

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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I've come to appreciate my accent

Would a podcast be something for *Observant*? I'll be honest, the idea has come up once or twice, but I had never given it much serious thought. But now that we have the expertise in-house – colleague DB was, until recently, a radio and podcast producer – it seemed like the right time to put our heads together.

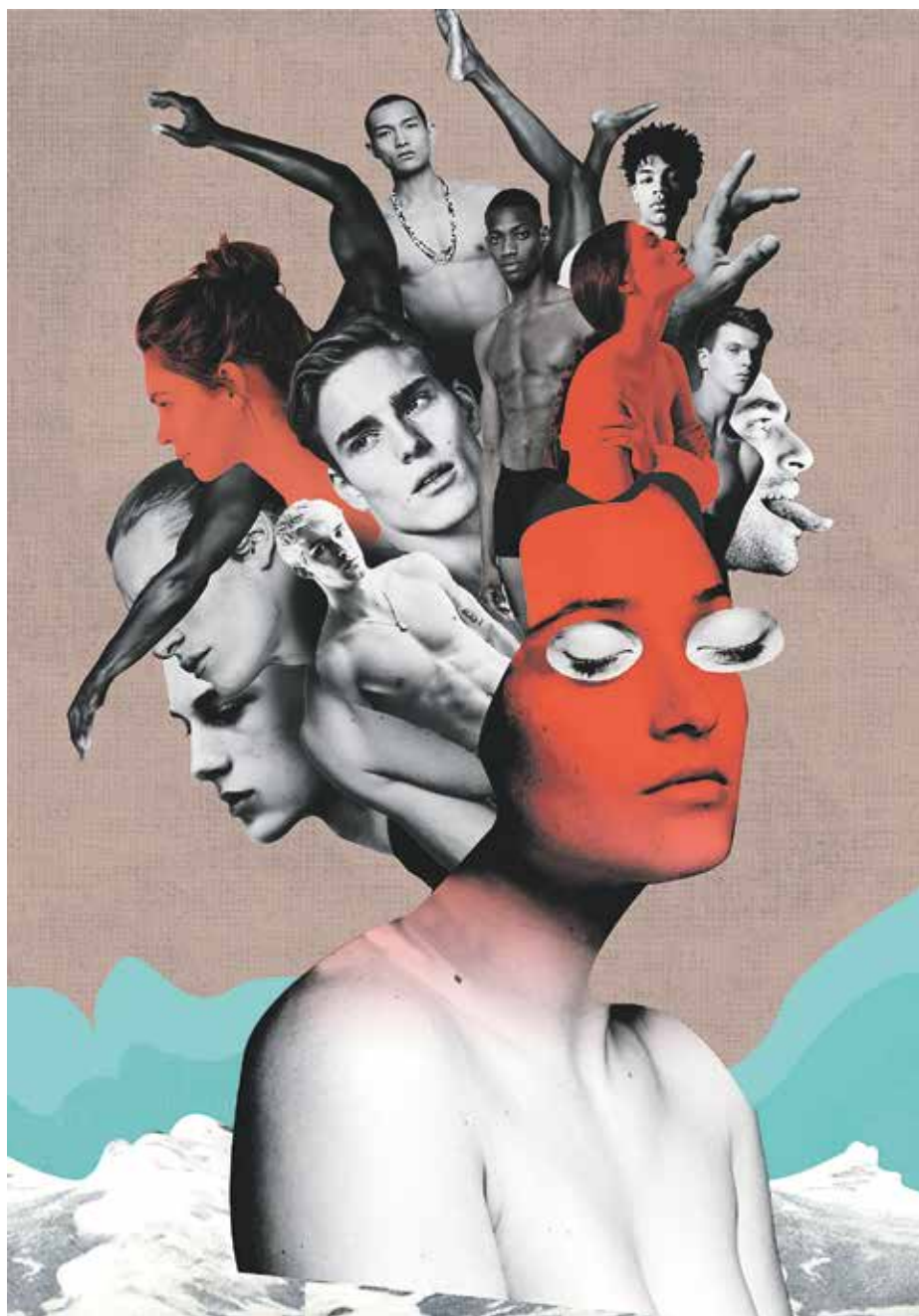
It quickly became clear that we had plenty of ideas. “We could give our readers a weekly news update every Thursday morning”, someone suggested enthusiastically. Another idea: “If we interviewed a researcher about the US elections, we could splice in audio clips of Trump.” Or: “We could complement written articles by asking interviewees a few more personal or in-depth questions afterwards, recorded on WhatsApp or a voice recorder.” And: “What about our weekly series where sexologist Marieke Dewitte answers questions about sex? It would be great to have her on the podcast to discuss real-life cases and examples.”

