

The role of emotion in induction



A small exercise

- As an institution – what are the things you need to achieve during induction?
- What emotions do you see students experiencing during induction?
- Are there potential tensions between what we need and what students might need?



Transition and emotion

It has long been recognised that the transition to higher education can be a stressful process. It is not unusual for students going through transition to experience psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, a reduction in self-esteem and isolation.

At Derby we conducted a research study of 353 randomly sampled students using clinical measures of distress (CORE GP) and a questionnaire about their early experiences. This was administered in the first 6 weeks

63% of students scored in the clinical range - their distress levels were above every day emotional experiences

There was no difference in average distress levels between students who had moved into student accommodation and those commuting from their family home

Correlations

Clinical range

- Felt lonely
- Felt overwhelmed
- Believed they should be doing better
- Were struggling to make decisions
- Felt restless
- Felt homesick
- Felt angry

Non clinical range

- Felt they had settled in
- Felt part of the community
- Believed negative feelings were normal and temporary
- Felt ready and prepared to start their course

Thinking and feeling strategies

In a separate study (Hughes & Smail, 2015) we asked students to identify what had made their experiences better and what had made them worse in the first 6 weeks

1. Social integration and support
2. The impact of student's mind-set and thinking
3. University actions

All of which suggests that transition is at least partly a psychological and emotional process

This is particularly important given that we ask students to undertake a lot of new learning during induction and we know that high negative emotional arousal shuts off higher cognitive functioning

Possible parts of an explanation to guide practice



Mere Exposure – (Zajonc, 1968)

- Speed up familiarisation and belonging (in reality and imagination)

The ability of students to meet their needs (physical and emotional) in their new environment

- Help students to recognise and use the strengths they already have
- Support them to acquire skills necessary to meet their needs
- Help them to see clear and practical pathways to success
- Reduce emotional arousal so they can think clearly to accomplish all of this

The beginning of a different approach

- We decided to target induction with a new session focussing on student emotions and the felt experience
- Our traditional induction was information heavy
- Students did not remember the information they were given
- They were unable to find the relevance in what they were being told – they did not yet know why this might be helpful
- Students experiences of being shuttled around and talked at, about things they couldn't assimilate, increased anxiety and made them feel alienated from their new university
- As a widening participation university – many of our students arrived motivationally flat

The session

The aims of the session were

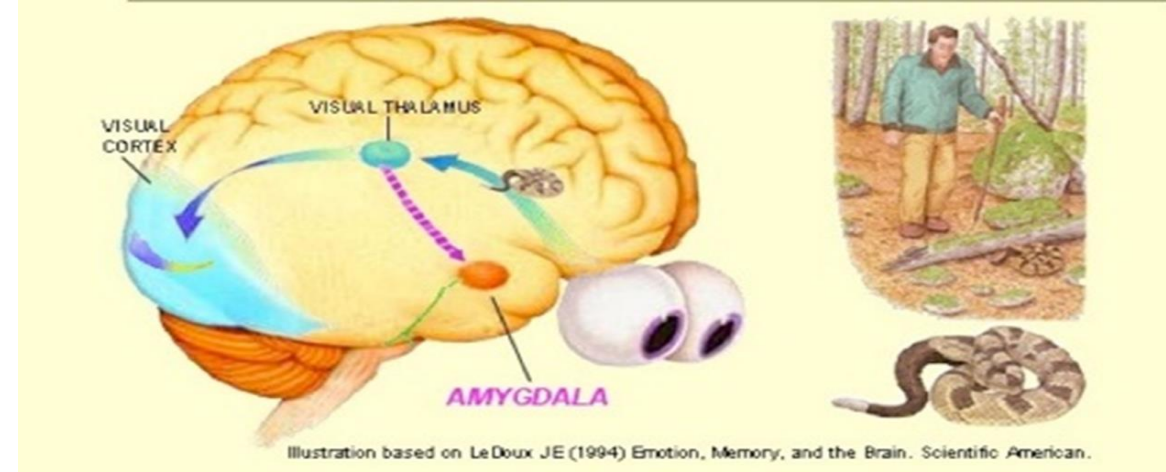
- To reduce negative emotional arousal
- Normalise feelings
- Link wellbeing to academic performance
- Increase confidence
- Raise motivation
- Increase willingness to use and access support



In the first year we were given 20 minutes... not everyone was convinced by our approach

The session content

- It's ok
- You belong
- Steps you can take, things you can learn – you don't need to know everything yet
- Emotional hi-jacking is normal – and can be overcome
- Be ambitious
- Use support
- Keep learning
- Plan
- Have fun



Outcomes

82% of students rated the session as the best part of their induction

Students interpreted the session differently. In feedback comments they referred to the session as - 'the stress session,' 'the session about wellbeing,' 'the talk about time management,' 'the talk about goals,' 'the one where he talked about our potential,' and 'the career planning session.' In each case they were referring to the same workshop.

