

What I Wish I Knew podcast transcript



Title: What I Wish I Knew

Episode 6: About studying smarter and beating burnout (according to science)

Year: 2025

[Intro music up]

00:00:05:12 - 00:00:31:11

SAM

Hi everyone, and welcome to What I Wish I knew, Swinburne's VTAC podcast for Year 12s. Today we will be covering mental health and study tips you might not know, but wish you did, to help you during your final year of high school. I'm your host, Sam Eddy, and I'll be joined by Dr Catherine Orr, a Swinburne lecturer with an expertise in cognitive neuroscience, and Dr Kelvin Wong, another lecturer here at Swinburne who works as a clinical psychologist.

00:00:31:13 - 00:00:50:23

SAM

We're here to put your mind at ease and set you on the right track, because let's be honest. Between keeping up with assignments and getting through exams, navigating Year 12 can feel daunting. So let's get into it. Catherine, great to have you here. Can you please just introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your work here at Swinburne?

00:00:51:00 - 00:01:22:06

CATHERINE

Hi, Sam. I'm really happy to be here. My name's Catherine Orr. I am a senior lecturer in the department of Psychological Sciences, and I have a balanced position, which means I do some teaching and some research. For my research, I actually love working with teenagers. So I study brain development in the adolescent period. And how that changes in teenagers' brains and the social expectations that we have of teenagers can impact wellbeing into adulthood.

00:01:22:08 - 00:01:44:16

SAM

So great to have you, you know, join us with your experience and your expertise. And I'm really excited to pick your brain and hopefully give some tips to our listeners on how they can maximise this time and, you know, make use of this, I guess, phase of preparation heading into exams and the end of Year 12, focusing on a neuroscience perspective.

00:01:44:22 - 00:01:56:19

SAM

What advice would you give students in terms of looking at boosting their mental focus or, you know, really getting their mind ready for that next phase of Year 12?

00:01:56:20 - 00:02:17:23

CATHERINE

Yeah, it's such an exciting time. I think Year 12 feeling right on the precipice of so many exciting opportunities. So the first thing I would say is that all the advice that you read online or the

newspaper and even what I'm going to talk about today, most of that is based on averages. So thinking about what works best for most people.

00:02:18:00 - 00:02:50:06

CATHERINE

So everybody's unique. If you're neurodivergent or if you have learning differences, or if you've got study habits that work for you that have helped you succeed up to this point, then my advice would actually be probably don't change anything. Don't add extra stress to your life at this point, but if you feel like you don't have a good study routine, or you don't have good study habits, or you feel like there's areas where you can improve, there is some really good scientific evidence about the things that do work well for a lot of people.

00:02:50:08 - 00:03:24:06

CATHERINE

And if we think about study and performing well in exams in particular, that relies a lot on memory. Memory is quite complex. So we talk about memory as though it's one thing, but there's actually multiple stages to memory. There's the initial hearing something and keeping it in your awareness, which is what we call short term memory. And then the thing that I think is key for studying is moving things from that short term memory, where you can just repeat it back, moving it into your long term memory stores, which is really what happens when you really understand something and you can hold onto it over an extended period of time.

00:03:24:08 - 00:03:48:16

CATHERINE

And then being able to access that information in an exam context and put it on the page, so that it can serve you. And what we know from science is that the process of moving something from your short-term memory to your long-term memory, we can make that more efficient and more successful if we can link new information that we're trying to learn to information that we already have.

00:03:48:18 - 00:04:18:18

CATHERINE

So the way that cognitive scientists talk about long-term memory is like it's a network. So you've got networks of overlapping information. And when you learn something new, it becomes embedded in that network and linked up to things that you already know. And so when you're trying to learn something new, if you can try to think about it and how it relates to things that you already know, that's really, really going to help it embedded in your long term memory, but also increase your understanding of what that is.

00:04:18:20 - 00:04:29:17

SAM

I guess, in terms of appealing to our listeners, what's something they can do with that advice right now? Like what does that look like? How do they actually connect something to what they already know?