I started to worry a bit. How much of our time would this take up? But DB reassured me that it wouldn't be too time-consuming if we went about it smartly. For example, a journalist out on assignment or conducting an interview could easily contribute to a podcast. Wait, what? How? Well, they could explain their choice of topic, provide some background information, share what stood out during the interview, or – and this is always the best part in retrospect – talk about anything that went wrong. Not everyone was immediately on board. “I became a journalist to *write*”, was a point that came up. We're not all eager to be on TV or the radio. I remembered being an 18-year-old student, having to introduce myself in front of a professional video camera. Walk towards the camera, sit down and speak. This was before mobile phones, and I'd only ever seen myself in photos or the mirror. Watching the recording back was a shock. Was that really me, with those long strides and that accent? I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Never again, I decided.

Now, decades later, those kinds of appearances (which thankfully don't happen too often) are still not my favourite thing, but they're occasionally part of the job, and you can't turn them down. And I've come to appreciate my accent. So, bring on the podcasts. We'll be doing trial runs in November and December.

Riki Janssen

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the *Observant* office



Collage: Simone Golob

“Even in 2024, men with many sexual partners are seen as experienced, while women are labelled ‘sluts’”

How many people have you slept with? If you ask a new partner this question, there's a chance you won't like the answer, especially in a straight relationship where the woman has had more sexual partners than the man. How can you overcome your own prejudices in this situation? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte has the answers.

“Every year in the first lecture of my sexology course, I ask if there's still a sexual double standard between men and women”, says Dewitte. “And even in 2024, the answer is yes. Men who have had many sexual partners are seen as experienced – he's a stud, but she's a slut.”

According to Dewitte, this shows that certain gender role expectations persist in society. “Like the expectation that women should say no to sex. Social desirability certainly plays a role there. This is reflected for instance in a study where people were asked how many partners they'd had. Women reported higher numbers when they thought they were hooked up to a lie detector compared to when they couldn't be caught lying.” Women seem to report lower numbers, even in anonymous surveys, for fear of being judged. Men, on the other hand, are expected to always want sex. “As a result, men feel pressured to perform. But these are social constructs we can change.”

Dewitte encourages people to interrogate their own stereotypical attitudes. “And also those of your friends. If they make fun of your new girlfriend having more experience than you, point out their narrow-minded thinking. Open up the conversation and ask why they think it's weird. People often gossip to hide

their own insecurities.” If you are the one who has a problem with it, it's time to take a long hard look at yourself and understand why, she says. “Does it make you feel insecure? Are you afraid of being found wanting in comparison? Does it make you jealous? Is it that you don't trust your partner?” In all cases, Dewitte recommends open communication.

“Talk about your feelings. Tell your partner what's bothering you. It's important to realise that everyone has a relationship history. Your partner can't change their past, but they're in a relationship with you now. Focus on that, not on the past. And work on your self-esteem. This will benefit you more than being clingy or controlling.”

Cleo Freriks

Marieke Dewitte is a clinical psychologist and sexologist at Maastricht University. In this weekly series, she answers questions about sex from students. If you have a question, you can submit it anonymously, scan the code



Students eager to move after second explosion hits their house



The devastation the day after the explosion Photo: Observant

Six students are eager to move out of their house on Volksbondweg after an explosion hit the restaurant below their home late on Sunday night. The explosion was the second in a month. In extreme cases like this, Maastricht Housing can help speed up the search for new accommodation, says department head Maurice Evers.

The students were startled awake around 3 AM on Monday by a loud bang. The fire alarm went off immediately as a fire broke out in the entrance downstairs. The students, who prefer to remain anonymous for safety reasons, acted quickly. One student grabbed a fire extinguisher, jumped out of a window onto the flat roof, scaled a fence, made it to the street through a neighbour's house and started putting out the fire. By the time emer-

gency services arrived, the flames had been extinguished. The other students were able to leave through the front door.

How did they manage to stay so calm? "It sounds bizarre to say this, but after the first explosion, we were ready for it", says the student who put out the fire. The first incident happened on 5 September, when Chickzz, the restaurant below their home on Volksbondweg, was hit by a (smaller) explosion. The police are investigating both incidents. The owner of Chickzz told *De Limburger* that she has "no idea" who might be targeting her restaurant. Wednesday, mayor Wim Hillemaar decided to close the restaurant for three months.

