has been working an office job since leaving university in his twenties. His children are now in high school themselves, and so are a little more independent. Chris has decided that this is the time to work towards a change of career, and has enrolled in a Diploma of Case Management. He has set a long-term goal of completing the Diploma within two years.

Chris works out that, on average, his long-term goal time-frame would give him six and a half weeks to complete each unit. He makes each unit a medium-term goal with a six-week time-frame. This allows him some flexibility if unforeseen events occur, whether family issues, illness, or other unexpected changes, while ensuring that he will complete the Diploma within his set time-frame.

Chris works out short-term goals for each unit:

- ➔ Completing the Study Guide, reflective activities, and Book of Readings: three weeks.
- ➔ Revision and further reading or research: one week.
- ➔ Completing assessments and practical tasks: two weeks.

At the beginning of each unit, he figures out what steps he will take, and when, to meet each short-term goal. For example, he breaks each Study Guide up by its sections, and allocates a certain number of hours to complete each section, including its self-reflection activities and readings.

From *Living with Purpose*, you are already aware of the benefits of effective goal-setting: people with well-developed goals are more likely to achieve what they set out to do and even experience greater wellbeing (Santos, 2018). Having clear goals and a purpose for studying will also help you maintain motivation and productivity. Some goals, however, do not achieve these benefits – goals that are vague, unrealistic, or imposed by others are unlikely to be effective (or to benefit your wellbeing – Bernstein et al., 2018). As such, it is highly recommended that you ensure that the goals you set meet the SMART criteria, which is to say that your goals are:

- ⊕ **Specific:** Each goal is clear and specifies a particular outcome. For example, completing a Study Guide; spending a certain amount of time on a task; or developing a new habit.
- ⊕ **Measurable:** A concrete indicator shows whether the goal has or has not been achieved. For some things, this will be included within the 'specific' goal – if the goal is to complete a task, for example, then whether or not the task is finished is the measurement. For other kinds of goals, however, you will need to add a measure in. It is not enough to say that you will do 'some' of something, or do something 'more' or 'less'. Instead, specify:
  - o the number of times you will do the thing or the amount of time you will spend on it (e.g., read for half an hour, read twenty pages, or complete two readings);
  - o the frequency with which you will do it (e.g., once per day, 3 times per week); or
  - o the degree to which you are going to increase or reduce it (e.g., increasing the time you study each week by two hours).
- ⊕ **Achievable:** The goal is realistic and you have (or can get) the resources to meet it. For the most part goals should be moderately challenging, but get started with easier goals to build your confidence, motivation and momentum. Keep in mind that setting unrealistic goals is counter-productive.
- ⊕ **Relevant:** The goal relates directly to your purpose, or what you want, need or value. While you might set goals in any area of your life, this guide is about your studies; the goals you set in this area should relate directly to your learning and progressing through your course.
- ⊕ **Time-bound:** The goal (and each action step) specifies a due date or deadline. State when the goal or action step is to be completed, and record when it was done. This will make it more likely that you will take the required actions and achieve your goal.

Not all of your goals will operate in exactly the same way. You will have long-term goals, which are likely to relate to your values or purpose – they will be focussed on building the kind of life you want. They might relate, for example, to completing your course of study or gaining work in the field that you are studying. Long-term goals are met through medium and short-term goals (also called sub-goals). It can be helpful to identify what your long-term goal is, and then to work out your medium and short-term goals from there.

As you study, it is inevitable that challenges will arise. From distractions that tempt you away from focussing on your reading or assessments, to competing demands on your time and energy. One way to stay on track and increase your chances of achieving your goals is to set implementation intentions, the 'if-then' plans we discussed in *Living with Purpose*. Think about what is likely to get in the way of studying, and plan how you will deal with these issues; spend some time picturing yourself implementing this plan.

Chris knows that his study time is likely to be interrupted by emails, messages, and requests from his family, so he forms implementation intentions. He decides that he will turn off email notifications during his study periods, and check his emails only after he has finished the period. He also turns off social media notifications. He decides to keep his mobile with him while he studies only during those periods where one of his family members is not at home, so that he can be contacted in an emergency; at other times, he will leave the phone in another room and only check it during breaks.

Chris speaks to his family about the importance of his study time. He tells them that if there is an emergency or they need his help for something important and urgent, of course he wants them to interrupt him. He also explains, however, that most of his study periods will be brief, and that when he has longer study periods he will be taking breaks regularly; he asks his family to leave any non-urgent matters for a break or until his study period has ended.

After *Living with Purpose*, you are probably familiar enough with the process of goal-setting to get straight into it. If it has been a while since you completed those activities, however, you can always review them to refresh your memory. The goal-setting template has been reproduced on page 20; you may use this template, any others you like, or write your own, in completing the following activity. Just make sure that whatever template you use covers all the SMART criteria!

## Activity 2.1: Goal-Setting for Study

1	<b>Why are you studying? Take the purpose you identified in Activity 1.1 and check that the goals you set help you reach that purpose or enact your values.</b>
2	<b>Take your study purpose as the long-term goal: how will you get there? Write the broad steps that you will need to take (i.e., your medium-term goals).</b>  <b>You might break up your goals by time or size. You might choose, like Chris, to consider each unit of your course a medium-term goal, or you might break up your journey towards your long-term goal by time periods, or other things that need to happen. Your medium-term goals might be similar to each other, or quite different. At this point, do not focus on anything smaller than completing a unit or something that takes anything less than a month or two to complete.</b>

3	From your list of medium-term goals, select the one that needs to be completed first. If you need to work on more than one simultaneously or there is not a clear 'first step', select a relatively simple goal that you would like to start working on straight away.
4	Is the goal you have selected one that can be achieved in six or fewer basic steps? If so, write it out as a SMART goal (if not, find a sub-goal that will move you towards this medium-term goal, and write that as a SMART goal). For example, if your goal is to complete the Study Guide and Book of Readings within the next month, make sure you have written this out as a statement of achievement, and included the timeframe.
5	Write a sentence or two about why the goal is important (i.e., how it will help you achieve your purpose/long-term study goal).
6	List each step that is required to meet the goal. Write each step in SMART format and record the date on or by which you will carry out or complete the step.
7	What could get in the way of achieving your goal? Think about possible distractions, the potential for procrastinating or wanting to do other things, not having all the resources you need to achieve the goal, or competing priorities. Identify one obstacle and form an implementation intention. Write down how you will overcome the obstacle and imagine yourself taking that step.

