

Know Before You Go

Helping you
to navigate
university life



student
minds

Acknowledgments

This resource has been adapted by Student Minds with permission from Dr. Stan Kutcher, ONS, MD, FRCPC, FCAHS Professor of Psychiatry and Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health IWK Health Centre, Dalhousie University. The original edition can be obtained through teenmentalhealth.org.

Know Before Your Go: UK © Dr Stan Kutcher

With special thanks to;

The mental health organisations that offered feedback and support with the dissemination of this work. To the individuals that gave their time to provide feedback through focus groups, telephone calls and survey responses and to the Rethink Mental Illness Coproduction team 2018 for their feedback and contribution to the guide.

In partnership with Southern Universities

The Southern Universities Network (SUN) is a collaborative partnership comprising HE providers in Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight. The Network partners include; Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth University, Solent University, University of Portsmouth, University of Southampton and the University of Winchester.



SUN SOUTHERN
UNIVERSITIES
NETWORK

If you would like an accessible version of this document please email us, along with your requirements, at info@studentminds.org.uk.

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity.

We empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support others and create change. We train students and staff in universities across the UK to deliver student-led peer support interventions as well as research-driven campaigns and workshops. By working collaboratively across sectors, we share best practice and ensure that the student voice influences decisions about student mental health.

Together we will transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive.

**student
minds**

Find us on
social media:
@StudentMindsOrg

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. Know Before You Go, the book that you are now reading, was designed to help you do just that!

Know Before You Go 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. But 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.



Contents:



Identity

Identity is all of the pieces of you that make you who you are.

You actually have many identities, not just one, and you play many roles in every part of your life. Your identity will also change as you evolve throughout your life. You are not defined in only one way. All of the different parts of you work together, and each aspect of what is called your identity influences and contributes to each other part. Sometimes figuring out who you are is shaped largely by you and sometimes it can be influenced by others, which can at times be confusing and challenging. Understanding yourself and knowing who you are can help you to respond to new situations and be more understanding of new people and points of view.

Let's explore some different parts of identity...



In this section:



Racial and Ethnic Identity

The particular racial or ethnic group(s) you feel a part of may influence your identity. This may affect your dress and language, and the ways in which you engage and communicate with others from and outside of your race or ethnic group(s). Some people may have advantages in life because of their race or ethnicity while others, because of their race or ethnicity, may face disadvantages and challenges. Although establishing racial or ethnic identity may be confusing at times, it can also be empowering and provide you with a sense of self and community.

Things to think about:

1. Do you identify with a particular race or ethnicity?
2. In what ways do you feel disadvantaged by your race or ethnicity?
3. How does your race or ethnic community influence who you are?
4. In what ways do you feel advantaged by your race or ethnicity?
5. In what ways do you define yourself by what others think or feel about you or how your race or ethnicity is commonly portrayed?
6. How does your race or ethnicity impact the other parts of your identity?



Cultural Identity

A particular cultural group(s) you feel connected to may influence your identity. This may include a geographic area, such as a country, region or community that you live in. It may also include belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, a particular race or ethnic community, a spiritual or faith group, or the disabilities community, for example. Your cultural identity may also be shaped by an interest oriented community such as music, art, gaming, or athletics. And, to make it even more complicated, you are likely to have a number of different cultural identities at the same time (for example: your city, your school, your athletic team, your synagogue).



Things to think about:

1. What cultural group(s) do you identify with?
2. How does your cultural group(s) influence who you are?
3. How does your cultural group(s) influence your interests?
4. In what ways does your cultural group(s) impact your values?
5. How do your cultural connections provide you with a sense of self and/or belonging?
6. In what ways does your culture impact the other pieces of your identity?

Family and Community

The people you consider to be your family and your community will play a significant role in your identity. They will influence what you do, the way you think, the things you care about, and more. Sometimes that influence means that you function similarly to your family or community, or it may mean that you do things differently. Understanding your family and community and the role they play in your life will help you better understand who you are and help you navigate the experiences that come your way.

Things to think about:

1. How do you define your family and community?
2. In what ways do your family and community influence how you think about the world around you?
3. In what ways do you function similar to your family and community and in what ways are you different?
4. How do your family and community influence how you interact with other people?
5. How do your family and community influence what you value as important?
6. In what ways do your family and community impact the other parts of your identity?



Personality

Your personality traits, of which you have many, will help shape your identity. One aspect of your personality may include whether you prefer quiet and value alone time or prefer being more social and around others. Your sense of humour, how animated and expressive you are, whether you prefer routine or spontaneity, whether you are cautious or a risk taker, and if you are more optimistic or pessimistic, are just some of the other aspects of personality to consider.