00:04:29:19 - 00:05:12:00

CATHERINE

Yeah. So if you, for example, if you're studying chemistry and biology and maths, the information that you might be trying to remember might feel different across those three subjects, but there's likely to be similar principles or mechanisms underlying all of those. And so if you can really rather



than just thinking about things at a surface level where you're just rote learning or memorising to regurgitate in an exam, if you can think about the principles or the mechanisms that are involved, that connect the maths in the chemistry and the maths and the biology and the chemistry in the biology, really building those connections will really help embed that knowledge in your memory.

00:05:12:02 - 00:05:29:13

SAM

The other thing I wanted to look at was times of study, like there's a lot of people that say you should only study for, say, 20 minutes and then have a break, or others say you know, straight 55 minutes, five minute break, 55 minutes, five minute break. So what is the best advice in terms of how much and how long?

00:05:29:14 - 00:05:50:19

CATHERINE

So there are lots of those strategies around. I know the Pomodoro technique. I don't know if anyone's heard of that one where you set a timer for, I think it's 20 minutes and then you take a break. If that works for you, fantastic. But my advice for everybody that's listening would be what I said at the start, which is that everybody is different.

00:05:50:21 - 00:06:13:07

CATHERINE

And if there's a technique that doesn't work for you, please don't beat yourself up and try and force yourself to use something that isn't working. If you're open to trying new things, give them a go because they are successful for some people. But please don't persist with something if it's not working and if it's just adding stress. Because one of the things that we know about memory is that stress has a really negative impact on your memory.

00:06:13:13 - 00:06:40:22

CATHERINE

And so if you feel that you're really struggling to force yourself into using a technique that isn't working for you, then that's adding extra stress and extra distraction, which is really what you don't want. Yeah. So I was talking earlier about the difference between short-term memory and long-term memory. One of the other things we know about long term memory is that you actually need to have a break from actively reading and rehearsing to consolidate things in your long-term memory.

00:06:40:22 - 00:07:00:21

CATHERINE

And so consolidate just means kind of lock it in or embed it down in your long-term memory. And so one of the best things you can do in terms of making sure that those memories are getting stored safely in your long-term memory, is to have a break from that active learning or reading, and rehearsing stage of learning and memory.

00:07:00:21 - 00:07:26:19

CATHERINE

So if you can take a walk, would be one of the best things that you can do. So try to get outside and get some natural light, get some fresh air, and try to take a bit of a break from that active learning and try to do some reflection on the things that you've learned and think about how you can, you know, relate them to other things that you might know to really encourage that long-term memory process.

00:07:26:19 - 00:07:38:04

SAM

And looking at it in terms of cramming for exams, is there any science that backs up whether or not this is an effective practice? Is it worthwhile or should I just not even bother?

00:07:38:10 - 00:08:04:08

CATHERINE

So there are some people who have a very particular kind of memory. They used to call it photographic memory. So for those kinds of people, cramming can be beneficial in some kinds of exams. So if it's the kind of exam where it's just a multiple choice exam or you just have to regurgitate information and you have that particular kind of memory system, then yeah, cramming might help you.

00:08:04:08 - 00:08:43:13

CATHERINE

But the vast majority of people and the vast majority of exams, if you've been working consistently or even semi consistently for a couple of months, on your preparation, cramming is not going to help you. It's just going to potentially force some useful information out of your short-term memory. It's going to stress you out. And when I talked about the three stages of memory, the short-term memory, the long-term memory, and then accessing the information when you're in the exam context, cramming actually makes it really difficult to access that information in the exam context, because it's not embedded in a network of information.

00:08:43:13 - 00:08:54:06

CATHERINE

And so it's really hard to understand or to sort out which of the information you've crammed in over the last 24 hours is relevant to the question that you're trying to answer in the exam.

00:08:54:08 - 00:08:57:16

SAM

So can it kind of get in the way of answering it?

00:08:57:16 - 00:09:00:21

CATHERINE

It can be confusing and overwhelming.

