

COUNSELLING SERVICE

3994/02.18/AB

STUDENTS AND  
MENTAL HEALTH

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER 

MIND MATTERS

## STUDENTS AND MENTAL HEALTH

### WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN?

The word 'mental' means 'of the mind' including your thoughts, feelings and how you understand the world around you. Mental health means the working order of your mind.

### WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM?

We are all very used to thinking about our physical health. We have regular check ups for our eyesight, blood pressure and we try to eat healthily and get exercise. It is an accepted part of our lives that sometimes things go wrong with our bodies such as catching a bug or getting physically injured.

In the same way, we can have problems with our mental health. We might feel sad, in despair, panicky, scared, or angry and these feelings can become so strong they start to overwhelm us. If these feelings become too much to cope with, or our ordinary daily living is affected by disturbing thoughts and/or feelings, then we are likely to develop a mental health problem.

“...MENTAL HEALTH MEANS THE WORKING ORDER OF YOUR MIND.”

### SIGNS OF A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM

A mental health problem may distort a person's view of the world and produce a variety of distressing symptoms and behaviour. They may:

- do or say strange things that do not make sense or fit with reality
- hear or see things that nobody else can
- seem sad, angry or despairing all of the time
- believe that someone or something is trying to harm them or get them
- swing from feeling tired and lethargic to becoming very energetic and high
- think people are talking about them.

### WHAT CAUSES MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?

There is much disagreement about the causes of mental health problems, but few proven facts. Things like difficult family background, childhood abuse, stressful events, blocking feelings, biochemistry and genetic predisposition are all possible reasons. In this way, mental distress is like physical health problems – a person may have a genetic predisposition eg heart condition but life style, including diet, levels of stress, social situations may be what brings on the illness.

# DIFFERENT TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## ANXIETY

Almost everybody feels anxious at times but for some it can be a constant debilitating and unrealistic worry about any aspect of daily life. It is normal for students to be anxious about exams and deadlines but for some the level of anxiety is greater than the situation warrants – it can feel like a life or death situation.

## DEPRESSION

We all know what it feels like to be sad and unhappy. If you feel depressed, you can feel very down, hopeless, worthless, unmotivated and exhausted. Depression can cause problems with sleep, appetite and self-esteem and can interfere with the ability to engage in ordinary daily activities.

## PANIC ATTACKS

A panic attack is a sudden, unexpected bout of intense terror. The symptoms can include shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pain, trembling and faintness.

## PHOBIAS

A phobia is an unreasonable fear of a particular situation or object. In some instances, phobias are so extreme that they cause major disruption to life. Common phobias include fear of heights, flying and enclosed spaces.

## MANIC DEPRESSION

Manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder, causes mood swings from deep depression to extreme elation or 'highs'. Hyperactivity, scattered ideas, easy distraction, recklessness and loss of inhibition can occur during manic episodes.

## SCHIZOPHRENIA

Schizophrenia is a term used to describe a group of disorders that cause distorted thoughts and perceptions. Symptoms may include hallucinations, hearing voices, delusions and paranoia. There are different types of schizophrenia and symptoms vary in individuals. It can be very debilitating and interfere with the ability to perform everyday tasks. However, most people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia are not ill all the time.

## SELF-HARM

Self-harm is a broad term for many acts which cause personal harm including forms of cutting, burning, exposure to unnecessary risks or injury through taking toxic substances. Self harm can be seen as a way of expressing deep distress.

## SUICIDE/SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

Suicide can be seen as a way out of what feels like an unbearable existence. Often there is anger underlying these thoughts and there may be feelings of failure, loss of self-esteem, isolation and hopelessness.

# DIFFERENT TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## EATING DISORDERS

Food can be used as a way of expressing emotions that are difficult to talk about.

### ANOREXIA

Someone with anorexia will deny themselves food, while they may actually feel extremely hungry. There are many reasons for this and they can be linked to feelings of low self-worth, extreme fear of rejection, need for control and a distorted body image.

### BULIMIA

Bulimia involves eating large amounts of food, bingeing, followed by getting rid of the food by vomiting or using laxatives. Many people with bulimia binge and purge in secret so there may be no obvious outward signs of the problem.

## PERSONALITY PROBLEMS

This is more difficult to define but can involve strange, threatening, obsessive or anti-social behaviour which disturbs and disrupts others. Someone with a personality disorder may tend to ignore usual procedures, seem unduly paranoid, lack boundaries and have relationship difficulties.

## PSYCHOSIS

Psychosis refers to symptoms rather than to a specific diagnosis. There are many types of mental distress that can be categorised as being psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder and depression. Using illegal drugs or alcohol can also result in someone experiencing a psychotic episode. Someone experiencing a psychotic episode may have sensory hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, and a distorted sense of reality and may lack insight into their own mental state.

The range of mental health problems and their severity can vary greatly. What is clear is that mental health problems are very common.

“ONE IN FOUR  
PEOPLE WILL DEVELOP A  
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM  
DURING THEIR LIFETIME.”

