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How to look after your mental health at university

Despite all of the benefits of newfound independence, studying for a future career and meeting new people, university can take its toll on student mental health.

With [nearly half](#) (49%) of 18–30 year olds now entering higher education, universities have responsibility for millions of young people each year, many of whom will struggle with their mental health at some point.

What's causing poor student mental health?

"While university can be a great experience, for many students it can also be really stressful," says Nick Harrop, Campaigns Manager at [YoungMinds](#). "Living away from home for the first time, making new friends, dealing with financial problems and struggles with your studies can all pile on the pressure."

The 'student lifestyle' can also contribute to mental ill health, says a representative from the [University Mental Health Advisors Network](#) (UMHAN). "Many students struggle to maintain healthy day-to-day routines. Lack of [sleep](#), poor diet, work pressures, lack of [exercise](#) and increased [alcohol](#) consumption are all risk factors for developing mental health difficulties."

Combine this with the [stress](#) of meeting deadlines and expectations and it's no wonder that students can find it difficult to cope.

"The expansion of higher education in recent decades means that having a degree does not guarantee graduate employment," says UMHAN. "Students are experiencing more pressure to gain good honours degrees, develop through volunteering and participation in sports and societies, as well as shouldering a higher debt than ever before."

Age is also a factor in student mental health. "In addition to these lifestyle factors, the years spent at university coincide with the [peak age of onset](#) for a range of mental health difficulties, with 75% of mental health difficulties developing by mid-20s," says UMHAN.

Mental health conditions also exist in their own right. Students might find that an existing mental illness is worsened or triggered by [stress](#). Moving away from existing support networks and mental health services can feel daunting.

What support is on offer?

Each university offers its own support and services but they generally include student support or welfare services staffed by mental health professionals, says UMHAN. "This may include Mental Health Advisers, Disability Advisers, Mental Health Mentors, Well-being Advisers and Counsellors. Students with long-term mental health conditions may also be eligible for support such as mentoring, funded through Disabled Students' Allowances."

Universities are often able to provide students with free counselling, although the waiting lists can be long in some areas. A [BBC analysis](#) found that the number of students seeking support for mental health issues increased by 50% between 2012 to 2017, putting pressure on university support services. It is important to let student services know as soon as you think you will need mental health support so that you can access help as quickly as possible.

Universities may also provide assistance through the Students' Union, support groups and workshops. They are often able to help you with the problems which might be causing you stress, such as finance or homesickness.

Your academic tutor might be able to provide you with some support. They may be able to talk to you about managing stress, help you with your workload or point you in the direction of university services.

How can students help themselves?

Looking after student mental health isn't just the responsibility of universities. There are lots of everyday things students can do to look after their mental well-being.

Seek help

"If you're struggling to maintain your well-being at university, it's important to acknowledge your feelings and speak to someone about anything that's worrying you. This could be your tutors, parents, friends, a student counsellor, or a helpline," says Harrop.

It's a good idea to research the support available at your university before you arrive. As soon as you know that you might need support from student services, including if you have an existing mental health condition like [anxiety](#) or [depression](#), let them know so that you can go on the waiting list for support as soon as possible.

If you are already receiving support for your mental health elsewhere, make sure that there is a plan in place to smooth the transition to university and alleviate any concerns you might have.

Change your GP surgery to one close to your university (many universities have a GP surgery on campus) so that you can access NHS mental health services and continue to receive any medication you might need for your mental health. If you are not registered, you can request an emergency or temporary location appointment if you need medical assistance.

Create a routine

Creating (and sticking to) a routine can help you to look after yourself. This might include getting up at the same time each day, making sure that you go on a short walk for some fresh air or setting yourself a schedule. Even if it's just making sure to brush your teeth or taking a shower when you get up, completing small tasks can help you to feel more motivated.

Keeping a healthy lifestyle goes a long way in improving your mental health. Eating regular, balanced meals and drinking plenty of water can help you to feel physically better. Exercise can also give you an endorphin boost, providing a distraction from stress and negative thoughts. Create a bedtime routine to help you get plenty of sleep each night.

Social life

Whilst socialising might be the last thing you want to do when you're feeling low or stressed, scheduling in some activities you enjoy with friends can give you something to look forward to. If you're feeling lonely, social activities like volunteering or sports can help you to build up a support network.

Many social events at university revolve around alcohol and nightlife. It can be tempting to turn to alcohol or drugs when your mental health is suffering but they could actually make you feel worse. Drugs especially can lead to unpleasant experiences when you are already feeling low and some have been shown to be a [cause of depression, anxiety and psychosis](#).

Managing stress

From finances to friendships, reading to relationships, there are things you can do to manage your stress.

"Check if your university can support you with managing any work, and try to take some time out for yourself if things become too much," suggests Harrop.

Knowing your stress limits means that you can recognise when you need to take some time to step back from work and look after yourself and your mental health. Taking a few hours to watch a TV show, see a friend or read a book can give you the time to rejuvenate, refresh and feel prepared for whatever you need to deal with.

Most universities offer advice to their students about managing exam stress, financial worries and balancing their time, either through the student's union and around campus or online.

Universities are responsible for millions of students, each of whom is going through their own journey of managing their mental health and stress, as well as enjoying and shaping their university experience. No matter how bad your mental health gets, there is always someone who can give you support, reminds Harrop.

"Remember, you're not alone – there are people and organisations out there who can help."

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