Things to think about:

1. How would you describe your personality?
2. If there is a difference in the way that you describe yourself and ways others describe you, why do you think that is?
3. In what ways does your personality influence how you think about the world around you?
4. How do you think others would describe your personality?
5. How does your personality influence how you interact with other people?
6. How does your personality influence what you value as important?
7. In what ways does your personality impact the other parts of your identity?



Values

Values are principles or judgments about what is important to you and to others. They can help shape your views and behaviour, and impact your personal growth and development. Values come from our homes, parents, communities, schools, peers, culture, religious and spiritual teachings, people we appreciate, respect and cherish, and society in general. Sometimes there can be a “clash” amongst different values and sorting out what to do in that kind of situation may be challenging.

Things to think about:

1. What do you value?
2. How do you feel when your values are different from others?
3. How can values influence the way you view the world?
4. Where do your values come from?
5. Can values change?
6. Which values are most important to you?



Strengths and Challenges

We all have things that come naturally or more easily to us, in the same way that we have things that take more time and attention before we get them. It is important to have a good sense of what your own strengths and challenges may be, as well as how they connect with the other aspects of your personality. Strengths and challenges don't make us more or less intelligent or capable — just different and unique.

Things to think about:

1. How would you describe your strengths and challenges?
2. How do your strengths and challenges influence how you interact with other people?
3. In what ways do your strengths and challenges impact your connection to or engagement with school?
4. How would you share your strengths and challenges with those in your life?
5. In what ways do your strengths and challenges influence how you feel about yourself?
6. In what ways do your strengths and challenges impact the other parts of your identity?



Social Identity

All people have a personal identity and multiple social identities – all of which contribute to our sense of self. Our personal identities, such as our name, specific family and place in the family, age, personality, interests and talents are attributes that provide us with a sense of individuality. Our social identity, in contrast to our personal identity, refers to the significant group categorisations assigned to us by the society in which we grow up and live and which we share with many others. These include components of identity that we have already described, such as our racial/ethnic/cultural, gender and religious identities, as well as identities that pertain to economic class, geographic identities, and identities that pertain to sexuality. All people are born into social identities and it is important to note that our social identities can and will likely change throughout our lifetime.

Things to think about:

1. What social identities do you most associate yourself with?
2. In what ways has your social identity changed over the course of your life?
3. How does your social identity influence your belief about your own capacity for or limitations in achieving life goals?
4. What social identities were you born into?
5. What aspects of your social identity are you proud of? Are there any aspects of your social identity (now or in the past) that are or have been a struggle?
6. In what ways does your social identity (s) impact your values?
7. In what ways does your social identity provide you with a sense of self and/or belonging?

Spirituality and Faith

Spirituality is a sense of connection to something bigger than oneself. It comes in many different forms and is considered a universal human experience. It is a look at our inner selves and way of being as we relate to our surroundings, including interactions with others and our environment. We usually look for meaning in our spirituality. Some people describe themselves as highly spiritual while others do not consider themselves to be spiritual at all. There is no “right” degree of spirituality. Faith, or religion, is a strong belief that is shared by a community that helps followers find meaning in their world. Spirituality and faith/religion are two separate but common phenomena. Both shape who we are and may provide us with community as well as helping us determine our values and life directions.

Things to think about:

1. Where do you find meaning?
2. How do you feel you should live?
3. How do you determine what is right and wrong?
4. How do you feel connected to others?
5. What rituals do you follow?
6. What do you believe and why?



Sexuality

Sexuality is an important part of who we are. It encompasses sex, sexual orientation (who we are sexually attracted to), gender identities and roles, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in our thoughts, values, behaviours, fantasies, desires, beliefs, and attitudes. Our sexuality is personal and how we express it can be influenced by facets such as our family, culture, social group, religion, and/or spiritual beliefs. At times, components of our sexuality may not align; for example, our religious beliefs may not support our sexual fantasies or notions of pleasure.

Things to think about:

1. What would you identify as the different components of your sexuality?
2. Are there aspects of your sexuality that make you feel uncomfortable? If so, how can you effectively address that discomfort?
3. From the following, which have had a strong influence on how you express your sexuality: family, culture, social group, religion, and/or spiritual beliefs?



Gender Identity and Expression

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of being male, female, both, or neither. It is a person's internal feeling about who they are and it may be different from their biological sex. Gender expression, on the other hand, is the way in which we present or show our gender to the world. The world around can often put pressure on people to define and express their gender in a particular way (for example: boys should dress like boys and girls like girls). This can limit the way that people express their gender.

Things to think about:

1. How do you identify your gender?
2. Do you feel like your gender expression is limited by society?
3. What aspects in your life influence how you express your gender (such as family, friends, religion, social media, cultural or ethnic group)?
4. Of these, what would be most influential? How do you like to express your gender?



Becoming Independent

Becoming more and more independent is an expected and natural part of every person's path through life.