## Self-Management

As an independent learner, you do not have a timetable set by anyone else. While this allows students flexibility to plan their studies around their other responsibilities, activities and needs, it requires self-management skills, including planning and effectively using study time. While it might be tempting to think you can simply get study done when you have free time, you are much more likely to complete your course in a timely manner if you set a structure for yourself.

As a student, self-management means taking charge of your own learning – engaging actively with the units you study and the activities involved – and taking responsibility for your progress and achievement. Plan how you will spend your time, when and where you will study, and how you will deal with competing priorities and distractions. If you are not sure how to do these things, do not worry – the rest of this section focusses on exactly that.

# Scheduling

Imagine a student who intends to study for eight hours per week. She figures she will spend a couple of hours studying on week days after work when she does not have anything more pressing to do, and make up the rest of the time on the weekends. Each week, however, she finds that by Sunday she has done, at most, two or three hours of work (if any at all!) – something else always ‘comes up’. Unfortunately, this is all too common. We may not want to take the time to set up a plan for ourselves, but trying to ‘wing it’ often means simply not getting things done.

How you plan your time will depend on your particular circumstances. Every student has other responsibilities and activities they need to consider and have time for, whether these relate to parenting or other caring roles, work, community involvement, or managing health issues. Considerations will also include chores and errands, time for social contact and support, and self-care. As such, we cannot tell you how you can or should organise your time; what we can tell you, though, is that you will achieve much more if you have a plan and stick to it.

Many of our students have children, and we understand the challenges of balancing parenting and study. If you have children, you will need to consider how their needs will be met and when you will be free to study. If they are at day care or school and you have some time during the day, you might consider whether you could study then. If the children are young and you care for them or work during the day, you might be able to put in an hour’s work after they go to bed. If they regularly spend time with other family members, you may be able to dedicate some of this time to uninterrupted study periods. Of course, you will also have a number of other activities that you also need to make time for, including having some time to yourself.

Chris has earlier start and finish times at work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He decides that he will study for two hours after getting home from work on those days, and for six hours on Saturdays, while the children are doing their own schoolwork or spending time with friends. This allows him evenings and Sundays to spend time with the children, get his housework and errands done, and have contact with his friends.

Developing your own weekly schedule is very useful for post-school education. We have provided a template you might like to print and use (see page 21); you can also find many templates online, write your own, or use a diary or app. When you are writing a schedule or study plan, ask yourself:

- ➡ Does it allow time for the other things in your life? Think about your family and social connections; chores and errands; activities, relaxation and enjoyment; exercise and sleep.
- ➡ Is it reasonable? You might be able to schedule in twenty hours of studying, but if that means you do not have time for other things – day-to-day activities, other events, meal breaks, downtime, and so on – or assumes that you have more productive time in your day than you actually do, the plan may be downright counterproductive. You want a plan that helps you identify what you are doing when; sometimes sticking to it will be challenging, but it should not encourage you to feel overwhelmed, pressured, or de-motivated.

Of course, having a plan is only helpful if you use it. Implementation intentions can be useful here: plan for how interruptions and distractions will be handled; how tasks will be prioritised; and how you will adapt if you miss a study period, or if a task or unit takes longer than expected. Note, too, that over time you will review and adapt the schedule; you may find, for example, that you have more or less time to devote to studying than expected, or that circumstances change.

## Activity 2.2: Developing a Schedule

1	Select a schedule template that suits you.
2	Block out the times when you cannot study – time you will be sleeping, meeting family or other caring commitments, work or volunteer shifts, and so on.
3	<p>Look at the remaining time and consider how much of it you will need for other activities, household tasks, time with friends and family, and relaxation. Consider how much time you can realistically dedicate to study based on this.</p> <p>If the time remaining after steps two and three is less than you want to spend studying, you may need to reconsider some of your optional activities or reduce your expected study time. Spending less time each week studying will likely extend the duration of your studies, but setting unrealistic expectations for study time is also problematic. As important as studying may be, we know it is not the only important thing in your life.</p>
4	Determine a realistic number of hours you would like to spend studying each week, and mark these on your schedule. Double-check you will still have time to meet your commitments and consider other potential impacts. Ensure you still have time to relax and to spend with the important people in your life. Adjust the schedule if necessary.
5	Commit to studying on the days and times you have identified.



**Note:**

If you or your family has a cycle of events or commitments, a fortnightly or monthly schedule may be more helpful.



# Other Time Management Strategies

For many of us, there is simply too much to do and not enough time or energy to do it. Beyond scheduling, other strategies for prioritisation and time management include:

- ➔ **To-do lists:** What do you need and want to get done? Write down every activity, then ask:
  - o What is important to get completed today? (Mark these as to do today.)
  - o What is important to get completed this week? This month? (Mark these with the date they should be completed by.)
  - o What tasks do I want to complete, but which can wait if others are more important?
  - o Are there tasks that can be delegated?
  - o Are there tasks that can be let go?
  - o If I do not do X task today, when will I do it?
  - o Will putting off a task make things more difficult tomorrow or next week? Will it cause a delay or issue later? (For example, while not getting an assessment task completed this week is unlikely to have serious immediate impacts, a delay might mean you complete your course later, with professional and financial consequences.)

When you have developed a to-do list for today, plan how and when you will complete each item. Some tasks will be necessary for meeting your goals; others will be things that simply have to be done. Do not focus solely on challenges, chores, and goal-directed work, however – time for yourself and the important people in your life matters too.

- ➔ **Breaking big tasks into small steps:** A big task can feel overwhelming, but as with goal-setting, figuring out the smaller, actionable steps that will lead to completion is helpful. Identify each step that the task requires, and view each step as its own task – make a list of what needs to be done and tick off each as you complete it. It might also be helpful to plan how much time you will spend on each step – add this to your schedule.

If you are enrolled in our Graduate Diploma program, for example, and are preparing to write an essay, you will need to take a number of steps: writing an essay is not one big task, but numerous smaller ones. You will be analysing the question, reviewing the relevant aspects of the Study Guide and Readings, doing further research, developing an approach, drafting, re-writing (and re-editing!), and submitting.

Similarly, if you have to complete a practical, you need to decide how you will do it; if you are attending a seminar, tasks will include booking in, making arrangements, reviewing the material, making notes for yourself, practicing the important skills, and attending the seminar. If you are completing the practical via video or private assessment, most of the same steps apply, but you will also be finding volunteers and making other arrangements.

