

The ABC of Sustainable Personal Tutoring

This post has been adapted from an [original post by Dr Leah Bijelic](#), written for PhD researchers.

In any role that involves supporting or helping others, especially people who may confide in us or may be worried, upset or stressed, we need to make sure that we take care of ourselves as well.

While Personal Tutoring doesn't only involve working with people who are seeking emotional support, it is a role that is often positioned as 'supportive', 'pastoral' or aiming to assist with student welfare or wellbeing. A Personal Tutor is often the first point of contact for students who have a concern, problem or emergency – at university or at home. This means that the individual in the Personal Tutor role, can find themselves in situations that take an emotional toll. How can we set and sustain professional standards that allow us to offer emotional support without taking on the students' stress, or giving too much of ourselves to the role?

As well as being detrimental to our physical and emotional health, stress makes us inflexible as Tutors and colleagues. It raises adrenaline, and triggers 'fight or flee' reactions, which divert energy away from our problem-solving abilities; our capacity for abstract thinking, and creativity take a back seat. You will have heard phrases like 'you can't pour from an empty cup' and 'fit your own oxygen mask before helping others' – which are metaphors designed to remind us not to exhaust ourselves in the pursuit of helping others.

It can be useful to have an aide memoire to remind us to take care of ourselves in our tutoring work – and so below, is the A B C of sustainable Personal Tutoring.

A stands for Awareness

Awareness of how we are doing day-to-day helps us to recognise when things are getting unmanageable, out of balance, or when a boundary has been crossed. Stopping to check how we feel emotionally, physically relationally is restorative, and helps prevent the gradual deterioration in wellbeing that is a route to chronic stress.

Self-awareness is a leadership attribute, and modelling good self-awareness is a way of teaching it to your students too.

Perhaps you could add to your diary, a monthly 'ABC Day', when you will make a few minutes over your morning coffee to stop and notice how you are feeling. Does anything need to change to help you find balance and set boundaries? Are you in need of a conversation with a colleague?

B stands for Boundaries

Boundaries establish each person's role within a professional relationship. They set expectations for the Personal Tutoring role, helping your students understand the value of tutorials, and get the most out of this key part of their university education.

Boundary setting also protects your emotional wellbeing, defining the limits of your responsibility. It's important to maintain your own space and this means keeping a professional distance.

It is easy to slip towards doing more than you wanted to, if boundaries are not set and communicated, and this leads to resentment. It can be very hard to do this 'in the moment' if a student is upset or in crisis, but establishing some ground rules with new tutees, and sticking to them week on week, will help make sure the shared understanding is in place when it's needed. Some key boundaries to communicate:

- Time: The tutoring support they are entitled to is finite, how many hours should they expect?
- Office hours: Make clear what your working pattern is, whether they should make an appointment to see you or just turn up, and that you don't read or respond to email outside of your working hours.
- Communication: How should they contact you? What do you consider to be a reasonable response time for an email? It may seem easiest to share personal phone numbers and social media with tutees in the moment, but will you be happy for them to contact you by that methods at any time? Are you happy for them to read everything you share with friends?
- Expertise: What topics are you happy to discuss or advise on? What are your specialisms? What is outside your area of expertise?
- Behaviour: For example sending apologies if you can't make a scheduled meeting or tutorial? Is lateness OK, maybe if prearranged? What are your expectations around group dynamics and

Setting boundaries is part of treating our Tutees like capable adults, who we expect to self-manage. We as tutors give them the tools and trust them to find their own best way forward, but we don't do it all for them. In this way, we are teaching our students to become their own problem solvers, not fostering their dependency on us.

C stands for Connection

Who can help you? Crucial to resolving problematic, or emotionally demanding, situations is knowing the best approach to take. But we can't all know it all. Having a good team of colleagues to draw on for input, and give you space to debrief, can help you help your Tutees. Sensitively airing issues with supportive colleagues is a healthy way to get input and feedback on your approach.

Who else can help students? What specialist support services exist for Study Skills, English Language, Careers, Counselling and Mental Health, PT Employment, Administration (e.g. Visa applications), and Finances? The Personal Tutor role can include signposting to other sources of assistance. Even if students know these services exist, their unfamiliarity with them, who they are for, and what they do, can prevent them from accessing the support. A recommendation from you may get them through the door.

Healthy work is balanced and sustainable, so remind them (and yourself), to connect to friends, groups, and family, as part of a wide and varied support network. Feeling connected to our interests, networks, activities, and to others in our lives is one of

the best protective factors against chronic stress. It gives us context and brings perspective to our work. Feeling like we belong – to institutions, communities, neighbourhoods, and in the world – adds to our sense of self-worth. Having a rich life outside of work or study makes us flexible and buoyant in our professional lives.