It requires the development of new skills and the confidence to use them to help us shape our own destiny. While this is a lifelong process, the adolescent and young adult years are a key period in that journey. Being more independent will give you the freedom to make choices for yourself and greater opportunity to chart your own path.

It requires the development of new skills and the confidence to use them to help us shape our own destiny. Becoming and building independence is actually a lifelong journey and many students find that their time at university is a key period in defining who they are and becoming more independent – whatever their age. Being more independent will give you the freedom to make choices for yourself and greater opportunity to chart your own path.



In this section:



Building Resilience

Resilience means having the skills to be better able to adapt to the inevitable stresses of everyday life. When life difficulties, adversity or even trauma strikes, you may experience a range of challenging thoughts and negative emotions. Resiliency will help you to keep functioning both physically and psychologically through these rough patches. However, resilience is more than just coping with life's challenges on your own. Being able to reach out to others for support is a key component of being resilient, as is learning from failure.

Living Arrangements

Respect for others and clear communication are two important aspects of making any living arrangement work. Another important consideration is being aware of and reasonably accommodating to the needs of others. In college, university or when you begin to work, you may set up an independent living space, often shared with others. It is important that you choose your roommates or living partners carefully. As you make your plans, it is a good idea to discuss any specific concerns you may have (for example: dietary needs, party space versus study space, guests, etc.) or write out a contract which clearly outlines everybody's responsibilities and conditions when you move in, if you do not have the option to meet first.

Managing Stress

Experiencing stressful situations is a normal, and expected part of life and is not harmful. On the contrary, it can be healthy and it is part of how we learn to become resilient and develop skills that we need to adapt to the challenges life brings us. It is necessary to understand that when we experience the sensations we call stress, that this is a signal that we have a problem or challenge that we need to solve. Solving the problem reduces or shuts off the stressful feelings and our solution now becomes a new skill that can help us in the future. Avoiding stress or focusing only on reducing our stressful feelings can change every day positive stress into chronic long-term negative stress – because we have not successfully addressed the challenge we have encountered, even if we have reduced our feelings of stress.

There are many useful strategies we may be able to consider in managing the normal stresses of life. These include changing how we think about stress.

Making Decisions

Every day we make many decisions — sometimes on our own and sometimes together with others. Some are simple and others are complex. There is no formula for making the best decision, and often we may not know the outcome of that decision for some time in the future. When making a decision that's important to you, it's often best not to rush and instead, to take the time to consider your options, the likely outcomes of your decision, and the advice of people you trust. Don't expect to get every decision right. We can learn valuable lessons from all the wrong decisions that we make! It's good to keep in mind this quote from the famous inventor:

**"I have not failed. I've just found
10,000 ways that won't work."**

- Thomas Edison



Managing Money

Understanding your total expenses compared to how much money you have is important to help you budget. The preparation of a budget is a good starting point, but sticking to it can be a challenge. It is important to know where your money goes! Planning well may help you avoid getting over your head in debt.

Relating to Family, Friends and Community

Positive support from family, friends, and community promotes better health throughout your life. Culture, customs, traditions, and beliefs of family and community can all contribute to your health. However, as human beings we are continuously evolving and the way we relate to family, friends, and community may change over time. And, not all family, cultural or community influences may be helpful or supportive to you.

As you become more independent you will make important choices that will determine how all these different influences interact to help make you the person that you are and that you will become.

Building Relationships

When we experience a change in our lives, such as getting a job or going off to school, there is an opportunity to meet new people and build new relationships.

Not knowing many people can be a bit scary at first, but don't let your "stress signal" stop you from making new friends. Most people feel some stress when meeting new people and making new friends. Instead of thinking about meeting others as a "stress", imagine how exciting it can be to develop new friendships and discover new ways of looking at the world. And remember, not every new person you meet will be an automatic friend. You get to choose who you will be friends with! The more people you meet, the more likely you will be to find another person who will become a friend.



In this section:



Meeting New People

Get Involved

Look for opportunities to get involved in activities that are of interest to you. It might be a sports team, club, faith group, or a volunteer organisation. Your involvement can lead to meeting others that have interests similar to you. Don't wait for people to come to you; get out there and look for opportunities to meet others.

Communication

Do all you can to be welcoming and open to new people. Engage with others, introduce yourself, and listen to others and their stories and perspectives. Depending on your comfort level — smile, make eye contact, laugh, and enjoy relating to others. At the same time, be aware that not everyone greets each other the same way. For example, hugging someone when you greet them is common in some cultures but not in others. Be respectful and considerate, while at the same time being yourself.



Be Open-minded

As you meet new people, you will be exposed to new cultures, values, and beliefs. These may be different from those you have been exposed to in your home town, your family, or with your high school friends. If you are going to college or university, one of the most exciting parts of that experience is being exposed to ideas that are different from your own. Being exposed to different ideas can make you feel uncomfortable, but don't shut yourself off from ideas that are new to you or different than yours. Try to be open-minded. Be inquisitive and interested in others and their lives. Think about things critically — both the new ideas you are facing and those you have carried with you from before. This will help lead you to new and potentially enriching life experiences and relationships.



