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**Courage, commitment and resilience:  
traits of student midwives who fail and retake modules**

**Abstract**

In the context of staff retention in maternity services in the United Kingdom (UK) the concept of resilience has a very high profile, as explored in Hunter and Warren's study funded by the Royal College of Midwives in 2013. The ever more complex demands of contemporary midwifery practice in the UK lead some midwives to make the very difficult decision to leave the profession, with the top five reasons being dissatisfaction with staffing levels; dissatisfaction with the quality of care they were able to give; excessive workloads; lack of managerial support and poor working conditions (Royal College of Midwives, 2016).

It is estimated that approximately 20% of students who commence the pre-registration midwifery programme will not qualify to become a midwife (Centre for Workforce Intelligence, 2012); reasons for non-completion of studies include wrong career choice, financial difficulties and family circumstances (Galloway, 2015). Academic failure is not cited as a key reason for leaving the course.

This article will share the stories of three students who failed and then retook a theory module during their pre-registration midwifery programmes of study. The students show courage in their willingness to publicly discuss their experiences; commitment to their chosen profession by retaking the module and resilience by persevering despite the additional emotional and financial demands of their situation. A fourth student provides 'Top Tips' for others who might find themselves in the same situation.

Keywords: resilience; pre-registration midwifery education; courage; commitment

**Introduction**

A previous article considered the relevance of Hunter and Warren's findings to pre-registration midwifery education and whether student midwives were adequately prepared to deal with the ever more complex demands of their chosen profession (Power, 2015). It is estimated that approximately 20% of students who commence the pre-registration midwifery programme will not qualify to become a midwife (Centre for Workforce Intelligence, 2012). With the recent 'retirement time bomb' (RCM, 2015:2) it is more important than ever that student midwives are supported to successfully complete their programmes of study to join the depleting workforce. Students leave the programme for a myriad of reasons such as wrong career choice, financial difficulties and family circumstances (Galloway, 2015); however academic failure is not cited as a key

reason for leaving the course. The experiences of those students who have failed and retaken a module are the focus of this article as their narratives give an insight into their character traits and motivations.

#### Louise's Story

Unfortunately at the end of Year 1 I failed a module which would mean I would have to step off the course in order to repeat the module. Initially this was upsetting; midwifery was my dream and at the time I felt it was slipping away. It crossed my mind if I had failed Year 1, how was I able to pass Years 2 and 3. Looking back now, I see this as a blessing. I had been out of education for a long time, other than the credits I needed to get onto the course and repeating my GCSE science I was not prepared for the academic demands of the programme. I was also juggling being a single mum to a very young child. After university, clinical placements and being a mum, the only time to study was evenings which I found exhausting. During my year out I ensured I made the most of it: I continued to work at my Trust as a Health Care Assistant, mainly in Accident and Emergency which was the closest area to midwifery I could think of to work in due to the fast pace and multidisciplinary working. I found that it not only kept my basic skills up but gave me confidence when working with the multidisciplinary team such as doctors. During quieter moments I would ask the nurses questions which I felt would benefit my training such as medicines' management. I sought further help for academic assessments from the university's Learning Development department to ensure this side was also developed during my year out. Being back on the course I feel much more equipped to succeed. I am not naturally academic, but my passion for midwifery keeps me focussed to ensure that I do succeed.

#### Charlotte's Story

My experience of repeating a module has been a rollercoaster of emotions. At first it was a big shock and a panic as I didn't really know what it meant and what I was going to do next. I felt like I had let my family and myself down. However, once I got over the initial shock and disappointment I started to look at the bigger picture. I realised I am 20 years old with a life-long career in midwifery ahead of me and that another year at university was not the end of the world. I spoke to my lecturers to get advice on how to move forward and they helped me plan for the future. Although it has been very disheartening and hard not to be on placement whilst my friends continued without me, it was never an option to give up for me. I have always dreamt of being a midwife and one set back won't stop me from pursuing my dream career. It has made me more determined than ever to do well and better myself.

I have passed my first assessment of the module, I have recently been offered a job as a bank healthcare assistant, which will allow me to earn money, whilst

choosing my hours to fit in with time in university. Now I am currently focusing on revision for my upcoming exams.

