



# HOW TO COPE WITH STUDENT LIFE

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*This booklet is for anyone experiencing a mental health problem who is a student or considering becoming one. It gives information about how you can look after your mental health while studying and what sources of support are available.*

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## WHAT CHANGES CAN I EXPECT ON BECOMING A STUDENT?

Studying is likely to bring a number of changes to your life. Hopefully it should be enjoyable and interesting, but it can also be challenging – especially if you are experiencing a mental health problem. Some changes or new experiences that many people experience are:

- Meeting and working with new people.
- New demands such as deadlines for written work or presentations.
- Exams.
- Balancing the demands of studying with work or caring commitments.
- Maintaining relationships with family and old friends.
- Leaving home or moving house.



## WHAT TYPE OF COURSE SHOULD I TAKE?

Apart from choosing something you want to do for your personal development or pleasure, or to improve your work prospects, it is important to try to choose a way of learning that fits with your lifestyle and preferences. There are many different forms of course available. They may vary in length, when and where you can do them, and whether they have exams or assessments. Some things you might like to consider when thinking about your mental health might be:

- **Full or part-time**

Part-time courses allow you to have more free time for work or other responsibilities and they may give you more flexibility for medical appointments, for example. Full-time courses are completed more quickly and you may find it easier to fully concentrate on your studies without having to juggle a lot of priorities, which may cause stress.

- **Online or at college**

Online courses mean not having to live near or travel to the college or university very often. It is more flexible and often allows you to complete work at your own pace, so could be less pressurised. Support is usually provided, but you may need to consider if you would feel isolated.

Attending a course at a college or university campus gives you the opportunity of more immediate support from other students, tutors and student advisory services.

- **When you want to study**

Many colleges and some universities offer evening-only, weekend or distance learning courses. These can be combined more easily with a full-time job or childcare responsibilities. Evenings may also be useful if you take any medication that makes mornings difficult. Or you may prefer day courses that give you a sense of a more regular routine.

- **Exams and assessments**

If there is a choice, you may want to think about how you deal with pressure and if you want ongoing assessment and/or exams. If you are studying just for personal interest, you may be able to do a course that doesn't require exams or assessments, or where they are optional.

Most colleges and many universities will have courses that suit you whichever choices you make. Their admissions department will usually be able to help you consider your options and will be happy to provide more detailed guidance. Most will have a website with information and contact details you can use.

## HOW CAN I MANAGE THE DEMANDS OF MY COURSE?

Studying can be demanding. It is natural to feel anxious about this at first. But while it may appear daunting, most people do quickly adapt to new forms of studying and find it rewarding. It is useful to get as much information as possible about what is expected of you, and what is available to help you with the course, as soon as possible. If it does seem too difficult or stressful, it helps if you have considered where you will be able to go for support.

### Find out what is expected of you

Knowing what to expect can help you feel more in control. Some things to think about are:

- How and when will my work be assessed? (see 'How do I deal with exams and assessments?' on p.9)
- How many lectures, seminars, lab sessions or other appointments will I be expected to attend?
- How many written tasks will I be expected to complete?
- Will I have to give presentations or explain my work?
- When are the key deadlines for important work?

Your college or university should provide all of this information before you start. It may also be on an internal website. If not, ask to speak to the course tutor or administrator about anything you are not sure about. Remember they are there to help you with these questions, and other potential students are likely to be wondering about the same things you are.

### Plan ahead

#### Practical arrangements

Make yourself as familiar as you can with the buildings you are studying in. Find out how and where you can access any services you need. Making time to do this early on may avoid stress later.

- Find places you will need to study, such as the library, laboratories or venues for your lectures and classes.
- Find the students' union or student advisory services office. Make a note of the location or phone number.
- Understand the system for getting important books or other equipment that many people on your course are likely to need at the same time.
- Learn how to access shared computers. Or, if you use your own, is there a student network or intranet that you should log in to?

### Scheduling your work

Once you have found out when deadlines and exams are, you may be able to predict when busier times will be on the course and times when you will want to have a lower workload. You may find a written planner useful so you can keep track of your commitments.

This can help you plan ahead for other responsibilities you have, e.g. Christmas, children's birthdays, work commitments, planned holidays, medical appointments or therapy sessions.

You may also already be able to predict times when your mental health will be less good; for example, anxiety around an anniversary or other regular event. And you may need reflection or recovery time after therapy sessions or other appointments.

A plan can also help to inform your tutors or academic supervisor of likely times when you will not be able to complete as much work. They are likely to be able to be more flexible when informed in advance.