Being with Yourself

Loneliness

Change is never easy and it is normal to feel lonely if you are in a new place and are looking to build new relationships. If you are experiencing loneliness over an extended period of time, try to change your daily patterns and connect more with people. Don't be afraid to reach out to people you trust and let them know how you are feeling!

Role of Solitude

When we are going through transitions in our lives, spending a certain amount of time alone can help us to pause, recharge, and reflect on life. These pauses can help us reflect on what is going well, changes we might like to make, and plans for how to move ahead. Different people need different amounts of solitude, so opt for however much feels right for you.



Self-Awareness

Being self-aware can help you through many challenging times in your life. It can also be important to the types of relationships you choose, how you function in those relationships, and what your expectations and needs are from those relationships. Spend some time getting to know yourself — it is time well spent.



Dating, Romantic Relationships and Encounters

There are many types of relationships that we form with people throughout our lifetime. Sometimes we have intimate encounters that can be brief in duration, sometimes we are dating, sometimes we have friendships, and other times we are involved in more committed and long-term romantic relationships. Sometimes more than one relationship with others can exist at the same time. Regardless of the type of relationship you form with others, there are some important things to consider.

Things to think about:

1. Be safe and choose partners who respect you and whom you respect
2. Communicate your expectations, needs and boundaries with your partners
3. If a relationship is not working out for you, consider safe and healthy options to deal with ending it
4. Find a balance that works for you of time for yourself, your friends and family, and the things you enjoy
5. Remember that you are not the only person in the relationship, so listening to and respecting your partners and friends is essential

Abusive Relationships

What is an Abusive Relationship?

Abusive relationships occur whenever one person tries to dominate and control the other person, this may be through violence, intimidation, threats, manipulation, emotional abuse or by controlling money or other resources. Abusive relationships often develop over time. At first, the signs may be subtle and you may hope that the relationship will change and improve over time, but abusive relationships tend to worsen and become more violent or controlling. If you are concerned about a relationship, you should seek support from your university support services or a relevant charity.

Forms of Abuse

Emotional Abuse

The use of constant criticism, insults, threats, and intimidation to isolate another person and make them afraid to leave the relationship or seek help.

Physical Abuse

Any kind of assault with the body (e.g., punching, kicking) or with an object (e.g., gun, knife, baseball bat) intended to cause physical harm.

Sexual Abuse

Any kind of forced sexual act, ranging from sexual touching to intercourse (rape). Some people believe you cannot be raped by someone you are in a relationship with; this is not true. If you don't agree to have sex, it's rape. It does not matter who the person is or what your relationship is to that person.

Financial Abuse

Limiting access to financial resources (e.g., cash, bank accounts, credit cards) so as to limit your ability to leave a relationship or to control you within a relationship.

Warning Signs of Abuse

Remember — the warning signs may be subtle and you may hope that the relationship will improve but abusive relationships often worsen over time. And, remember, the abuser in a relationship is not determined by sex, wealth, or other identifying feature.



1. Your partner isolates you, limiting your time with family and friends.
2. Your partner is jealous and accuses you of things you did not do.
3. Your partner tries to control many aspects of your life (e.g., decisions, finances, how you dress, your friends, etc.).
4. Your partner criticizes you and makes you feel ashamed.
5. Your partner calls you names or ridicules you.
6. Your partner uses intimidation to make you feel afraid of them or to control your behaviour.
7. Your partner is violent and may yell at you, push you, or hit you.
8. Your partner demands you have sex, even if you say no.
9. Your partner threatens to hurt themselves, you or your family or friends if you do not do what they want.
10. You feel you always have to always act a certain way to please your partner (i.e. walking on eggshells).
11. Your partner frequently demeans or humiliates you in front of others (this can be done as a “joke”).

Getting Help

It is very important that you speak to someone you trust if you are experiencing these warning signs.

If you are concerned that you are in an abusive relationship, don't wait until something bad happens. Make an appointment with a health care provider (such as a nurse or psychologist) on campus and share your situation with them. You can also check out the following websites:

Education

People may change careers several times in their lifetime and they may take many paths to learning along the way. Some people may choose to go straight into the working world after leaving school, while some will take a gap year, and others will go directly to university. Whether you make the choice by yourself or with the support of your family or your friends, remember that there is no single “best” life path.

While having a life goal may be a good plan for some people, others may flourish without one. If you have a goal, don't forget that opportunities and challenges that you did not anticipate will arise. Don't miss opportunities because you are focused only on one goal.