- ⊕ **Taking reasonable breaks:** Studying in big chunks without breaks is not effective. Figure out when you will have breaks, for how long, and then stick to your plan. Some people set reminders to get up and move around for a few minutes every hour or half hour. Gentle stretching and doing a bit of exercise can be particularly helpful, especially when you are spending so much time sitting and reading or writing (although, as you will remember from *Living with Purpose*, it is important to discuss any new exercises with a doctor first).
- ⊕ **Ticking or crossing off:** This is so satisfying! Plus, it helps with maintaining motivation.
- ⊕ **Rewarding yourself:** When you have completed a series of tasks, or completed a particularly challenging task, do something nice for yourself. This might be taking a longer break, eating a treat, or spending some time doing a fun activity.

Some methods combine a number of time-management techniques. The 'pomodoro method' (Griffith University, n.d.) involves a to-do list, focussed study or work intervals, and regular breaks. If you were to use this method, you would start by writing a to-do list for your study period, for example, 'Finish reading section one; complete Reading C; review notes from last week; complete the first assessment task'. Writing this out by hand is recommended.

You would then set a timer for 25 minutes (the interval can be adapted). Note that some proponents of this technique recommend using a physical timer, such as a bench-top oven timer that requires winding. (In fact, the technique is named for the tomato-shaped oven timer that the inventor, Francesco Cirillo, used - 'pomodoro' is Italian for tomato.

You would then focus on your task - no distractions, changing direction, conversations, or answering calls, messages or emails! When the timer went off, after 25 minutes, you would mark off what you had done and have a 3-5 minute break, ideally getting up and moving around a bit.

You would then set the timer for another 25 minutes and start again. After four cycles (two hours), you would have completed a 'pomodoro' and would take a substantial break - say, 20 to 30 minutes.

Methods such as this can be very useful - they set strict times for concentrating on study, but also enforce breaks, which is helpful for maintaining focus and energy (it is not a good idea to 'cram' or try to study for significant periods without a break). They can also help us become better aware of how long certain tasks take, which is useful for scheduling. However you structure your time, though, it will take some discipline to avoid the pitfalls of frequent procrastination or distractions.

# Procrastination and Distraction

Whether it is study, work or household labour, most of us are prone to procrastination and giving in to (or seeking!) distraction at times. A bit of productive procrastination can be okay – getting a few little things off the to-do list before settling in to a bigger task, for example. Often, however, procrastination simply delays or even prevents progress; even productive procrastination poses this risk. Strategies for reducing procrastination include:

- ⊕ Time management strategies – e.g., to-do lists, breaking tasks down into smaller steps, and creating and committing to a schedule.
- ⊕ Jumping in and getting started. If you have been putting off starting your assessment book, for example, and it seems a bit overwhelming, just open it up and start working on the first question.
- ⊕ Doing bigger or more challenging tasks at the beginning of the day or study period – taking a ‘get it over with’ approach.
- ⊕ Starting with a small task that can be quickly completed and ticked-off; build motivation for further action and use this to tackle a bigger or more challenging task.
- ⊕ Figuring out when your energy level is higher and doing important tasks then. Less important tasks, or those that take less brain-power, can be fitted in at lower-energy times. If you are a ‘morning person’, get started early and get the harder or bigger tasks started, if not completed; if you come alive after lunch or dinner, schedule study tasks requiring concentration and effort for those times.

If we think of procrastination as someone aiming to prevent you from achieving your goals, their ally would be distraction. Often, these two might attack together. Distracting things – such as social media, email, messages, and television – can be tempting things to procrastinate with. Even something we generally do not like, such as housework, might be an attractive distraction from something particularly challenging. Set up your study time and space to minimise distractions and things that encourage procrastination:

- ⊕ Create a space that is conducive to study. Somewhere you can keep the materials you need handy is helpful; where possible, a dedicated study area is great, but many of us do not have the space for that. You might find that you focus better in particular environments; if home is too distracting (there are always other things to do there) perhaps there is another quiet space you could use, such as a local library or park.
- ⊕ Take distractions and tools of procrastination out of your study space. If practicable, put your mobile in another room or on ‘do not disturb’ mode; turn off notifications; close computer windows not directly related to your current study task; and avoid having the TV on or any audio that is distracting.
- ⊕ Take regular breaks and use that time to do things that you enjoy or that help you feel energised; then put those things away and re-focus until your next scheduled break.



## Note:

You might think that it is okay to be semi-distracted, or work on a couple of things at once. The bad news is, multi-tasking does not really exist. While we can sometimes get away with doing one task that requires cognitive focus at the same time as a task that we can do on autopilot (talking on the phone while putting away the dishes, for example), we cannot effectively do two things requiring cognitive focus at the same time. When we think we are multi-tasking, what we are actually doing is flicking our attention back and forward between two tasks. As you might guess, this is much less efficient than completing one of the tasks and then moving on to the other; it also increases the risk of missing important information and making mistakes.

# Goal-Setting

Goal:

This is important because:

Action	Due Date	Completed
Step 1:		
Step 2:		
Step 3:		
Step 4:		
Step 5:		
Step 6:		

Dealing with obstacles:

**Instructions:** In the first column, identify the time periods by which it is most useful for you to break up your day. Fill in each section of the grid according to how you will spend that time. Make sure that you allow time for relaxation, social connection, and fun!

## Setting Yourself Up for Success

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN



“Study groups were a great way to gain fresh perspectives I hadn't considered.”

What benefits you?

# Preparing for Progress

Some of our students come to us with recent experience studying; for others, this is their first foray back into the world of education since distant school days. Whatever your background, though, a few simple study skills will prepare you to make the most of this experience – they will also make progressing through your course much easier. This section also includes some tips for tackling assessments and the anxiety they sometimes cause.

## Study Skills

A big part of study skills involves applying the self-management techniques we discussed in the previous section. Goal-setting, scheduling, planning, and limiting procrastination and distractions set you up to learn effectively and efficiently; to progress through your course in a timely manner; and, of course, to see the process through to completion. Other study skills help with learning and retaining information, and producing high quality assessments; we turn to these critical skills now.

### Active Learning

Effective learning is an active process. Studying is not just about reading – reading, particularly if only done once and without really engaging with the material, is a recipe for forgetting. It is also insufficient for the development of the skills and capacities that are at the heart of VET programs.