All six students were at home during the explosion. Although they escaped unharmed, they no longer feel safe living there. "We're just

waiting for it to happen a third time", says one of them. A housemate adds, "There's a hole above the front door. You can see the first floor through it. What if the next explosion is even bigger?"

The students want to move, but finding affordable housing isn't easy. Can the university help? "If the students reach out to us, we can contact landlords and try to prioritise their search for new accommodation", says Maurice Evers, department head of Maastricht Housing. "We can't guarantee anything – the university doesn't directly rent out rooms, except at the Guesthouse, which is currently full. But we can act as an intermediary. The Huurteam can also review their current rental agreement to see if it can be terminated."

Cleo Freriks

Fewer first years in Maastricht

In September, fewer new students than last year started a programme at Maastricht University. This is mainly because there is less enthusiasm for the Bachelor's programmes. Overall, however, UM is still growing slightly: there are now about 23 thousand students.

These are preliminary figures; students often apply to multiple institutions, so there will still be some shifts. The final percentages will follow in a few months. Last year, enrolment still increased significantly, for the Bachelor's programmes even around 10 percent. This year, the story is just the opposite: a 10 percent drop. Because of the uncertainty surrounding the numbers, the Executive Board does not want to release details about which programmes are 'losing' students. For the Master's, the figures do show an increase of 5 percent.

UM is "stabilising" in size, as the Executive Board writes in its press release, and that's "in line with expectations. The university already indicated last year that it has an eye for what the city of Maastricht can handle in terms of growth. (...) In doing so, the university wants new initiatives with growth potential to also land elsewhere in Limburg." In Venlo, Heerlen and Sittard-Geleen. On the other hand, the university should not attract too few students because the labour market in the region "still has major shortages".

International students

What about the ratio of international versus Dutch students? This year, 61 percent of all students have a foreign passport (last year 59 percent). However, among the new batch, the proportion of Dutch students is increasing slightly, the Executive Board reports. Last year, 35.8 percent of all first years were Dutch. That has now risen to 36.7, spokesperson Koen Augustijn says. Is there an explanation for this? "There is no one-to-one explanation," says Augustijn. "Yes, international recruitment has been at a standstill, as agreed with the minister. That may explain some of it. But the effect is small: we expect only a limited decrease in the proportion of international students in the intake."

Venlo

In The Hague there is an act – 'Internationalisation in Balance' – containing a number of measures on language and intake. The cabinet wants fewer foreign and more Dutch students in the programmes. All Dutch universities have already anticipated this by halting new English-language Bachelor programmes for the time being. However, programmes that have already been developed or are going through the assessment process will still be admitted. For example, Sustainable Bioscience in Venlo has been given the green light (but must still pass the accreditation process).

It was announced this week that the municipality of Venlo and UM will each invest €8 million in the growth of research and education in that city for the next four years.

Brain Science

This year, UM launched the Brain Science programme, a combination of psychology, biology, mathematics and data science, which involves three faculties. Although there is a fixus of 150 students, the programme attracted only 84, according to the latest application figures. They had hoped for more, emails Anke Sambeth, Vice-Dean of Education for the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. But at the same time, "it gives us a chance to gauge whether all the big plans are working or whether we may need to make adjustments."

Euregion

One last detail, about UM's role in the Euregion, the area within 100 kilometres of Maastricht. President Rianne Letschert always insists on Maastricht's special border location. Preliminary figures show that more than half of the students come from the Euregion, which could be Limburg, Belgium or Germany.

Wendy Degens



How to cope with homesickness



The fall marks the anniversary of when I moved from Canada to the Netherlands, and this year is a monumental one: I have now lived here for *half of my life*.

I thought I would only come here to complete my bachelor's degree. Then I decided I would only stay to complete my master's degree. And the rest is history. I fell in love with this country and with so many of the people in it, including my husband and now, our two kids. Still, it hurts to miss my 'first home' and, increasingly, to realize I cannot 'just' move back. My life has become interwoven with the Netherlands, and it is not just about me anymore.