In this section:

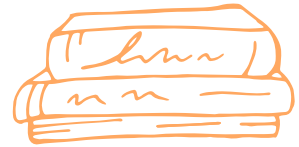


Course Selection

Your first year of university or college is a year of discovery. Choosing a course or program can be challenging and exciting at the same time. Some people know exactly what they want to study but many don't. When choosing, it can help to ask yourself: What interests me the most? What are my hobbies? Which courses did I enjoy in high school? What am I good at? What am I not so good at? Are there courses I need to take to help me achieve what I may want to do? Asking your family, teachers, and friends what courses they took and enjoyed may also help.

Once you have an idea of what interests you, you should check the admission requirements for relevant programs so you know if there are specific A-Level/pre-entry courses you have to take in order to apply. Some useful points to consider;

1. Read the departmental calendar or website thoroughly – It will provide you with a basic description of the courses.
2. Class size – Do you prefer bigger, lecture-type classes? Or do you prefer smaller, discussion based classes?
3. Class time – How much contact time do you prefer? Courses may vary on the amount of independent learning expected.



Organisation

Being organised when transitioning to university life will help you manage your time, reduce stress, and help keep you on a path to success. You are probably going to be responsible for your meals, laundry, bills, and many other things that you may have had help with in the past. Different strategies work for different people and you may find that some things work really well for you at one point but that you need a completely different approach a few weeks later. All of this is fine – just experiment and keep trying new ways to stay organised. We've listed a few tips to think about below.

Set Goals

Set realistic goals for your first school year and break them down into smaller, more manageable goals. Writing them down can make them more concrete and help motivate you.

Stay Healthy

Try to eat three meals a day, and healthy snacks. Look for vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean proteins when possible.



Colour Code Your Calendar

For example, highlight all of your tests in yellow, assignments in purple, study time in blue, etc.

Use "To-Do" Lists

Spend a few minutes each evening preparing a list of things you need to accomplish the next day.

Use a Student Planner

Schools give these out for a reason - they work! You can also use your phone to help you keep track of your assignments, work schedule, class times, study groups/times, as well as fun events like school functions, society meetings, etc.



Don't Forget to Reward Yourself

Reaching goals you set is an accomplishment. When you set your goals, also decide on the reward you will get once you reach that goal. Make sure you reward yourself for all the small goals along the way to your larger goals as well! This may help keep you motivated.



Study tips

1.

Ask questions.

Ask yourself questions about what you are reading. This can help you figure out the most important areas to focus on.

2.

Quiz yourself.

Use chapter review questions to reinforce what you know and determine what you need to review.

3.

Cramming is not ideal.

It can cause added stress, loss of sleep, and loss of concentration. Also, it does not promote long term learning. Pace your studying.

4.

Highlight key points.

This can help you recognise the most important parts and can help you with a last minute review.

5.

Take scheduled breaks.

Commit to taking a break from studying at regular intervals. Sometimes walking away for a few minutes can be refreshing.

6.

Group study.

Sometimes studying with your classmates can help with areas you find difficult.

7.

Stay away from distractions.

Study where you will not be distracted. Remember, the TV and your phone count as distractions!

8.

Sleep.

Studying will be much less effective if you are tired. Try to get a good night's sleep, or take a nap (20 – 30 minutes) if you are tired.

9.

Careful with caffeine.

Too much caffeine can increase feelings of anxiety and restlessness. However, caffeine in moderation can be helpful (just know your limits!).

10.

Do not procrastinate.

This may lead to cramming and that does not help. However, some people study best under stress, and they procrastinate as a way to get into their optimal study zone. Know your study sweet spot!

11.

Reduce your stress levels.

If you start to feel stressed, taking a few deep breaths can help you relax. Exercise and good time management can also help. And, remember that the stress feeling is there to encourage you to study!

Resiliency

Things in life don't always go your way. Nobody lives a life that is stress-free. Experiencing set-backs teaches you how to recover from them and move on. Learning to cope with academic challenges is important and many students will experience academic difficulties when they first start university or college.

1. Lessons to learn. Ask "what could I have done differently and how can I apply what I have learned from this to other situations?"
2. Accept it. You cannot always control what has happened, but you can control how you deal with it. Focus on what you learned, not on what you think you may have lost.
3. Be realistic. Put things into perspective and don't sweat the small stuff. Not every stressor is the end of the world. Indeed most of them are good for you.
4. Relationships matter. A good support network can go a long way in helping you cope with stressors.
5. Put yourself first. Taking care of yourself with proper food, exercise, rest and friendships is an important part of preparing yourself to deal with stressors.
6. Trust yourself. Know that you are capable of success, and that some areas may just need more effort than others.
7. Learn from your failures. We tend to learn more from our failures than our successes. When you fail at something (and you will), use that experience to help you develop new skills and strategies.