You are engaging in an adult education program, which means that you are responsible for your own active learning. Your Study Guides are chock-full of information, the Books of Readings further your knowledge, and you have a range of self-reflection activities to help you operationalise what you are learning. Engage with all of your study resources – complete self-reflections, make notes or diagrams to help develop your understanding and improve recall, and review your notes regularly. We forget most new information within days of learning it, so working regular review sessions into your study schedule will help you remember what you are learning. This will also make using the information in practice much easier, and your assessment writing more efficient.

Remember, too, that AIPC is here to help. In addition to your course materials, our website, newsletters and blogs have a wealth of content. Our student Facebook page provides opportunities for you to engage with your fellow students. Many of our courses also have webinars and instructional videos. And, of course, our friendly Education Advisors are on hand to talk through unit content and assessments.

## Note Taking

Note taking is about recording key concepts and pieces of information, in your own words; identifying and clarifying important terms; and using your own writing to deepen your understanding and recall of sometimes complex material. There are different formats for note-taking, and you might like to research and experiment, or use various forms for different purposes. You may find brief sentences best for some material, and diagrams, flow-charts or mind-maps more useful for other topics or when summarising information and relationships noted more comprehensively in sentence form. Common formats for note-taking include:

- ⊕ **List format:** Record terms, concepts, issues, developments, etc., usually in single words, phrases, or short sentences. May use multi-level lists; diagrams and pictures can be added.
- ⊕ **Cornell style notes:** Pages are divided into a right-hand column of general notes and a left-hand column that identifies cues or questions that can help with highlighting or reviewing general notes. At the bottom of the page, the student writes a summary of a few sentences, integrating the information and clarifying the student's understanding of it.
- ⊕ **Mind-maps:** A central term is written in the middle of the page, and related terms are written around and connected to it; these may have sub-issue related to them, and so on. Mind-maps should be clear and simple, with minimal words used to convey concepts.
- ⊕ **Table format:** Arranges information; particularly helpful for comparing and contrasting.
- ⊕ **Flow-charts and diagram:** Demonstrate processes or progressions.

Feel free to get creative – use of pictures and colour can help highlight ideas and aid recall.

As a simple example, we can take notes on the development of counselling theories (from the first unit in our Diploma of Counselling) in a variety of ways. A table format could list the developments on one axis, and have columns for central tenets and major figures, allowing for a summary and easy comparison of information. A list format could also cover the different approaches in some detail:

- ⊕ Humanistic/person-centred therapy (1950s onwards)
  - Emerged as alternative to psychoanalytic and behaviourist traditions
  - Encourages client exploration of own thoughts and feelings
  - Encourages client's self-directed problem solving
  - Major figures include:
    - > Carl Rogers
    - > Abraham Maslow
- ⊕ Cognitive theory (1960s)
  - ...



The information could be mind-mapped:



A diagram or timeline could be used to summarise the development of approaches over time:

Late 1800s	Psychoanalytic theory
1950s	Behaviourist theory and humanistic/person-centred therapy
1960s	Cognitive theory
1970s	Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
Late 1900s	Solution-focussed and narrative therapies

Note taking enhances your knowledge and understanding, and is also a revision tool. You can quickly and easily review well-written notes, and get a summary of important information, without having to re-read all the source material (although reviewing source material is also helpful).

Understanding and recall can also be enhanced by using different methods to take in and reproduce information. As well as reading and note taking, try talking through the key concepts of the unit, concerns the unit addresses, or ideas you have with friends, family, or fellow students. Listen to recordings such as webinars and instructional videos, or use a spoken-word app on your computer or device to hear the information in a different form. You could even record yourself talking through important points and key concepts, and play back the recording.

Be active in considering the information you receive, too. This is a point in your education where you are not only expected to take in information, but to critically evaluate it. There is a lot of misinformation in the world, and in our fields; in addition, even information that is widely regarded as correct may at some point be disproved by further investigation. When you are reading or listening to a source, consider how authoritative the author is (e.g., whether they have professional standing in the field); whether the source is current (could the information be out of date?); the logic of the arguments; the evidence provided; and whether alternative explanations are possible. Bear in mind that many, if not most, sources will try to persuade you that they are correct – and some will not be. Be aware of this, and remember that there may be other perspectives on the topic at hand, or evidence against what the source presents. Be wary of appeals to emotion or assumptions that are not backed up by logical argument (RMIT University, n.d.).

You are training for work, and an ethical and responsible worker takes in information critically. As such, while you are studying, you should be thinking carefully about (Bernstein et al., 2018):

- ⊕ What the source is saying.
- ⊕ What the evidence behind their claim is.
- ⊕ Whether the claim makes sense, given the evidence and other information.
- ⊕ Whether there are other viable explanations or perspectives.
- ⊕ What further information could help clarify, disprove or support the claim being made.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

VET courses are practical by nature – our purpose is to teach you not only the information base required for each unit and course, but also how you would go about using the relevant skills and techniques in practice. Naturally, this does not happen simply by reading or talking about them; it only happens by doing. So, practice! Communication skills can be practiced frequently. Get friends, family or other students to role play counselling, support, or coaching sessions. Imagine how you would respond to clients in various situations, and practice giving different responses. Fill in forms and templates you may use in the workplace. Practice writing professionally. Such practice may feel a little awkward at first, but you will quickly find that your learning is enhanced, your confidence is higher, and you are more capable of the skills you need to perform.

## Writing Skills

Part of your training involves learning how to communicate professionally. As such, the writing you do in your assessments, while not expected to be perfect, should be formal and academic/professional. To develop this style of writing, there are some simple things you can start with:

- ⊕ **Use objective, professional language:** For example, if we were to criticise an idea in an informal setting, we might say, "That's rubbish!" This, however, is unprofessional; a more professional way to express this could be, "This idea is subject to serious criticism."
- ⊕ **Keep the text simple:** Avoid 'emojis', exclamation marks (especially multiple exclamation marks), and colloquialisms.
- ⊕ **Use paragraphs:** While there are no iron-clad rules for paragraph length – they should be as long as best suits the information provided – there are general, flexible guidelines.
  - For your assessments, an answer of less than 100 words will generally not require multiple paragraphs; 100 to 200 word answers may use a single paragraph, but you should consider whether two paragraphs will make your response clearer. For longer responses and essays, paragraphs are essential.
  - Ideally, paragraphs will consist of between four and eight sentences.
  - Paragraphs should start with a topic sentence that makes your main point; the rest of the paragraph should provide evidence or further detail illustrating that point.
- ⊕ **Use simple sentences:** When we are writing academically or professionally, we are often discussing complex topics. The temptation to write long sentences, tying ideas together, can be strong. This makes the writing more difficult to comprehend, however. If you find yourself doing this, try breaking up the sentences. While academic writing is often considered complicated or dense, the best academic writing is actually simple and concise.
- ⊕ **Balance thoroughness and brevity:** When writing, you want to convey your ideas and cover your topics comprehensively, without repetition or belabouring the point. This is a challenge, but as you practice it will become easier.
- ⊕ **Plan!** Before you start writing, jot down what you want to cover, and figure out a structure that will be clear and have a natural flow to it.
- ⊕ **Edit your work:** We all make mistakes in writing – much more frequently than we think! When you have finished writing, pause, and read over it slowly and carefully. Check the basics (spelling and grammar) but also whether the writing flows in a sensible fashion, and whether it says everything it has to without repetition or unnecessary detail.