Tips for success:

- Try to be positive and remember it's only one year out of a career you will do for the rest of your life
- Utilise help from the university as much as possible, e.g. lecturers, Personal Academic Tutor, Learning Development department, Course Leader
- Plan and organise time to prepare for future assessments well in advance of the due date
- Seek support from family and friends
- Look for a job for financial support, but be careful to leave enough time for revision and university work

### Liz's Story

So you open the page on your University results page and what you see is a second fail grade. The shock is numbing and the thoughts about how you were planning on celebrating are gone with that feeling. The initial days are the hardest but it does get better and you will find your strength again, but in order to get there you must be kind to yourself. Maybe what I am about to say will sound a bit over the top, but to me it felt like a bereavement: I went through the five stages of grief identified by Elisabeth Kübler Ross (1926-2004) of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

In the first few days of hearing the news you begin to tell others from the cohort, work, family and friends that you need to retake a module. Constantly repeating the story becomes akin to picking the scabs off a freshly healing wound. If you are in placement you need to let your mentor know, if they are worth their salt they will be understanding and supportive. At times you may feel in limbo: you are no longer in your cohort but with a new group of students. Emotional support will help you keep strong: friends that make you laugh and bring you into the light are much needed. Some friends disappear and others can shine their brightest in your hour of need, these are the friends you need right now. However, you may also need friends that will not allow you to stay in your onesie all day and eat ice cream at 9am! There is the day that comes when you need to wash your hair and say hello world I am fabulous and will be a Midwife!

If you feel that you don't have the right support then make use of the student support services through the university. They will be able to signpost you to academic support and counselling services if you feel you need them. I found that mindfulness worked for me, something which I hadn't explored previously, which could be applied to stressful situations I will come across once I qualify. Getting feedback on the areas which you didn't pass on is going to be valuable for your next attempt. However, timing is important and if you are still feeling angry you could be defensive in the meeting and miss the points which are

highlighted. When you are in the 'acceptance' phase this will be more conducive in you using this feedback to move forward and improve.

So the next challenge to conquer is your income. The sooner you speak to your HR department the better to see what you can do. Some Trusts may offer you an MCA position either under a contract or bank shifts. If you are not comfortable with this choice then maybe care work in another area of health might be an option or take a break and use the time to reflect. If you work in the Trust you want to work in once qualified you can stay up to date with current policies which will be to your advantage when it comes to re-entering practice as a student or applying for a midwifery position.

If you need an incentive to get going then give yourself something to look forward to like a hairdresser's appointment, body massage or trip to the cinema. Be kind to yourself, we can be our own worst critic and berate ourselves for the situation but that is not helpful in building your strength back up again. Talk to midwives in practice and other students who have also been through this themselves. Knowing others that have been through a similar situation may help you feel less isolated and give you some suggestions to keep positive. One great suggestion was to look into something to add to my practice, such as hypnobirthing. By having additional training before qualification I will have an additional string to my bow and maybe the edge on other applicants. By picking yourself up and carrying on you are demonstrating commitment, resilience and courage.

#### Alice's Top Tips

- Make use of all the available support provided by all university professionals
- Don't be afraid to ask for any additional assistance; including financial support
- Create an exam/essay rota to stay on track of deadlines and prioritise work in order to stay focused and organised
- Take time out to appreciate your current situation, the length of your degree may have changed, but you are still on track!
- Proof read every piece of work before submission. Ask another person to check for mistakes to feel reassured your work is to the best of your ability
- Gather all relevant literature relating to the module topic, including the information gathered from the first attempt at the module! It all helps!
- Be grateful for the second opportunity and stay positive
- Believe in yourself and you will succeed!

#### **Conclusion**

These stories are not remarkable: students fail modules, that's a fact. What is remarkable is that they, along with other students in their position have demonstrated courage, commitment and resilience to pick themselves up and keep striving for their dream. In the current climate of an increasing birth rate accompanied by increasing social, economic and clinical challenges, exacerbated

by high levels of attrition and staff shortages (RCM, 2016), such students are displaying the character traits of highly motivated individuals. Such traits are important if they are to successfully deal with the demands of contemporary midwifery practice and provide women and their families with the high quality care they deserve. I commend all 'retakers' for their tenacity and wish them the best of luck with their ongoing studies.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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