## STUDENTS AND MENTAL HEALTH

### THERE ARE MANY FACTORS THAT CAN LEAD TO MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES FOR STUDENTS.

- Financial hardship, debts and having to take on employment as well as managing studies can create additional pressures.
- Being away from home for the first time and coping with independence can be a struggle.
- Juggling responsibilities, family problems, relationship break ups and difficult life events can all be hard to deal with.
- The process of learning, being assessed and exams can be very stressful and raise all sorts of psychological issues.
- Worries about the future, relationship and identity concerns, and career anxieties can all contribute to students feeling very vulnerable.

## KEEPING MENTALLY HEALTHY

### TALK

It can be helpful to talk through your feelings and concerns to someone you trust, perhaps a friend, relative, another student or a member of staff. Sometimes, it is helpful to talk to a complete stranger. The Counselling Service has a team of professional counsellors who have experience in helping students with a wide range of problems.

### LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Get enough sleep, exercise and eat a balanced diet.

### HAVE FUN

Make time to do things that you enjoy such as going out, sport or seeing friends. The Students' Union organises social events throughout the year and there are numerous University societies where you can participate in different interests and activities.

### BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

Find ways of building up your self confidence and feel good about your capabilities. Try out new activities and challenges.

## KEEPING MENTALLY HEALTHY

### GET HELP

Do not be afraid of seeking help if things feel difficult. Speak to your personal or senior tutor, Students' Union or the Counselling and Advice Service.

### UNIVERSITY SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH LONG TERM MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

There is a range of support available for you at the University if you have a long term mental health problem. Long term is defined as more than 12 months, and included are the conditions listed above as well as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), acute anxiety disorder and borderline personality disorder.

## LETTING THE UNIVERSITY KNOW

### REGISTERING WITH DISABILITY LEARNING SUPPORT

It is important that you let the University know of your mental health problem so that appropriate support is made available to you. You can meet with the Disability Learning Support Adviser to have a confidential discussion and register for support.

Depending on your particular needs, you may be able to access:

- Extended library book loan scheme
- Special exam arrangements
- Access to assistive technology
- Lecture materials in advance (where possible)
- Special arrangements for in class tests (where possible)
- Assistance with applying for the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).

### CONFIDENTIALITY

In order to access support, you need to meet with the Disability Adviser. Your wishes about who is made aware of the exact nature of your condition will be taken into account when co-ordinating any support. Any arrangements made are in line with respect to confidentiality and no information will be passed onto other members of staff without your permission.

### FINANCIAL SUPPORT: DISABLED STUDENTS ALLOWANCE (DSA)

Students with long term mental health problems can apply via Student Finance England (SFE). This is a non-means tested award and can help pay for necessary support or equipment.

You can download an application form from [studentfinancedirect.co.uk](http://studentfinancedirect.co.uk)

## SUPPORT WITH YOUR STUDIES

### MENTORING FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME

Disability Learning Support, in conjunction with the Counselling Service, run the Mentoring for Mental Health Programme. This helps students integrate into university life and on to their courses. University life can be stressful and if you have long-term mental health problems, sometimes it can feel more difficult.

Mentoring is not counselling but you can meet up with a trained counsellor on a regular basis to discuss any problems; get regular support and work out strategies to deal with your studies more effectively.

You can request a mentoring appointment at any point during your studies by contacting the Counselling Service.

### DIFFICULTIES WITH COURSEWORK

It is important you tell someone if you are having difficulties with your course. Discuss your concerns with your personal tutor, Disability Adviser, mentor, key worker or other staff. There are options available, including the possibility of studying part-time or suspending studies.

## EMPLOYMENT

Many students with long term mental health problems are concerned about getting employment after completing their studies. You can meet with a careers consultant, at any stage of your course, to discuss your future options. There is specialist employment support for student with long term mental health problems.

### HELPING YOURSELF

- It can help to make timetables to organise your work and free time so that you keep on top of your workload. Your mentor can help with this.
- Keep healthy by exercising, eating and sleeping well and avoiding alcohol and drugs.
- Stay in regular contact with your CPN or relevant professional
- Maintain contact with the Disability Adviser, your disability tutor, personal tutor and/or mentor as needed.
- Identify stressful periods and work out strategies to deal with them in advance.
- Understand what triggers a crisis for you.
- Take your medication and review regularly with your GP/health professional.

### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The Service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email [counselling@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@westminster.ac.uk). See webpage [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling) for further information.
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. They can be contacted via email [studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk). See [westminster.ac.uk/advice](http://westminster.ac.uk/advice) for more info.
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 020 3506 8800 (Central London) or visit [westminster.ac.uk/disability](http://westminster.ac.uk/disability)
- The **Students' Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 5454 or email [su-info@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:su-info@westminster.ac.uk). Visit [uwsu.com](http://uwsu.com) for more info.

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [studentdepression.org](http://studentdepression.org)

### DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT [WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

#### Acknowledgements:

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