# Assessment Anxieties

Let's face it, assessments can be anxiety-producing... but they do not need to be. If you plan how you will tackle assessments using the time management and goal-setting skills we have already discussed, you will not only make it more likely that you will get them done in a timely manner, any anxiety or inclination to procrastinate that you might have felt is also likely to decrease. Follow up with the suggestions below, and you will find that many of the most frequent assessment-related difficulties that students face can be significantly reduced or avoided altogether.

## Let's Get Practical

We find that many of our students feel nervous about their practical assessments. At times, this prompts them to avoid the assessments (or procrastinate) until the end of their course – sometimes, a student will finish all other assessments, and the only thing standing between them and graduation are the practical assessments that they have been putting off.

This approach has a number of problems. For one thing, it means that one or more practical assessments, which are about practicing and demonstrating the skills associated with a particular unit, are not completed at the time of the unit. It can also mean that the student has to complete a large number at once, or face a delayed graduation and a consequential delay in meeting their goals associated with course completion. We can imagine how this would drive up stress levels.

Another problem has to do with our psychology. When we feel anxious about something, we are tempted to avoid or postpone it in order to reduce our anxiety; while our anxiety appears to immediately decrease when we engage in avoidance, the anxiety we experience over time actually *increases*. So, a student who feels anxious about completing a practical assessment and puts it off is likely to feel even more anxious when they eventually face the assessment.

The best way to tackle practical assessments, then, is to:

- ➦ Do each practical just after you have completed the unit it is associated with. This way you will be doing the practical when the relevant information and techniques are fresh in your mind, and you will also enhance your understanding and get a better start in developing the skills required to work competently in that area.
- ➦ Practice the skills beforehand. You could:
  - Ask friends, family, workmates, or fellow students whether they would be willing to practice with you.
  - Use the case studies in your Study Guides and assessment questions. Read the information provided, pretend you are with the client, and practice your responses out loud. Try different responses, asking various kinds of questions, explaining relevant concepts, and using appropriate techniques.
  - When you are reading a book or watching a show, pick one of the characters and practice responding to them as if they were your client.
  - Use relevant skills on yourself. Imagine you are your own client: ask questions, consider responses, and practice skills and strategies.

- ⊕ Create a plan for completing the practical assessment. You will need to determine the method you will use, and the specifics of the plan will somewhat depend on that. However, there are common elements, whatever the method:
  - Practice beforehand. This will help you develop your skills and the confidence you have in them; you can also use practice sessions to identify areas you would like to develop further, before your assessment. This will likely also reduce nervousness.
  - Write clear, brief notes about what you need to cover (*not* a script).
  - Speak with your volunteers (for video or private assessments) or fellow students (if you are completing the assessment at a seminar). You are not permitted 'coach' them or tell them what to say, but it is a good idea to discuss the process and ensure they understand the volunteer information (included in your practical assessment instructions) and are prepared for their roles.
  
- ⊕ Practice anxiety reduction strategies. If you are feeling at all stressed or anxious about practical assessments, remind yourself that this is both normal and able to be reduced. There are a number of anxiety management strategies discussed in the next section, and an activity where you are guided through applying cognitive strategies to study-related worries. These strategies are simple and effective – all they take is a bit of practice.
  
- ⊕ Finally, remember that we do not expect perfection. You are expected to demonstrate various skills and behave professionally during practical assessments, but your assessor knows that you are a student and that this is part of your education. You will receive information about how you can strengthen your skills, but this is not a bad thing. In fact, in order to practice in an ethical manner, being open to such feedback and responding appropriately (for example, by further developing your knowledge and skills) is absolutely essential. Here, you have an opportunity to do so in a supportive environment.

# Activity 3.1: Practical Plan

Getting your practical assessments completed in a timely manner will be easier if you have a plan for how you will go about them.

1	<p>It is recommended that you complete each practical assessment at the end of the unit to which the assessment relates. Make a written commitment about when you will complete the assessment. For example,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⊕ If you are attending seminars to complete your practical assessments, this could say, "I will complete the practical assessment at the first available seminar after I finish the relevant unit. When I have completed the Study Guide and Readings, and am starting the written assessments, I will contact my AIPC branch to discuss seminar dates."</li><li>⊕ If you are submitting your practical assessments via video or having a private assessment, your commitment may be, "I will speak with my friends/family/co-workers/fellow students and seek volunteers whenever I start a unit that includes a practical assessment. I will complete and submit the practical assessment within two weeks of completing the written assessment."</li></ul> <p>Naturally, the plan you make will have to be realistic given your particular circumstances.</p>
2	<p>Detail the steps required to complete the practical assessment and record them in a goal-setting format (such as the template provided on page 20). Your goal will be to complete the assessment, and the action steps will detail each activity required in order to reach the goal. Specify due dates for each action step and the overall goal, and check that your goal-setting is SMART.</p>

## How to Respond to an NYC [Not Yet Competent] Result

Think about learning to drive. You are not expected to know and operationalise all knowledge about the road rules and mechanics of driving from your first time behind the wheel; you should have the basic knowledge already, but when you get in the car to drive for the first time, you are relying on the knowledge and skill of your teacher or supervisor to point out where you can improve. When you go for your driving test, you may not pass the first attempt – it is very common for people to be ‘not yet competent’ the first time they try. But the assessor provides feedback; the driver reviews or builds on what they have learned, and practices various skills a few more times; then they go back for another attempt at the test.