Student comments-

- "His speech helped with my confidence"
- The wellbeing talk, encouraging and fun which is very important
- Wellbeing man made me feel so much better about everything
- The end talk was really encouraging and a useful reminder to look after yourself

Students were unusually enthusiastic in their responses

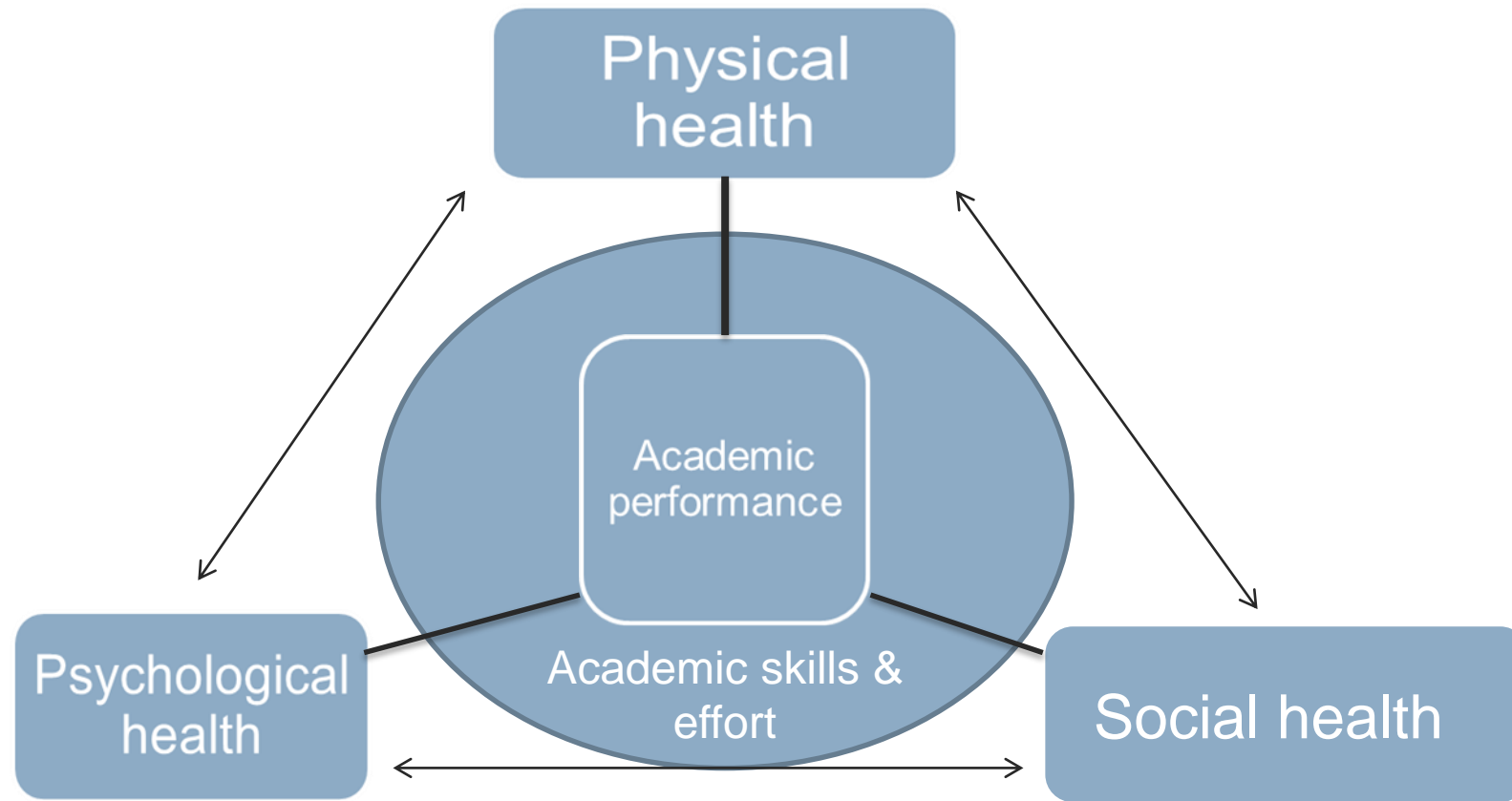
Impacts

- Increased student willingness to access support
- Students approach staff who delivered the sessions, months and sometimes years afterwards, to talk to them about the positive impact it had
- Students indicated that it helped them feel better immediately
 - “I didn’t know what I was doing here and felt a total fraud. I know why I’m here now and I know the university cares.”
- Helped us build better relationships with academic staff

Lessons

- Different cohorts responded differently – this wasn't easy to predict
- Shifting language, metaphors and making specific links to the curriculum of the students in each session made a real difference
- Students still didn't like being in large anonymous groups – we now deliver to groups that are as small as possible
- This has led to us working with academics to develop further sessions that link similar messages to students' subject of study that we deliver across the year, e.g.
 - Theatre Arts – Creativity, Performance and You
 - Business Management – Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace
 - Education Studies – Learning and Emotions

Bio-psycho-socio-academic view of academic performance



Implications

This was a small, short intervention that appeared to have a significant impact in the moment and to have lasting value for at least some students

This suggests that students might benefit from a greater focus on emotions and the felt experience during induction – and beyond

To do this may require us to pare back information giving and administrative processes – moving to ‘just in time’ communications later in the term

Challenges to focussing on emotions during induction

A need for efficiency in our processes – induction is a good time to get things done

A potential focus on a particular view of ‘customer service’

A desire to communicate important messages by many different parts of the organisation

Alternative views of the role of universities – should we be worrying about what our adult learners feel? Is it our role to make them feel better? Might this actually disempower them?

Resources

What focussing on emotion doesn't mean

Encouraging rumination

Suggesting that there is a 'normal' emotion students should feel – that if they feel fine there is something wrong

Providing mass therapy

Our focus has instead been on normalising and accepting emotions, raising positive emotions and helping students take positive, achievable and practical steps to manage and respond to their emotions during transition



Tasks – what might all of this mean?

Discuss in groups:

- Do you believe a greater focus on emotion and the felt experience in induction would be beneficial?
- Do you believe there are risks to this approach?
- What are the challenges to remodelling induction to focus more on emotion? How could they be overcome? Should they be?

How could you mould a workshop on emotions to be relevant to students on the following programmes?

- Computer Games Programming
- Accounting and Finance
- Engineering