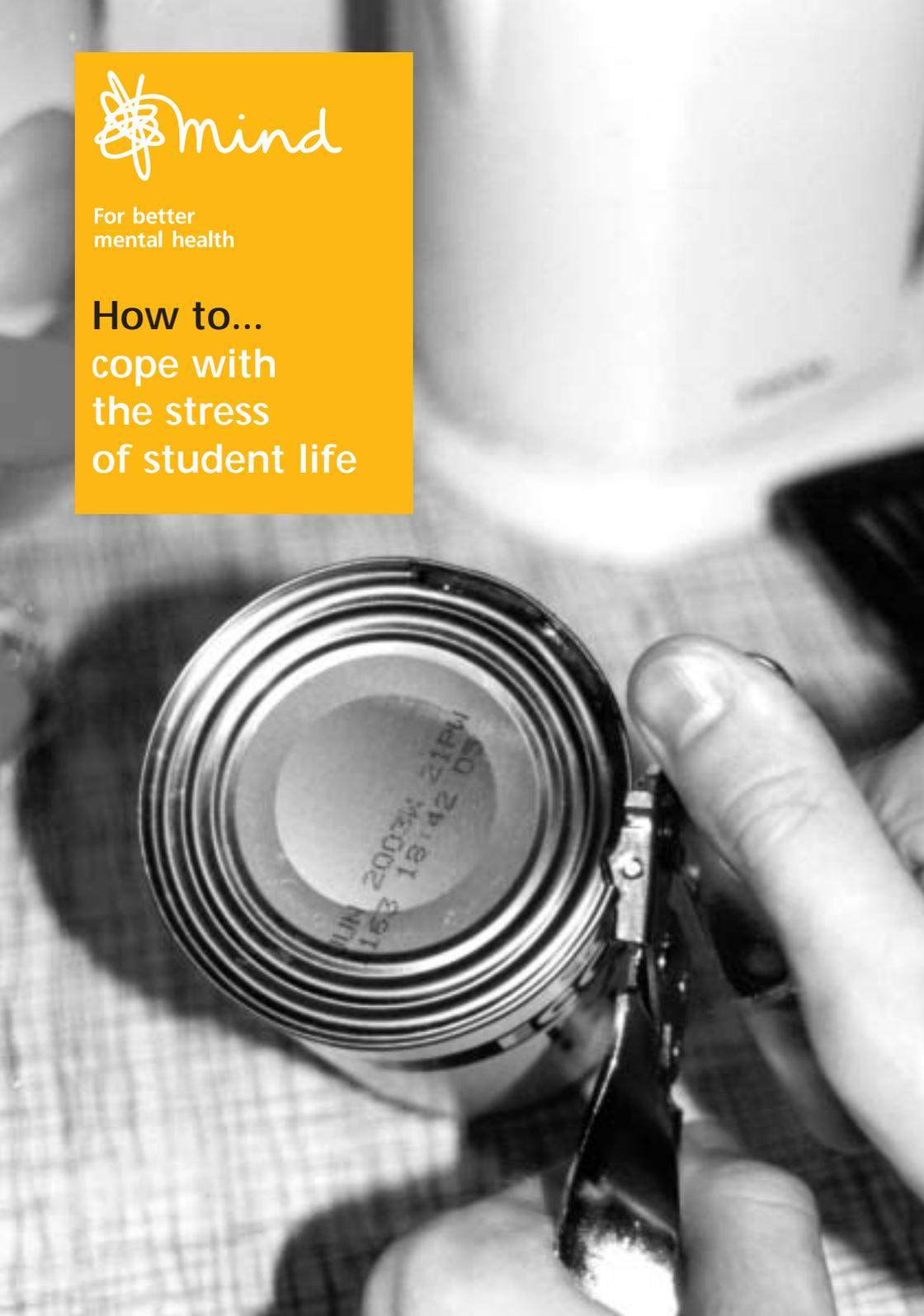




For better
mental health

How to...
cope with
the stress
of student life



How to... cope with the stress of student life

“So this was how it was, face to face with the future – being alone, having no-one to talk to, being afraid of the city and Training College and teaching, and having to pretend that I was not alone, that I had many people to talk to, that I felt at home in Dunedin, and that teaching was what I had longed to do all my life.”

Student life is exciting. But it can also be very pressured and stressful. A lot has to be achieved in the limited time available. This booklet is aimed at students and their families. It focuses on some of the anxieties that you are likely to encounter as you embark on your courses, and suggests ways of coping.



