

*Congratulations! You made it (and it is not an easy feat)!*

...and here you are; part of a unique program of study jointly offered across UNE and the University of Newcastle. And while your program of study offers unique challenges, it also brings the day-to-day obstacles that many university students face. So here are some specific and general tips and tricks to help steer you along should the road get a little long and winding.

### **Why study medicine anyway? Is it more than the *White Coat* ?!**

Just as donning the white coat (especially for the first time) can be a mark of having “*made it*” and a representation of the **high standards, order and cleanliness** of the medical profession, for many students the motivational factors behind the desire to study medicine go a little deeper than this symbolic achievement. For some it is about opening the door to a diverse range of career opportunities within a globally recognised field. Or it is about helping others and being a part of the healing process and profession. Or for some it may be about gaining tangible outcomes such as financial security, status, respect or obtaining a stable and safe career. Despite these differences, what matters is that you don’t forget your own personal motivation for studying medicine (and of course this can and may change), but keeping your eye on the prize and **why** you want the prize in the first place can go a long way to keep you on track when the going gets tough.

*So next time you don your white coat take a moment to reflect on what brought you here in the first place.*

### **The Unique Challenges of being a Medical Student**

Of course it goes without saying, *it’s going to be hard*, but that does not mean that the challenges of being a medical student need to define your entire degree. There is more to your degree than just the hard bits, so the key is to maintain a healthy perspective. That said, below are listed some of the unique challenges that JMP students encounter:

- ◆ Longer academic year comprised of Semesters (*being out of sync with the Trimester structure of most UNE degrees and therefore most UNE students*).
- ◆ High contact hours...potential burnout (*it’s not about turning up for a couple of lectures each week...you need to be on deck, Monday to Friday plus the outside hours!*).
- ◆ Problem Based Learning (PBL) pedagogy- (*you have to present content to your peers*)
- ◆ Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE’s) - (*increases the potential for time pressure and public performance issues*).
- ◆ Clinical placements— (*the need to constantly adapt to new environments due to frequent rotations*)
- ◆ Time constraints due to a large volume of course content (*greater risk of getting left behind should you fall behind*).
- ◆ Experiencing the “*I cruised through school, but now it’s not so easy*” syndrome.
- ◆ Face saving in the light of competitive peers.
- ◆ Exposure to mortality or death and human suffering (*potential questioning of own values or belief systems*)

### Additional challenges:

- ◆ Isolation of studying in a rural location, especially if this is not your first preference (*far from the city and family and/or established support/peer networks*).
- ◆ The college lifestyle of other UNE students may be distracting for those of you living on campus (*“it might be OK for others to party late into the night but I have to prepare for my OSCE’s tomorrow”*)
- ◆ The integration of visiting medical officers may mean last minute cancellation of classes (*the need to be flexible and adaptive*).

## Minimise the Challenges and Enhance Your Wellbeing

***“Self care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.”*** Eleanor Brown

You are embarking on a journey where your end goal is to care for others. However, the trap can be that you may forget about yourself in the process. The question to ask is, ***“how can I care for the health of others when my own physical (and mental) health may not be up to scratch”***; especially in light of the challenges we just spoke of. So whether it be now as a medical student or later on as a practitioner, remember your own self care. Here are a few ideas...

- ◆ Think ***“healthy”*** - join a gym, take a walk, eat well, dance or move, breathe!
- ◆ Think ***“involved”*** - engage with your fellow students, engage with your local communities, volunteer, join a group, take up a hobby.
- ◆ Think ***“organised”*** - develop and implement schedules (yearly, monthly daily) add a hint of flexibility to ensure you can adapt to last minute changes.
- ◆ Think ***“time out”*** - be mindful, be in the “now”, slow down, relax.
- ◆ Think ***“support”*** - reach out to others (peers, friends, family, academic staff, support services). And view this as a sign of strength and a willingness to create the change ***you*** need.