00:09:00:23 - 00:09:06:00

SAM

What can I do to avoid burnout when exams are approaching?

00:09:06:05 - 00:09:26:07

CATHERINE

I think that one of the reasons that people burn out is because they become so invested in the one thing that they're working towards, they think that, you know, their ATAR is going to determine the rest of their lives. They think that their performance in Year 12 is going to determine whether they're happy or not for the whole rest of their life.

00:09:26:09 - 00:09:48:06

CATHERINE



And if all you're doing, if all you're doing is studying, then you're not getting any information that anything else matters. But if you're spending time with your friends, if you're watching movies, listening to music, doing a hobby that you enjoy, it's just a constant reminder that you know there is life after Year 12. There's things that are important and valuable in your life other than academic achievement.

00:09:48:06 - 00:09:50:24

CATHERINE

Yeah. And I think that's really, really important.

00:09:51:01 - 00:09:55:15

SAM

But can the idea of pressure or stress actually be a good thing?

00:09:55:20 - 00:10:16:02

CATHERINE

Yep. You have asked very good questions. And there is actually a name given to this phenomenon. It's called the Dodson curve. And what it means is that there's a point at which a little bit of something is good. So for stress, a little bit of stress is good because it's motivating. It can focus your attention. And so a little bit of stress can be a motivator.

00:10:16:08 - 00:10:21:13

CATHERINE

But there comes a point where too much stress is actually negative.

00:10:21:15 - 00:10:24:13

SAM

What is too much stress? How do you recognise that?

00:10:24:15 - 00:10:49:16

CATHERINE

Again, it's going to look different for everybody. A lot of people feel their stress in their body, so they might feel their throat getting tight. They might feel physically hot. That might be an indication that this is stressing you out a lot, and perhaps to the point where the work that you're doing, although you feel like you should be doing the work, doing the work is actually counterproductive.

00:10:49:16 - 00:11:11:16

CATHERINE

It's increasing your stress, and you're actually potentially not encoding or learning a lot of that information. So that might be an indication that you need to take a little break, do something to try to regulate your body and bring you up. Bring your heart rate and your blood pressure down a little bit. Other people don't necessarily feel stress physically in their bodies.

00:11:11:16 - 00:11:29:19

CATHERINE

It's more kind of cognitive or thinking. So they might find their thoughts are racing. They might have what we call avoidant thoughts. So they sit down to study something and they're it's almost like their thoughts kind of bounce off the thing that they're trying to study because they're finding it so stressful, they try to avoid thinking about it again.



00:11:29:19 - 00:11:45:01

CATHERINE

That's another indication – that you're sitting down, you're trying to work, you've blocked out this time. You're not doing things that you do enjoy. But that time is actually not productive because you're not able to concentrate on the thing that you're trying to concentrate on.

00:11:45:03 - 00:11:58:08

SAM

What about you walk into an exam, you sit down and you've got that 10, 15 minutes of reading time. What do I do if I become really stressed in that moment to, you know, regulate myself and get back in the game?

00:11:58:10 - 00:12:17:20

CATHERINE

So again, what I'm going to suggest are things that are based on averages. So things that work for most people, they won't necessarily work for everybody. What I would recommend is having some strategies that will help you regulate your body. So your body and your mind are really well connected, and your mind often takes its cues from your body.

00:12:17:20 - 00:12:37:00

CATHERINE

I find that body-based strategies work for me. And so rather than trying to control my thoughts, which is losing game for me, I find it easier to try to regulate my body. So I try to take slow, deep breaths in through my nose for kind of four or five, hold it for a count of four or five, and then breathing slowly out.

00:12:37:02 - 00:12:47:02

CATHERINE

And what that does is it just brings your heart rate down. And that for me, is what I need to kind of break that vicious cycle between my heart racing and then my thoughts racing.

00:12:47:07 - 00:12:52:14

SAM

Right. I think we might finish off with just some rapid-fire questions.