Our assessments are designed so that you can demonstrate your knowledge and skills, but they are also opportunities to learn. Each assessment item relates directly to an area of knowledge, understanding, or skill deemed necessary to be considered competent with reference to the requirements of each unit. (These can be found in the Unit Outcomes section of each StudyGuide.) Your Study Guides and Books of Readings cover all of the information and skills required, with the exception of assessment items that specify the need for independent research. If you are actively learning, you will have the understanding necessary to successfully complete the assessments. Active learning, as you know, requires more than reading the Study Guide. It means stopping to think about what you are reading, seeking further information, making notes, critically considering the information you receive, engaging in self-reflection tasks, and practicing the skills discussed. Doing all of these things will prepare you for both the written and practical assessments. However, we do not expect your first response to demonstrate competence every time.

At times, your responses to questions will tell our markers that there is an aspect of an issue, area of knowledge, or skill set that requires further development. (In fact, on-going development is part of each area of study that AIPC offers – with effort, we become increasingly competent over time, so being marked competent is just the beginning.) When this happens, your response will be marked ‘Not Yet Competent’ or ‘NYC’. This is not a ‘failing grade’; our assessment system, like the rest of our processes, is designed to help you learn, and NYCs are part of that.

When you receive an NYC, the marker will include information that will guide you in resubmitting your response to achieve competency. There are two main ways in which answers may be NYC, and the things you will need to do to remedy this will differ accordingly. The response of your marker should indicate which kind of issue it is, and how to go about correcting it in your resubmission.

- ⊕ **Missing the point of, or an aspect of, the question:** When a question is misread or misunderstood, a student will give an NYC answer. The student may have all the information, understanding or skills required to answer the question, but they have not demonstrated these because they have misunderstood what is required.

**Solution:** We are careful to clearly state what each assessment answer should include, so you can reduce the likelihood of getting this kind of NYC in the first place: read each assessment question slowly and carefully before answering it, and after you have answered it re-read the question *and* your answer to ensure that the answer is relevant and covers all required points. If the feedback indicates that you have not adequately answered the question, follow the same process.

- ⊕ **Needing to re-read, review, or further practice in the relevant area of knowledge or skill:** The other common kind of NYC occurs when a student has not developed sufficient understanding of a particular issue, area of knowledge, or technique.

**Solution:** Use the marker’s feedback to identify what gaps in information or comprehension need to be filled in order to answer the question competently. Go to the relevant part of the Study Guide. You will notice that the Assessment Book identifies relevant sections and sub-sections for most questions (apart from integrating knowledge, essay, and case study items), so it is generally easy to figure out what you need to review. Read the relevant pages carefully, and complete any self-reflective exercises and readings, and then attempt the assessment item again – just make sure you read the question carefully and review your answer to ensure it covers all required content, before resubmitting.

Of course, our Education Advisors are available by phone and email, 9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday AEST. If you have any questions about the content of a unit or the requirements of an assessment item, please contact the Education Advisors – that is what they are here for! They cannot proof read your assessment responses or give you the answers to assessment questions, but they are skilled in talking through the relevant content and helping you figure out what you need to do to achieve a competent result.

Please remember that, while it may be disappointing to receive an NYC, it is not actually a problem. When we discuss twisted thinking and catastrophising in the next section, we review skills for dealing with situations that can seem worse than they really are, and you will work through a process for challenging unhelpful thoughts. For now, keep in mind that we are here to help you learn, and an NYC is just another opportunity to develop your knowledge and skills. It is also a time to practice openness and responsiveness to feedback, qualities highly valued by employers and clients alike.



## Activity 3.2: NYC Implementation Intention

As you know, implementation intentions are 'if-then' plans – they guide us in working towards our goals by determining in advance how we will respond to a particular situation or challenge. In this activity, we create an 'if-then' plan for getting an NYC result: *If I get an NYC, then I will do \_\_\_\_\_.*

1	Imagine that you have submitted an assessment item, and it has been marked NYC. Your marker has given you feedback about what is required to be marked competent when you resubmit the assessment.
2	Do you think it would be most useful to act on the feedback straight away – to immediately start reviewing, researching and re-writing your response – or to take a break and do something pleasant before re-writing your response? (This is not a question with a 'right' or 'wrong' answer; think about what might work best for you.)
3	If you think you may find receiving an NYC disappointing or stressful, what will you do to address this? For example, if you know that this sort of event is likely to trigger some twisted thinking, will you use cognitive strategies to challenge that thinking? Would it be helpful to do a relaxation activity or get some exercise before focussing on your re-submission?
4	Develop a plan for dealing with an NYC result. Identify the steps you will take in response, including any positive coping strategies that you might use if you find receiving the NYC stress-provoking (see your <i>Living with Purpose</i> guide or the next section of this guide for further detail), as well as a plan for writing your resubmission.
5	Write the plan as an implementation intention: <i>If I get an NYC, then I will do _____.</i>



### Hint:

We tend to deal with stress much better if we view stressors as challenges; that is, if we 'reframe' the situation (you might remember that we covered reframing in *Living with Purpose*). What could you do to reframe an NYC as a challenge?

If you implement them, the strategies and skills we have discussed in this section and the last will reduce – and may well prevent – many of the common problems that students experience. There are a range of other issues that come up among our student group from time to time, however, so in section four we focus on what you can do about several of the most common student concerns.



**“The practical components prepared me for working in the industry.”**

**What benefits you?**

# Other Common Student Issues (and What to Do About Them)

AIPC has been offering distance education for many years, and over that time we have noticed that several issues arise for students over and over again. Often, these issues can be reduced with the strategies we have already discussed – self-management, study skills, etc. – but some require a bit of extra care. In this section, we will look at common issues faced by students, and simple strategies for addressing them. We will also give you some ideas about where you can go if extra support will be helpful.

You will already be familiar with some of the concepts that follow from the *Living with Purpose* guide; here, you will be learning how to apply those strategies, as well as some that might be new to you, directly to common student issues. This will help prepare you in case issues arise as you progress through your course. We hope that it will also help to quell any pre-study nerves you might be feeling.

## Maintaining Motivation

It almost seems inevitable – no matter how meaningful or important a goal, almost everything that requires our effort over time seems vulnerable to diminishing motivation. As you learned from *Living with Purpose*, however, there are a whole lot of things you can do to help maintain your motivation: keeping the big picture (purpose and values) in mind; using effective time management, planning and goal-setting techniques; making sure that you are ticking off or marking complete each task you finish; rewarding yourself for progress; and, if possible, connecting with other students or using your social support network as an accountability system. Remember, however, that *feeling* motivated is not required for achievement. If you put your head down and get a few tasks off your study to-do list, you will progress – and you will probably find that once you stop searching for your motivation and just get on with your study, the motivation returns of its own accord.