Career Planning

When you are making career choices, it may be helpful to review the Identity and Becoming Independent sections of this resource. It may also be helpful to think about the following:



Things to think about:

1. What path do I want to take? Straight to university or college? Take a gap year? Go straight to work or into a job-training program?
2. Is the choice my own or are my family and friends a part of my decision making? Who can I ask for advice?
3. What is my financial situation and how will that impact my study and career choices?
4. Where do I want to work or study?
5. What opportunities exist in the place where I want to study or work?
6. What are my goals now and in the future?
7. What am I passionate about and can I fulfil those passions in other ways or only through work?
8. How and where can I get all of the information I need to help me make the most informed decisions?

Mental Health

Mental health is an important part of everyone's health. Mental health, like physical health, will help us live full and rich lives.

Just as we are encouraged to take care of our physical health, we also need to promote and maintain our mental health. Lucky for us that many of the things that are good for our physical health are also good for our mental health; what is good for your bicep is also good for your brain! Indeed, we are now realising that we cannot separate mental and physical health. After all, your brain is a part of your body.



In this section:

Introduction

Different models exist to help explain mental health. Student Minds often refers to mental health on 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

It is useful to think about different categories related to mental health. These are mental distress, mental health problems and mental disorders.

Mental distress is normal, expected, and necessary for growth and resilience. It is characterised by the stress response, your body's signal that something in your environment needs to be addressed (for example: facing a final exam or going to a new school). This signal (often called stress) helps you assemble your resources to solve the problem and learn new skills. A mental health problem arises from a much greater challenge in your life (for example, death of a loved one) and may require additional resources and supports to assist you in navigating that challenge. A mental disorder is a diagnosed medical illness that requires professional interventions using effective treatments to help you. All of these (mental distress, mental health problem, mental disorder) include difficulties with how we feel, think, and behave. It's very important not to confuse these different categories. Just because you are feeling sad, low, down, or depressed does not mean you have a mental disorder!

And, a person can be in more than one category at any point in time! A person can have mental health and a mental disorder at the same time.

Examples of these different categories would be:

1.

Disappointment or sadness after a relationship breakup or failing at something important (such as not being selected to be part of the school team).

This is mental distress.

2.

Grief and poor ability to function at school after someone close to you has died.

This is a mental health problem.

3.

Intense sadness along with negative thoughts (such as hopelessness), fatigue, and sleep problems that interferes with your ability to live your life.

This is a mental disorder.

Developing Positive Mental Health



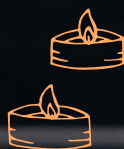
Exercise

Daily physical activity improves your physical and mental health. Any exercise is better than no exercise, but 30 minutes per day of exercise that increases your heart rate to a robust level (e.g., running, playing football) is recommended.

Sleep

Sleep is an important part of staying healthy. Although the amount necessary varies from person to person, most adults need 8-9 hours of sleep each night.

Developing good sleep hygiene is important – check out [Healthy Sleeping](#) for tips on how to develop your own sleep hygiene routine.



Take Time to Relax

Taking time each day to do something that you find relaxing is important for your mental health. It might be listening to or playing music, reading a book, talking to a friend, or meditating – whatever you find to be relaxing. Taking time to relax on a regular basis can help you recognise the strategies to use when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

You may also find it helpful to practice strategies such as Deep Breathing (Breathe in for 4 seconds. Through your nose, if possible). Hold your breath for 4 seconds (You're not trying to deprive yourself of air; you're just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs). Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds. Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing in again. Repeat this process as many times as you need or Hand Relaxation [Clench the muscles of your left hand into a really tight fist for 5 seconds. Gradually let go of your fist (for about 15 seconds) while breathing slowly and concentrating on the way your hand feels. Repeat using your right hand] during times of stress. Often about three cycles (left plus right hand relaxation is one cycle) is enough to help decrease the stress response.]

Time Management

Having structure in your day and an understanding of what activities and deadlines are coming up can help you avoid unnecessary stress, help keep your mood stable, and help prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. Keeping a daily agenda or schedule can be very helpful – even if it only includes basic daily activities, such as when to exercise.

For help getting started, check out [Taking Charge of Your Health](#).

Limit/Avoid Alcohol or Drugs (including cigarettes and caffeine)

Although you may feel better temporarily, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs won't solve your problems and may even make them worse in the long-term. The UK guideline for both men and women is that to keep health risks from alcohol to a low level it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis. What does that look like?

Take a look [here](#) for a helpful infographic.

Limiting your caffeine intake can also be helpful. Caffeine can temporarily make us feel more alert or less drowsy but you should limit your intake (this includes in energy drinks) as excess caffeine consumption can have adverse effects on your sleep. It can be particularly useful to limit your intake after midday.

Eat Healthy

Eating a balanced diet gives your body the fuel it needs to help it get well and stay well. Try not to skip meals and go easy on the junk food. There are many free apps and online tools that you can use to help ensure you're getting the right balance of healthy nutrients each day.