Coincidentally, this year I was paired as a mentor with a student who recently moved here from North America, 'just' to complete her master's degree. I could relate to her feelings. I remembered my own first weeks, crying in my dorm room, wondering why on earth I had wanted to move so far away. According to research on homesickness among students, it may seem counterintuitive, but maintaining contact, like a daily call with parents, can help. However, it is equally important to form new relationships. First, with other students from your home country (or who are at least also away from home) and who can relate to your feelings and discuss home-related things (e.g., planning Canadian Thanksgiving). Second, with local students, who can help you feel more connected here (e.g., baking *vlaai*). Another research-backed strategy is to immerse yourself in activities you enjoy, such as via a sports club. One thing that also helped me as a student was having a planned trip home to look forward to (e.g., a white Christmas in Canada). What if you're like me and are living away from your 'first home' permanently, or at least for the foreseeable future? Decorate your house with memories, cook traditional meals, and integrate rituals. That's why you'll recognize our home as the one that is already decorated for Halloween and smells like apple pies and butter tarts.

Last, I am trying to make peace with the fact that life simply becomes increasingly 'messy' as we age and there is no way to 'cure' my homesickness, and that is okay. It's the result of this complicated and beautiful life, and I am lucky to have love on both sides of the ocean.

Jessica Alleva, assistant professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience



series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire

Charly Hilf (Cologne, Germany, 20)

/ second-year student of European Studies

/ Lives in: Maastricht

/ Relationship status: single



Photo: Joey Roberts

“
It’s good to do what scares you
”

Do you ever Google yourself? Sometimes. My birth name is Charlotte. Around the age of ten, I started calling myself Charly. You won’t find much about me through Google, though. I’m quite careful about sharing personal information online. My Instagram account is private, and I only post about things like trips, university or fashion. On TikTok, I share photos from my modelling work. I signed with a modelling agency in Germany two years ago. I was at a hair salon in Cologne, where I’m from. I wanted a new hairstyle, and I’d heard the stylist was good. We got chatting and towards the end he asked, “Would you like to be a model?” He knew someone who ran a modelling agency. I was on a gap year and thought, why not? A bit later, I was FaceTiming the owner while still in the chair. I haven’t had loads of jobs yet. They often ask you at the last minute, sometimes just the night before a shoot. Now that I’m studying in Maastricht, it’s not always easy to fit in.

What’s hard about love? Trusting someone and communicating. I was in a relationship with a girl for three years, from when I was sixteen to nineteen. We spent all of our teenage years together. We broke up last October. We didn’t see as much of each other after I moved to Maastricht. Cologne isn’t all that far, but it just wasn’t the same. Luckily, we’re still good friends. My type? Confident, independent, outgoing, curious, interested in who I am and what I want. Sometimes I find I’m the only one asking questions and I’ll just think, “Don’t you want to know

anything about me?” I’m very close to my family – my younger brother, my mother and father – so I need a partner who understands that.

When I look in the mirror, I see... A strong, independent woman, but also someone with insecurities. Not about my intelligence or academic achievements, but about my looks. I’ve always felt that way, and no, the modelling world doesn’t help. It’s all about who looks the best, after all. There’s always that competition. I do put quite a bit of effort into my appearance. I often plan my outfit the night before. Preferably something comfortable, in my favourite colour, blue, and a bit experimental. I’m very open about my insecurities; I’m not afraid to talk about them with my friends and family. I talk about everything with my mother, but maybe even more with my father. We never had strict rules at home, like curfews. We were given trust and didn’t abuse it.

What upsets you most? The current state of politics in my home country. The far right recently won state elections in the east. It’s just absurd. A large building near my parents’ house has been renovated for refugees. When I was last home, some people in the neighbourhood had distributed a pamphlet protesting against the plans. I find that absolutely shocking. What happened to the open-minded idea that there’s room for everyone?

I take after... my maternal grandmother. She’s tall and slim like me, and we have the same eyes. I also love sewing, which she’s very good at. She even made my mother’s wedding dress. I’ve got a sewing machine and a mannequin in my room. I buy fabrics at the market to sew cardigans, trousers, T-shirts and bags. I get my creativity from my grandmother, but also from my father. He works in IT and has a background in mathematics, but he’s also got a completely different side. He’s very interested in art. We used to draw together. He’s a playful man, a bit crazy, but in a fun way. In 2012, we went to a concert by the Swedish rock ‘n’ roll band Royal Republic. We’ve seen them a few times since. They’re playing in Amsterdam this December, and I’ve gotten us meet & greet tickets!

