**Supporting senior student wellbeing**

**Speaker 1:**

This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Year 12 is a big year for both students and their parents. With assessment and exams coming up you may be thinking about how you can best support your young person’s wellbeing so that they can make the most of this exciting year.

Hi my name is Virginia Bowdidge and joining me to talk about tips and strategies to support your Year 12 students is mental health and wellbeing coach Lydia Najlepszy Najlepszy.

Thanks for your time, Lydia Najlepszy. What's the number one thing parents can do to support the year 12 student?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

I think it's really important that parents stay calm and model best practice for students as well. So when their children are starting to tick into poor wellbeing behaviours to actually be able to help support them and remind them and also model best practice.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Could you give an example of a poor wellbeing behaviour?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

Drinking lots of coffee to stay awake to study all night. I'm sure we've all done that. We want the young people to be able to sleep well. That's really important. So having great sleep patterns. We know that if we have less than the 8 to 10 hours sleep a night and often people say that's a lot, but it's what science tells us we really need, we're not going to think very clearly the next day and everything escalates.

So being able to sleep well. Good diet. So making sure that we're fuelling ourselves with quality food and not those sugar kicks that will make it hard to sleep and also hard to concentrate. So those sorts of basic patterns that we learn are good for us, but we don't always adhere to particularly when it gets a little bit tricky and the going gets a bit tougher like you find at exam time, or even now with COVID. People are starting to get stressed and they're forgetting about those routines that can really support good functioning.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What other tips have you got for parents to support their child's wellbeing?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

Really important, particularly as we go towards the busy time that parents help their young people be really clear about setting up routines and prioritizing work. Often when we start to get stressed, we get overwhelmed and being able to break down each of their subjects, do a bit of a timeline, a study schedule, but also scheduling breaks so there's a bit of balance is really important.

Encouraging their children to look for help, ask for help. The teachers are there to help guide and support their students and so to be able to ask a teacher to clarify some work or if they're not quite getting it is really important to be able to get a routine in place where they allow themselves a certain amount of time on a task. 45 minutes is a really good time to an hour and then having a short break, whether it's an exercise break or just some fresh air, move their eyes away from the computer, freshen themselves up so that they can then concentrate again.

 I think that's really important. Couple of the other things that are really important are having some balance in terms of their friends and their socializing. So we know that you can't go full bore at study and think that we're going to function well the next day. So enabling some downtime, maybe prioritizing some things that they enjoy doing just to give themselves a reward and a bit of a break and get energized again.

We know that the brain really needs dopamine to function well. Dopamine comes from sleep and exercise and connection to others and positive emotions is another one that really helps the brain switch on. So staying positive or having little snippets of time that creates positivity and a positive mindset is really important. That might just be having a joke, lightening up a bit, not being a parent that puts more pressure on their child, but supports them to actually get organized. Often I think too, when kids are really balking at doing the work, it's about unpacking what that might be about because there might be an underlying worry or concern they have and I think the parents do, and I've got three kids that went through seniors, sometimes you just need a thick skin to enable look after your own wellbeing to enable a calm space in the house.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

There's also discussion around mindfulness. Is that something that would help students as well as parents?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

Absolutely. So we know that mindfulness is just that opportunity to notice what's going on for us at that moment. One of the great things that mindfulness does: A. is it gives you an indicator as to what am I feeling, what's my body experiencing. So I might be sitting at a desk trying to study and all of a sudden, I feel like I'm going nowhere. My brain's spinning. We do it at work. When we're really, really busy and all of a sudden nothing's making sense.

So if we take a break and we do a nice deep breath and we just do a physical check in. How's my neck going? How's my stomach? Am I having butterflies? Am I feeling calm? What's my body telling me? It allows us to tune into how am I traveling right at this moment and then to take some steps, purposeful steps to address it.

So, if my neck and shoulders are really sore, I'm going to end up with a headache by the end of the evening or the end of the study session if I don't just get up and move and do some stretches. I might notice that all of a sudden I'm really thirsty and hydration's really important and often if we've been using caffeine drinks or high energy drinks which are not great for us to sleep at night, we'll get really dehydrated. So noticing when it's time for us to have a break is important.

The other thing that mindfulness does is it's a distractor. So if I've been really stressed about something and all of a sudden I tune into me and my body and I do a bit of a mindfulness check going through my body or I might listen to a mindfulness tape or an app that actually distracts me. It gives my brain a break from the business of working full tilt or trying to learn it and to remember all the material I might be reviewing. It builds in a practice that enables us to manage our wellbeing, but even notice our wellbeing and then take some positive action.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Self care is another thing that we hear a lot about. Can you give us some examples of self care and how parents can foster that in their children, including how can they manage self expectations?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

So in terms of self expectations, I have a really strong belief that we often load up our young people with these huge expectations and that there's only one pathway to get there. So for example, I might as a student have a dream to head towards a particular career, or on the flip side, I might be really worried that I haven't made up my mind yet about which way I want to go.

I think a really important piece of the puzzle of staying calm about the future is to know that there are so many different pathways we can take. So that the QC exams are only one point in time and they don't define our future or they don't define ourselves. It's having a growth mindset that says I'm going to do my best and obviously you've got to prepare for it and do you work But if this doesn't work out as well as I had hoped, that's okay, there are other options for me and I'll do my best and that's all I can do.

That sort of mindset is about reinforcing that I'll put the effort in, I'll put the work in, but my life isn't over if this doesn't go as well as I wanted it to because there are so many other options there. What we want to try and do is make sure that young people maintain hope for the future and see that there are so many different pathways, but without cutting themselves short or doing themselves short.