Check out [this website](#) for more information.

Build Healthy Relationships

Having a good support network of people that you can talk to when necessary for help or advice is an important part of staying mentally healthy. Also, helping others is a good way to boost your health.

See the [relationships section](#) for more information.



Mental Disorders and Other Related Concerns

That may require professional care

Depression

Depression affects approximately 7% of people over the course of one year. It often begins during the teenage years.

Symptoms

For More Information:

1 A Major Depressive Episode that lasts at least 2 weeks, where you've felt sad or depressed most of the day, almost every day.

2 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

3 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.

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:

For More Information:

1 Unexplained or poorly explained cuts, burns, bruises, or scratches, especially on their arms, legs or stomach.

2 Wearing clothing that isn't appropriate for the weather or situation but covers most of their body (for example, long sleeves and trousers on a very hot day).

3 Hoarding razors/knives and other objects that could be used for self-injury.



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

For More Information:

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

It is important to note that it is not always possible to tell if someone is going through emotional distress and having suicidal thoughts. Sometimes there are no warning signs.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

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

Symptoms

1 Excessive and persistent worry about many different things that last at least several weeks at a time, and usually for several months.

2 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
- Feeling like you cannot get enough air
- Difficulty relaxing
- Being easily startled
- Anticipating the worst outcome for any situation
- Excessive concerns and worries about usual daily activities

3 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.

For More Information:

Social Anxiety Disorder

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

Symptoms

1 Intense fear of social situations where people could judge you or you could feel embarrassed that lasts at least 6 months.

2 Fear or anxiety is much stronger than it should be for that type of threat.

3 Avoiding these social situations whenever possible.

4 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.

For More Information:

Panic Disorder

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

Symptoms

For More Information:

1 Intense uncontrollable panic attacks that occur for no obvious reason

2 Panic attacks are intense feelings of fear that are at their worst for about 10 minutes. They may include:

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

3 Worry about having another panic attack

4 Avoiding places that would be difficult to escape from if you had a panic attack (e.g., crowds, buses).

5 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.

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.

There is no “correct” body type and there is no reason to expect everyone to try to conform to any body type.

Threats to our body image can include;

1 Appearance Ideal. Take a look at this [animation](#) for appearance ideals through history.

2 Comparisons. Constantly comparing ourselves to others – whether that’s our peers or celebrities – tends to lead to unhealthy thinking patterns and behaviours.

For More Information:

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

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

1 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.

2 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

For More Information:

Bipolar Disorder

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

Symptoms

1 A Major Depressive Episode that lasts at least 2 weeks, where you've felt sad or depressed most of the day, almost every day.

For More Information:

2 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 restless 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

3 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.

4 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.

5 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 build-up of words inside you that need to get out, and speaking much more 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

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

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. 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.

Symptoms

1

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.

For More Information:

2

Compulsions are repetitive and frequent behaviours or rituals. Although compulsions are performed 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 is often transient and most people recover well with early intervention, but some have continuing difficulties.

Symptoms

1 Delusions: Beliefs that may be bizarre or untrue and beyond culturally accepted norms.

2 Hallucinations: Hearing, seeing, or otherwise sensing things that cannot be heard, seen or sensed by others.

3 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

For More Information:

Gambling Problems

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



Warning signs

1. Ongoing money problems because of gambling.
2. Constantly borrowing money from friends.
3. Avoiding friends to whom you owe money.
4. Relationship problems because of gambling or money losses from gambling.
5. These symptoms prevent you from being able to do well at school, at work, or in your relationships.
6. Acting secretive or lying about gambling.
7. Nervousness or anxiousness, usually about money.
8. Constantly talking about gambling or money.
9. Neglecting your responsibilities due to gambling.
10. Choosing to gamble instead of spending time with friends or family.

For More Information:

Drug & 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 dependence:

For More Information:

- Craving alcohol or drugs
- Drinking more alcohol or taking more drugs than you meant 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
- 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 a drug

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.

Grief & 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:

For More Information:

1 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.

2 If you are grieving a loss 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.

Trauma

Trauma is the term used for an upsetting event or events in a person's life that start to greatly affect their life, either physically or emotionally. We know that it is a major factor in many people's mental health and wellbeing, and examples would include:

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

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.

People experiencing abuse as children are three times more likely to go to mental health services for help. However, people who are most distressed and disabled over long periods of their lives are usually those with an accumulation of traumas.

For More Information:

Where to go for Help

Are you feeling desperate or distressed right now?

Need to talk to someone?

- **Samaritans** - open every day throughout the year, visit their website [here](#) or call 116 123
- You can book an emergency GP appointment with your **GP surgery**.
- If you need urgent medical advice call the **NHS 111** (England & Wales) or **NHS 24**(Scotland) - T: 08454 242424
- If you need immediate medical help or attention call **999** or visit **Accident & Emergency (A&E)**.