How many hours per day do you spend on your phone? About four hours, I’d say. During the pandemic, it was sometimes as much as seven hours. I’ve set time limits on certain apps, like Instagram, or I’ll just keep scrolling. I also like to watch Netflix, but I watch films and shows on my laptop. That’s not a phone [laughs].

I still need to learn... To step out of my comfort zone more often. I think it’s good to do things that scare you. I’m practising. I go for coffee alone, take myself out to dinner, go to cafés and parties alone, go solo camping. Eventually, I want to travel somewhere far away all by myself. Alaska is on my bucket list. My grandfather really wants to go there, but sadly he’s no longer able. I think it’s a beautiful place. Going to university in Maastricht has already been good practice for me. European Studies is interesting, and I enjoy Problem-Based Learning, but I do miss the creative side. Over the summer, I took a two-week fashion design course at a university in London. Maybe after completing European Studies I’ll enrol in the full programme, pursue a second bachelor’s degree. My father always says, “Bachelor’s, master’s – just don’t start working until you’re thirty.” I realise I’m very privileged to be able to do things this way.

Wendy Degens

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

UM research leading to better child interviews

"More cases of child abuse are now being identified"

When child abuse is reported in the Netherlands, the standard procedure is to arrange for the child to speak to a specialist as soon as possible. Thanks to UM research, these child interviews now follow a standardised format. The pilot study has already helped to identify cases that might otherwise have been missed.



Illustration: Shutterstock

It's been a long road to the forensic standardised child interview, explains Corine de Ruiter, professor of Forensic Psychology and the driving force behind the project. In the early 2000s, she first learnt that the organisation for handling child abuse reports in the Netherlands – then Advies Meldpunt Kindermishandeling (AMK), now Veilig Thuis – didn't use a standard interview method. In fact, AMK employees barely spoke to the children involved at all.

"I was asked to develop guidelines for assessing the risk of recurrent child abuse", recalls De Ruiter. Through literature

research, she identified seventeen contributing factors. "For example, a parent might have a poor understanding of what a child of a certain age is capable of, and become enraged by their 4-year-old not coming home on time. But a 4-year-old isn't even able to tell the time yet! Other factors include addiction, mental health problems and financial stress."

To the researchers' surprise, AMK case files contained virtually no information on these factors. "AMK was very focused on 'child signals', behaviours that were thought to indicate a child is being abused, such as throwing temper tantrums, hitting

other children, being very withdrawn or having nightmares. But if there's one thing psychologists know, it's that behavioural issues don't necessarily indicate abuse at all. They can have many different causes."

De Ruiter also noticed that AMK rarely spoke to the children involved. All information about a child's behaviour and family situation came from teachers, doctors and police officers. "A strange approach, as these professionals usually don't see what happens in the home. I found it quite shocking, to be honest." De Ruiter's guidelines for assessing the risk of recurrent child abuse led to a change in AMK's approach. They began to pay more attention to the reasons why parents abuse their children. "But back then, training courses on interviewing children were still a step too far."

The idea was shelved until 2016, when it resurfaced during a project on high-conflict divorce at AMK (by then part of Veilig Thuis). "High-conflict divorce cases almost always involve children, otherwise there's nothing to fight over. Yes, money, but financial disputes are usually resolved much more quickly", says De Ruiter. Her team assisted professionals in conducting structured interviews with fighting parents, which again raised the question: why don't we speak structurally to the children involved? And not just children involved in high-conflict divorce cases, but also in reports of child abuse.

Veilig Thuis Zuid-Limburg was willing to start a pilot study. "We randomly assigned reports of child abuse to a group of employees we had trained in an evidence-based interview protocol and a group of employees who continued to use their own methods, as they were used to. They conducted interviews with children, which we recorded and assessed for interview quality." In De Ruiter and her colleagues' method, it's out of the question to use dolls or pictures and ask children to point to where they were hurt or touched. "These are highly suggestive and stimulate children's imagination, with all sorts of negative consequences." Another crucial part of the method is asking open, inviting questions. "Previously, employees would ask questions like, 'Was daddy wearing a red or a blue jumper when he got so mad at you?' This could make a child feel

pressured to say either red or blue, even if the jumper was actually black."

Trained Veilig Thuis employees soon noticed that children began to open up much more. "All kinds of important details would come out. They also learnt to listen very carefully and use the same terms as the child. If a child says 'odd' and you change it to 'strange', you can't be sure you're talking about the same thing. Repeat the word the child used and ask what they mean by it."

