

blackbullion ✨

Blackbullion's guide to staying healthy and safe at university

What is stress?

Stress – we all know what it means but we often forget how to manage our own stress.

Stress, when managed well, can help us perform under pressure but when we become overwhelmed stress can have a negative effect on all aspects of your life. The most important thing to recognise is what causes your stress, recognise the difference between good and bad stress and learn about your body's way of coping with stress.

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones including adrenaline and cortisol, which rouse the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed up your reaction time, and enhance

your focus. This is known as the “fight, flight or freeze” stress response and is your body's way of protecting you.

When stress is within your comfort zone, it can help you to stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life – giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. Stress is what keeps you alert during a presentation at university

Counselling services [at universities] are facing an annual rise in demand of about 10%



and sharpens your concentration to help you to study for an exam. But beyond your comfort zone, stress stops being helpful and can start causing major damage to your mind and body.

When you repeatedly experience the “fight, flight or freeze” stress response in your daily life, it can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can shut down your immune system, upset your digestive and

reproductive systems, raise blood pressure, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up the aging process and leave you vulnerable to many mental and physical health problems.

‘Stress is like spice - in the right proportion it enhances the flavour of a dish. Too little produces a bland, dull meal; too much may choke you.’ - *Donald Tubesing*

The following lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of chronic stress.

The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

Physical symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heart rate
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds or flu

Cognitive symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgement
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional symptoms

- Depression or general unhappiness
- Anxiety and agitation
- Moodiness, irritability, or anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loneliness and isolation
- Other mental or emotional health problems

Behavioural symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Managing stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you can be stressful. This includes positive events such as going to university, marriage and buying a house.

There are certain things you can do to help manage your stress so that you don't become overwhelmed:

Emotional awareness

Knowing when you're feeling stressed and the ability to self-soothe and calm yourself down can help aid you.

Social engagement

Talk to friends and family about how you're feeling. Develop your network of people to engage with when you're feeling overwhelmed and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Physical activity

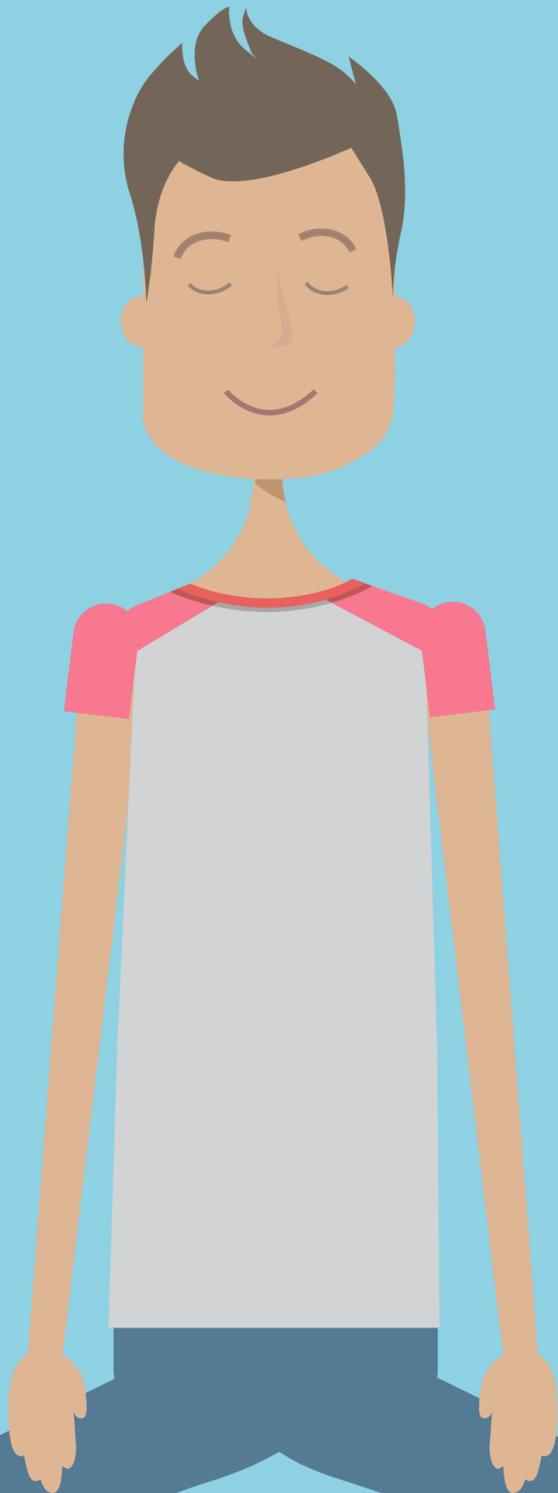
Exercising regularly, whether it's a walk, session in the gym, playing sports...whatever feels right for you, as exercise releases happy hormones.