What difficulties should I expect?

Student life is a transitional period. You do a course because you think it will enable you to do or have something that you want, such as increased job opportunities or enhanced enjoyment of life. Studying is part of a process of change. It can cause a lot of anxiety.

Leaving home

If you go to university straight from school, you are facing the challenge of leaving home, separating from your parents and beginning the process of finding your identity, as an adult, and your place in the world. This is a big psychological upheaval. It also involves many challenges at a practical level. You will need to practise housekeeping, manage a budget and find your way around a strange place. This all demands energy, just as you are beginning to take on the work requirements of your course and build a social life.

Mature students

Mature students will already have left home, but will still have many changes to deal with. There may be less money, less free time, and a change in social status, for better or worse. You may have a partner and children; your new life will have an impact on them, and your relationship with them will be affected.

Changing identity

You may go from being a biggish fish in a smallish pond (as a sixth-former at school, or a manager in a company) to being a tiny fish in an enormous pond. You may feel differently about yourself, and other people may react to you differently. You will be making new friends, and have a chance to make a fresh start. You may be working with peers who are your intellectual equals, for the first time in your life. You may find you are cleverer than you thought – or not so clever! It takes time to adjust to this new sense of who you are.

New opportunities

There may be sports, social and political activities open to you now, which you've never tried before. This has two aspects: it can be very exciting, but it can also be terrifying. Don't get swept away! It would be unwise to go on your first pot-holing expedition, for example, on the same weekend that you are moving into new lodgings and handing in your first essay! Recognise how much you are dealing with at once, and go at your own pace. Be prepared to feel terrified sometimes.

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Family relationships

Relationships with your family will change too. This can be especially difficult if you are the first one ever to go to college, or the first of your gender. Other family members can have complicated feelings about this. They may secretly envy you, or be afraid that your new experience will make you too strange and hard to communicate with – no longer 'one of us'. Their reactions may cause you to feel insecure, lacking in confidence or guilty about having this opportunity.

But there can also be problems if everyone in the family has been to college. Can you live up to their standards? Do you have to work in the same field as them, or do they feel threatened by your choice of subject? The pressure to succeed may also contain a hidden message about not being too successful.

The most important thing with family situations of this kind is that these feelings need to be acknowledged, by being talked about. This draws their sting, and makes them easier to deal with.



How will I deal with practical issues?

Accommodation, finance, food, and travel can all present daunting problems in your first weeks. Ask for help from older students, from other first-years, or from your teachers. Don't be proud! You are not alone in your difficulties.

There should also be institutional sources of advice and information. Most colleges should have an accommodation office, to help you find somewhere to live, and a student advisory service to give information of other kinds. There should also be a students' union. The students' union will often publish a handbook or a welfare manual outlining sources of help.

Eat!

Use the canteens, if any, if the food is bearable, especially at the beginning. It's very important to eat properly, and not to exist on snacks, beer and coffee. If you are anxious, preparing your own food may feel like too much trouble. But if you go to the canteen, you will be fed, as well as having the opportunity to meet people and make friends. If there is no canteen, or the food is inedible, join the students' union and campaign for change!

Meet people

Seek out other newcomers. Loneliness can make the challenges of your new life seem much worse. Yet when you start, everyone is alone. Colleges recognise this and often organise 'getting to know you' social events, 'freshers' fairs' and the like. Take advantage of these and any other social opportunities. The very beginning of your first term, when you first arrive, is a key time for making friends. Use strategies like propping your door open, if you are in a hall of residence, to encourage people to drop in and get to know you.

If you are shy, you may find it very difficult to join in. But it's important to remember that there will be many students who are feeling nervous and putting a brave face on it. If there is something that especially interests you, such as music or a sport, find out if there's a college society that focuses on this. Once you have found some kindred spirits, life becomes more manageable.

Live with others to start with, if at all possible. If you can't get a place in a hall of residence or student flat, try and find a flatshare. Avoid being isolated in a bedsit, where there are no other students. That way you avoid loneliness, and share housework and meals.

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How will I cope with the academic work?

Inevitably, you will feel anxious about this to start with. Will I be good enough? Can I keep up? This is the major challenge, and you will be facing it without the close guidance you may have previously enjoyed from a teacher or parent.

Get the right information from the start. How many lectures, seminars or laboratory sessions are compulsory? (How much can you get away with not attending?) With assignments, what exactly are you being asked to do? For example, with written work, what is the question? How many words are you expected to write? What is the deadline for handing it in?