Be careful to allow enough time for yourself. While both academic work and social occasions are an important part of the studying experience, many people find it useful to plan for breaks to take stock.

### Get support

#### Academic support

If you have a mental health problem, it is your choice to decide whether or not you want to tell someone. Speaking to an academic supervisor or course tutor about your mental health may be scary at first. However, if you are willing to tell an appropriate person that you have a mental health problem, it is usually easier to access the academic support that you need.

Additional support for someone with a mental health problem will depend upon the nature of that problem and the demands of your course. See SAMH's booklet Reasonable Adjustment for students. Some common forms of support are:

- More regular meetings with your supervisor or course tutor.
- Being given more flexibility around absence e.g. for medical appointments.
- Adjustments to your timetable so that you can avoid early seminars, lectures.
- Flexibility with some deadlines.

Think about what kind of support you would find useful. You might want to talk about this with a trusted friend or counsellor before starting a course.



### Welfare support

There are many welfare support options available to you – some based at your college or university, some in the wider community.

- **College or university student support services**

A student counsellor, student liaison officer or other support service provided directly by your college or university. They will often have services available or be able to offer advice about your circumstances independently of your academic tutors or your GP.

- **The students' union (SU)**

Will usually have at least one welfare officer who can provide independent advice or support. This can be either an elected student representative, who will have received additional training, or a staff member. They are independent of the university or college, although usually based in the same buildings. They can also refer you to external support and often have money available to help you access this if appropriate.

- **Student Nightline service**

Many universities also have a telephone service that is open when other support services at the university are closed. A nightline volunteer will listen to you and provide emotional support. It is a confidential service and volunteers will not ask you for your name or other details.

- **Other voluntary organisations**

Also provide support to students as well as members of the public. Citizens Advice Direct and other specialist organisations can give support on practical issues that may affect, or be affected by, any mental health problems, e.g. housing issues, debt. If you are feeling down, experiencing distress or struggling to cope, the Samaritans are available 24 hours a day, by telephone or email (see 'Useful contacts' p.25).

## HOW DO I DEAL WITH EXAMS AND ASSESSMENTS?

Almost all courses will have formal examinations and assessed work as a way of monitoring student progress and grading qualifications. Most people feel some anxiety about what mark they will receive, and almost everyone feels significant pressure before exams.

Most people find exams stressful because of what's at stake. You may be feeling under pressure to succeed. You may worry you're not good enough, or haven't done enough work. It can be particularly worrying if something important to you depends on the results.

Remember, particularly if you have previously experienced anxiety or become unwell in stressful situations, that it is quite common for tests and similar situations to cause this to reoccur. This is natural, but you may want to prepare. Below are some ways to help yourself.

### Get organised

It is best to have all the information about the exams you will be taking as soon as possible, so you can make a plan for coping with them. This will go a long way to putting your mind at ease.

- You will probably want to confirm how you will be examined. Find out what kind of assessments will there be and when they will be.
- Make sure you know which parts of your course will have formal exams and what will be assessed by coursework.
- Get a copy of the syllabus or a guide to what content you are expected to know.
- Make sure you have caught up if you have been absent for any significant topics.
- Keep your notes in an organised format that works for you so you can look back at them.



- Collect suitable revision guides where appropriate. The BBC has a range of revision tools for school pupils that contain advice that is useful to anyone. The Open University has advice for older students. See Useful contacts on p.25.
- Remind friends and housemates that you have exams and they may need to be patient with you. Where necessary, you may want to ask that a quiet space, for example your bedroom, is particularly respected for a time.

### Plan a revision timetable

Try to start your revision in plenty of time. Take time to plan a revision timetable that:

- Is linked to your exam timetable, so you revise subjects in the right order.
- Is realistic and flexible, in case of any unexpected events.
- Shows your priorities clearly.
- Balances your revision with other demands on your time, e.g. meals, sleep, chores or other commitments, as well as time for relaxing.
- Takes into account your best time of day for studying. This is particularly important if you are taking medication that affects when you can concentrate.

Everyone needs time off and it's a bad idea to abandon your social life and sporting activities but for a period near the examinations, you may need to cut down. It is important to keep in mind that some sacrifices may be valuable in achieving what you want to get from the course.



## HOW CAN I DE-STRESS?

Learning how to de-stress is crucial. Straightforward, effective, self-help techniques are going to be very helpful when you have a heavy workload, in the run-up to the exams, and even when you're sitting in the exam room.

### Try a relaxation routine

- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply. Breathe out more slowly than you breathe in.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles – imagine the tension disappearing.
- Relax each part of the body in turn – from your feet to the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- After twenty minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch.

### Do some physical activity

As little as ten or twenty minutes a day spent doing moderate physical activity can have a positive impact on your mental health. Exercise releases 'feel good' hormones, which can help overcome a low mood. It can also distract you from unwanted thoughts or worries, and is an excellent way of coping with stress – especially if it's enjoyable.

You may want to do something on your own, or try out the opportunities for sports or social exercise that colleges and universities usually offer.

You may prefer to work it into useful tasks, such as housework or gardening. Think about what appeals to you – you are more likely to stick with it.

But remember, while activity is good for you, doing too much can be stressful. See SAMH's booklet *Get Active* for more ideas.

### Consider complementary therapies

Yoga, meditation and massage all have proven benefits in reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Ask at college about what's available or find out about local classes from your library.

### Get enough sleep

If you're tired, your worries can get blown out of proportion. If you've been finding it difficult to get to sleep, try cutting down on stimulants (e.g. tea, coffee and alcohol) and make sure you have time to unwind before bed. Some people feel very stressed about not getting enough sleep. Remember that it is normal to struggle to sleep before something you are worried about, e.g. exams.

### Get extra support

If you have a mental health problem, you may be entitled to extra time or other useful support in exams such as a smaller, quieter room. Talk to your tutor or supervisor about what options may be available. If you are worried about ongoing symptoms of stress you might consider contacting a specialist stress counsellor.

## HOW DO I COPE WITH THE STUDENT LIFESTYLE?

For most people, studying is also a time where they socialise with a wide range of people and have a number of new experiences. While this is often a very positive experience, it can sometimes feel overwhelming. This section describes some common situations and some ways of coping with them.

### Social activities

Many people find college and university an opportunity to have a more extensive social life, especially if studying full-time. Most colleges and universities will have a wide range of opportunities to meet fellow students and take part in social activities. If you are studying and have a mental health problem, it is particularly important to have a level of social activity which you are comfortable with. This is not always easy – for example, if you're feeling depressed or anxious you may find the range of options intimidating or too much to cope with. Some ways of making social life a positive part of the university and college experience are:

- Take advantage of organised social events at the start of your course because everyone will be feeling equally nervous then.
- Take an active part in a club or society that interests you. You are likely to feel more comfortable when you know you have a shared interest to talk about.
- There are usually more social experiences on offer than anyone would have time to do. Choose ones where you think you will feel comfortable and, remember, it is ok to say 'no'.
- Talk to people you are studying with. Chat to your neighbours if you live in halls or shared accommodation. It may be easier to connect, as you will already have something in common with them.
- If you are mostly studying online or doing a distance learning course, try to make contact with fellow students. This may be through an online community that your course has set up, or through informal groups on social media, such as Facebook. This will give you the opportunity to share any worries and get to know other students you already have something in common with.



### Food and drink

The student lifestyle is often associated with poor food and drinking lots of alcohol. While many students eat well and don't drink to excess, this stereotype can be true at times.

It's very important to eat properly to remain healthy.

Most snacks, alcohol and caffeine all contain chemicals that can have negative effects on your mental health. The right foods can help your concentration for studying and help you feel well generally. You may want to prepare your own food for at least some of the week. If this feels like too much trouble, consider using the student canteens, if available. They will usually provide healthy options at a reasonable price.

While many people enjoy socialising over a few drinks, remember that alcohol can worsen depression and, in larger quantities, can cause anxiety or other health problems. Try to ensure you have some days without drinking. It is important to be particularly careful if you are taking medication. Many common drugs for mental health conditions recommend not drinking alcohol at all while taking them.

### Living with other students

If you have moved away from home to be a student it is likely that at some point you will have to organise your own housing. While most universities provide accommodation in halls of residence for the first year of study, it is then normal to move into other accommodation, often shared. Choosing where and who you live with is important to anyone, but may be particularly so if you have a mental health problem.

Some things to consider:

- Where do you want to live? Houses very close to a college or university are often more expensive, but the shorter journey time may reduce pressure when you are busy.
- You may want to share with people you are comfortable telling about your mental health. Do you want to tell them at all?
- Does the accommodation have enough space for you to have a quiet place when you need it?

## Loneliness

If you are lonely, it can help to make the most of opportunities for social contact, however small. For example, meeting people for a coffee while planning a joint piece of work, talking over the washing machines at the laundrette, or chatting while making food in a shared kitchen. Even if you are shy or find it difficult to join in, remember that there are likely to be other people in the same situation who will appreciate you talking to them.

If you are studying online, there may be course forums or email-based groups that you can contribute too. This can be a good opportunity to get to know people and have social contact. This can make it easier to socialise with those people if the course has occasional events, such as study weekends or exams, where you will all eventually meet.

An experience that is particularly common at college and university is finding that, over time, you know a large number of people but do not really consider many to be friends. This can be especially difficult if you are looking for support with a mental health problem and are unsure who you can talk to about it. In this situation, some options you might consider are:

- **Peer support.** If your college or university is large, there may be groups specifically for students experiencing mental health problems.
- **Helping others.** If you feel well enough, you might like to volunteer on a befriending scheme or support group.

Your students' union may be able to help you do this.

- **Talking to your academic tutor or supervisor.** They will often be able to assist by, for example, pairing you with other students you are more likely to have things in common with for group work.
- **Talking to your students' union welfare officer.** They will be able to suggest ideas that are suitable for your specific situation. They may also know other students having similar feelings of loneliness that you might want to talk to.

## Contact with friends and family

If you have moved away from home, it can be difficult to keep in contact with friends and family. Even if you haven't moved, you may not spend quite as much time with your family and friends as you used – you may just have less time than before, are discovering new friends, or may just want to be more independent while studying.

However, it can be useful, especially if you're feeling low or experiencing poor mental health, to get support from old friends and your family. Some ways to ensure you can keep in contact while also having an independent or new lifestyle are:

- Use email or skype to keep in contact with old friends – even quick forms of contact like forwarding jokes allow you to keep in touch.
- When you have more time, write letters – people often find these more personal and nicer to receive.
- Set aside a time each week to make a phone call to a close friend or family.
- After you have settled in, invite friends to stay so you can show them around. They may then do the same for you.
- Keep people up to date with what you are doing, so they feel they are still part of your life – you don't have to tell them everything, just don't cut them out completely.



## HOW COULD MY FINANCES CHANGE?

Studying often affects your personal finances.

It is important to be aware of how you will pay for essentials like food and housing, any tuition fees, and course costs such as books and other equipment. Also, the money you receive and the way you get it may change. Some things to consider are:



- Will you have a reduced income from work? For example, will you be working fewer hours?
- Will you be entitled to any benefits you have previously received? Many benefits such as Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) or Employment Support Allowance (ESA) are not available to students. Speak to your benefits office, Job Centre Plus or a Citizen's Advice Direct for more information.
- Will you have to pay council tax?
- Are you eligible for a student loan?
- Does the college or university you are studying at have hardship funds, scholarships or other money you can access? Your academic tutor, supervisor or welfare officer may be able to help you with this.
- Are there discounts and other offers that you can access through being a student? Membership of the National Union of Students (NUS) is usually automatic, and having an NUS card can save you money at many shops and organisations.

[www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges](http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges) has information on student loans and fees, while the Money Advice Service may be able to assist with managing your personal finances (see 'Useful contacts' on p.24).

## CAN I STILL CONTINUE TO GET TREATMENT FOR A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM I HAVE?

A change in your circumstances such as becoming a student, particularly if it means moving away from where you have lived, can interrupt treatment for a mental health problem. Even if you are not moving home to study, you are likely to find that some details of your treatment change.

You may want to use these checklists to minimise any disruption to your treatments.

### Moving away to study

- Get a list of local GP surgeries (available online) or the address of a university medical centre.
- Register with a new GP.
- Check your medical notes will be transferred by your old GP practice.
- Make an appointment to see the new GP.
- Check if any treatment you have been receiving is available in the area you are moving to.

### Studying while staying in the same area

- Tell your doctor or therapist that you will be studying.
- Ask to change the times of any regular appointments that clash with your classes.
- Find out whether your university or college will want you to register with a specific medical centre. If you have any specific medical requirements that will be affected by this, contact the university or college to discuss them.
- Consider asking your doctor to review any medication you are taking that may affect your studying.

## WHAT IF MY MENTAL HEALTH GETS WORSE?

If your mental health gets worse, or you experience an acute episode relating to a mental health problem – for example psychosis or severe anxiety – you will want to access suitable support. If you are aware that your mental health is getting significantly worse you are likely to want to talk to your doctor in the first instance. If your mental health problem is less severe, you may still want to talk to a welfare officer or friends to see how they can support you.

It's important for you (or someone you trust) to explain the situation to your academic supervisor or tutor as soon as possible. Even if you have explained that you have a mental health problem before, they may be unaware that it has worsened. See SAMH's booklet 'Reasonable Adjustments for Students'.

When you are feeling well enough they will be able to talk to you about your academic work. It may be that you are able to continue the course as normal. But if your studying has been significantly affected, you may be able to:

- Defer the course for a time, while you recover.
- Repeat a term or year.
- Repeat specific parts of the course that have been affected by your illness.
- Receive special dispensation when units are marked because you were ill.



## HOW CAN FRIENDS AND FAMILY HELP?

*This section is for friends and family who want to help someone they know with a mental health problem who is studying or considering becoming a student.*

If someone you know has decided to become a student, you may find it a new challenge for you as well as them. You may feel that they are changing rapidly, making new friends and having new experiences that you don't fully understand or are not part of. You may also be particularly worried about how they are going to cope if they have moved home or just have less time with you. These concerns may be increased if you are worried about their mental health. Some ways that you can help them are:

- **Keep in touch.** If they have left home for the first time, make the effort to be the one who stays in contact. Even if they appear very busy, they are likely to appreciate the effort.
- **Make time to be together.** Offer to take them out for a meal or go for a walk.
- **Accept that things may change.** Try to understand that they are likely to have made new friends who they will often spend a lot of time with.
- **Ask them how they are doing.** It doesn't have to be a serious conversation about mental health but most people will appreciate being asked.

- **Take an interest.** What are they working on at the moment? When are any major exams?
- **Give them space.** If they have left home for the first time, remember that being a student is part of a process of gaining independence and growing up. It is natural that they don't want to tell you everything.
- **Offer practical help.** Offer a night's babysitting or help with a routine task, such as preparing or cooking food. This sort of thing will really be appreciated, and save them time and, possibly, stress.
- **Remember that studying can feel like a job.** While they may not be 'working' in the traditional sense, try to show that you understand they can be under pressure.

If you are finding it difficult to help someone with a mental health problem see SAMH's booklet *How to cope as a carer*. Carer organisations also offer information, advice and support for people caring for someone with a disability (see useful contacts p.24).





## USEFUL CONTACTS

**SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health)****t: 0141 530 1000****e: [enquire@samh.org.uk](mailto:enquire@samh.org.uk)****w: [samh.org.uk](http://samh.org.uk)**

Details of local SAMH services and information and sign-posting for people concerned about mental health. Office hours 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)****t: 01455 883 300****Main w: [bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)****Sister w: [itsgoodtotalk.org.uk](http://itsgoodtotalk.org.uk)**

For practitioners in your area.

**BBC learning website****w: [bbc.co.uk/learning](http://bbc.co.uk/learning)**

For study tips and revision ideas.

**Citizens Advice Direct****t: 0808 800 9060****w: [advice.scot](http://advice.scot)**

Advice on legal issues, money and other problems.

**Mental Welfare Commission Scotland****Service Users & Carers Advice****Line: 0800 389 6809****w: [mwscot.org.uk](http://mwscot.org.uk)**

They protect and promote the human rights of people with mental health problems, learning disabilities, dementia and related conditions.

**Scottish Government****w: [gov.scot/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges](http://gov.scot/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges)**

General government information on education, including financial details.

**Breathing Space Scotland****t: 0800 83 85 87****w: [breathingspace.scot](http://breathingspace.scot)**

Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

**Money Advice Service****t: 0800 138 7777****w: [moneyadviceservice.org.uk](http://moneyadviceservice.org.uk)****National Union of Students****t: 0845 5210 262****w: [nus.org.uk](http://nus.org.uk)**

Promoting and defending the rights of students.

**Open University****w: [www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy](http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy)**

Information on study skills.

**Samaritans****Chris, PO Box 9090,****Stirling FK8 2SA****Helpline: 116 123****e: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)****w: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)**

24-hour telephone helpline.

**YoungMinds****Parent Helpline: 808 802 5544****w: [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)**

Information for both parents and young people.

**See Me****t: 0141 530 1111****w: [seemescotland.org](http://seemescotland.org)**

National programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination.

## Further information

To read or print SAMH's information booklets, visit **[samh.org.uk](http://samh.org.uk)**;

to order copies contact SAMH on 0141 530 1000 or at [enquire@samh.org.uk](mailto:enquire@samh.org.uk)



SAMH is Scotland's largest mental health charity and is dedicated to mental health and well-being for all. We are here to provide help, information and support to people affected by mental health problems.

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