So that preparation is important because that's that sense of, okay, I need to put my head down and work towards this, but it's not the end of the world if things don't quite go as well as I wanted. Give you an example. We might be working towards a particular pathway that requires me to go to university and I might not have got the entry score that I need for that particular university or for that particular course, but by doing some really good career navigation and career counseling, I can see that there are lots of different ways to get to that end point.

It doesn't need to be one space or one pathway. So when we see that our year 12 exams, particularly with the year we've had this year, that it's not the only way forward. It's an important process, but there are other ways to get there after the exams. We can then work with confidence knowing that we've got a backup plan. I think that's really, really important for parents, as well as for kids to understand. From a self care perspective, that's part of self care.

So being aware of what my options are and having a plan, A, B, C, and D, and knowing that the end of the world doesn't happen just because I don't get the results that I wanted. Having said that doing my best is also contributes to my wellbeing because it says to me I've taken this seriously, I've prepared as best I can and I'm now just going to do what I can to get through. But with the future, I think a lot of young people think my future stops if I don't get the results that I was hoping to get. So it sort of puts it in perspective and that's really important.

Having a growth mindset around the journey is really important. So growth mindset is a bit like I'm not there yet, but by doing X, Y, and Z, I can find a way forward. I think that's a really important attitude that parents can help support young people develop. The other parts of self care, the physical bits that we've already spoken about, having good balance, having external interests so that it's not just one group of friends or one particular area that is my interest and I've got some balance around a variety of interests.

Having some downtime, some social time for self care is really important. So it might not be as much as you have when you're not studying for exams, but it's still getting some positive enjoyment out of each day and something that you look forward to, even if it's only for that 30 minute break. Treating yourself. So you might have a goal to get through a certain amount and rather than dragging it on and doing a bit more and a bit more and a bit more actually building in reward breaks through your day.

Things that you're looking forward to. I think another really important concept is this too shall pass. In about two weeks’ time, I won't be doing this and having a list of the things that you're really looking forward to, to be able to tick off.

I worked with high performance athletes for many years, and they would work and train really hard and towards their goal. They were passionate about those goals and those goals didn't always come to fruition, that there was a backup plan, understanding that not every day is going to be wonderful. So negative emotions are part of who we are. They're also really good signal that says, "Hang on, what's going on here?" It enables us to be mindful of what we're experiencing and to start to unpack why am I feeling like this and what can I do, or who can help me deal with this emotion at the moment?

A really important thing that parents can do is keeping an eye on the young person to just check mood. Noticing when the young person is may be withdrawing or sometimes we see people getting really angry. So the negative emotions really spiral up and often that's an indicator that there's some distress occurring.

So to be able to tap into additional support is really important. So it may be tapping into the school counsellor or guidance officer, might be to a favourite teacher, might be accessing a little bit of tutoring if they can do that to just help support them, or it might even be tapping into a GP. Particularly where you're noticing a young person is experiencing some pretty negative emotions for a period of time, it might only be a couple of weeks to support them or encourage them to tap into some of the networks of support that are around them.

Some of the other ones might be a GP to have a chat. There's some really great resources online. E-Headspace is one. Kids Helpline is a really good one. The B U Beyond Blue apps and resources are really good and Reach Out as another one. There's lots of really good resources, but I think like anything, if we notice when we're not traveling well, and we can either ramp up and get support from those around us or the professionals, we can actually learn how to better manage when we're starting to really struggle with some of the negative emotions that might start to impact on us in our ability to learn and study, but also just to function.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Could we sum it up for parents to be calm and also to help their children to be informed, be prepared and have a backup plan?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

Love it. Absolutely.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Are there any other helpful strategies you can think of to manage anxiety or would they fall under what you've already spoken about?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

I think a really important point around anxiety is that it's normal to feel a bit anxious and worried, particularly in the environment that we've had recently. It would be abnormal not to have some concerns. The tipping point happens though where our worries start to impact on our capacity to sleep or to eat well. We might find ourselves eating lots of junk food or not eating at all. When our emotions are either causing us to withdraw or to really escalate and a rule of thumb is often if you can't, for your wellbeing, if you can't interact with others and be able to just do the normal functions of life, so either learn or do studies or do you work, if that's been impacted for more than a couple of weeks, and you've noticed either a change in yourself or someone else's noticing a change in you, then it's really time to get additional support.

Prior to that, though, all those habits that we were talking about, the basic habits about connecting with others, having a good laugh, the positive emotions, the distracting, the getting decent sleep, eating well, all of that, when we're recognizing that we're starting to get a bit stressed or anxious, those supports can really help us get back to an even keel. I think that other stuff that we were talking about, about having a backup plan and knowing that there are people you can talk to is really part of the mix.

What we need to watch is the spiral down. So I talk about it a bit like a toothache. You know how quickly do you go to the dentist when you notice that you've got a sore tooth? Do you leave it for a couple of days? And then it's starting to cause a problem or do you really leave it until it's pretty intense?

So the sooner we can check in, and it doesn't always have to be health practitioner, it might just be someone at school, do a bit of a check in, putting some positive habits in practice, use some calming techniques, like the mindful apps, some nice music, something that gives you ... What's your program on TV that makes you laugh? All of those things can help reduce the negativity and support young people to actually achieve their study goals, but also learn some really important life skills for future.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thank you for that. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

By learning these skills and practices and creating a really strong foundation of healthy habits, and often we underestimate that part, but that's the most obvious and the simplest thing to do, we can then learn the habits that will be useful for us down the track. So I think that there is life at the end of the tunnel, and this is amazing opportunity going forward to have lots of positive experiences. So I think just to put it in perspective and say, this is a point in time and it will change, but I'll give it my best shot. I think that's the really important bit.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks for your time, Lydia. That sounds like there's some really great advice there.

**Lydia Najlepszy:**

You're welcome. Thank you.

**Announcer:**

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