What resources are available? Is there a library; what hours is it open, and how many other students are going to be wanting to read the same book, at the same time?

Is there a photocopying machine, and do you have to pay to use it? Are handwritten essays acceptable, or do you have to use a word processor? If your tutors don't make themselves clear, ask questions and be persistent.

Make yourself a realistic timetable. When you are assigned a task, estimate how long you think it will take you. Then add on a bit more time, as you have probably been over-optimistic in the first place. Then set a time each day, or each week, to do it.

Thinking ahead also involves taking into account any resources you will need to complete the task. It may turn out that the library has only one copy of an essential book or paper, and someone else has just borrowed it. It's better to allow too much time, and then find the bonus of a couple of hours off, than to stay up all night, drinking black coffee, in a panic.

Set clear priorities

You need to make hard choices. You may want to go to that meeting, film, or match tonight, but the essay has to be handed in tomorrow. Or you'd like to spend every waking minute with a new partner, but you haven't done enough revision.

Part of the art of survival is to make realistic assessments of consequences. If you are late handing in the essay, can your tutor be appeased or negotiated with? Try to negotiate with your tutor before a deadline and ask for an extension, if necessary. What will happen if you do badly in a test or exam? If your final results depend more on how well you do in exams, rather than the quality of your course work, you may decide to put less effort into writing perfect essays and more into revising for exams.

Get support

Beginning to take responsibility for your own learning needs some support. Some institutions have systems to provide for this, ensuring that each student has a tutor or mentor, who can act like a sort of academic parent to them, advising them on their work and helping them plan realistically.

Many, however, do not. Even when this is the case, it's possible to form a support group of fellow students, formally or informally, to help each other. Be prepared to ask for support and help.

What if work gets too much?

If you feel things are getting on top of you, it's important to acknowledge this at an early stage, before you fall too far behind. The first thing to do is to seek objective advice from someone who knows your work and the standards required. Such a person could be your tutor or another teacher.



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It may be that your work is fine, but your personal standards are too high – you think your work is not good enough, but others are satisfied with it. On the other hand, it may be that you have not yet learned to organise your work realistically, or that you have a problem with deadlines, as such.

Your workload may seem overwhelming because you're experiencing emotional problems, which are affecting your ability to concentrate and work effectively. These may be to do with unresolved difficulties from your past, or to do with current relationship problems. It's important to seek help and support, if you are distressed. You should be able to get access to counselling through college counselling services or the college welfare officer. If you lack confidence, it may be worth considering a course of assertiveness training (see p. 14).

Your personal tutor should be able to advise and help you if the problem is to do with worries about work, or help you find counselling if the problem is emotional in origin. In either case, the earlier the problem is acknowledged, the more likely it is that a solution can be found.



Is this the right course for me?

Sometimes the problem is more fundamental – the course you are doing is not right for you. It can be difficult to work out what exactly is wrong. Here are some pointers that you may find useful when considering this.

Emotional difficulties

Has some major event just happened, such as the end of a love affair? Has someone in your family recently had an illness, accident, died or been made redundant?

How is your general health? Are you feeling tired and run-down? All these things can make us less enthusiastic about work and therefore less able to do it. Your competence will return with your general physical and emotional wellbeing. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 13, and *Further reading*, on p. 14, for more information on how to look after yourself.)

You decide

How did you come to a decision about doing this course in the first place? Did you decide for you, or to please someone else, such as a teacher or a parent? In the long run, you have to lead your own life and set your own goals.

Long-term goals

What are your long-term goals? How will your course of study affect your ability to achieve them? Have they changed since you decided on your course? You may suddenly realise that you are more interested in town planning or politics than the architecture or modern languages you are supposed to be studying. You may even feel that you would rather be working at something else altogether, and not be at college at all.

Boredom

How do you feel at the beginning of a new term, when given a list of lectures or assignments? Generally, you shouldn't be tired at this point. Does your heart lift with excitement at the prospect of at least some of the work, or does it sink? Is the sinking feeling, 'I can't do this, it's too difficult' or, 'I'm really just not that interested in this subject'?

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What do I do if I decide to change courses?

When the realisation hits you that you are on the wrong course, it's a crisis and can feel devastating. The consequences can be very serious. For example, your finances, as well as your place at college, may be tied to a particular course. Your family may have made all kinds of investments in you, on that course, and may be upset at your wish to change. The college authorities may be very unsympathetic. There is therefore a strong temptation to bury this awareness, grit your teeth and get on with the course. Sometimes, this is the best decision, especially if you are nearing the end of the course, have a clear idea of what it is you really want to do afterwards, and a plan for doing it.