Diet

Boring but true, good food can make you feel better, whilst sugar and processed foods can play havoc with your system. But, again, listen to your body – everything in moderation!

‘When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive – to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love.’

- *Marcus Aurelius*



Challenges on campus

So far we have talked about the impact of stress and how it can affect you. What is important is to recognise that going to university for the first time can be highly stressful and anxiety-provoking. There will be a myriad of challenges that you will be faced with and it is important to recognise that although it can feel stressful and overwhelming at times, it is important to not only have fun and enjoy yourself but also to recognise that there will be challenges ahead. These challenges on campus can involve the following:

1. Gambling
2. Alcohol Abuse
3. Eating Disorders
4. Drug Abuse
5. Exam and general stress
6. Sleeping
7. Financial Stress
8. Sexual Issues
9. Peer- pressure and social anxiety

In this section we will look at each of the identified issues and how you can avoid pitfalls, getting help that you may need to address the problem and what to do if you're feeling stuck.

Gambling

According to The Guardian (2014) it's estimated that around 127,000 young people in the UK have a gambling problem, and opportunities to get involved in gambling are increasing. The revised Gambling Act means that casinos no longer require membership, and bookmakers and online betting sites can now advertise on television. It may feel that it's an easy way to make money but the bottom line of gambling is that the house always wins. With the increased pressure

on student loans it can feel easier to attempt to gamble – don't! You will not win! If for any reason you do fall into this trap, know that there are agencies that can help, as listed below. Gambling is as addictive as smoking – if you can avoid it, all the more better for your mental health.



It's estimated that around 127,000 young people in the UK have a gambling problem.

If you're concerned about the amount of time or money that you or someone you know is spending gambling, you can talk in confidence to a Gamcare adviser, by phone on: 0808 8020 133 or via the [NetLine](#). (Available to people living in England, Scotland and Wales).



Alcohol abuse



Perhaps one of the most common problems on campus is the issue of alcohol. When is enough enough? When does too much become an issue? How do we know when is too much? Do you know your limits? We all love a good night out, but it's really important to keep the drinking in moderation. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges you'll face at university is the pressure to drink. But this doesn't mean you have to give in to the temptation to join the clan. Part of the difficulties

are knowing your limits. Once you know what is going to cross the line for you, it's a good time to stop drinking or at least cut back. There is peer pressure at university to do all sorts of things and try out all manner of new behaviours but it's about knowing what your body can take. You're going to make mistakes and you're going to make epic fails but the point is to look after yourself and look out for your friends.

85% of students think getting drunk is part of University culture. (NUS survey)

If you're concerned about any issues associated with alcohol, see your GP or contact Alcoholics Anonymous www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

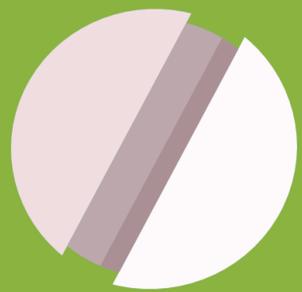
Drug abuse

There is no surprise that university students dabble in recreational drug use. Research suggests that certain universities are more prone to this type of behaviour than others. And, most tellingly, that a bit of drug use during your student years doesn't necessarily mean you're going to fail all your exams. While the University of Manchester, for example, may have among the most drug-taking students in the UK, it's also ranked – alongside Oxford and Cambridge – as one of the 50 top performing

universities in the world. As with everything if you are going to dabble make sure that you do it in a safe space with people you trust. No-one can stop you from experimenting but if you do just do it carefully.

In 2014 there were 2,248 deaths which were related to drug misuse. This is an increase of 15% on 2013 and 44% higher than 2004. (NHS)

If you're worried about drug abuse please contact: Talk To Frank on **0300 123 6600**



Eating disorders

Eating disorders are a range of conditions that can affect someone physically, psychologically and socially. They are serious mental illnesses and include anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorders. Over 725,000 men and women in the UK are affected by eating disorders. They can be serious, but they're treatable conditions. The sooner someone enters treatment the better the prognosis. Anyone can develop an eating disorder and they claim more lives than any other mental illness – one in

five of the most seriously affected will die prematurely from the physical consequences or suicide. Eating disorders are complex and there are a range of reasons why people may develop one. A whole range of different factors including genetic, psychological, environmental, social and biological can influence the potential development of these disorders.