Other local resources

- [Mind](#), mental health charity.
- [Rethink Mental Illness](#).
- [The Mix](#), essential support for under 25s.
- [Young Minds](#).
- [Psychological Therapies \(IAPT\)](#).
- [Citizens Advice](#).
- [Relate](#).
- [Victim Support](#).

Help Seeking Tips

If you're concerned about your mental health or the mental health of someone you know, the first and most important thing you should do is tell a safe and trusted person. A doctor (general practitioner/family doctor) can help you determine what is going on and help you access the appropriate treatment. Many people find it helpful to tell a family member, teacher or school counsellor, coach, or friend first so that they have a support person to go with them to the doctor.

[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. You can view and download the full guide [here](#).

Sexual Health

This section has been included to help you make safe and informed decisions that will contribute to your own sexual health and that of your partner(s).

Sexual health is a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence (WHO, 2006a).



In this section:



WHO definition of Sexuality:

“...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.” WHO, 2006a

Having information on safer sex can contribute to making safe and informed decisions that contribute to positive sex-related outcomes and minimizes the risk of unintended pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Alcohol use and/or drug use combined with sexual activity increases the risk of potential unsafe sex and damage to your health, such as the ability to consent, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, sexual violence and the emotional/social/physical and legal impact of generating and making public sexual images. When drinking in settings where there is the potential for sexual experiences, be mindful of ensuring your drink is with you at all times. Having a friend around when you are out, or establishing a buddy system, can help to keep you safe when you are drinking or engaged in drug use. Drink spiking is a serious crime.

Contraception

There are many different types of birth control available. You may wish to discuss options with your doctor in order to make an informed decision on what will work best for you. Contraception will significantly reduce your risk of unintended pregnancy and some forms of contraception will protect you and your partner(s) against STIs.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

One aspect of sexual health and safe sex concerns understanding and practicing healthy behaviours that will protect you and a partner from Sexually Transmitted Infections (that can cause damage to your health if left untreated). It is important when entering into a sexual relationship, however brief, to decide together how to best avoid the likelihood of contracting an STI. Risks of contracting an STI increase when measures for protection are not taken, particularly when drug and/or alcohol use impact one's ability to make safe decisions. If you are worried that you may have contracted an STI or have had unprotected sex and would like to be tested you may find it helpful to visit an [STI clinic](#).

Unintended Pregnancy

Find out where you can go for help and advice if you're pregnant and not sure you want to continue with the pregnancy.

Sexual Violence and Harassment

Sexual assault is not about sex. It is an act of violence and power over another person. Sexual harassment is any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that you find offensive or which makes you feel distressed, intimidated or humiliated. You don't have to have objected to a certain kind of behaviour in the past for it to be unwanted and constitute harassment. 1 in 5 women aged 16 - 59 has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16 (Rape Crisis). Although victims are more commonly female, males can also be victims of sexual assault and harassment. Statistics for sexual assault are believed to be an underestimate of how often sexual assault actually occurs, as many cases do not get reported.

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?

Where all parties involved are safe from emotional, social, and physical harm. This is a critical part of positive sexual encounters. Consent also refers to the 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.

Online safety

An emerging concern in the area of sexuality is the posting of sexually explicit pictures online. Remember that if you send or post a picture of anything electronically, you have little or no control over what will happen with that image. Before you send an electronic image it is a good idea to ask this question:

"Am I comfortable with having everyone in my family seeing this?"

If the answer is no, you may want to reconsider sending it. Remember, sometimes that picture you think is cute or sexy or funny can be used in harmful ways.

If you or someone you know needs help regarding harmful images/videos that have been posted online visit [Victim Support](#).

Where to go for Help

Tell a safe and trusted person in your life who can help you seek medical attention and/or help from the authorities. You can also seek help by calling 999, speaking to your GP or visiting your local emergency department or clinic.

You can also contact your local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) which provide support to victim/survivors of sexual assault regardless of whether you choose to report the offence to the police or not.

Most importantly, tell someone so that you are not dealing with this on your own.

Urgent support

Are you feeling desperate or distressed right now?

Need medical help?

If you need medical advice you can book an emergency GP appointment with your GP surgery.

If you need urgent medical advice call the NHS 111 (England & Wales) or NHS 24 (Scotland) - T: 08454 242424

If you need immediate medical help or attention call 999 or visit Accident & Emergency (A&E).

University can be a very exciting time in your life.

By knowing what to expect and having a resource to help you navigate the ups and downs, you're setting yourself up for success over the next several years.

We hope that you'll return to flip through this resource whenever you have questions and that these next few years will help you create the basis for a happy and fulfilling life.





Here for
students

**student
minds**