For most people, however, it is helpful to acknowledge these feelings if they make themselves strongly felt. You need to find someone to talk them over with. A crisis like this is both academic, because it affects your course work and professional future, and emotional, in that it will have an impact on your relationships with your family, your self-image and your future emotional wellbeing. Therefore, you will probably need support with both aspects. You will need both academic advice and personal counselling. You may also need some kind of support in negotiating with your parents, the college authorities and your funding body, if any, if you do make the decision to change your course.

It's important to seek help early with this kind of crisis. If your course really is wrong for you, and you are going to change, the sooner the better, in most cases. Think very carefully, during your first term, about whether you really do wish to study this particular subject for three or more years. Examine the alternatives. It may be possible, at an early stage, to switch to another course, without your funding being affected.

College authorities vary in how they deal with a student who wishes to leave or change courses, but you may be surprised at how supportive some tutors can be. It's also worth talking to a college welfare officer, if there is one.

What if there's nobody else like me?

We all have a deep need to belong, to fit in, especially when everything around us is new and pressured. It can be very hard to feel different. We often feel we have to be like others in order for others to like us.



When there is something about you – your accent, gender, skin colour, wheelchair, religious symbol prominently worn – that marks you out as different from the majority, straight away, this can cause anxiety all round. You may feel, 'Will they like me, even though I'm different? Do they accept that I have a right to be here?'. Those you meet, on the other hand, may worry, 'I've never met anyone like her before. What will she be like? Will she like me, even though she's different? Will she hate me, or envy me, because I'm one of the majority?'.

When difference leads to hostility, and you are subjected to prejudice, it can be devastating. You feel alone, powerless and invisible as a person. It feels as if everyone is relating to your accent, skin colour, disability or whatever, and not to you.

It isn't your problem

Remember that they are expressing something about them, not about you. Other people will put on to the person who is different, all their anxieties about their own lives. For example, the only woman on an engineering course could be seen by male fellow students as challenging their sense of masculinity.

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They show hostility to her because of their own anxiety and insecurity. People who are clear and secure about their own identity, whether it's around race, gender, sexuality, or anything else, have no need to persecute others.

Seek out others in the same position. You may feel alone if you are the only single mother in your department. But there will be others in other departments, or other colleges in the same university, or in other universities. Test out if you really are the only one in the country or world like you. The chances are that, somewhere, there are others in your position to whom you can look for support, comfort and encouragement. You may have to look at a national level to find them, so scan the magazines on the bookstalls or the letters columns of local and national student publications, for individuals or organisations who share your concerns. With friends, it's easier to face the world.

Seek allies

Institutional oppression needs to be resisted politically, at an institutional level. For this you need allies. You also need personal support. Many people who are not Black, female, gay, working-class or disabled have been successfully brought together in support of people who are. Friendships and love, as well as political alliances, can grow across these barriers, too. Injustice is injustice; all kinds of people are prepared to resist it. It's not easy to work together with a disparate band of people, as it brings up our deep fears about difference. Nonetheless, it is a challenge that many people have relished.

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest Local Mind Association, contact *Mind*infoline on 0845 766 0163.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG

tel. 0870 443 5252, web: www.bacp.co.uk

See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

Get Connected

North Acton Business Park, Wales Farm Road, London W3 6RS

helpline: 0808 808 4994, web: www.getconnected.org.uk

Free helpline that finds young people the best help

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

Chapter House, 18–20 Crucifix Lane, London SE1 3JW

infoline: 0800 328 5050, web: www.skill.org.uk

A national charity promoting opportunities for young people

National Union of Students

Nelson Mandela House, 461 Holloway Road, London N7 6LJ

tel. 020 7272 8900, web: www.nusonline.co.uk

Websites

www.at-ease.nsf.org.uk

www.thesite.org

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Further reading

- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with exam stress* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to cope with loneliness* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2003) £1
- Manage your mind: the mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £13.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2003) £1
- Mind troubleshooters: stress* (Mind 2003) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2002) 50p
- The secrets of self-esteem* P. Cleghorn (Vega 2002) £7.99
- Sunbathing in the rain: a cheerful book about depression* G. Lewis (Flamingo 2003) £7.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding obsessive-compulsive disorder* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding phobias* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding the psychological effects of street drugs* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding self-harm* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
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For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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