***“You can do anything but not everything.”*** David Allen

Along with self care, recognising the signs of **burnout** can also be a preventative measure to ensure sustained wellbeing for university students. Given the challenges, medical students are especially prone to being at risk of burnout. If ignored this can lead to mental health issues. Here is a brief run down of what to look out for:

- ◆ A decrease in productivity (more avoidance, disengagement).
- ◆ A decrease in overall health (more colds, headaches, sleep problems).
- ◆ A decrease in resilience (more moodiness, stress, anger, frustration).
- ◆ A decrease in self esteem (more doubt, withdrawal, self criticism, fear).
- ◆ A decrease in joy and meaning (even more doubt, questioning, uncertainty).

If you notice any of the above changes, the potential for burnout may be there.

With burnout, the key variable to keep in mind is **BALANCE**. So think **HOLISTICALLY** and aim for a healthy **STUDY-LIFE BALANCE**.

*...remember you are more than a med student !*

## Mental Health and Medical Students

There are a number of untruths out there regarding mental health and medical students. Here are just a couple of myths that need busting!

**Myth:** *“If I talk to anyone about feeling stressed, or that I am experiencing mental ill health I will get a black mark on my academic record and my career prospects will be limited.”*

**Fact:** While some stigma related to mental health does exist within parts of the medical profession, there is a current trend to break this pattern. The take home message is, *“let’s attempt to turn this around”*. Therefore, acknowledging our difficulties and limitations and seeking support can be seen as a strength, not a weakness.

**Myth:** *“My problems really aren't that dire. Surely I need to meet DSM criteria to seek out psychological services?”*

**Fact:** A large proportion of people who seek the support of psychological services are the “worried well”. If your current mental health status is impacting on your ability to achieve your day to day goals, or if you have noticed some type of shift in thinking styles or simply have a problem you need to talk through, seeking out professional support can go along way to creating the change you want to create. Therefore, carrying out psychological assessments is only one facet of the work that mental health professionals engage in and only one of a myriad of reasons why people seek their expertise.

**Myth:** *“I have to be tough. This is what the real world of medicine is like.”*

**Fact:** Being a good medical student does not require you to go through some sort of endurance test rite of passage; where all other things in your life no longer matter. Yes, there might be a culture within some parts of the medical profession where working long hours, not eating, not showing emotions is seen as some badge of honour. But that is not sustainable or restorative and the majority of the medical profession recognises that the costs of such a culture are very high indeed.

Remember...

We all have mental health just as we all have physical health

We all need to nourish our minds just as we nourish our bodies.

We all experience stress, anxiety and depression from time to time just as we all get a cold, stomach bug or sprain an ankle from time to time.

So in a nutshell, your mental health can be seen as a normal aspect of being a medical student therefore it’s more about how you go about managing and nurturing it rather than ignoring or covering it up!

The support you need to succeed

**So where from here? To access support in regard to your mental health and your JMP experience, you can access individual counselling sessions to discuss any of your concerns or you may want to develop specific skills, such as (just to name a few!)...**

- ◆ effective time management skills
- ◆ an adaptive life/study balance
- ◆ enhancing self care
- ◆ mental flexibility to effectively shift from station to station during OSCE's
- ◆ study skills to better meet the demands of tertiary study and the JMP program (as opposed to pre-existing secondary education based study skills)
- ◆ resilience and adaptability in the face of homesickness and clinical placement rotations
- ◆ dealing with death and illness
- ◆ strategies to help minimize potential burnout
- ◆ cognitive, behavioural and mindfulness strategies to help combat stress, anxiety and depression

**And lastly, here are some helpful resources that may further support your JMP experience ...**

**To check out info on medical students wellbeing go to:**

<http://mentalhealth.amsa.org.au/keeping-your-grass-greener/>

**To get involved with JMP student groups, go to:**

<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/joint-medical-program/student-life/student-groups>

**To find out what Armidale has to offer and to become involved in the broader Armidale Community, check out these sites:**

<http://www.armidale.info/index.htm>

<http://www.armidaleregional.nsw.gov.au/community/get-involved/volunteer>

**And don't forget our other Tips Sheets and useful links page. Go to:**

<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling/tip-sheets>

<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling/useful-links>

**And finally, don't forget to have fun...let your JMP experience help shape the Dr you will become!!**

How to contact a UNE Counsellor:

**UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)**

Phone: 02 6773 2897

Email: [studentcounselling@une.edu.au](mailto:studentcounselling@une.edu.au) via [AskUNE](#)

<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling>