Congratulations!

Starting university can be a wonderful and exciting experience, but it can also bring its own unique challenges. It's natural to feel nervous or overwhelmed during the first few weeks at university, and it can be a while before you feel like you've found your feet.

At times you may need some information to help you successfully solve the problems you encounter and perhaps help others who need your assistance. This is normal and expected as you transition from one part of your life to another.

We created this resource as a way to help you and your peers address some important things that aren't usually talked about, but are important to think about at this transition point in your life. We know that not all life's lessons need to be learned the hard way. Sometimes knowing what to expect and getting some tips on what to do can go a long way to helping a person find their own way. Transitions, the guide that you are now reading, was designed to help you do just that!

Transitions is here to provide a single source that you can reach for when you need that information or could use some tips.

You might not need to know what is on every page of this book and that's okay. However we hope that you'll keep it in on hand, as there is likely something in here that will be helpful to you, or to a friend, at some point over the next few years.

Academics

How is university different to school?

Learning at university is likely to be very different from what you experienced at school. You may hear people talk about the need for you to engage with 'active' or 'self-directed' learning. This simply means that you will be in control of your own learning much more than before. While, to begin with, this can seem strange and even daunting – in time most students realise that learning in this way can be more personally fulfilling and enjoyable.

That doesn't mean you should expect to be able to learn like this right away. You need to give yourself time to learn how to learn as a university student. Be patient, use our tips below and the resources at your university and everything will come together.

Expectations

In university the expectation is that you are now an independent adult. That means that you are in charge of your own behaviour. You are responsible for you!

Professors and tutors likely won't notice if you're not in class and they won't be calling you to check up on any papers or assignments you didn't hand in. It is up to you to keep track of what you need to do and to motivate yourself to do what needs to be done. This can be a challenge for some students. Finding a friend in class to attend classes together or to be a study partner, or even just reminding yourself how much money you're paying to be in university might help you focus on your personal responsibilities and help motivate you to do what you need to do.

Pace

Rather than having lectures/seminars on a subject every day; in university, you often have contact time just once or twice a week (although some courses may be more frequent). This means that you will likely be covering a lot of material in class, and moving through the material quite quickly. Many students find this difficult at first. Course sizes can be large, which can make it difficult for you to ask questions when you don't understand something. That can lead you to feeling left behind. You may be required to complete a number of readings in between lectures – some of which will be talked about in seminars and some of which might just be background information. Even if you're not required to do extra reading, reviewing your notes and doing independent research into the areas you don't understand can help you keep up.

Also, remember that every professor or tutor should have office hours – times you can go into their office and ask questions. Just make sure you arrive prepared with a list of questions and don't expect them to teach the entire class to you over again one-on-one.

Give yourself 3-4 hours of work per module outside of class time to work on assignments or just to keep up with what is being taught. It may help you to think about university as a job. The classes are only a small part of your "work". Much of what you need to do happens outside of class.

Academic workload

Your workload might increase quite a bit compared to school – and your professors or tutors will often not be aware of (or concerned with) the workload you have in your other classes. This means that you might end up with multiple exams and assignments, all due in the same week, or even the same day. Occasionally, your professors or tutors might be willing to accommodate deadline changes, but more often than not, they won't. Your best course of action is to plan ahead – review each class' syllabus at the start of the semester, map out all of your deadlines in a planner, and figure out how soon you need to start studying, writing, and researching for each task in order to get them done in time.

Leaving things to the last minute or planning to do an all-nighter is not a sustainable long-term strategy.

Set your "deadlines" for assignments 24 hours in advance of when it really is. Try to hit the date you set. This gives you a bit of wiggle room in case something unexpected comes up.

Feeling unprepared

Some students feel as if school didn't prepare them enough for university – whether it's the independence, expectations, structure, work load, or competencies (such as writing and study skills) that they need. This may mean that you feel overloaded or stressed by university life. However, these challenges are completely normal and actually expected!

Many students feel like this – remember that part of your learning is learning how to be a successful student. Very few students know how to do this right away. If there are things you don't know how to do yet, simply see them as a new challenge that you can meet by developing some new skills and changing your expectations. If you label the emotions that you are feeling as a signal that you are getting ready to rise to a challenge, you will create a much healthier approach to university life. If you interpret the "stress" that you are feeling as negative and try to avoid the challenge, you will experience less joy and excitement about your new environment and deprive yourself of new learning.

For more information, see our section on managing stress.

Students are different, schools are different, and each university or college is different – meaning that there are almost always going to be at least a few people who may feel overwhelmed by their new situation. If this feels like you, remind yourself that you are the person in charge of your university experience. Go to the campus writing/study centre or make an appointment with your professor/tutor to ask for extra help. Consider starting a study group with people from your course. Reach out to people in your residence, seminars, extracurricular activities, your Students' Union or elsewhere to create your own support system. And remember – just because your friends and family may be far away, it doesn't mean they can't still support you from afar.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't keep it to yourself. Reach out for help; there are many things that can be done to help you, help yourself.

"If you ever feel like you're struggling and feel overloaded with deadlines that you can't cope with, take a step back. Speak to your housemate, a close friend, or even contact your university's wellbeing service for a bit of support. You are most definitely not alone, and I can assure you that so many people will be able to relate and will be very willing to help you out."

Student Minds Blogger

Coursework and assignments

Writing your first university paper can feel intimidating. Coursework and assignments often follow a different format than you are used to in school and it can be hard to know where to start. The key to doing well on assignments is to understand what's expected, allow yourself enough time to properly research and write, and make sure you edit well.

Talk to your tutors about what is expected. Sometimes this information will be in the syllabus so make sure you check that first. Ask about length, type of content, grading scheme, and format. (Some papers have to be in specific formats – which have guidelines for how to reference the material you researched and more. You can often take a workshop on reference formats at your university's library. Information on the use of different formats is also available online.)

If you struggle with writing, schedule a meeting with your campus' writing/study centre. Most, if not all, universities will have one staffed with experts who can help you learn how to better plan your paper or assignment.

Assignment tips:

"It's often worth changing things up and exploring different places to work (coffee shops & the public library were my favourites). Working at home in the morning and then heading off to the library for the afternoon can also be a good way to avoid cabin fever!"

"Create a timetable that covers the whole week (Monday-Sunday) and fill in the times of when your lectures and seminars take place, from there you will be able to work out which pieces of reading, revision or coursework you need to prioritise on and complete first."

"Planning out your work and making a schedule can help you to feel more in control. Break down big tasks into small manageable steps and add one or two of these to your daily to do list, so that instead of worrying about having to write a whole essay, you know that you just need to spend an hour or two this morning writing a plan."

Exams

Your first on-campus exams might feel pretty stressful because they can be very different from the exams you had in school, with higher expectations and less support. The best way to deal with exam stress is to know your material well and give yourself enough time to study. Starting to study the night before is never a good idea but constant studying can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. You need to find your balance. Make sure you schedule time for studying and time for recharging. You don't want to burn yourself out before the exam! Just make sure you're getting a balance of both. Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercising are also important. You'll absorb information better and faster if you're feeling your best.

Exams can also be a great opportunity to learn. After you receive your results, it's a good idea to spend time reviewing to see where you went wrong so you can do better next time. Many professors, and teaching assistants are willing to discuss your exam results with you afterwards. Just make sure that you have thoughtful questions to ask when you approach them and aren't just looking to vent. Venting is best saved for your friends, not your professors!

Exam tips:

"Exam season shouldn't force you into five weeks of solitude. Keep in contact with your friends and family, as they are your biggest support network."

"Speak to those who aren't stressed - those people on different courses to you with different exam dates, those perhaps who have none at all, these are the people who might be able to restore your calm and create a better atmosphere for your revision breaks!"

"Schedule in some time to get active. We all know exercise relieves stress. Plus, it lets your brain focus on something other than your module contents."

"It is essential to be organised to achieve exam success. However, it is important to be realistic whilst organising your revision plan. Some people may have a part-time job, sports practice, a doctor's appointment, or a friend's birthday. Your revision plan needs to fit around this."

Box Breathing

Box Breathing can help your heart rate return to normal, which helps you to relax.

Here's how you do it: If possible, sit and close your eyes. If not, just focus on your breathing.

1. Inhale your breath (preferably through your nose) for 4 seconds.
2. Hold your breath for 4 more seconds. You're not trying to deprive yourself of air; you're just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs.
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds.
4. Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing in again.

Repeat this process as many times as you can. Even 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed and in control.

Check out this website for a nice way to do the box breathing exercise described above.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation can help to release tension that you may be holding in your body.

It's a quick, easy, and subtle way to calm yourself down.

1. While taking deep breaths, clench your right fist tightly for approximately 5 seconds.
2. Continuing to breathe deeply, slowly release your fist over the course of about 15 seconds while concentrating on the way your hand feels.
3. Repeat with your left hand.

Although not as easy to do in public, you can also do Progressive Muscle Relaxation with your whole body, starting with your toes and working your way up to your face, one section of your body at a time. This is a great technique to use if you're having trouble falling asleep.

Talking to Academic and Support Staff

There will be many times throughout your time at university when you need to speak to your lecturers or course staff. Knowing how to approach them in a professional way can help ensure that your concerns are heard and help you feel less stressed while doing so.

Things to consider:

- Schedule an appointment or visit during office hours. Showing up unexpectedly can often mean that you will not get the time you need.
- Address the person by their title and last name (e.g., Dr. Brown or Ms. Chu) unless they've specifically told you that it's okay to use their first name.
- Explain what class or program you're in, the issue about which you're emailing, and the request you're making to them.
- Thank the person for their time. Even if they haven't done anything for you (yet).
- If not in person then use proper email technique; no short hand or 'text speak'; give context, don't assume they will know who you are or what you are emailing about.

Students with learning disabilities

Having a learning disability is not about intelligence – many people with learning disabilities have an average or above average IQ. Learning disabilities affect how a person processes or applies information. If you have a learning disability, you're probably well aware that school can be challenging. The good news is that today's universities have programmes in place that can be of help to you.

If you have a learning disability, make sure you check out what resources exist on campus when you're making your decision about which institutions you will apply to and access those resources as soon as you register. You may also need to provide information about your disability to the office that has been designated to help you. Make sure you have all the reports, assessments and documentation required. It may also be a good idea to let your professor(s) or tutor(s) know that you have a learning disability.

I think I have a learning disability – now what?

Although learning disabilities may be diagnosed in primary school, sometimes they go undiagnosed and untreated for years. If you suspect you have a learning disability that is interfering with your ability to succeed at school, university or at work, **you should seek help** to determine what kind of evaluation may be required to establish the presence of a learning disability. Your university's Disability Office will be able to help you.

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

Students who have a disability, including a long-term health condition, mental health condition, or specific learning difficulty, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia may be eligible for additional financial support to cover any extra study-related costs you incur. You can get the allowances on top of your other student finance and you won't need to repay DSAs. The amount you receive depends on your individual needs - not your household income.

Check out this link for more information and a helpful video.

Students with pre-existing health conditions

If you have a pre-existing health condition (physical or mental) that requires follow-up or ongoing care and you are moving to a new area to go to university, talk to your GP and \ or specialist about moving your health care. Make sure that you have this discussion with your GP and \ or specialist as soon as possible, after you have decided where you will be studying. Remember that it can take a few months to get this kind of referral in place. If possible speak to your new GP or specialist before you move and make an appointment to see them as soon as you arrive – even if you are currently well. It is much better that you begin this relationship when you are not in a crisis.

Take a look here for information on discussing and disclosing difficulties at university.

If you have been prescribed medication, bring enough of your medicines with you to tide you over until you have registered with your new GP and are able to get a new prescription. Be careful not to overmedicate yourself in times of stress or during exams. Also be aware that mixing medications with substances such as alcohol or drugs can lead to problems.

Students with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can affect academic success. People with ADHD have difficulty sustaining attention and can be hyperactive, easily distracted, disorganised and impulsive. They also have a number of challenges with what are called "executive functions" – such as planning and organisation. ADHD affects about 3-5% of the population. Approximately 30% of people diagnosed with ADHD also have a learning disability.

Symptoms of ADHD include:

- feeling restless or fidgety
- talking a lot and interrupting
- inability to focus or prioritise
- finding it hard to sustain attention
- forgetfulness
- impulsivity - saying or doing things without thinking

Just because you experience one or more of these symptoms, it doesn't mean you're definitely affected by ADHD. If you have previously been diagnosed with ADHD or if you think you might have ADHD, visit your GP or university health centre to discuss your concerns. With the right combination of learning strategies and medication, most people with ADHD are able to succeed and thrive at university.

For more information on learning difficulties, visit British Dyslexia Association.

For more information on ADHD, visit YoungMinds.

Self-advocacy

If you have ADHD, a learning disability or a pre-existing medical condition, here are a few things you may want to do:

- Register with the disabilities services office; they may be able to help you with learning strategies and set up helpful accommodations for your classes.
- Tell your academic advisor, professor, or tutor about your disability so they can help make the best academic plan for you.
- Find out about tutoring services available on campus.
- Take medications as prescribed and make sure that a doctor is monitoring your medication use.
- Keep important paperwork, such as your course schedule, student loans, and scholarships in a folder and store it in a safe place.
- Educate yourself. Understand what it means for you to have your condition and how it's likely to impact your life.
- Study difficult material when your energy level is at its peak and take frequent short breaks.
- Write down assignments, exams, meetings, and 'to do' lists in an agenda, instead of trying to remember everything in your head.
- Sit at the front of the classroom to minimise distractions.

Building resilience

Things in life don't always go your way. Nobody lives a life that's completely stress-free – nor should they expect to or even want to. Negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, grief or disappointment are normal and have an important job to do – they help us to focus our attention on something important and make adjustments to improve our wellbeing. This is called adaptation or building resilience.

Resilience to academic failure

Getting your first paper or exam back can sometimes be a shock. The expectations in university level courses are often much higher than those in school and doing well often requires much more effort. Even people who were straight-A students in school can be in for a surprise. It can take some time to become comfortable with this new reality. You should not take this reality as a negative outcome. On the contrary, it is likely a more realistic evaluation of where you sit in a much larger group of people. Use this experience as a challenge to learn more and improve your skills. Doing poorly on a paper or exam doesn't mean you're a failure as a person.

It means that the academic techniques you are using need to be fine-tuned and maybe changed. Almost everyone has had a "wake-up call" at some point - use this experience as yours. Figure out what you did wrong and learn from it. You may not have understood the lecturer's expectations before – now you do. Or maybe you actually didn't study enough/work hard enough – it happens. Now you have a better understanding of what's required to succeed in the course. Maybe your writing or study skills could use some improvement – visit the academic skills centre on your campus for additional help. Early failures can pave the way for future success, but you need to use them as a springboard for self-improvement.

Tips for becoming more academically resilient:

- Think about what you have experienced and use this to plan for a better result in the future.
- What do you think could have been done differently and how can this be applied to other situations?
- Humour helps. A positive attitude helps you to see humour in stressful situations. Instead of getting angry or frustrated, laugh it off.
- Accept that the world does not necessarily need to change to accommodate to you. Sometimes you need to change how you are dealing with it.
- Be realistic. Put things into perspective and don't sweat the small stuff. Not every stressor is the end of the world. Indeed, most promote growth.
- Ask yourself if you'll remember this moment in two years' time. Most likely the answer is – NO.
- Take action when you need to. Instead of feeling helpless, get out there and find solutions. If something is wrong, speak up. Be polite about it, but speak up.
- Relationships matter. Having a good support network provides a buffer for stress. Take time to nurture yours - friendships take time and effort but are worth it.
- Trust yourself and trust in your work ethic. Hard work often leads to good results. It's not how smart you are but how you work that usually counts most.
- If you need help, seek it out. Go when you first realise that you need help. **Don't wait until there is a crisis.**

Money

Once university starts, your life will get busy fast. That's why it's worth taking the time to make sure you've got your financial plan for the year covered. Start by making sure you've covered these basics.

Figure out what it's really going to cost

Budget planning may not seem like a fun summer activity – but it's something that can make all the difference once the academic year starts. And it doesn't have to be that difficult or complicated.

Start by figuring out what all your costs are going to be.
Don't just think about the big cost items, such as tuition and books. Think about all the little things that you have maybe never had to pay for before. Items such as: that morning coffee, or public transportation, or clothing and entertainment. It all adds up fast if you aren't prepared for it. Where will you live? If you're planning to live in residence, find out what is covered and what isn't. If you're living at home make sure you know exactly what transportation costs you'll encounter. If you're living off-campus make sure you know all the costs (rent, utilities, etc.) as well as how much you'll need to put aside for food and transportation.
Try tracking your spending for a week or a month, so that you know how much you're spending, and on what.

Then add up all your sources of money coming in.
This includes money you've saved, money from your parents/family, income from any jobs, and money from things like scholarships and student loans. Sort it into two categories: "sure thing" and "maybe." Be conservative and underestimate how much money you will have.

Once you know your sources of income and have a picture of your outgoings, you could try creating a budget.

Check out Lisa's blog post where she talks about the things that she found helpful when managing her finances at university.

Save the Student have a downloadable student budget spreadsheet.

Money Saving Expert have a Student Checklist with 60 ways that students can save money.

NASMA's Student Money Matters magazine is full of information about student finance, tips on making your money go further and offers aimed at students.

How to reduce financial stress

Learn from Laura's story

I was one of those students who didn't get the financial thing right the first time. I supplemented my summer earnings with a little financial help from the Bank of Mom and Dad. Seemed like a great idea at the time — hey, who doesn't want "free" money! But the inevitable "catch" was that I had to face the dreaded "Oops, I need more money" conversation. I sweated over which parent to ask. Who is going to be the least judgmental? Who is least likely to drill me on where the money went? How do I convince them that I really am responsible? I felt like a failure. I hadn't prepared myself adequately for the realities of balancing my academic and social life. An important part of first-year post-secondary studies is the new connections, friendships and networks we build that will last us a lifetime. Surprisingly, small indulgences — and don't get me wrong, treats are important — like caramel whipped non-fat lattes can become a big cash flow drain when you (like me) aren't keeping track.

During your first few weeks of university, one of the most important things that you can do is talk to others who have been through this and do research to figure out what the academic year is really going to cost. This would have helped me better figure out what my "real" costs were likely to be. Here are some tips that I now wish I had considered to help stay on top of the little things so that I would have had a better handle on my finances.

Making Time to Plan (Read: Budget!)

I had not done a good job of separating my needs from my wants. This is really important. Spending on the wants can take money away from spending on the needs. I could have used an online budget calculator to help me with this.

Staying Alert.

One thing I could have done is signed up for electronic banking. There are some systems that send alerts when a payment is coming up and lets you know when your account balance is low. That would have saved me some headaches for sure.

Thinking About Hidden or Unanticipated Costs.

You may be surprised how many little things can add up. Soon those expensive coffees, phone bills and gourmet sandwiches at lunch add up to much more than expected. I also forgot to add the costs of some apartment essentials – such as cooking utensils. Guess what? Tongs, soup ladles, dish washing detergent, and can openers all cost – and those costs add up!

Making Your Smartphone Your Wallet.

There are some great online financial tools you can use. You can even pay back a friend who covered dinner last night. Sharing expenses with friends is a great way to save money and using free eTransfers to split the bill is quick and convenient. Or use a mobile wallet to manage your accounts, credit card and gift cards.

Budgeting is both a science and an art, and sure I strayed from it from time to time, but once I learned how to do it better, it was really helpful. Putting my plan on paper also inspired me to get a part time job to help with that extra pocket money so that I could enjoy my new social life, and rely less on my parents. It was a big life lesson for me, and a big step forward in my independence.

Mental Health, Mental Illness, Stress and Other Related Concerns

1 in 5 people will develop a mental illness each year.

Awareness is at an all-time high; however, this awareness is not always coupled with knowledge and understanding. Knowing about something is not the same as knowing something. People know mental illness can be a problem – but many people do not understand what mental illnesses actually are. Nor do they know how to distinguish between the symptoms of a mental illness and the expected emotional and cognitive challenges that come with being a human being and being exposed to the ups and downs of life.

Given that this period of transition in your life is a time when many students are at higher risk of developing a mental illness, it's important to **understand what constitutes mental health and what constitutes a mental illness** and what to do if you suspect you (or a friend) may be experiencing a mental illness.

What is mental health?

There are many different definitions of mental health. Many of them are vague and use words that mean the same thing as mental health to define mental health. Not very helpful. Here is one that is more clear:

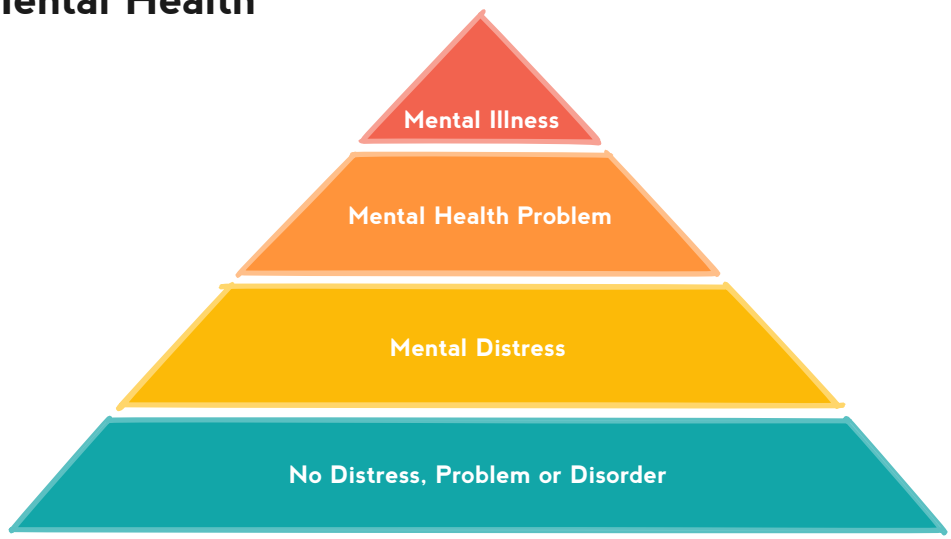
Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. World Health Organization, 2014

Essentially, mental health is the ability to successfully adapt to life circumstances.

Having good mental health does not mean not feeling sad, unhappy, annoyed, angry, etc. Often these negative emotional states are actually a sign of good mental health.

Different models exist to help explain mental health. Student Minds often refers to mental health as a continuum and below is a model that describes states of mental health. It can be useful to be aware of different models to give you an understanding of how to talk about your own mental health in different settings, for example to friends, classmates, teachers and health professionals.

States of Mental Health



As you can see in the diagram, these four categories are separate components and are all part of having mental health. They are not mutually exclusive. A person can experience mental distress, a mental health problem, and a mental illness all at the same time. A person can have good mental health and a mental health problem at the same time! A person can have good mental health and a mental illness at the same time, just as a person can have good physical health and an illness at the same time.

Understanding the differences between these components is crucial to getting the right kind of help if you need it (for example, treatment if you have a mental illness). Mental distress only requires that you understand and successfully manage the stress response, develop healthy and adaptive coping skills, which you learn by embracing and not avoiding the challenges of life. Mental health problems often require additional help and support; however, support from family and friends is often enough. Sometimes a counsellor or religious/spiritual leader is helpful. Mental illnesses, however, require treatment from a qualified health care professional.

The following pages include information about a few common types of mental illnesses more often diagnosed at this point in your life. If you have a better understanding of mental illness, it will help you to recognise possible symptoms in yourself or in others. **Seeking help early is a key part of getting better.**

A mental illness occurs when a person is unable to function in their everyday life due to the way their brain is controlling their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. It is diagnosed the same way all illnesses are diagnosed and if you have a mental illness, rapid access to effective evidence-based treatment delivered by a qualified health care provider is what you need.

A mental health problem is a substantial emotional, thought, or behavioural difficulty (or all three) that causes you significant life challenges and that usually requires you to get help from friends, family or people you trust. **An example** is the grief that you experience if someone close to you dies, or the period of adjustment following moving to an unfamiliar place. A mental health problem is not an illness. It is a sign that you are having difficulty adapting, but that is to be expected given the magnitude of the stressor. You will need more support from family and friends and may find additional help from a counsellor or religious/spiritual leader useful.

Mental distress is normal, expected, and happens to everyone - usually daily! It is a signal that you need to solve the problem causing the distress; so you adapt by changing yourself or your surroundings. For example: you are late for your morning class so you take a bus instead of walking and next time you get up a half hour earlier. Mental distress is not an illness. It is your adaptation signal. You don't need treatment for mental distress.

Stress

We use the word stress as short hand for the stress response, which is the way your brain and body let you know you have a challenge or problem that needs to be addressed. This is the signal that underlies adaptation and is key for the building of resilience.

Understanding and managing the stress response

The stress response is the way our brain tells us that there is a problem in our environment that we need to deal with. This is the signal that causes us to adapt and become more resilient. The word "stress" has been used as short-hand for the concept of the stress response, but it has taken on a negative connotation that leads to unhelpful ways of thinking about and managing our stress response. Using clear language to describe our experiences helps us learn how to use the stress response to promote, instead of reduce, our health and mental health. People also often substitute the word "anxiety" when they mean the stress response; however, anxiety (which is a constant state of hyper arousal) is not the same thing as the stress response.

The myth of evil stress

The discussion of stress in much of the media and our culture can easily make us believe that any potentially stressful situation is bad for us. In fact difficult situations can provoke two very different responses – one helpful and one unhelpful.

Being stressed can result in us avoiding important tasks, feeling overwhelmed and isolated and lead to feeling anxious. But being stretched is actually very good for us. When we are stretched we usually find things difficult, emotionally challenging and may doubt our ability to cope – however those feelings can help us focus our attention on important tasks, remain motivated and find solutions. Each time you a) experience a stressful situation and b) successfully cope with that situation, you're making yourself stronger and more resilient. You are learning how to better cope with the challenges of life and developing skills that you can use in the future. The next time a similar situation comes along, you're better equipped to handle it and it likely won't feel as stressful as it did this time. The key is not just reducing the amount of stress you experience, but learning how best to deal with the challenges that come along with being alive.

Trying to avoid situations that are challenging or difficult is perfectly understandable. As a species we are programmed to avoid pain, including emotional pain, so wanting to shy away from situations that cause emotional difficulty is, to an extent, programmed into us. However, avoiding things can actually make us more stressed. You are also missing an opportunity to learn the skills you need to take on the daily challenges of life. Over time, these can lead to you feeling helpless and constantly "stressed out". If you find yourself regularly avoiding some tasks and struggle to change your behaviour, talk to someone in your university support services.

Check out this TedTalk by Kelly McGonigal to learn more.

Most people don't have exam anxiety. Instead, they're experiencing the normal stress response to writing an exam. It's a signal that you need to develop solutions in order to succeed at that task. How are you going to prepare to do the best that you can do? What skills do you need to develop to help yourself take on this challenge?

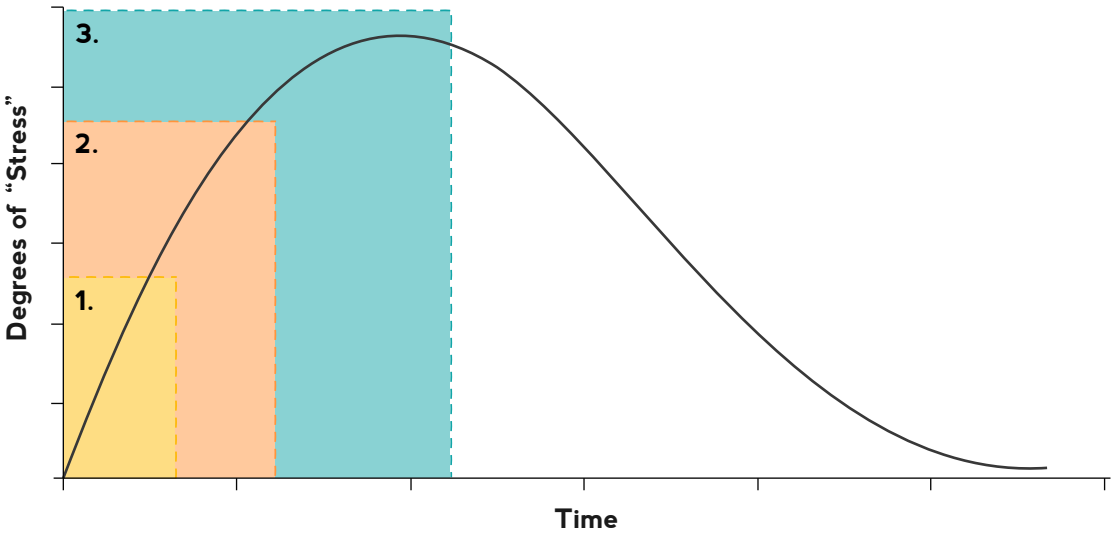
The good news is that even if you've become a stress avoider or have learned to feel overwhelmed or helpless when experiencing stress, you can reverse that and develop health-promoting ways to manage your stress. You can turn your stress from your enemy to your friend.

Three steps to healthy stress management

You can figure out how to manage your stress response in a way that is healthy, promotes adaptation and helps build resilience. Check out this diagram of the typical daily stress response curve. As you can see, in response to a challenge arising in your environment (called a stressor; for example: an exam, getting cut from the team you were trying out for, getting a poor grade, fight with a friend or intimate partner, etc.), your brain and body respond with the signal that tells you that you have a problem that needs to be solved. Notice that the stress response curve goes up, peaks, and then gradually goes down. On that curve are three stress management points, each of them should be used to help you successfully manage the situation.

Three things to do: the curve

Stress response curve



1. At this point, the focus is on how you are thinking about your stress response experience. Research shows that if we see this signal as negative (such as: I feel stressed out; I can't handle this; I feel overwhelmed), our body's response is unhealthy, leading us to avoid the situation or expecting others to solve the problem for us. However, if we see the signal as positive (such as: I am being challenged to solve a problem; my brain and body are getting ready to help me tackle an important challenge; etc.) our body's response is healthy, leading us to prepare to adapt and change like the stress response intended.

2. At this point, the focus is on determining what the problem is and developing solutions for solving it. For example: the stress response to having to write an exam may lead you to seek out study skills help or meet with your professor or tutor to review some concepts you do not fully understand. When you solve the problem the stress response has identified, it goes away. And, you are left with a new skill that you can use in the future. You have successfully adapted.

3. At this point, the focus is on the intensity of your stress response. Sometimes our stress response can feel quite intense (especially if our previous pattern has been to avoid stress) and at this point, techniques designed to decrease our stress response may be helpful. This is the time to bring in the technique of box breathing. It uses your control of your diaphragm to decrease the stress signal. You can learn how to do it and then practice until it becomes second nature to you. Once you have mastered the technique, you can apply it in situations where your stress response is intense and you can do it in a way that no one else will notice. And guess what? Many of the fancy and costly stress reduction products and programs use this technique as part of what they are selling. But you can just learn this and use it – for free! Check out this website for an excellent description of the technique and an interactive practice tool that you can use to learn how to apply it.

Mental illness

At some point, most people have said something along the lines of, "I'm so depressed," "that's my anxiety talking," "she's so OCD," "you're giving me PTSD" or "I am so traumatised" when referring to totally normal everyday events. Although these comments are sometimes meant to be light hearted, they can actually be harmful to people's ability to understand what these disorders actually involve and to separate out the difference between the range of normal and expected emotions and the symptoms of a mental illness. When we use clinical terms to describe normal emotions or behaviours, we weaken the words, making it more difficult for someone with that disorder to feel they are being taken seriously. Conversely, when we use these clinical terms for something other than their intended purpose, we also run the risk of pathologising totally normal emotions – making people think they're experiencing a mental illness when they're not. Being careful with the language we use, and choosing any of the numerous, more specific and non-clinical words that exist to describe our emotions and behaviours is one way that you can become more mental health literate.

For each mental illness in this section, there is a brief overview of the common symptoms so you understand how the illness is different from the normal life experience and you know when you should be concerned. If the symptoms for a mental illness sound like something you (or someone you know) are experiencing, make sure you visit the accompanying links for more information (including possible causes and evidence-based treatments) and make sure to talk to your doctor or a qualified mental health professional about what you've been experiencing.

Note that this is not a comprehensive list of all mental illnesses, but rather the mental illnesses most likely to emerge around this time in your life.

Visit the Getting Help section of the guide on pg 68 for places to go to access support.

Depression

Depression affects approximately 7% of people in the course of a year and often starts during adolescence. It is NOT the same as having negative emotions, even if those emotions persist over time. Depression is always characterised by significant challenges in daily functioning (such as isolating from friends, doing poorly in school work, etc.).

Symptoms:

A **Major Depressive Episode** must last at least 2 weeks, where you've felt sad or depressed most of the day, almost every day. You might also experience most of the following symptoms:

- Eating much more or much less than normal.
- Sleeping much more or much less than normal.
- Moving restlessly or barely moving at all.
- Feeling really tired and lacking energy.
- Losing feelings of pleasure or enjoyment.
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, or guilty.
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions.
- Losing interest in activities you usually enjoy.
- Having thoughts of death and dying, including suicidal thoughts and plans.
- Attempting suicide.

These symptoms need to be substantial and persistent (for example: feeling tired means so tired that you have to push yourself to function, not the kind of tired you feel when you have been working long hours and have not had enough sleep). These symptoms prevent you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships and are not due to an obvious cause. Sometimes people can become depressed for other reasons such as having an underactive thyroid gland or in response to certain types of medication.

Teenmentalhealth.org

Self-Harm

Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences. It is not an attempt to die and it is not a suicide attempt, however, self-harm may lead to unintentional death. People who self-injure often need to learn alternative coping strategies (often in counselling or therapy) before they are able to stop self-harming. Self-harm can take many forms and some people will use more than one method.

Warning Signs that suggest someone you know may be harming themselves:

- Unexplained or poorly explained cuts, burns, bruises, or scratches, especially on their arms, legs or stomach.
- Wearing clothing that isn't appropriate for the weather or situation but covers most of their body (for example, long sleeves and pants on a very hot day).
- Hoarding razors/knives and other objects that could be used for self-injury.

Teenmentalhealth.org

Suicide

Suicide is the biggest killer of young people, male and female, under 35 in the UK. Most people who attempt suicide have a mental illness and effectively treating that mental illness is one of the most important steps in reducing the risk of dying by suicide.

Warning Signs

- Intense hopelessness or sadness
- Preoccupation with death
- Talking about what it will be like when they're gone
- Giving away valued possessions
- Loss of interest in regular activities
- Withdrawal from family and friends

Papyrus UK

Samaritans

If you or someone you know are having persistent thoughts about suicide, this is a signal that help is needed. Confide in a family member, trusted friend or mentor and seek help as soon as possible from your student health service. If you or a friend are feeling overwhelmed by suicidal thoughts, go (or take your friend) to a hospital emergency room immediately. Remember that most people who have severe and persistent thoughts of suicide do not die by suicide because **help is available**.

Eating Disorders

BEAT, the UK's eating disorder charity report that approximately 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder and cite the most common disorders as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder (BED), eliminating EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified).

Symptoms:

- Becoming so focused on your weight and eating habits that it interferes with your emotions, your thoughts, your behaviour, and all aspects of your life.
- Depending on the particular disorder, you might:
  - Use unhealthy strategies to try to reduce your weight.
  - Feel out-of-control when you eat.
  - Base most of your self-esteem and self-worth on how you look or how much you weigh.
  - Feel depressed and unhappy most of the time.

BEAT

Anorexia Bulimia Care

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar Disorder affects approximately 1% of people over the course of their lives and often begins before age 25. Someone with Bipolar Disorder has both major depressive episodes and manic or hypomanic episodes.

Symptoms:

A **Major Depressive Episode** must last at least 2 weeks, where you've felt sad or depressed most of the day, almost every day. You might also experience most of the following symptoms:

- Eating much more or much less than normal.
- Sleeping much more or much less than normal.
- Moving restlessly or barely moving at all.
- Feeling really tired and lacking energy.
- Losing feelings of pleasure or enjoyment.
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, or guilty.
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions.
- Losing interest in activities you usually enjoy.
- Having thoughts of death and dying, including suicidal thoughts and plans.
- Attempting suicide.

A **Manic Episode** that lasts at least one week, where your mood has been extremely elevated or irritable and you are much more active and energetic than usual. You will also experience most of the following symptoms:

- Feeling really confident, like you can do anything (even if it's impossible).
- Feeling like you don't need to sleep, and not getting much sleep.
- Feeling super talkative, like there's a buildup of words inside you that need to get out, and speaking much more and more quickly than usual.
- Feeling like your thoughts are racing and jumping from one idea to another really quickly.
- Feeling easily distracted by small and unimportant details.
- Feeling motivated to move around and get things done, often without accomplishing goals.
- Feeling like nothing can go wrong, even when you do really risky things, like having unprotected sex, using drugs, speeding, or blowing all your money.
- Experiencing delusions and (fixed false beliefs) and/or hallucinations

These symptoms need to be substantial and persistent, preventing you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships and are not due to an obvious cause.

Teenmentalhealth.org

Panic Disorder

Panic Disorder affects approximately 2% of people between the ages of 15 and 24.

Symptoms:

Intense uncontrollable panic attacks that occur for no obvious reason. Panic attacks are intense feelings of fear that are at their worst for about 10 minutes. They may include:

- Racing heart.
- Sweating, chills, or hot flashes.
- Trembling or shaking.
- Feeling like you can't breathe or like you're choking.
- Pain in your chest.
- Nausea.
- Feeling dizzy or faint.
- Feeling like you're not in your own body, like you're watching yourself freak out.
- Numbness or tingling.
- Fear that you're going to lose control, go crazy, or even die.

You may worry about having another panic attack and avoid places that would be difficult to escape preventing you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships and are not due to an obvious cause.

Having panic attacks does not mean you have Panic Disorder. For more information visit teenmentalhealth.org

Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Generalised Anxiety Disorder affects approximately 9% of people over their lifetime, affecting twice as many women as men.

Symptoms:

Excessive and persistent worry about many different things that last at least several weeks at a time, and usually for several months. You will also experience most of the following symptoms:

- Restlessness, feeling on edge.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Trouble falling asleep.
- Trembling or twitching.
- Hot flashes.
- Nausea.
- Light headedness.
- Going to the bathroom often.
- Being easily startled.
- Anticipating the worst outcome for any situation.
- Excessive concerns and worries about usual daily activities.

These symptoms need to be substantial and persistent, preventing you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships and are not due to an obvious cause. But remember – anxiety is not the same as the stress-response.

Teenmentalhealth.org

Social Anxiety Disorder

Social Anxiety Disorder affects approximately 4% of people between the ages of 15 and 24.

Symptoms:

- Intense fear of social situations where people could judge you or you could feel embarrassed that lasts at least 6 months.
- Avoiding these social situations whenever possible.
- Fear or anxiety is much stronger than it should be for the type of threat.

These symptoms need to be substantial and persistent, preventing you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships and are not due to an obvious cause.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) affects approximately 1-2% of people in the UK during their lifetime. It often begins in late childhood for boys and slightly later for girls.

Teenmentalhealth.org

Symptoms:

Someone with OCD experiences obsessions, compulsions, or both, which can cause a lot of distress, take up a lot of time, and prevent you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships. These symptoms need to be substantial and persistent and are much more than being tidy, careful, precise and super-organised.

Obsessions are frequently-occurring thoughts that feel out of your control and cause you significant distress and anxiety. They may or may not be realistic. Some examples include:

- Contamination by germs.
- Doubt about whether a particular action was performed (e.g., was the front door locked?)
- Having things in a particular order.
- Impulses to commit a violent act.
- And more.

Compulsions are repetitive and frequent behaviours or rituals. Although compulsions are performed as a way to decrease the anxiety caused by an obsession, they actually make the obsession worse in the long-term. Compulsions are very difficult to resist. Some examples include:

- Washing or cleaning.
- Checking if something was done.
- Putting things in a specific order.
- Counting objects.
- Repeating actions.
- Asking for reassurance.

Psychosis

Psychosis occurs in a range of disorders that affect 3-4% of people over the course of their lifetime and usually begins before 25. It may be transient and some people recover well with early intervention, but some will have continuing difficulties.

Symptoms:

- **Delusions:** Beliefs that may be bizarre or untrue and beyond culturally accepted norms.
- **Hallucinations:** Hearing, seeing, or otherwise sensing things that cannot be heard, seen or sensed by others.
- Other symptoms:
  - Disorganised thinking or speech that is difficult to understand or follow
  - Abnormal movement (repetitive or strange movements) or lack of movement (completely rigid)
  - Lack of emotions
  - Loss of goal-directed or purposeful activity
  - Loss of speech
  - Loss of pleasure
  - Lack of interest in social interaction

NHS website

Hearing Voices

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

It is estimated that up to 3 in 100 people may develop PTSD at some stage in life. If you live in a dangerous environment (such as a war zone) you are more likely to develop PTSD than if you do not.

Symptoms:

These symptoms need to be substantial, persistent, and can occur as a result of a stressful event or situation (either short or long lasting) of exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone. These symptoms should not be confused with the acute stress response that naturally occurs after an intense and threatening stressor. PTSD is not the result of common challenging circumstances, such as, parental divorce or loss of a job. It has become fashionable to label almost any difficult negative life situation as “traumatic”, which is not true. Note that you cannot develop PTSD without experiencing or witnessing (or to a lesser extent, learning about) a traumatic event. However, it is important to remember that the majority of people who experience or witness a traumatic event like this will not develop PTSD.

Experiencing intrusive symptoms, such as:

- Recurring, involuntary, and intrusive memory of the event.
- Recurrent upsetting dreams related to the event.
- Flashbacks to the event.
- Intense or prolonged emotional and/or physical distress when exposed to something that reminds you of the event.
- Avoidance of anything that reminds you of the event.
- Difficulty remembering aspects of the event, distorted and unrealistic thoughts and beliefs about the event, feeling detached or disinterested, excess negative emotions and lack of positive emotions.
- Angry outbursts, reckless or self-destructive behaviour, hyper-awareness of your surroundings, and difficulty concentrating or sleeping.

These symptoms are severe and last more than a month and make it difficult for you to function at school, at work, and in your relationships.

Other Areas of Concern

Drug and Alcohol Misuse

Drugs and alcohol are misused by many people, which can impact not only themselves but the other people in their lives. If someone in your family struggles with alcohol or drug abuse, you may be at risk for misuse.

The following can indicate signs of substance use disorder:

- Craving alcohol or drugs
- Drinking more alcohol or taking more drugs than you mean to
- Difficulty reducing the amount of alcohol or drugs that you use
- Spending a lot of time trying to get, use, or recover from alcohol or drugs
- Not doing what you're supposed to do at home, school, or work because of alcohol or drug use
- Continuing to drink or do drugs, even when it causes or worsens social, physical, or psychological problems
- Consistently choosing alcohol or drug use over other social, work, or entertainment activities
- Using alcohol or drugs in situations where it could cause you harm (such as getting into a vehicle when you or someone else has been taking drugs or drinking)
- Needing to drink more alcohol or take more drugs than you used to in order to get the same effect
- Experiencing withdrawal from alcohol or drugs

Even without the presence of these signs, drug use can be harmful for a variety of reasons; there can be an impact on your physical and/or mental health; increased vulnerability; changes in your behaviour that may result in contact with the police or disciplinary action at university.

Talk to Frank

Gambling

Although many people are able to gamble without experiencing problems, some students are gambling dangerous amounts of money, both in casinos and online.

Warning signs of a gambling problem:

- Ongoing money problems because of gambling.
- Constantly borrowing money from friends.
- Acting secretive or lying about gambling.
- Choosing to gamble instead of spending time with friends or family.
- Nervousness or anxiousness, usually about money.
- Avoiding friends to whom you owe money.
- Constantly talking about gambling or money.
- Relationship problems because of gambling or money losses from gambling.
- Neglecting your responsibilities due to gambling.

NHS website

GAMCARE

Body Image and Confidence

Body image is the perception that a person has of their **physical** self, and the thoughts and feelings that result from this perception. Just like everybody has mental health, everybody has a body image which can be positive or negative.

Appearance Ideals can be a threat to our body image (take a look at this animation for appearance ideals through history). There is no such thing as an ideal body image. Feeling comfortable in your body is what matters, not what someone else thinks your body should be like.

If you find yourself saying derogatory things to or about yourself, ask yourself whether you would say the same thing to a friend? Next time you catch yourself saying something negative about yourself think about reframing your narrative and focus on what your body **can do** as oppose to just how it looks.

Many thanks to Rethink Mental Illness: Co-Production Team 2018 for content on Body Image.

If you are struggling with your body image and would like more information speak to your GP or visit:

- BDD Foundation
- BEAT

Grief and Loss

Everyone experiences loss at some point in their life. Although grief can be very painful, it is a natural and normal part of life. There is no right way to grieve – everyone grieves in their own way. For some people, the grieving process may last a few weeks or months until they have time to adjust and adapt to the loss. Other people may not show any outward signs of grief, and appear to move on quite quickly. Still others may grieve for much longer periods of time and need professional help to move on.

If you are grieving and the pain that you feel doesn't weaken or diminish as time goes on, consider talking to your doctor about how you're feeling. You may benefit from talking to a trained mental health professional.

- NHS website

Trauma

Trauma is the term used for a substantially threatening and upsetting event or events in a person's life that start to greatly affect them, either physically or emotionally. Some people experiencing traumatic events develop ongoing problems or even a mental disorder such as post traumatic stress disorder, but many who face such events do not. Support from trusted others is important for those who experience trauma. We know that it is a major factor in many people's mental health and wellbeing, and examples would include:

- Accidents, war, natural disaster
- Sexual abuse
- Physical assault
- Domestic abuse
- Neglect

People experiencing abuse as children are three times more likely to seek support from mental health services. However, people who are most distressed and disabled over long periods of their lives are usually those with an accumulation of traumas. Trauma can be connected to many symptoms, behaviours and diagnoses, including self harm or drug and alcohol problems. It can impact on relationships and also the capacity to trust others, including those who are trying to help.

- Section on abusive relationships
- Victim Support
- NSPCC website
- NAPAC website

Treatment

Feeling sad, worried, stressed, or any other negative emotion is not the same as experiencing a mental illness. These experiences do not require medication and you may find that you benefit from support from your family and friends. The section on Managing Stress can also help you to learn some healthy and adaptive coping and self-care strategies. However, if you find these experiences overwhelming or feel unable to manage them, you may benefit from speaking to your university counselling service.

If you are concerned about your mental health you should speak to your GP, who will be able to guide your through the treatment options, or speak to a mental health practitioner or counsellor at your university.

See page 22 for a refresher on the difference between mental distress, mental health problems, and mental illnesses.

Remember, different disorders have different evidence-based treatments.
Just because something works well for one mental illness does not mean it works for all mental illnesses.

What is the purpose of treatment for a mental illness?

The purpose or goal of treatment for a mental illness is usually not to cure the illness, as that's not always possible. Instead, treatment has three goals:

- Decrease the symptoms the person is experiencing.
- Improve the person's ability to function in their daily life (e.g., at school/work, at home, in relationships).
- Prevent the symptoms from coming back.

What are the different types of treatment?

There are three broad types of treatment, all of which act on the brain by helping to restore brain function:

1. Talking therapies (e.g., Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or Interpersonal Therapy [IPT])
2. Social (e.g., Social Skills Workshops or reducing drug and alcohol intake)
3. Medical (e.g., Medications).

These treatments can be used on their own or in combination, depending on the specific disorder and the person being treated.

How do I make an informed decision?

The type of treatment you receive will depend on you and the disorder being treated. Your doctor should discuss with you the different evidence-based options but you should come prepared with a list of questions to ask to ensure you're making the right decision for you.

Check out this guide to help you get started.

How to tell someone you have a mental illness

Choose somewhere quiet without interruptions where you can have a relaxed conversation. Do something relaxing. Sometimes it's easier to talk openly when the focus isn't just on the conversation you're having. You might like to suggest going for a walk together, or invite your friend round for a drink or a meal.

"Often going on a walk with my friends helps. We can talk for hours walking around the woods and the setting also serves as a fun thing to do when the weather is nice."

Make sure you have enough time to chat. If you have a short amount of time to talk this can put more pressure on the conversation. Remember that not all friends or family members need to be part of your support system; you should never feel obligated to tell someone about your mental illness just because they're in your life. This decision is entirely up to you.

How to have the conversation

Be prepared: you might find it helpful to write down some of the things you want to say, either just to prompt yourself, or as a letter to give to your friend.

Start the conversation by telling the person why you are telling them. For example, "I learned something about what I've been experiencing lately and I wanted to share it with you to help you understand where I've been coming from these past few weeks."

Remember that the other person may not know much about mental illness and may have some misconceptions about what it really means. Do your best to educate calmly (and it's a good idea to do a little of your own research first). You can also share where they can find out more. For example teenmentalhealth.org and Student Minds.

Let the person have some time to think (and do their own research, if they're so inclined) after your conversation. Don't expect them to understand right away, especially if they're not familiar with mental illness.

For more information on looking after yourself and others visit the Student Minds website.

Visit the Getting Help section of the guide on pg 68 for places to go to access support

Special thanks to Dr Steve Wright, Consultant & Medical Lead in Early Intervention Psychiatry, Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust & Dr Daniel Whitney, Trust Grade Doctor, Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust, for their assistance with this section.

Sexual Health

University or college may be a time when you choose to explore, or further explore, your own sexuality. Making safe and informed decisions about how you engage in sexual activity can help increase the likelihood of positive experiences and decrease your risk for negative experiences.

Consent

The age of consent for sexual activity in England and Wales is 16. Those under 18 cannot consent to those in a position of power/care/trust. This protects people up to the age of 18 from those in positions of trust.

What is consent?

Consent is where all parties involved are safe from emotional, social, and physical harm. Consent is a critical part of positive sexual encounters, which includes sharing and/or posting of sexual images and/or videos online. A person has the right to say 'no' at any time and be heard.

For more information on consent take a look at this YouTube video from The Mix.

How to know if you've received consent

The only way to be certain is to ask someone if they would like to engage in whatever sexual activity you're proposing and they say yes. When the degree or type of sexual activity changes, you can also check that your partner continues to consent by asking "is this okay?" What someone wears or their past behaviour does not imply consent.

- You have **not received consent** if your partner is drunk, high, or unconscious.
- You have **not received consent** if your partner is under the legal age of consent.
- You have **not received consent** if you have used force, intimidation, manipulation, or your authority to have sex with someone – even if they do not explicitly say no.
- You have **not received consent** if your partner says no (in any respect), pushes you away (or any other action that implies they are not agreeing to the act), or resists in any way.
- You have **not received consent** if a partner who previously agreed to sexual activity is no longer interested in participating.
- You have **not received consent** if your partner is silent or unresponsive.

Consent within a relationship

Consent is **still required in a relationship**. Each partner has the right to decline sexual activity whenever they choose. Consent is never waived in a relationship.

Click here for examples of myths around consent.

Choosing a method of protection

There are many different types of protection you can use to ensure safer sex. Making sure you have all of the necessary information (and discussing with your doctor/ sexual health clinic, where appropriate) can help you make the right decision for you. Remember that birth control and protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are two different things. If you are not using condoms, you will not be protected against STIs. And even using a condom does not guarantee you 100% protection against STIs, so make a plan to keep yourself safe and keep sex fun.

Click here for more information about types of contraception.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Sexually transmitted infections can cause serious health problems if left untreated. When you enter into a sexual relationship, however brief, it's important to decide together how to best avoid the likelihood of contracting an STI. Your risk of contracting an STI increases when you don't take protective measures, particularly when drug and/or alcohol use impact your ability to make safe decisions.

Click here for more information on STIs.

Internet pornography and relationships

Widespread consumption of internet pornography is a relatively new social phenomenon and there is much that we don't know yet about how this will impact the sexual experiences of individuals. Some research has shown that frequent use of internet pornography can become habitual and create difficulties in achieving intimacy with human partners. Other research suggests that use of internet pornography can be a component of a healthy sex life. What is important is how use of internet pornography affects you and your partner(s).

Ask yourself what your thoughts and feelings are about pornography and what role it should play (if any) in your intimate relationships. If you are in an exclusive relationship, discuss where you stand with your partner and trust your gut instincts. If it makes you feel bad, then it's not okay. If it is something that you choose to use, make sure that it's balanced with healthy relationships and openness to real people.

Unintended pregnancy

Vaginal intercourse may result in pregnancy, even when using birth control. If you find yourself or your partner pregnant unexpectedly, it is important for you both to know that there are options that can support decision-making about whether to continue with the pregnancy or not.

If you have been raped and find out you are pregnant, it is important to talk through the options with somebody you trust. This may include visiting a SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre), speaking to your GP, calling a rape crisis centre or telling a friend or family member.

Abortion:
Abortion is the ending of a pregnancy and can be done at a hospital or at an abortion clinic. It's also sometimes known as a termination. The pregnancy is ended either by taking medications or having a minor surgical procedure. Most abortions in England, Wales and Scotland are carried out before 24 weeks of pregnancy.

NHS website

Adoption:
Adoption is a way of providing a permanent home and family to a child who can't be brought up by their birth family.

Adoption UK

Parenting:
If you choose to raise and parent the child, it is important that you visit your doctor to receive prenatal care as soon as possible.

For more information on things to consider when pregnant visit Sexwise.

Questions to consider when making your decision:

- Are you involved with the other person? Are you in a stable relationship? If not, does that matter to you?
- What are your responsibilities? (e.g., school, work, family, time)
- What are your goals in life?
- What kind of life will you be able to provide for a child?
- What are the financial realities? Can you afford to have a child? Are you able to find a job that pays what you'll need to make with your current qualifications/education?
- What are your personal beliefs and values (religious and otherwise)?
- Do you have the time to raise a child and study?
- Do you have the social support of family and friends? Is your family nearby and willing to help out?
- What are you willing to give up? (e.g., your current social life, living in a certain area, staying in university, etc.)

There are many aspects of your life that will have to be considered as you deal with this important issue. Trying to sort out everything on your own can be very difficult. You may want to contact your student health clinic and student counselling office to get unbiased help and support. Although avoiding the situation can be tempting, remember that some options are only possible in the early stages of your pregnancy. Avoiding the reality of the situation can result in you having to make a decision you're not comfortable with simply because there are no other options left.

Take a look at this guide for further useful points to consider visit Sexwise.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is sexual activity that occurs without consent. This includes all unwanted forms of sexual activity, including the taking and sharing of sexual images or videos, verbal threats, and acts, such as grabbing/fondling, kissing, and rape. Although the media largely focuses on the sexual assault of women, men can also be sexually assaulted, as can people of any sexual orientation or gender identity.

If you have been subject to sexual violence:

- Try to find somewhere safe.
- See if a friend or someone you trust can be with you.
- Remember: you are not to blame and you are not alone.
- If you don't feel like talking to a friend or family member yet, contact your nearest Rape Crisis Centre.
- If you need urgent medical care or attention, call 999 (or 112 from a mobile) and ask for an ambulance, or go straight to your nearest Accident & Emergency department.
- Find more information about Sexual Assault Referral Centres (or SARCs) here. Or if you're thinking of reporting to the police, find more information here.

If someone tells you they've been sexually assaulted:

Be mindful of the language you are using, believe what they are telling you, be patient and don't push them to tell you anything before they are ready. You can say:

- "I believe you."
- "It's not your fault."
- "You're not alone."
- "You are very strong by telling me this".
- "What do you need? What can I do?"

Stay calm. Panicking will not help the person feel better and may make them less willing to disclose further.

Be supportive. Don't try to fix the problem or make promises that you can't keep. Remember that they're telling you because they trust you – respect that trust.

Don't pry for details but listen if they're disclosed. Depending on your relationship and how much the person has been able to process what happened, asking for specific details about what happened may do more harm than good. The police may need to know this information but unless your friend chooses to tell you, you do not.

Encourage them to seek help. Encourage the person to seek medical attention if the assault was recent and to report to the authorities, if they feel comfortable. If not, do not report what happened to the police without your friend's consent. The person may feel more comfortable if you accompany them to A&E or to the police station.

Information on supporting someone who has experienced sexual violence.

Information on possible effects of sexual assault.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity – Figuring Ourselves Out

Our experiences around sexuality and gender play an important role in our identity development. This sense of self can be complex and multidimensional; depending on where you may have grown up, your cultural or religious backgrounds, or messages you've received from media and your community. You may be comfortable or uncomfortable in some of these domains, and this level of comfort can change over time. For example, you might have certain ideas about what it means to be part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) community. Being LGBTQ+ is not wrong or bad, it just is. And, as you explore different parts of your sexuality and gender identity, it is okay to be uncertain. This is all normal. You will grow and develop as a person over time, and learn more about yourself. Keep listening to, and trying to understand, your feelings.

When it comes to sexuality and gender, we are all uniquely diverse. Sexuality and gender exist on a spectrum. If your gender identity is different than your sex, you may identify as transgender. If your attractions are toward the same gender as yourself or more than one gender, you may identify as gay, bisexual, pansexual or queer. If you have no attractions to others, you may identify as asexual. Please note, you could have more than one label that fits you! Everyone has a gender identity and a sexual orientation.

How do sex, gender identity and sexual orientation differ?

These terms can often be confused:

- Your **sex** is defined by your physical characteristics (i.e. what sex organs you have).
- Your **gender identity** is your deeply felt sense of gender, regardless of your physical characteristics (these don't always 'match' up!).
- Your **sexual orientation** is defined by who you are attracted to (romantically, emotionally, physically).

Terms/ definitions:

LGBTQ+: Acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer", an inclusive term for the community.

Intersex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Bisexual: A person who is attracted to two or more genders.

Sexual Orientation: Our attraction to others romantically, emotionally, physically and sexually.

Transgender: A word to describe someone whose gender identity does not align with their anatomical sex (e.g. a person born with male anatomy, but whose internal sense of self has always been female). Some transgender people may take steps to align their anatomy with their identity, like hormones or surgery, but not every transgender person will do this the same way, or feel this is necessary. The important part is to respect how a transgender person self-identifies.

Cisgender: A word to describe someone whose gender identity and anatomical sex align (e.g. a person born with female anatomy, and whose internal sense of self is female).

Gender Identity: Our deeply felt sense of our gender, of being female, male, or neither. Sometimes our gender identity aligns with our anatomical sex, and sometimes it does not.

Pansexual: A person who is attracted to people regardless of gender, physical body, or identity. This can be used to describe sexuality that is fluid.

Heterosexual: A person attracted to an opposite sex. This is often referred to as straight.

Queer: A term used by some in the LGBTQ+ community to refer to themselves. Historically, this term was used as an insult, and many LGBTQ+ people still consider it derogatory. It should be avoided unless a person identifies themselves as queer, and is used in a positive context.

Asexual: A person who experiences little to no physical or sexual attraction to others. An asexual person may still want relationships of an emotional nature.

Lesbian: A woman who is attracted to other women.

Gay: A person attracted to the same sex. Men and women can identify as gay.

Homophobia: The fear, hatred, ignorance and stigma towards people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual and queer.

Transphobia: The fear, hatred, ignorance and stigma towards people who are transgender.

Biphobia: The specific stigma bisexual people face in our cultures and communities.

Coming out and finding community

Coming out is the process of sharing your identity with others. This is a personal process and different for everyone. You may choose to tell some people but not others. You may choose which places and people feel safe, and which do not. This information should be yours to control. Share this information with people you trust, who respect and accept you. If you are not ready to talk about this, you may want to find a confidential support group to hear about the experiences of others, or find community.

If you are comfortable with yourself, you may still want to find community and people of similar experiences, especially if you feel alone or like you are the only LGBTQ+ person you know. There is still a need for working together to fight homophobia and transphobia in our society. You may have local support groups, LGBTQ+ Pride events, or a university society in your area.

- Find LGBTQ+ media, books, and materials that represent you.
- Make sure your school or workplace has LGBTQ+ policies that protect you and others. If these do not exist, they should. Find out who can make that happen.
- You deserve to feel safe, like you can bring your whole self to your home, university, work and community.
- Build support: come out to the people you trust the most. As your supportive network builds, come out to others as you feel comfortable.
- Remember LGBTQ+ people are found in every race, culture, religion, level of ability and population across the world. The community is very diverse.
- Join an LGBTQ+ support group. If there are none in your community, there are many online.
- There may be people who do not accept you. This is not your fault. Those people have to work through their discomfort, stigma, homophobia or transphobia.
- You don't have to figure yourself out right away, and you may find new language that better describes who you are as you go. It's okay to change the way you describe your feelings.

You are not alone. Never doubt your own self worth.

Being LGBTQ+ and mental health

Historically and even today, LGBTQ+ people face higher rates of discrimination, judgment, and stigma. They could be treated badly by others because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This could look like bullying, name-calling, physical violence, sexual harassment, or other forms of prejudice. This is also known as homophobia and transphobia. It is the fear, hatred and ignorance of different sexualities and gender identities. This can put a huge amount of stress on you. It can make people feel shame or guilt about their identity, even though there is nothing wrong with being LGBTQ+.

It's important to know that in the UK, you have the right to live free of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. If this is happening in your environment, it's important to seek help and support.

Click here for more information and support.

Having a gender identity that is different from your anatomical sex is not a mental illness. Neither is having a sexual orientation that isn't heterosexual.

Gender identity and mental health

Transgender people may feel significant distress and discomfort as a result of their gender identity not matching their sex, or because others fail to see or recognise their gender identity. This is known as gender dysphoria, and can sometimes be experienced as symptoms of anxiety, depression or difficulty interacting in society.

Some transgender people will address the dysphoria by taking steps to transition. Transition is the process of aligning the way you are seen and move through life with your already existing identity. This may include changing the name and pronouns that you use, or changing the way you express your gender (with clothing, hairstyles, etc.). Some trans people may undertake medical intervention such as hormone therapy or surgeries to align their physical anatomy with their identity, or they may legally change their name or gender marker.

Transition is an individual process and each transgender person may undertake different steps, based on what they require to feel more comfortable, or help their dysphoria. It is important to remember that it is a person's self-identity that determines who they are, not what steps they have taken (or not taken) in their transition.

If you are experiencing gender dysphoria, it's important to reach out and seek support. If you know someone who is transitioning, you can be supportive by accepting their self-identity and validating their identity by using their chosen names and pronouns, or by shutting down transphobia from others.

Special thanks to The Youth Project for their assistance with this section.

Relationships

You do and will have all kinds of relationships in your life – friendships, romantic relationships, professional relationships, family relationships, and passing acquaintances. Although the relationships themselves will differ, they all have one thing in common: healthy relationships involve mutual respect. This means that not only should you treat the people in your life with respect – for their thoughts, ideas, and emotions, and for their privacy – but you should expect that same respect in return. If someone fails to treat you with the respect you give them, chances are that relationship is not very healthy and probably is not something you need in your life.

Friendships

It's common to worry that you won't make friends at university. However, it is important to remember that everybody will be in the same position as you. Very few first year students will know anybody else at their university, so it is likely that they'll be experiencing the same concerns. In fact, in a survey, more than half of students found it easier to make friends than they had expected.

How to be social without drinking

Freshers' week and university life in general is often associated with the pressure to drink from friends, and the misperception that you need to drink to have fun. This needn't be the case.

You don't need to order alcoholic drinks at the bar - if you would rather stick with soft drinks, do so and don't let people make you doubt your decision. If nights out are something you would rather not fill your week with there are plenty of alternatives. In recent years, many university Students' Unions have begun to organise freshers' week events which are neither associated with nightclubs nor alcohol. The preconception that university life involves going out and drinking too much is a myth.

"I had never been a big drinker - I just liked to have a drink now and again with friends (sometimes to make me more confident). But, because of the drinking culture that surrounds university, I became very anxious about not being able to drink. I thought I would be the only one at uni that didn't drink. I thought everyone would think I was boring, and therefore that I would not make any friends."

Student Minds Blogger

Romantic relationships

There are many different types of romantic relationships – from single encounters/one night stands to casual dating to committed relationships. There is no one right type of relationship – it just has to feel right to all of the people involved. Sometimes people will engage in relationships with very different expectations, for example to engage in sex and sexual activities or not. What you expect and what the other person expects may be quite different. Be alert to that possibility and if you become aware that expectations are different, it is important to have a respectful and considerate conversation about those expectations.

Long-distance relationships

For some people, starting university can also mean being separated from their partner. Whether you've moved away for university, your partner has, or you both have, learning to navigate this new relationship dynamic can take some work. It's not enough to rely on spending time together to keep you close because that's just not as possible as it was before.

Key components of a healthy long-distance relationship:

- Trust in each other's behaviour.
- Respect for each other's time.
- Honesty about your thoughts and activities.
- Clear expectations for how the relationship will work (including details as specific as how often you'll talk on the phone).
- Open and regular communication about your thoughts, emotions, life events, and daily routines.
- Familiarity and involvement (to some extent) with your new friends (e.g., they know the person exists and various details of their personality/life and vice versa).
- Face-to-face visits whenever possible (more than just regular video chats, which are also helpful!)
- An end goal. Do you plan to live in the same city when you've finished university?
- Are there future plans to be close geographically? If you don't plan to ever live in the same place as your partner, you may want to consider whether you want to invest the time into maintaining this relationship.

Breakups

Not every relationship works out. Breakups can be hard, even if you're the one who instigated the split. They are also common and normal. Most people experience one or more relationship breakups over their life. If you're struggling, cut yourself a little slack. Moving on can take some time – here are some tips that might help:

Tips

- **Let yourself grieve.** It's okay to feel sad about what happened. Regardless of who initiated the breakup, you're still experiencing a loss. Grief is natural. Give yourself a chance to imagine life without that person. That said, it's totally okay if you're not grieving – everyone (and every relationship) is different.

- **Deal with the angry phase.** It's totally normal to feel angry but letting it fester inside will only make you feel worse. Feel your anger. Express it in a reasonable manner. And then let yourself move on.

- **Write down your feelings.** After a breakup, your feelings can change pretty rapidly. Writing them down can be a good way to make sense of what it is you're feeling. You can even write a pretend letter to your ex, if you feel there are things you need to express and you can't say to them face-to-face.

- **Let yourself have time to think.** Sometimes breakups are especially tough because we learn that the person we were dating is not who we thought they were. This can be upsetting, but also liberating. Consider whether you actually miss your ex, or whether you miss who you wanted them to be. Having a realistic picture of your ex, flaws and all, can make moving on much easier.

- **Avoid comparisons.** Try not to worry about how your ex is handling the breakup; focus on yourself and what you need. Everyone has their own way of coping with loss (e.g., talking to a friend, focusing on work, partying) and you and your ex may deal with the breakup differently.

- **Talk to your friends and family.** Talking about how you're feeling to someone who cares about you can give you a chance to get your emotions out in the open or make sense of what happened, which may help you move on.

- **Get out! Hiding away may only make you feel worse.** Getting out of your house or apartment can have a major impact on your mood - whether you're going for a walk, going out with friends, or playing a sport.

- **Try not to use alcohol or drugs for support.** You might feel better in the short-term, but when you come back down, you'll probably feel worse. Take a look at pg 32 for information on drug and alcohol use.

- **Get to know YOU.** Take this time to get to know yourself better. It's easy to get caught up in being "we" and forget about "me." Figure out what you enjoy. A breakup is a great time to try something new. Launch yourself into a new hobby or sport that you've always wanted to try!

Learn from Josh's story

I've always been more of a relationship kind of guy. I like having a steady girlfriend I can count on. Anyway, I was with this girl from high school for two years before we both moved on to university. She got into UBC and I got into the U of A. I was really upset that we didn't get into the same school. It obviously meant that our plans to move out together were going down the crapper. But we decided to make it work through a long-distance relationship. We had planned to see each other on every long weekend and holidays. We talked online for hours every night, but it just wasn't the same. She decided that it wasn't working out and it was actually interfering with her grades, so she dumped me. I felt so helpless!! I couldn't eat or sleep and didn't want to do anything.

What changed the situation?

My roommates were on an Ultimate Frisbee team and as they headed for practice one night, one of their team members called with a broken leg and had to pull out for the rest of the season. I really wasn't interested in playing at all but my roommates said if I covered for their missing team member they'd pay for groceries for the next week. Although I hadn't been eating much lately, I figured they must really need me to make an offer like that. So I went to practice with them that night. Surprisingly, I didn't even think of my ex-girlfriend for the entire evening. After the next practice I was really starting to have fun. We went to a pub after practices and I started to learn how much more fun it was hanging out with friends without needing a girlfriend by my side. In fact, girls were the furthest thing from my mind for a while!

My advice to someone going through a breakup

You can't force someone to want to be with you. We all have different priorities. If someone doesn't want to be with you, why would you want to waste your time wanting to be with them? There's more to life, so get out and have fun.

Abusive relationships

Abusive relationships occur whenever one person tries to dominate and control the other person, this may be though violence, intimidation, threats, manipulation, emotional abuse or by controlling money or other resources.

Take a look at pg 34 for information on sexual violence and consent within relationships.

Warning signs of abuse

- Your partner is violent and may yell at you, push you, or hit you.
- Your partner isolates you, limiting your time with family and friends.
- Your partner is very jealous and accuses you of things you did not do.
- Your partner tries to control many or all aspects of your life (e.g., your decisions, your finances, your clothes, your friends, etc.)
- Your partner demands that you have sex, even if you say no.
- Your partner threatens to hurt themselves, you, or your friends/family if you do not do what they want.
- You feel you have to always act a certain way to please your partner (i.e., walking on eggshells).
- Your partner blames you for their actions.
- Your partner uses intimidation to make you feel afraid.
- Your partner criticises you to make you feel ashamed.
- Your partner calls you names and ridicules you.
- Your partner makes jokes to demean or humiliate you in front of others.

If you experience any of these warning signs, speak to someone you trust. People often feel ashamed to admit that they are being abused. **Know that this isn't your fault.** No one deserves to be abused. It's tempting to make excuses for your partner when you care about them. Unfortunately, those excuses won't make the abuse stop. Leaving an abusive partner can be really frightening. It may also be risky for you, especially if you live together. Have someone (e.g., a friend or family member) with you and consult the police, a shelter for domestic violence, or help line, if you decide to leave.

If you realise that you have acted in an abusive way towards your partner, counselling is important. Resist the temptation to be ashamed and ignore the problem. There are completely confidential organisations that can help you work through your issues. Never physically attack your partner. Domestic violence is a criminal offence and conviction could leave you with a criminal record that could impact the rest of your life. It's never too late to get help and admitting that you have a problem is the first step to solving it.

Click here for more information on dating violence.

If you are afraid that you might be at risk for violence, please call 999.

Leaving an abusive relationship

Making the decision to leave an abusive relationship can be really difficult. Your partner may apologise and promise you that it won't happen again. Unfortunately, research has found that it usually does, and often the abuse gets worse over time. Although you may still love your partner, making your decision even harder, you don't deserve to be abused. If you stay in an abusive relationship, it's very unlikely that it will improve. It may be hard or embarrassing to tell friends or family what is happening, but the safest thing is to have someone with you when you or your partner leaves, while you transition out of the relationship.

If you break up with an abusive partner and are living in residence or on-campus, it is very important to let residence security know if you fear for your safety. It might be hard to tell people what has happened, but at the very least, the people in your life should know that the relationship has ended. That way, your friends or accommodation will know not to tell your ex where you are or what you are doing.

Provide campus security with their picture so they are prepared. Report any threats or violence to the police. If you are living in the same accommodation as your ex it may be possible to get them removed, or it may be that you decide to find alternative living arrangements. Contact your university accommodation services for support.

If you are living off campus, make sure that your ex cannot enter your flat/house. If you don't feel comfortable telling your flatmates what happened, make sure they understand that your ex is absolutely not welcome in, nor should they be invited to any social events. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty for ending the relationship. If you feel like you cannot get away from your ex among your group of friends, consider taking a break, a vacation, or staying somewhere else for a while. You can also consider a restraining order, which can be obtained from criminal court or by contacting local police services.

You may also find it useful to contact a local domestic violence shelter. They will be able to help you prepare a plan to safely get out, particularly if you are living with your partner.

Be aware that the abuser might have access to your e-mail and banking information, so change all passwords and notify your bank. It also may be a good idea to change your phone number as most mobile phone companies are not able to block a single number.

Once you are out safely, consider seeking counselling to deal with the emotional and physical fallout of the relationship.

Learn from Sarah's story

"I was in love with this guy for three years. Then he was kicked out of school for selling drugs on campus and everything changed. He got really mean. I felt that I had to do whatever he wanted. He started calling me names and pushing me around. I told myself that he was just going through a bad stage, and that things would improve. I didn't complain because I didn't want him to break-up with me."

What changed the situation?

He had this "thing" about me not answering the phone in our apartment. One day when my boyfriend was in the shower the phone rang and I answered it. He came running out of the shower and ripped the phone right out of the wall and gave me a fat lip. A couple of days later I told my friend what had happened and her reaction was a reality check! I realised my relationship was NOT normal! So I left. It was not easy. He bought me flowers and called me constantly. I actually felt sorry for him and almost took him back, but I knew in my heart that he needed help and it was his problem, not mine. So I cut him off completely, which was really hard. But I am glad I did it.

My advice to someone in an abusive relationship

Get out! It will not get better and it may get worse. Don't make excuses or feel guilty about their behaviour. You have the possibility of a good life and healthy relationships in your future. Focus on where you can go, not where you have been.

Healthy conflict resolution

In every relationship – from family to friends to romantic relationships – you're going to sometimes have conflict. Conflict is not the end of the world and can even be healthy, provided you deal with it in respectful ways. Here are some suggestions:

Tips

- **Listen.** Listening well has to begin with an interest in what someone has to say and respect for their viewpoint. Listen to explore their perspective, not to gather evidence to support your own position. Pay attention to what they're saying verbally and nonverbally. Consider why they're upset or why they may have acted the way they did.
- **Don't interrupt.** Let the other person express his or her thoughts without jumping in or jumping to conclusions. Ask the same in return.
- **Be aware not only of what you say but also of how you say it.** Often other people are more aware of how we say something than they are of our actual words.
- **If the other person's reaction seems out of proportion with the situation, ask them if anything else is going on.** Our experiences shape how we interpret information and it may be that the other person is reacting to something that happened earlier that was either triggered by something you said or just has not yet resolved for them.
- **Acknowledge their feelings.** People are more likely to feel that you have heard what they are saying if their feelings are acknowledged.
- **Speak clearly.** Pause before you respond to ensure that what you say is actually what you want to say. It's easy to get caught up in the heat of the moment and blurt out something you don't really mean or later wish you hadn't said.
- **Give reasons.** Explain why you feel the way that you do. Giving someone reasons helps them understand where you are coming from and with time, they may understand your point.
- **Stay calm.** Raising your voice will only encourage the other person to raise their voice, which does nothing to further productive conversation.
- **Allow each other to cool down.** After the argument is over, give each other a little space. This is especially important if the other person did not get what they were hoping for out of the argument – they may need some space to calm down and deal with their frustration.
- **Take a break** if things get too heated or if the conversation keeps going in circles.
- **Remember, conflict isn't about winning.** "Winning" an argument is not the goal. Solving the problem is the goal. Conflict resolution often requires compromise.
- **What did you learn from the experience?** When things have cooled off, consider what triggered the argument and what you learned from what happened. Now that you know that, consider if or how you will change your behaviour in the future.

Living Situation

Your living situation may change as you begin this new phase of life. Regardless of whether you're living on or off campus, with or without flatmates, there will be aspects of your living situation that you'll need to navigate. Even if you continue to live at home, your relationship with your family members is likely to shift as you become more independent.

University Halls

Many first year students opt for living in university managed accommodation, where this is available. You may not know who your flatmates are going to be until you arrive which can be a bit daunting but you'll be surrounded by other students in the same situation as you. It is always worth considering all of your accommodation options and making a decision that feels most comfortable to you.

Living at home

If you've made the decision to live at home while you go to university, you may think that your living situation hasn't changed at all. Depending on the relationship you have with your family – that may be true! But for many families, their dynamics shift when someone starts university or college. This shift can make adjustments necessary for everyone.

Building trust with your parents

As you get older, the way you relate to your parents changes. You're no longer as dependent on them for food, shelter, safety, or guidance. **These changes can be hard on your parents and hard on you.** It's easy to get frustrated and feel like your parents are trying to be too involved in your new life. Your increased independence means that you don't need your parents as much as you used to and it's not always easy for them to let go. For some parents who have spent much of their time pushing obstacles out of their children's way or frequently intervening to help their child succeed, the expected autonomy that comes with university/college life can be a huge change. Your growing up can feel like a loss to them. Here are some ways you can make the process easier for both of you:

Respect - If you want them to respect you, then you have to respect them. Check out the Conflict Resolution tips below for some suggestions.

Talk - If you have something you need to talk about, tell them. Trust is built on open communication.

Follow through - If you agree to do something, do it and do it well. This builds trust and helps your parents see you as a responsible and competent adult.

Commuting to campus

Whether they're living at home or just off campus, many students choose to commute to university rather than live there full-time. Some students are fortunate enough to be within walking distance but more often than not, students need to either drive or take public transit to get to class.

Driving (or cycling) to campus

If you're planning to drive to campus, there are a few things you'll likely want to consider before classes start. First, where will you park? Is there a parking lot (or a bike rack) for students? How much does it cost? Other aspects to consider when driving include how long it will take you to get to campus; whether your classes will conflict with rush hour traffic; and how much petrol, parking, and car maintenance will contribute to your overall expenses. It's a good idea to do a "test run" of your route to campus before your classes start. Just make sure you coordinate your "test run" with the time you'll actually be heading to class.

Public transport

Public transport is a popular and often affordable way to get to class – although your options depend on where you live. If you're new to the area where you'll be attending university or college, it's a good idea to research your travel ahead of time rather than assuming that it's similar to where you lived previously. Many smaller cities may only have a bus system (compared to larger cities with tubes, trams, and more) and some small towns may have no public transport system at all. Questions you should ask include: How long will my commute be from home to university and back? How frequently do the buses run? Is there a student rate or maybe a student pass? It's a good idea to do a "test run" before your classes start. Just make sure you coordinate your "test run" with the time you'll actually be heading to class.

Making friends and getting involved

For people who live on campus, there are built-in potential friends just next door. When you live off campus, it can take a little more effort to meet new people and get involved. Here are a few things you can try whatever your living situation:

- Leave your door open while you're unpacking in your room, or hang a friendly sign from it.
- Ask your housemates or coursemates if they'd like to explore the campus or the town centre. If you are living at home and therefore know the area well you could offer to give them a tour.
- Consider having a stash of biscuits or teabags for group situations - you'll instantly be loved.
- Don't be afraid to introduce yourself randomly to somebody you're standing in line with or sat next to. This doesn't just go for freshers week either! University can always be an opportunity to meet new people.
- Exchange numbers with people on your course and agree to go to lectures together - this sets you up for academic as well as social friendships.
- Explore different societies - you'll meet lots of different kinds of people with similar interests to you. It's worth trying out new things, because you might find an interest in something that you hadn't expected.

International students

As you start to settle into your new surroundings, you may find that things are very different than at home. Remember that adapting to a new environment may take time and that there will be some challenges that you may not have thought about before you arrived. Most campuses have an international student advisor who can help you with your transition to life in a new country. They will be able to help you with questions you may have about local laws and customs and the rights to which you are entitled. They may also help you understand the culture and social environment, which may be quite different than you are used to. Many universities have international student organisations that organise social activities with people who are also new to this environment. Just don't get caught up spending all your time doing things you would do at home and forget to explore your new country/culture! This is a great opportunity to make friends from around the world!

What is cultural adaptation?

Cultural adaptation is the process you go through when you experience a culture other than your own for a prolonged period of time.

4 Stages of Cultural Adaptation

Although every person's path through cultural adaptation is unique, there are a number of steps on this journey that you may share in common with others.

Stage 1 – The Party: You're having a blast! Everything seems so interesting. You're meeting new friends and everything is going smoothly.

Stage 2 – Shock: The novelty has worn off and some problems are arising. Suddenly, you're having trouble with university, food, dress, language, money. The daily tasks that used to be simple now seem complicated. Everything feels different than back home. You feel homesick and may start to complain about this new place or wonder why you came.

Stage 3 – Negotiation: You learn to deal with the unfamiliar ways of your new home. Your communication skills improve. The customs and beliefs of your new home become clearer. Things begin to look more optimistic as you settle in. You begin to develop friendships and build your social network.

Stage 4 – Stability: You've adjusted well to living in this new environment. You've accepted and understand the way of life and no longer feel out of place and unhappy. You are comfortable with who you are in this situation. You have created a new social network that is supportive of you.

Cultural adaptation tips

To help make adapting to a new culture a little easier, here are some things you can try:

- **Keep active.** Get out in the community around you and interact with others. Not only will this help you better understand the way of life in your new environment, you may find aspects of your new environment that you prefer to the life you came from.
- **Read.** Pick up local magazines, newspapers, or local tourism information guides to find out what is happening in your community. Attend those events that interest you.
- **Be friendly.** Introduce yourself and ask questions about the lives of people that you meet.
- **Contact your family.** Don't lose touch with your family back home. Display pictures of them and call, email, or contact them regularly.
- **Join a sports team.** This is the easiest way to get to know people and keep healthy. Exercise helps clear the mind of stress, is good for your physical health, and gives you an opportunity to meet people with similar interests.
- **Join a club.** You can also join clubs or societies on campus that match your interests – many universities have a listing of all the available clubs and societies online or have a "club/society fair" toward the beginning of the year where you can get to know the different clubs/societies and what they do.
- **Learn the language better.** Languages are full of unique phrases and slang. Listen to how locals talk and ask what something means if you don't understand it. Most people will be happy to help you navigate the subtle meanings of the local language.
- **Maintain contact with your own social/cultural/religious group.** Introduce yourself to other students of similar background, or other international students. They may be going through the same challenges that you are. Once people find out you're from the same place, it makes getting to know them much easier. Just make sure you don't only hang out with people who share your background, even if it might feel easier. Part of the fun of studying somewhere new is meeting people you wouldn't have the chance to meet at home!
- **Be patient and keep an open mind.** Although it's definitely an adjustment, studying abroad can be an amazing learning experience and can help you learn more about who you are as a person.

"If you're an international student, the first thing to recognise is that it is okay to struggle with missing home or with the extra effort of having to do more for yourself. It is not your fault for finding it more difficult to fit in, to deal with negative comments, to learn a new language if you must, or even to get over a bout of physical or mental illness. It is completely acceptable if you find that you have not adjusted as easily as the next person.

I found it helpful as well to create a safe and familiar domestic environment. Whether you live in college owned accommodation or you live out, small reminders of home are helpful in creating a comfortable space to rest and sleep well. Learning to make some of your favourite dishes is also a great reminder that things aren't necessarily all that different! Taking the time to understand yourself and how you are reacting to your environment is a great help as you learn to adjust. Remember to also take some time off when you're struggling and be aware of the support systems available to you at your university if necessary. On the other hand, if you are friends with an international student, why not check in with them too and see how they're doing? A kind word or a helpful conversation is sometimes all that is needed for a new place to feel a little bit more like home."

Student Minds Blogger

Feeling homesick

Perhaps you aren't worried about missing home and you can't wait to get started. Even so the likelihood is that someone you know or perhaps even yourself at some point may start to miss home.

In those situations, or for those who are feeling worried before making the move, know that moving away from home is a change that can be worrisome but one that affects everyone at some point in their life. Remember that technology can make the world of difference, as it's easy to get in contact with the people you miss.

It can also help to prepare for some aspects of living away from home that require adjustment to usual routines such as food shopping, cooking, laundry etc. You could plan out your time for the week, share tips and ideas with other students or even share these responsibilities with friends by taking it in turns to cook meals, buy food etc. Depending on where you are you might be able to take advantage of university canteens and washing facilities to make living away from home easier.

Take a look at this blog post for some great tips on how to overcome homesickness.

Being independent

Another area that can be difficult for new students is learning how to be independent; how to stand on your own two feet. Although some students have had to be independent and self-reliant for years, for others, this will be your first taste of real independence. You may now take on many new responsibilities, including paying your bills, buying groceries, making your own meals, cleaning your room or flat and even just getting yourself to class on time. This can feel like a burden, especially if you haven't had to do some of these things before. You'll probably make mistakes as you start to navigate the complexities of this independence and that's okay. Each mistake is an opportunity to learn and grow – it means that next time you're in a similar situation; you'll know what not to do. Talk to your family members, friends, or other trusted people about how they navigated some of these tasks and look to other areas of this resource for additional advice.

Life Online

So much of our lives are lived online today. All of these advancements in technology, unfortunately, also come with threats to our personal and financial security. Understanding how to keep yourself safe electronically is essential.

Privacy invasions and data theft

Using the internet can lead to invasions of your privacy and even data theft. This includes others gaining access to your email, social media accounts, and online banking information. Personal information stolen from you can be used by criminals to obtain other legal documents of yours. This breach of your personal information can lead to serious consequences, such as financial losses and even identity theft.

You can minimise your risk of data theft by:

- Not giving out unnecessary information to anyone (especially if they've contacted you first, rather than you contacting them).
- Logging out of all accounts/devices once you are done using them.
- Choosing complex passwords for your online accounts.
- Not visiting suspicious websites or clicking on unknown links.

Tips

Click here for more information about privacy invasions and data theft.

Bullying

Cyberbullying involves the use of communication technologies like the internet, social networking sites, websites, email, text messaging and instant messaging to repeatedly intimidate or harass others. **If you or someone you know is being bullied online, reach out for help.**

Cyberbullying includes:

- Sending mean/threatening emails or texts.
- Posting embarrassing or explicit photos of someone online
- Pretending to be someone else online.
- Tricking someone into revealing personal information and sharing it with others.

More information from the NHS website.

Sexting

Consensual sexting can be fun and part of a healthy intimate relationship, but sometimes it's easy to forget that this information can be electronically saved and potentially available to people you may not want to share that information with. Both texts and photos that you send to someone can also be forwarded and shared with others. Consider these potential consequences before engaging in these activities. You can also request to have photos or posts removed from various social media platforms by stating that they violate your rights.

Remember: Sexting can have consequences that range from embarrassment to criminal prosecution. There can be serious consequences if you share or possess sexually explicit images of or with someone under the age of 18, even if you think that the person has given you permission to have that material by sending it to you. Take a look at pg 34 for information on consent.

How to protect yourself online:

- **Think before you post.** It's so important to think ahead about your future when you are developing your online self now. Keep in mind that your future employers may search for information online to learn more about you when the time comes, so try to keep your online presence appropriate and true to your character. Posting certain party pictures or voicing negative thoughts online in the heat of the moment can have long-term consequences.
- **Educate yourself about privacy settings.** Take charge in protecting yourself online by understanding privacy tools and settings – make sure you're only sharing information with the people you choose. Keep in mind that privacy settings may fail or be breached, so try to be careful about ALL of the content that you publish.
- **Be socially responsible.** It is helpful to keep in mind that you should behave online as you would face-to-face. Don't take advantage of the anonymity of the internet in a negative way.
- **Understand potential consequences.** The way you behave online may lead to offline consequences - with your peers, social circles and beyond.

Remember, if you are not comfortable with what you put online appearing in your local newspaper, it may be a good idea to reconsider what you are about to post.

Getting Help

University education can be a really exciting – and sometimes stressful – time in your life. If you feel overwhelmed, or like you might be experiencing a mental illness, it's so important to seek help as soon as you can.

Why?

Most problems you are facing can be resolved with the right combination of support and/or treatment (if you have a mental illness). Mental illnesses are often very treatable with psychological interventions and sometimes medications. Problems such as academic difficulty in class can often be resolved with extra work, office hours, and tutoring. Relationship problems can often be resolved through introspection and good communication/conflict resolution. Nothing is ever hopeless – it's just a matter of knowing where to turn for support and getting the help you need as quickly as possible.

When?

If you are experiencing problems with your mental health, it's important that you receive the best treatment to help you get well and stay well. Speak to your GP and/ or your University student support services who may be able to arrange counselling or ongoing support for your mental health.

Helping a friend

Most students talk to their friends when they are having a tough time. We can talk to friends in confidence and they help us to keep challenges in perspective. The truth is that although university can be awesome, life's curveballs still get thrown at us and in these situations we really need our mates to be there for us. When supporting a friend, it's important that you look after yourself and remember your own priorities. Keep up with your usual interests and hobbies, and make time for your relationships with family and friends. While maintaining the confidence of your friend, ensure you are getting support. It can be tough worrying about how someone is doing, so find a way of ensuring you are supported too.

Signs of Concern:

- Sudden changes in behaviour.
- Extreme emotions.
- Lack of interest in activities or events that used to excite them.
- Feelings of hopelessness ("There's no point. Nothing will change.")
- Failing to meet responsibilities (e.g., going to class or work, handing in assignments).
- Talking about suicide or that life is not worth living.

If your friend is experiencing typical mental distress, then your support may help them to cope effectively. Doing small things to show you care can really help to bridge the gap between you if things seem difficult: send them a text to make them smile or drop by their room with a cup of tea.

If your friend has indicated they are feeling really desperate and actively suicidal, let them know that you care and that you are here for them right now:

- Ask your friend to make a deal with themselves that they will not act just yet.
- Encourage your friend to access professional support.
- They might phone an all-hours contact, such as:
  - HOPEline UK – T: 0800 068 41 41, SMS: 0776 209 697, E: pat@papyrus-uk.org (Hopeline will also be able to offer advice to you, as a friend worried about a young person)
  - NHS 111 (England & Wales) – T: 111 NHS 24 (Scotland)
  - Samaritans – 24 hour trained listening: T: 116 123, E: jo@samaritans.org
  - Or speak to or visit their local GP or Accident and Emergency department.

This guide, which is shaped by students' own experiences, will support you to look out for your mates, from starting a conversation to navigating the student journey.

Help for me

Universities have a range of different services to support student wellbeing.

Visit your university's website to find out what specific support is available, this might include counselling, student advice services, support networks as well as other resources. Wherever you seek support it's important to remember that if it isn't quite right for you, that's okay – you can try something else. At Student Minds we encourage the use of a range of support.

Please note that services vary from university to university, the best way to find out what support is available at your specific university is to look on your university website.

You can expect to find the following services at your university or local community:

GP (community doctor)

Visiting your GP is a good first step to take when thinking about getting treatment. This can seem like a scary prospect, but it is a very important step in the road to recovery. As well as offering support your GP will be aware of the services that are available to you and will be able to point you in the right direction. Your GP will also be able to discuss medication options with you, you can find straight talking info and videos about medication here.

University counselling

The University Counselling Service is a chance to explore and understand the issues you raise in a safe and non-judgemental environment. Details of your university counselling service will be available on your university website.

Advice centre

Advice Services are a free, confidential service where students can get information and advice on personal and academic issues such as finance and accommodation. They are often run by professional advisors who are independent of the University and you can find them in your Students Union or University building. They are the best people to contact if you are not sure what support you need - they can direct you to the most appropriate form of support.