# Responsibilities and Relationships

Our students are often juggling a range of responsibilities: household tasks, caring roles, work and volunteering, and other engagements. This can feel overwhelming at times. Time management and scheduling are helpful, but sometimes expectations need to be adjusted. If you find that you are struggling to meet competing demands, we have a few suggestions:

- ➔ **Activity audit:** For a week, note how you spend your time. This, naturally, will take a bit of time itself, but will be worth it if it saves you time later. You might use a written log or the weekly schedule template – just make sure that you are recording how all your time is spent, from getting up in the morning to going to bed. When you have the week’s data:
  - Figure out how and where you are spending your time (for some people – like your writer here – the amount of time they have spent on social media can be a shock!).
  - Identify any activities that can be done more efficiently or delegated; those you are spending more or less time on that you would like; and those that can be dropped or left until you have fewer commitments (e.g., when you finish studying).
  - Negotiate if there are activities that another person – say, a family member – can take or share responsibility for, or that can be shared among group members.
  - Identify your priorities and develop a schedule where these are locked in.

For many of us, there are simply more things that we would like to do than we realistically can. Sometimes, we need to give up on one or two, or postpone them. Just make sure that the things that matter most are there, and remember that you need some downtime too.

- ➔ **Life hacks:** There may be a few things that you can do more efficiently with what are often called ‘life hacks’ (tricks or strategies for reducing time and effort required for regular activities). While these may not be game-changers, even ten minutes saved each day adds up to over an hour per week. There are websites and books full of tips – many of them may be irrelevant to you and some seem downright silly, but one or two could save you time. Often, ‘life hacks’ are simply about getting more organised, or doing things that reduce the need to make decisions on the run. They include things like:
  - Bulk shopping (cutting down on the number of visits to the shops).
  - Bulk cooking and preparing meals in advance. A big ‘cook up’ on the weekend could provide a week’s worth of lunches or dinners, for example; you could put meal-sized portions in the freezer and then de-frost when needed.
  - Setting out clothes and packing school or work bags the night before (some people even recommend deciding on a week’s worth of clothes in advance).
  - Developing habits: repeated activities are easier to maintain and more efficient when they happen at the same time and in the same way.
  - Setting up spaces so that they are uncluttered, but what you most often need is readily at hand, and in a sensible and memorable location.

- ⊕ **Schedule review:** No matter how beautifully put together, no schedule can be carried out exactly, so a few deviations from your schedule are not necessarily a problem. However, if you find this happening regularly – and if it is not simply about procrastination and distraction – you probably need to undertake a critical review. The assumptions you initially based the schedule on might have been inaccurate, or things might have changed. Whatever the reason, apply what you have learned about time management and planning as you update your schedule.
- ⊕ **Ask for help:** It might be that there is simply too much happening at the moment. If so, can you ask a friend, family member, or someone else you trust for practical help? Can you collaborate with others (e.g., carpooling) to save time? Do you need more assistance due to stressors or other issues? Would a professional or service be helpful? (If this is the case, you will find more information on where to find support at the end of this section.)

While independent study can be extremely valuable in the flexibility it brings, some students do experience a sense of isolation while studying by distance. You have a range of options to combat this if it becomes an issue for you (these options may depend on your location, transportation, health, etc.). To discuss study-related matters, you can contact our Education Advisors. To connect with other students, you can get involved with our Facebook group. If days at home studying are getting you down, you could try studying at a library, café, or park (provided you can concentrate); or connect with friends, family, or other students online or by phone during your study breaks. If you are feeling lonely and disconnected, joining a community group or activity can be a great way to meet people and re-connect. It is also possible to make friends online (although it is important to be vigilant when doing this – people may misrepresent themselves and online scams are all too common). And, if you need some additional support, professional services are available.

## Untwisting Twisted Thinking (and Feeling)

Do you worry? Get stuck thinking about the same troubling or frustrating thing? Feel afraid that you might not have what it takes to complete a course of study or meet another goal? If so, you are far from alone. In fact, these experiences are so common, including among students, that many universities and colleges provide information about dealing with these issues. We covered these at length in *Living with Purpose*, but we will review helpful strategies here.

You might remember Burn's (1999) ten forms of twisted thinking (i.e., cognitive distortions):

- ⊕ All-or-nothing thinking.
- ⊕ Over-generalisation.
- ⊕ Mental filter.
- ⊕ Discounting the positive.
- ⊕ Jumping to conclusions.
- ⊕ Magnification.

- ⊕ Emotional reasoning.
- ⊕ 'Should' statements.
- ⊕ Labelling.
- ⊕ Personalisation and blame.

Another common form of twisted thinking, among students and others, is **catastrophising**. Burns might be including catastrophising as a form of 'jumping to conclusions', but it is so common that it is helpful to give it a specific mention. When we catastrophise we assume or imagine a more negative outcome than is realistic. We might go from receiving feedback about an area for improvement to thinking that we are incapable of ever performing competently, for example. Catastrophising drives up anxiety levels, and gets in the way of problem-solving and progress.

Strategies for dealing with stressors (i.e., things that cause us stress), anxieties and twisted thinking come in a few different types (Bernstein et al., 2018).

- ⊕ **Physical and behavioural strategies:** Activities that can help us cope with stressors and anxieties. These include:

- o Taking care of the basics of physical health: eating well, sleeping enough, and exercising. Exercise in particular, an old (and evidence-based) favourite for both physical and mental health, reduces stress and anxiety levels.
- o Time-management and planning (as discussed in section two).
- o Relaxation strategies aimed at reducing physiological responses to stressors. In progressive muscle relaxation, for example, muscle groups are tensed, the tension is held for a few seconds and then released, before going on to the next muscle group.

(Note that not all physical coping strategies are helpful: some, such as drug use, drinking, and other activities aimed at numbing or avoiding can have highly negative effects.)

- ⊕ **Cognitive strategies:** As you learned in *Living with Purpose*, cognitive strategies for dealing with troubling, stress-inducing or anxious thoughts include:
  - o Challenging the thought.
  - o Finding evidence against the thought or different perspectives to take.
  - o Considering the consequences of thinking in a particular way.
  - o Developing an alternative, healthier, or more realistic thought, and repeating it when troubling thoughts recur.
  - o Imagining how you would respond to a friend who was worried about what you are worried about.
- ⊕ **Emotional strategies:** Connecting with care and emotional support. Feeling valued and supported is important, and getting support from others can help us cope. If we have sensible and caring people around us, they can also help us challenge twisted thinking, as we get their thoughts and perspectives.

