

# There is help for students who feel isolated

By Tom Lax

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I studied Economics and Politics at Exeter University. My degree started 17 years ago almost to the day. Half a lifetime ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I was nervous and excited. I was ready and I was miles off. I couldn't wait for my parents to leave after dropping me off and I wished I hadn't pushed them out the door as soon as they had.

I had no confidence in my own opinion. I remember sitting in politics tutorials and listening to public-school-buffoon-homophobes spout bigoted rubbish about civil partnerships and the liberal policies of the New Labour government. I remember my head full of opinions, observations and oratory I would not be afraid to vocalise now but not having the strength to open my mouth at the time.

I started at Law School five years later, aged 22. Other people still intimidated me in my class – the way they stated their ambitions so easily and so specifically made me feel inferior. I started having panic attacks. I found it hard to stand up in front of ten people and give a presentation to the point that I thought I might faint. I had to give up coffee!

I am now a solicitor who represents brain-injured people in medical negligence claims. I also work with charities who support brain-injured people and run a book group for people who have brain injuries. I don't have an injury but I have spent a lot of time speaking with and being with people who have. I know that the most "minor" injury can undermine a person's sense-of-self and confidence – their ability to learn or communicate or integrate.

Finally... I am human living through the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. I am a very lucky one but no-one is impervious to the anxiety that permeates society. Just watching the norms I have settled into over the 35 years of my life upended overnight has surely impacted me in ways that I cannot understand. Anxiety is contagious and we are living in a world where everything is heightened. The human touch we require is denied by a cruel state of perpetual social distance.

I feel an enormous amount for all students right now. Especially those just starting out. It was hard enough without social distancing. I mean... it was the social closeness that made the experience for me – it surely was for most people? And then I think about disabled students for whom there is an extra barrier, who find their confidence depleted at a time when they need it the most and who might find it that bit harder to put their all into the experience so they can take as much out as everyone else.

To Universities, I would say, pay more attention to those who are vulnerable at this time. Reach out and keep reaching out. Perform welfare checks on students and follow up after you have done so. Update your Wellbeing protocols and make sure that your disabled students see them. Keep services open where you can in a safe and secure way and make clear what are you doing to replace in-person services where they are no longer available.

And... drawing on my experience as best I can... what I would say to any student who'd listen (disabled or otherwise) is that you are not in this alone. Everyone feels isolated now. Everyone feels isolated at university. Everyone feels like there is something holding them back. Believe in yourself, be honest with yourself and reach out when things get too much (there are specialist services at most universities that will support you – find them online and don't be afraid to access them and keep accessing them). Take your time. Keep trying different things until you find your own rhythm. Speak up – in tutorials, to your GP, to your new friends, to your old friends, to charities!

And... if you have to give up coffee for a bit... then just remember there are litres of the stuff in your future.

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