The pilot study also led to better initial screening calls, which are used to decide whether a report is followed up. "It turned out that reports that may previously have seemed harmless, and were therefore not followed up, sometimes revealed severe abuse. These cases are now being detected."

De Ruiter has seen a shift in employees' attitudes. "There was resistance at first. 'We've always done it this way, who are you to tell us we're doing it wrong?' But when they saw the results, they were convinced." Veilig Thuis is enthusiastic about the method as well. The UM team is currently training people to teach it to Veilig Thuis employees across the Netherlands.

"Now, the standard first step in any child abuse investigation is to speak in a research-based manner to the child", says De Ruiter. "This means that more cases of child abuse will be identified. As a researcher, you can sometimes make a real difference and have a real-world impact, which is a thing to be happy about."

"Why don't we speak structurally to the children involved"

UM STUDENTS ARE NOT YET PLANNING TO GIVE UP
THEIR CIGARETTES FOR
STOPTOBER

“YOU WANT TO FEEL
LIKE YOU BELONG,
**SMOKING IS A
SOCIAL THING**”





Old-fashioned roll-ups or a trendy vape, or both. A poll among students at Maastricht University shows that smoking remains an entrenched habit – as stress relief, socially, or just “because everyone does it”. It’s better to stop, this month’s – Stoptober – message tells us yet again, but it’s a hard sell to students.

Text: DEBORAH BLEKKENHORST
Illustrations: SIMONE GOLOB

Tucked away in the collar of her coat, a student stands outside the gates to the School of Business and Economics (SBE) on Tongersestraat, looking a little forlorn. Her left hand scrolls on her phone, her right hand holds a cigarette. “I’m from Croatia, everybody smokes there,” is her laughing response when asked why she smokes. “It’s the example set by your environment, by your parents. When we turn twelve, they just hand you a cigarette and a glass of alcohol, so to speak.” She was fifteen when she started, a pupil at secondary school, and as a first-year at SBE,

now twenty years old, she just hasn’t quit the habit yet. “Smoking is a release for me. Stress relief,” she says. “It can be hard to join in as an international student. You’re suddenly in a foreign country, surrounded by different people, it’s very overwhelming.”

STARTED YOUNG

She isn’t the only one who feels that way. “If you want to join a group, it’s often easy to just light up a cigarette,” says a third-year student who wishes to remain anonymous.

She started young too. “I grew up in Turkey, cigarettes are cheap there and you can buy them everywhere. So it’s really easy. I was fourteen and all my friends were doing it. It’s a social thing.”

Many students say the same, all of whom wish to remain anonymous, out of shame, because it’s awkward, or because their parents don’t know they smoke: they started when they were young and always because of friends, or parties, or “to feel like they belong”. “I was curious, people in my group of friends smoked occasionally, and then that turned into regularly,” says a 23-year-old Master’s student. A group of 18- and 19-year-old first years agrees. “We started smoking when we went out. You know, dancing, drinking. A cigarette is just the next step. The combination with alcohol is a nice feeling,” they say, as they pass around a pack of cigarettes.

Only a few metres behind them – on university property – stands a prominent sign intended to encourage a smoke-free generation. But that message seems to fall on deaf ears. “Smoking feels great and quitting is really hard” seems to be the common thread in all the stories. “Do you know what would be really hard if you wanted to quit? The pressure from your environment. You want to feel like you belong, especially if you’re new somewhere.”

ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURE

Recognisable and understandable, says Maastricht professor Gera Nagelhout, specialised among other things, in quitting smoking. “If everyone around you smokes, it’s very hard not to do it too. Good support is crucial if you want to quit, it helps.”

It’s precisely that help that is on offer again this Stoptober, the national initiative to help people to quit cigarettes – both real and electronic – that started ten years ago. By choosing such a massive and communal moment to quit, and supporting each other via social media, for example, the chance of succeeding is high. In the last decade, over half a million people have taken part.

How many of them were students is unknown, and whether there are a lot of takers among the Maastricht cohort remains to be seen, if the stories are any indication. “October is a very busy month with papers and exams,” admits more than one of them. “That’s precisely when we could use a cigarette to relax.”

NOT AN ADDICTION

The same applies to a large portion of the population, thinks Nagelhout. “Essentially, everybody needs to resonate with the Stoptober campaign. It’s not just a campaign for the elderly or people with a serious tobacco habit, but it does work for people who were already considering quitting. And that’s often not yet the case for students.”

