Mental Preparation: The Key for Success

In this article, I would like to share the experience I have gained from working with students, and offer ways of preparing mentally in order to get the best out of your studies, in the most effective and pleasant way possible.

By Ruthie Riesel, IDC Herzliya psychologist

We all know that students are "big kids", who have usually finished high school, taken matriculation exams, traveled abroad, worked, studied and gained some experience of life. Why do they need guidance in acclimatizing to university life? Why do they need everything explained in advance? In any case, they will jump into the water and start to swim. At the same time, practical knowledge and mental preparation can help in every new beginning - the army, the trip abroad, at work, and yes, also academic studies.

First of all: think ahead
The most important piece of advice I have for you is this: open your minds to learning, to absorbing the knowledge, wisdom and experience that you can learn from the lecturers, instructors and texts. The objective is not (only) to "get" a degree, but also to acquire knowledge, to understand and absorb some of the professional secrets you are learning. There are two reasons for this: a) learning is built up, layer upon layer - it is hard to continue studying for three or four years without a real understanding and a genuine connection with the material; b) the subject you are studying is very broad, and each of you needs gradually to find your own focus, the specific area within the greater whole that particularly interests you and that you will want to study in greater depth and deal with in the future. I have known quite a number of students who have chosen to complete their courses with the minimum effort required, and with a minimal absorption of real knowledge. At the end of their degree course, many of them find themselves at a loss: although they have the certificate, they don't have even the beginning of a professional identity (what interests me, what is the best area for me to work in, within the broad subject I have studied?), nor have they sufficiently taken the knowledge on board, which has an adverse effect on their self-confidence as they approach the job market, interviews and so on.

Zero hour: the supreme importance of Orientation Week
It is hard to overstate the importance of Orientation Week. This is the transition period between "normal life" and student
life. It is not just where the library is and how to look for an article in the database that you will learn during this week. This week, you will begin to taste the atmosphere of studying in an institute of higher education, you will receive clues with regard to the level of study required (much higher than at high school), you will be exposed to new words from the world of academe (dean, referee, seminar), and you will begin to get used to the idea that you are students, with all that this implies. And more important than all this - during Orientation Week you will get to know your classmates, your study group (see below), future roommates, partners in business, and perhaps in life...

Lesson 1: it's not good for a student to be alone

Academic studies are based on personal learning, for which there is no substitute, but it is hard to face all the assignments alone, and in many ways it is inefficient to do so. One of the sayings of the Sages commonly heard in the School of Law (like many others you will learn in the course of your degree studies) is that "you can only sharpen a knife against another", or in other words, in order to gain an accurate and in-depth understanding, it is necessary to discuss matters with your peer group, that is, other students. It is a common mistake, especially among new students filled with motivation and the desire to succeed, to try and study, understand, and carry out assignments alone and unaided, and here - the game is not worth the candle. In discussion, new ideas emerge, errors in understanding are revealed, and learning is corrected and sharpened in a way that enriches everyone involved. Apart from that, it enhances your motivation - the group maintains its pace of learning and its timetable, and even its morale, which is enormously important throughout the course of study and during exams. Therefore, create and cultivate a study group. Get to know the advantages and disadvantages of each of the individual members (this one comes up with ideas, he writes wonderfully, and she organizes and keeps everyone in line) - and take advantage of them. But watch out: the study group helps and improves your learning, but papers - just like exams - have to be written by each student alone, and joint papers (or very similar ones) should only be submitted when this has been explicitly allowed!

Juggling for beginners: creating a division of attention, time and energy between a thousand (important!) tasks

One of the most difficult things for students to cope with when they are starting out is the need to plan their time very well in order to meet the lesson assignments in a reasonable manner (without too many sleepless nights). Within a few weeks (or perhaps even days), you will discover that the student's daily work does not begin or end at a particular time. We are talking about long and crowded weeks filled with tasks, only a few of which are time-limited (lessons, dates for submitting papers and exercises). Many others, such as reading study material, or thinking about ideas for papers and exercises, are ongoing and can easily take up all your free (and not free) time. And as we know, there are other demands on your time: work, personal life, family, having fun. The keywords for dealing with the pressure you will be experiencing are: patience, learning from experience, and
balance. The first paper you submit will take hours and days to write; with the second, you will be more focused. By the time you reach the third paper you may already know when to start and went to finish it. It is very important to learn to balance the different requirements - and not be drawn exclusively into studying, at the expense of sleep and a social life, since this way of coping is an extreme violation of the balance of life and therefore is bound to collapse. On the other hand, you need to be realistic and understand that you will not be able to continue working on the same scale as before starting your studies, or spend your student days in a life of happy and indolent socialization (if you intend, at the same time, to have a serious academic experience).

**Makeup lesson: if you study in fall, you will succeed in winter**

A good student also needs to know how to succeed in exams, and this is a matter of proper preparation and the experience accumulated from one exam to the next. Your first semester break will be largely dedicated to getting through (hopefully with success) the exam period. Once again, you will come up against the beginner's questions and difficulties: how much do you really need to study? How do you answer different kinds of questions properly? How do you keep your cool in the face of surprises on the exam paper? The competitive atmosphere amongst those who aspire to excel doesn't necessarily contribute to peace of mind, but don't be too quick to complain - a reasonable degree of fair competition is likely to provide encouragement and incentive in the positive sense of the word. In order to improve your readiness for the exams, you need to find out in advance about the structure of the exam, acquire and practice with exam papers from previous years, and make use of strategies for effective learning and taking exams. For guidance on this subject, see the article on exams in the IDC magazine: [http://portal.idc.ac.il/he/Main/about_idc/news_events/DocLib2/exams_eng.pdf](http://portal.idc.ac.il/he/Main/about_idc/news_events/DocLib2/exams_eng.pdf)

**Social studies: so what do people do here apart from learning...?**

Social life on campus is no less important than the lessons, and every day there are new opportunities for new acquaintanceships, challenging extracurricular social and business activities. Anyone who wants and is prepared to contribute to the community will find many opportunities to do so, and the same is true of those who want to try their hand at a variety of different activities, such as the art of debate and persuasion, sports, music and singing, etc. Like in elementary school and high school, there are many who wait the entire lesson just for the recess, when they can engage in the truly important activity: getting a cup of coffee in the cafeteria and making personal connections. There are those who feel that they are living in a Hollywood sweet teen movie, but others are liable to replay familiar scenes from high school life: fear of social rejection, lack of integration, and negative feelings that threaten to surface. The intensive social interaction is liable to be dizzying and oppressive, especially to those who feel out of place in a large group, or those who view the lives of others as perfect, while their own lives seem deficient in many ways. From my work here, I am also aware of the potential suffering that is risked by entering into the competition of "who is the cutest / slimmest on campus", or "who is the most name-
branded guy around", suffering that is liable to involve eating disorders, drug abuse, serious financial difficulty, and a great deal of heartache, sometimes to the extent of preventing some students from keeping up their studies. In such cases, it is very important to wake up in time and seek help - from friends, family, or even from a professional. At the IDC Herzliya psychological counseling service, students can receive personal assistance or join specific therapy groups (on subjects such as exam anxiety, or problems in interpersonal relationships).

For further information on the psychological counseling service at the IDC and on other psychological issues, please visit the IDC Herzliya psychological counseling service website:
http://portal.idc.ac.il/en/main/services/StudentsDean/Pages/PsychologicalCounseling.aspx