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Student mental health: how to tell if your child is depressed at university

University can be an exciting time in a young person's life – for many it marks the first step into independent living, and a time to explore new opportunities. However, this exciting life change can also come with challenges, both physical and emotional.

How many students are affected by mental health issues?

Experimental data released by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in October 2021, revealed that 37% of first year students in England had symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, as opposed to 22% of those in the 16- to 29-year age bracket in the general population¹.

While the scale of the problem may have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it shows a worrying trend. So, what might trigger depression at university? How can we recognise it? And what might we do to help?

What can cause depression at university?

Periods of extreme change – both positive and negative – can have significant impact on our mental health. And going to university is often a time when a young person's life changes drastically.

"Being away from the familiar things of home such as family, friends, and pets can have an impact on mood," says [Dr Sharie Coombes](#), psychotherapist and mental health author. "It can be a challenge, too, to make new friends with people who know nothing about you."

The practicalities of student life can also take their toll on young people's minds. "It's understandable that many students feel overwhelmed with the combination of workload, self-care, and academic demands," explains Coombes. "Many students also struggle with a lack of confidence - comparing themselves to others on the same course."

And while many of us may have fond memories of nights out in our late teens, excess socialising may also take its toll. "Some young people socialise excessively, often as a defence against loneliness, and this may lead to exhaustion, then to depression," says Coombes.

Encouraging healthy habits

While depression may occur despite a healthy lifestyle, encouraging your child to participate in healthy activities could help to minimise the risk of mental illness. For example, encouraging them to eat a healthy diet, to take part in clubs, support groups and to exercise - all things important for maintaining [good mental health](#).

Parents/carers can also help by "talking and listening to them, to ensure they know you are still there. Show an interest in their new life by asking for photos of the town and explore other ways to 'be together' such as arranging a watch party," says Coombes. "Encourage them to cook [healthy meals](#) by making a recipe book of their five favourite meals for them to take with them. Above all, talking and listening is key."

What are the signs of student depression?

If you are a parent/guardian of a child at university, it's natural to want to keep an eye out for signs that mental health difficulties might be developing. But with distance and regular contact often a factor, what signs should we look out for in our loved-one?

"It can be a challenge to identify the signs of depression," says Coombes. "Some changes and potential signs may simply be the result of your child being in a new situation and being overexcited or very busy. It's important to look at the behaviour in context, bearing in mind what's normal for your child."

According to Coombes, behaviours that may indicate depression could include:

- Not getting in touch when they say they will.
- Not picking up calls or replying to texts.
- Giving vague answers when asked about their life at university.
- Saying they are stressed or worried.
- Asking to come home.

When to seek help

If your child doesn't directly share their feelings with you, it can be difficult to know what to do. If you suspect your child is depressed or see some tell-tale signs it's important to seek help. Suggest that your child makes an appointment to see their doctor and seeks mental health support.

"After an initial period, if things don't improve or settle down, or you remain worried, it's worth investigating further – either by talking directly to your child or, if you are worried, their university," says Coombes.

Those suffering from depression may not always be fully aware of their condition or may not wish to worry you. Knowing this means that, as carers or parents, we may struggle to feel reassured after raising the subject. However, there are other steps we can take which may be helpful.

"Sometimes it's helpful to talk about your own experience of similar or new situations – giving them 'permission' to admit difficulty," says Coombes.

"Make sure they are aware of support services in the area and suggest they talk to someone at university – a tutor or counsellor – to explore any difficulties they are experiencing."

Often, just showing you are there can be a great help. "Arranging to go up for a weekend, staying locally to show you are around can be helpful," says Coombes. "Showing an interest in what they are doing and how they are living is natural and may help assuage worries too."

"Alternatively, sometimes collecting them for a trip home for a weekend can be a good pick-me-up."

Supporting those with depression

If your child is diagnosed with depression, it's important to know that, despite potentially living at a distance, your support can be invaluable. "It's important to check-in regularly, even if they are rejecting in return," says Coombes.

"Talk to them but be non-judgemental. Remind them that they are loved and respected and that you believe in them. Sending cards, emails, letters, and even care packages can be helpful. Asking other family members to stay in touch can also be a great support."

Practical help such as making sure they have the right contacts to seek help, including [Samaritans](#) and [Young Minds](#) contact details, is also important. It's also important to consider that your child may feel university is not for them. "Sometimes children realise that university is not for them but worry about letting parents down," explains Coombes.

"Make sure they know that if they are unhappy, they can come home. If you think it's a difficulty in adjusting, perhaps suggest a set amount of time in which to see if it improves. But remind them that there are other options, and they can try again in the future."

Further reading

1. [ONS, Coronavirus and first year higher education students, England](#)

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