00:12:53:01 - 00:13:06:13

SAM

If you can just give me the first thing that comes to mind, I'm going to ask you to go against everything you believe in and not think too much. Just bang. Give me the answer. Most common mistake you say students make when trying to learn something new?

00:13:06:15 - 00:13:16:07

CATHERINE

So thinking that memorising it is enough, knowing really what you want to do is try to build that deep understanding and try to embed that new information into a network.

00:13:16:09 - 00:13:20:01

SAM

And do multiple exposures of information help with things like that?



00:13:20:03 - 00:13:26:22

CATHERINE

So it really does. But even better than multiple exposures is multiple exposures in different contexts.

00:13:27:00 - 00:13:27:06

SAM

Okay, right.

00:13:27:12 - 00:13:59:12

CATHERINE

So I was talking about the hippocampus earlier. You've got two hippocampi, one in the left side of your brain and one in the right side of the brain. And they're specialised for different kinds of information. So one specialised for more verbal information, the other's more specialised for visual information. And so if you can encounter information in different formats, so in a diagram or in a chart and then have someone explain it to you or read it in a narrative, then that's reinforcing that information in different ways.

00:13:59:12 - 00:14:06:15

CATHERINE

And it's much more likely to stick in. The best thing you can actually do is try to explain it to somebody else.

00:14:06:17 - 00:14:22:18

SAM

I'm so glad to hear you say this. I always say to my students when I get them to write out information, I want you to write it out in your own words. But I want you to write it in a way that you could walk up to someone in the street who knows nothing about the topic. And they'd listen to you read out what you've written and they'd go, 'I understand'.

00:14:22:18 - 00:14:23:03

CATHERINE

Yes. That's good. Endorsed by science. Well done, Sam.

00:14:27:09 - 00:14:29:23

SAM

Your best trick to overcome procrastination?

00:14:30:00 - 00:14:43:21

CATHERINE

So my best trick to overcome procrastination would be to break the task down into smaller, bite-sized pieces. And give yourself a little break or a little treat each time you finish a small piece.

00:14:43:21 - 00:14:50:12

SAM

Yeah, great. And the last one: one unexpected thing that can make a big difference for Year 12s?

00:14:50:12 - 00:15:13:05

CATHERINE

One unexpected thing that could make a big difference for Year 12s would be to reduce stress as much as possible. I think Year 12s are really encouraged to invest a lot of cognitive and emotional



energy into Year 12. And I think that's really understandable for people to want to perform their best. But sometimes that stress can be really counterproductive.

00:15:13:07 - 00:15:32:01

CATHERINE

And so I think keeping perspective on everything else that is good in your life is really helpful. Understanding that even if you don't get into the course that you wanted to get into first time, once you get into uni, there's a lot of flexibility you can move around within the university once you're there.

00:15:32:03 - 00:15:49:22

SAM

Yeah, 100%. It's a great point you make there, the idea that, you know, you may have had dreams of starting one degree, but if you didn't get in the front door, there's a side door, there's a back door. Walk around, see what else is out there. Start one course, perform well enough. Move into another. There's so many options.

00:15:49:24 - 00:15:53:18

CATHERINE

So much flexibility once you're in. And uni is great, it's so great.

00:15:53:21 - 00:16:11:12

SAM

Thank you so much for your time. Thanks for all of your invaluable advice. And I may go and take some of that on board for my own practice. Okay, shifting gears now we're going to talk to Kelvin. Kelvin, so great to have you here with us today. Please tell me a little bit about who you are and what you do at Swinburne.

00:16:11:14 - 00:16:26:08

KELVIN

Yes, I'm a senior lecturer here at the Swinburne University of Technology. I am also a clinical psychologist. So what I do here is mainly teaching to the postgraduate programs. So really training people to become clinical psychologists.

00:16:26:10 - 00:16:44:17

SAM

Great. And if you when thinking back to what it's like to go through high school and Year 12 and the pressure of that study as someone with your experience now, what is the one thing you would say to a Year 12 student to best navigate the months ahead?