In fact, many see the need for a cigarette as a temporary thing, not as a structural habit. That’s really not that strange, explains Nagelhout. “Young people’s brains are still

“Students also have their own responsibility”

Maastricht University is complying with the goal of a smoke-free generation by 2040. This means that since the summer of 2020, smoking is not permitted in, on, or around university properties. “We launched a campaign at the time to inform students, we organised events together with Peukenzee (an organisation fighting the issue of cigarette butts in the Netherlands, ed.) to increase awareness. That’s how we’re planning to tackle this,” says Git van Leeuwenstein, head of the UM department of occupational health and safety and responsible for the smoking policy. In the beginning, courses were also offered to help quit smoking. There was not much interest, and “because it’s also covered by basic health insurance coverage, we stopped offering it”. According to Van Leeuwenstein, the question is to what lengths the university can and should go to stop students smoking. “They have their own responsibility, we don’t want to patronise them. Ultimately, the challenge lies elsewhere, and quitting smoking is a long game.”

developing and they are completely unaware that they’re addicted. Only when something changes in their circumstances that leads them to want to quit, such as expecting a baby or finding a new group of friends, do they realise that it isn’t as simple as that.” The growing popularity of electronic cigarettes – vapes – won’t make that any easier either. Nagelhout: “The increasing use of vapes among children and young people is concerning. While they are less harmful than tobacco, they are still harmful and addictive.”

MEASURES

Most of the students questioned by *Observant* do indeed smoke an e-cigarette, mostly for convenience, and for the price. “I pay €8 for a vape that I throw away when it’s finished, and it lasts a week,” says one student. “It’s great that I can just use it indoors, over at friends’, and if you’re somewhere that doesn’t allow vaping indoors, you just go outside. I’m from Canada, where it is socially unacceptable to smoke nowadays. I didn’t even start until I came to Europe. People would shame me for it at home.”

That’s unlikely to change anytime soon in the Netherlands, but Nagelhout believes stronger measures are required if the desire of the government to have a smoke-free generation by 2040 is to be realised. “For example, an even higher tax, fewer points of sale and longer support for people who are trying to quit. It can easily take a year to really quit smoking. And change the focus. If young people are smoking because of stress, maybe you should also look at mental health and how that can be improved. There is a job there for educational institutions as well.”

Cigarette and vape: young people use both

Figures released by the Trimbos Institute, the national knowledge institute for substance use, among other things, show that almost as many young people smoke as use vapes. 69.1 percent of young people who use e-cigarettes on a monthly basis also smoke cigarettes every month. “We call that dual use,” says Marc Willemsen, head of Tobacco Control

at the institute and professor at Maastricht. “They think vaping is less harmful, but by continuing to smoke cigarettes, they maintain their nicotine addiction.” Willemsen points out that young people who vape actually take in more nicotine. “That’s partly because of the ease of use, they walk around with it all day. Furthermore, vapes contain

substances that we don’t know the long-term health effects of yet.” Health institute RIVM conducted a study on how many people in the Netherlands suffer from a chronic illness as a result of smoking. It involves roughly 672,000 people, in many cases suffering from COPD, lung cancer, or throat cancer.

science

Flight surgeon Yara Wingelaar-Jagt investigated the use of stimulants in the Air Force

Staying focused in a fighter jet: “Another cup of coffee won’t quite do the trick”

How do military pilots stay alert during long night flights? Modafinil, a stimulant, works better than caffeine, says Yara Wingelaar-Jagt, a flight surgeon in the Dutch military and an external PhD candidate at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. She defended her PhD thesis on the subject last week.

Flying a fighter jet over hostile territory sounds like it would be quite the adrenaline rush. But in reality, it can be quite challenging for military pilots to stay focused, says Wingelaar-Jagt. “Patrol flights often take place at night to remain undetected, and you might circle the same area for hours. There’s also a good chance you’re already fatigued. It can be hard to get enough sleep while deployed – you’re in a different climate, and there may be a lot of noise on and around the base.” But it’s essential to remain alert until the end of the flight. “Landing safely is the hardest part.”