Problem-solving is also helpful. If you are feeling stressed or anxious because of a particular situation, try to identify whether it is a situation that is within your control (or partially within your control) or not. If it is not, the strategies above may help you cope better with the stress that the situation brings and reduce its negative impacts. If you do have some influence, think about whether there are things you can do to change the situation. Make sure that you are critically considering the potential options – remember that some actions make problems worse, and when we are under stress our problem-solving capacities are limited. It might also be useful to talk to a (sensible!) support person when developing and evaluating potential solutions.

Cara is studying a Diploma of Counselling. Although she has studied previously, it has been some time since she had to study or write academically. She knows that she has to complete written assessments, and she is worried that she is not going to be 'good enough' to complete the course. She receives an NYC after submitting her first Assessment Book – the assessor has indicated that she needs to resubmit two assessment questions. Cara sees this as proof that she will not succeed. Cara is catastrophising (among other forms of twisted thinking), with her thoughts jumping from the NYC to not completing the course, and on to not getting the job she wants.

## Activity 4.1: Untwisting Twisted Thinking

Imagine Cara is your friend and has told you about her twisted thinking.

1	Do you think Cara's conclusion that she is not able to complete the course is accurate? Why or why not?
2	Is there evidence that Cara is capable of achieving competency? What evidence would you discuss with Cara? (Hint: If she only needs to resubmit two questions, that means that a lot of her assessment items were marked 'competent'.)
3	Do you think that there are more reasonable or helpful ways that Cara could be thinking about being marked NYC? How would you suggest these to her?
4	What would you suggest Cara do to deal with the NYC?
5	What would you suggest Cara do to reduce the anxiety she is feeling?

By completing the activity above, you used a number of strategies for challenging twisted thinking, and reducing stress and anxiety. The next time you notice feelings of stress or anxiety, or you identify potentially twisted thoughts, remind yourself that you have the skills to respond more effectively to these thoughts and feelings – and then put some healthy strategies into action.

## Extra Support

At times, we need help beyond what our own strategies bring; reaching out to others in our natural support networks and potentially getting help from professionals or services can be necessary. You might already have professional supports in place. Hopefully you have a general practitioner (GP) that you trust, for example; if you are experiencing health-related issues, and even some practical issues, a GP is a great first port of call, and they often provide suggestions for other services that can be helpful. You may also have a counsellor or mental health service you are familiar with, or services that help you meet particular needs you experience. If you do not, but you think you would benefit from speaking with a psychologist or mental health social worker, you might talk to your GP about a Mental Health Care Plan. It can also be very useful to have the number of a 24-hour helpline on hand, in case you want to speak with someone – they can also help you find other services that may be useful. Some of the many helpline services in Australia include:

- ⊕ Lifeline: 13 11 14 – provides telephone counselling and crisis intervention.
- ⊕ Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 – provides mental health support.
- ⊕ Kids Help Line: 1300 55 1800 – support for people aged 5-25.

## Action Planning

When we are feeling stressed or anxious, identifying and thinking through the potential actions available to us is more difficult. We often miss possibilities and have trouble making decisions. Having a plan in advance, then, can be helpful. When you notice that your thinking is twisted or that you feel stressed, you do not have to think too hard about what to do: just access your action plan and start working through it. (Naturally, all steps on the plan should be positive, healthy coping strategies!) Some people write out an action plan and keep it handy (on their fridge, in a desk draw, or in their bag or pocket when they go out); others keep action plans on their phones or other devices, so that they can access them anywhere.

Consider developing an action plan that includes physical and behavioural strategies, cognitive techniques, and potential supports. It is also important that the plan is realistic and the strategies are ones that you will use. There is little point in having a plan that is impractical or includes strategies that you do not find helpful. Experiment, identify a few things that do help, and practice them regularly to get the greatest benefit.



**Note:**  
Helpline details are correct at time of publication.



## Activity 4.2: Stress-Busting Short Cut

From *Living with Purpose* and this companion guide, you are now aware of a wide range of strategies that help students manage the challenges they face. When we are feeling stressed, however, it is often hard to remember or decide what to do in response – remember, anxiety reduces activity in the parts of the brain that help in these processes. This activity will give you a shortcut – a quick, go-to guide for stress-busting.

1	Start a new list or document, either on paper or electronically. (It can be particularly helpful to keep this list in a form you can easily access – and make sure its location is memorable.)
2	List at least two cognitive strategies you find helpful in untwisting twisted thinking.
3	List at least two behavioural or physical strategies that can help with reducing stress.
4	Identify at least two people you can seek support from.

Now, if you find yourself feeling stressed or anxious, or engaging in twisted thinking, you have a handy guide that will prompt you to use the skills you have developed.



### Hint:

*Living with Purpose* has sections on wellbeing and dealing with challenges; both include 'quick guides' at the end – you might like to use these as short cuts as well.

# Conclusion

We hope you have enjoyed *Studying with Purpose*, your companion guide for *Living with Purpose*, developed specifically for AIPC students.

Using this guide, you have:

- Identified why studying matters to you, tied study to your values and purpose, and developed a sense of the 'big picture' that will help you stay on course.
- Learned a range of skills that will help you complete your course, including planning, scheduling, active learning, and completing assessments.
- Developed strategies for addressing common student issues, including assessment worries and challenges outside of study.
- Developed an action plan for dealing with difficulties when they arise.

As you work through your course, keep in mind that studying is not just the reading, note taking, thinking, and assessment-writing that make up so much of your time as a student. It is also about who you are and how you want to live in the world. Studying should help you develop your understanding of yourself and the world around you, find new ways of looking at things, and develop your skills and capacities. You may find out things about yourself and others that you did not expect, and find yourself overcoming challenges and learning lessons that will serve you well in your future life, well beyond the educational content of the course you have chosen. Ultimately, studying should help you build a life that is satisfying and meaningful for you.

Studying is a marathon, not a sprint. Pause as you go through your course. Reconnect with your purpose for studying; reflect on the values that are driving your study and those you will enact as you take your learning and apply it in the real world. And take time to celebrate the progress you have made, whether it is getting through a study session, tackling an assessment, or completing a unit. Of course, your progress is not only about these external markers; it is also about what you learn, and how you develop and change as a result. Enjoy this period of growth – we hope you find it interesting both professionally and personally. Good luck and happy studying!

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