00:16:44:19 - 00:17:06:01

KELVIN

I think, first of all, it's, really normalised that it is a very stressful period. I think showing yourself a little bit of self-compassion, being like, hey, everyone goes through this, the stress that you're feeling, you know, even if you talk to the person next to you, you're not alone in feeling that level of stress. I think that would have been also something I would have liked to have known going through.

00:17:06:02 - 00:17:08:07

SAM

So it's like that idea of being kind to yourself.



00:17:08:10 - 00:17:11:17

KELVIN

Yeah, yeah. Being kind. You're not alone.

00:17:11:19 - 00:17:25:15

SAM

In terms of looking at studying and ways to best study and prepare for exams and assessments, is there a particular thing that you would suggest for avoiding distractions and staying focused?

00:17:25:17 - 00:17:56:18

KELVIN

I think, a couple of things. So knowing your own limits, you know, knowing that probably by studying immediately after you've eaten or really close to bedtime, probably not the best time to intake any new information. You know, if you're also really stressed prior to going to sleep, that would affect information being consolidated into your memory or, you know, going from short-term to long-term memory.

00:17:56:22 - 00:18:01:01

KELVIN

So retaining information might be more difficult if your sleep is disrupted.

00:18:01:05 - 00:18:09:13

SAM

I knew about the like, no study right before sleep. But I've never heard of this – don't study straight after eating. What's the science behind this?

00:18:09:15 - 00:18:23:02

KELVIN

To be honest, it's really about like, your body's just using its energy. It's digesting your food as opposed to, you know, allowing it to go to other areas of your brain, which is where it's needed when you're studying.

00:18:23:04 - 00:18:35:03

SAM

Very interesting. Do you recommend students have a particular study schedule that they should follow to best maximise retention of new knowledge?

00:18:35:05 - 00:18:56:16

KELVIN

I think it is less about the schedule. It's really about more how you study. So the best way to study really is what we call test/retest. So not just memorising and rereading information over and over again. It's really about how do you, maybe getting somebody to test you on that information.

00:18:56:16 - 00:19:17:10

KELVIN

So you're really activating that information in your brain and bring it up to mind and using that information. And that's the best way for retention rather than just, again, passive, what we call passive learning or passive studying where you're just reading things. Maybe more active studying where you're saying, 'hey, Sam, can you put up a cue card for me?'.



00:19:17:16 - 00:19:23:12

KELVIN

'What does the mitochondria do?' for example. And getting you to answer that as opposed to just reading.

00:19:23:14 - 00:19:35:18

SAM

In terms of, you know, avoiding burnout, what can someone in Year 12 do to maximise the time that they have, but also not to burnout? What can they do?

00:19:35:20 - 00:19:56:03

KELVIN

Noticing the signs of burnout for yourself? Everyone's fairly individual. There are some overarching signs of burnout. Like, you know, your attention is being unfocused or you you're finding yourself struggling with concentrating. You might be experiencing some low moods or even doing a little bit of a mood reading for yourself just to check in with yourself every now and then.

00:19:56:03 - 00:20:03:24

KELVIN

How am I feeling right now? So if you are checking in with yourself regularly, then you can apply some strategies.

00:20:04:01 - 00:20:32:11

SAM

Kelvin, a question I wanted to ask was around the idea of not just looking at the stresses of study, but teenage mental health. There are so many things outside of just going to school and having a massive study load that can weigh us down. You've got things like relationship issues, you've got things at home, financial stressors, anxiety, depression, all of these things that are going to really impact young people.

00:20:32:13 - 00:20:42:17

SAM

What advice or tips and strategies do you have for someone who might be going through other stuff other than just a really big study load?

00:20:42:19 - 00:21:10:21

KELVIN

So I think the first thing to remember that there's always help out there. So recognising when it's really negatively impacting your life. So these things, they do happen to us, right? As teenagers or late adolescents, we're struggling not only with what life throws at us, but also struggling with aspects of our self-identity, our self-concept, how we see ourselves and our role in the world.