In the past, people in the Dutch military were only allowed to use caffeine pills to combat fatigue. “Not very effective. One pill is equivalent to three to four cups of coffee. But if you’ve already been drinking coffee all day, as you may do during deployments, the effect is barely noticeable. It also wears off after a few hours.” Are there better alternatives? That’s the question Wingelaar-Jagt set out to answer at the Dutch military, where she works as a flight surgeon responsible for “keeping military personnel as safe as possible while in the air”. One option on the table was a form of amphetamine, commonly known as speed, which became infamous for its use by German soldiers in World War II. “Because of that, we know a lot about how it works. But it turned out to be unsuitable – it can become addictive and may impair judgment, leading to risky



Photo: Pixabay

behaviour. Not ideal for the military.” Ultimately, they settled on modafinil, a stimulant used to treat the sleeping disorder narcolepsy that has been gaining popularity beyond that. It’s used by both the US and French militaries, and it’s a popular – though illegal – “study drug” among students, competing with Ritalin on the black market.

As part of an experiment, dozens of Dutch pilots used the stimulant during a deployment to the Middle East, doing so over nearly two hundred long night flights. “They reported feeling less fatigued. Side effects were rare, and it didn’t seem to affect their sleep afterwards. So that’s positive. But those are subjective reports. We also conducted objective measurements

in a lab in the Netherlands. Participants were given modafinil, a caffeine pill or a placebo in the evening and then stayed up all night performing various tasks. Both caffeine and modafinil reduced the negative effects of fatigue, but modafinil’s effects lasted longer.” The results were promising enough for the Royal Netherlands Air Force to approve modafinil for flight personnel. “And we’re considering wider use within the Dutch military.” However, Wingelaar-Jagt stresses that the stimulant is a last line of defence. “Ideally, you’d ground someone who is fatigued. But during deployments or in war situations, that’s not always possible. In those cases, modafinil can provide an extra boost. Given all the threats in

the world today, it’s important to support our military as effectively as possible.”

Wingelaar-Jagt is less keen on the use of modafinil in civil aviation, where there has also been interest in the research results. “In my view, that’s a completely different situation – national security isn’t at stake. The same goes for students using modafinil as a study drug. This stimulant isn’t a substitute for sleep. Pulling an all-nighter is one thing, but chronic use is problematic. Sleep deprivation increases the long-term risk of multiple diseases. Unless you’re saving your country, I’d think twice before taking it.”

Dennis Vaendel

Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

03-10, 10.00h Prafulla Shriyan	15-10, 10.00h Max M. Meertens
03-10, 13.00h Julia N. DeBenedictis	15-10, 13.00h Khalid M. Alameer
03-10, 16.00h Lisanne Vonk	15-10, 16.00h Maarten Van Herck Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Hasselt University
04-10, 10.00h Rick H.G. J. van Lanen	18-10, 10.00h Anne G.R. Visser
04-10, 13.00h Hester W.H. Smeets	18-10, 13.00h Tom J.H. van Mulken
04-10, 16.30h Dr. Raymond Schlössels inauguratie	18-10, 16.30h Dr. Jessica Mesman inauguratie
07-10, 13.00h Gözde Şahin	21-10, 13.00h Sneha Mithun
07-10, 16.00h Arno J. Gingele	22-10, 10.00h Ine Nieste Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University and Hasselt University
08-10, 10.00h Suzanne J. Dedden	22-10, 16.00h Julie E. Oomens
08-10, 13.00h Margaretha K. Tuut	23-10, 10.00h Laura A. Kirsch
08-10, 16.00h Hubert Nii-Aponsah	23-10, 13.00h Lieve van Veggel Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Hasselt University/ tUL
09-10, 10.00h Konstantinos Gasteratos	23-10, 16.00h Alina Shirshikova
09-10, 13.00h Dārta Vasiļjeva	24-10, 13.00h Li Yang
09-10, 16.00h Danny Claessens	25-10, 13.00h Maarten H.P. Butink
10-10, 10.00h Eline Berends	28-10, 10.00h Christian A.M.R. van Slagmaat
10-10, 13.00h April C.E. van Gennip	28-10, 16.00h Dennis Bontempi
10-10, 16.00h Inge T.H. Römgens	29-10, 10.00h Stijn S.Horck
11-10, 10.00h Jelle L. Faessen	29-10, 13.00h Kelly M.C. Jardon
11-10, 13.00h Anne C.M. Cuijpers	29-10, 16.00h Nina M. Possemis
11-10, 16.30h Dr. Gijs H. Goossens inauguratie	
14-10, 10.00h Guanguao Zhang Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Dalian University of Technology	
14-10, 13.00h Jeroen B. van der Linden	



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