00:21:10:23 - 00:21:39:09

KELVIN

With that, there's a lot of, you know, things that can happen that could impact your mental health. So recognising when it's going too far, like if you are noticing your low mood is lasting longer than it, than it normally does, if you're not enjoying activities that you previously enjoyed, if your anxiety is preventing you from reaching out to others or leaving the house, for example.



00:21:39:09 - 00:22:04:02

KELVIN

Yeah, if you started to notice really negative impacts of, you know, on your mental health, then it would be time to probably get a second opinion. Go to a GP, get a referral plan and get in an appointment with a psychologist or clinical psychologist to get an assessment around what's going on for you. And that they can give you individualised and tailored strategies to help you manage.

00:22:04:04 - 00:22:25:14

SAM

Yeah, that's really good to hear, you know, from a clinical psychologist as yourself to say that it's a normal thing to do. And have conversations with your friends, have conversations at home, make it normal because it is normal to feel, you know, down at certain times and need extra support. We would like to finish with some rapid-fire questions.

00:22:25:14 - 00:22:39:13

SAM

If you can just give me the first answer that comes to mind, that would be great. Are you ready? Okay, good. I'm going to take that as a yes. Most common mistake that you see students make when juggling life and school?

00:22:39:15 - 00:23:00:10

KELVIN

Okay, so the most common mistake that I see students making when juggling life and studying is probably committing too much to one or the other. So when you don't have a balance, right, when you really invest in one, you forget about the other things that might provide a little bit more balance in your life and can help with stress.

00:23:00:12 - 00:23:06:05

SAM

Okay. Next one, your best self-care tip for stressed students?

00:23:06:07 - 00:23:26:08

KELVIN

My best self-care tip for stressed students, I think, would be to really connect with something that you enjoy that is not studying. For me, when I have to, like, study, you know, I do a little bit of pottery, and I just let my mind switch off, or, you know, go for a walk with my dog.

00:23:26:10 - 00:23:31:21

KELVIN

Just letting my mind, forcing my mind to switch off is the best thing that I like doing.

00:23:31:23 - 00:23:42:19

SAM

And if you don't have a dog, you should get one. They just fix everything. And last one: one unexpected thing that would make a big difference for someone in Year 12?

00:23:42:21 - 00:24:07:09

KELVIN

So one unexpected thing that would make a difference for someone in Year 12, and probably something that I wish I knew, was even just that reminder that this is not the end. At the end of this,

there's, you know, there are so many different opportunities in university and even maybe you do halfway through your degree and you're like, hey, this is not the thing for me that I thought my entire life was reaching this point.

00:24:07:09 - 00:24:21:22

KELVIN

But maybe you'll pivot. Maybe you'll meet some people who present you with different opportunities. So I think keeping an open mind towards the experience, I think is going to help you navigate life in general, but also university, but also life after university.

00:24:21:24 - 00:24:45:13

SAM

And I think that that plays into that idea of, like, you think you know what you want to do today, but tomorrow it can be a different story. And once you finish and you go to university or you go to TAFE, you figure out the options are endless. And I think that, on that, students should – when they're making preferences on VTAC – think about the fact that there are pathways and put some pathways on your preference list.

00:24:45:15 - 00:25:02:19

SAM

Have a look at what TAFE options are out there. Have a look at what UniLink diplomas are out there that might lead you into your preferred degree. If you don't, you know, make the entry requirements, it's just about going and having conversations with your careers advisers, with the universities, and find out what's available, because the options are endless.

00:25:02:19 - 00:25:29:20

SAM

There's so many things that can help you get to where you want to get to. There's not just one number that determines success. I think that just about covers everything. Thank you so much to Catherine and Kelvin. And thank you to our listeners for tuning in today. If you have any questions or you would like personalised advice on everything and anything VTAC, simply reach out to our team of Future Student Advisors and you'll find the link in today's podcast description.

00:25:29:22 - 00:25:34:05

SAM

Good luck with the rest of Year 12 and we will hopefully see you on campus at Swinburne next year.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