Over 725,000 men and women in the UK are affected by eating disorders. (Beat)

Beat are the UK's eating disorder charity, and can be contacted on **0300 123 3355** or emailing info@b-eat.co.uk

Exam stress



It's very common to feel stressed around exam time. You might feel there's a huge amount of pressure to do well, or anxious you can't fit all the revision in. The build up to results day can also leave you feeling overwhelmed and run down.

What are the symptoms of exam stress?

- Difficulty getting to sleep or difficulty waking up in the morning
- Constant fatigue
- Forgetfulness
- Aches and pains for no apparent reason
- Poor appetite
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities
- Increased anxiety and irritability
- "Flying off the handle"
- Increased heart rate
- Migraines/headaches
- Blurred vision
- Dizziness

Everyone has bad days, but if you've noticed three or more of the above symptoms and you've experienced them for some weeks you may need to do something about your stress levels.

Visit your **doctor (GP)** to rule out other possible reasons for the symptoms such as **depression**. If you're stressed, your GP may be able to advise you.

If you are suffering from stress, try some of the following ways to calm down:

- Try to make time for yourself away from your studies to wind down. For example, relaxing in a warm bubble bath, listening

to soothing music and shutting yourself off from the world for a while.

- Take time for your mind and body to relax. Chatting with friends, meditation, yoga or just watching a bit of TV or listening to music can take the edge off.
- Take time to work out, run or play sports. Regular exercise is a good stress reducer.
- Eat well – skipping meals will deplete your energy and leave you drained.
- Talk to your family and friends. Making time to see your friends will help you unwind and let you unburden any problems.

96% of students feel anxious about exams and revision. (Mental Healthy)

Financial stress



It's normal to feel worried, anxious or down when times are hard. When at university this can feel particularly scary, however there are lots of things you can do to help yourself if you're in a difficult situation. 80% of students are worried about making ends meet at university (savethestudent) Financial stress can affect your self-esteem which in turn can lead to emotional distress, which is a common human emotion.

Below are some tips to help you manage with financial stress:

- Don't withdraw from life because you think you can't afford to be active or socialise. Keep seeing your friends. If you have more time because you're not at work, take up some form of exercise, as it can improve your mood if you're feeling low.
- Facing your fears means not avoiding things you find

difficult. For example, if it looks like you're getting into debt, get advice on how to prioritise your debts. When people feel anxious, they sometimes avoid talking to others. Some people can lose their confidence about driving or travelling. If this starts to happen, facing up to these situations will generally make them easier.

- Be nice to yourself.
- Keep a routine and stick to it.
- Get a good night's sleep.

80% of students are worried about making ends meet at university. (savethestudent)

If you're feeling worried and this has not subsided after a few weeks, see your GP. Remember you don't have to suffer alone – there is help out there.

As above, either see your GP or contact helplines such as the **Samaritans** (08457 90 90 90) for confidential, non-judgemental emotional support.

The **Citizens Advice Bureau** is a good place to get information about benefits, how to deal with debt, what you're entitled to if you're made redundant, and who to speak to if you end up losing your home.

Peer- pressure & social anxiety

Peer pressure can be described as the influence you feel from a person or group of people to do something you might not otherwise consider doing or even want to do.

It's not uncommon to want to be part of a group and feel like you belong in a community, especially if you're new or less experienced than the people around you. This can happen while at university and you may feel compelled to take part in activities.

Peer pressure often happens because you don't want to be alone or left out. So you go with what other people think in order for them to include you. A peer can be anyone around the same age as you. At university especially you may feel even more pressure to fit in, particularly in the early days. You might try to live up to people's expectations, but it's important to be mindful to not have other people's expectations cloud what you want. If you're dealing with peer

pressure, you're not alone. There are lots of ways of being able to help deal with it.

One of the most important lessons while at university is being able to make decisions that are right for you. It also means taking ownership and responsibility for those choices and making sure that you're happy with yours. Spending time with people who enjoy the same activities as you make help alleviate pressure into doing things you don't want

70 percent of young people who smoke have friends who smoke or started smoking because of peer pressure.
(The Canadian Lung Association Study)



to do. Remember hanging out with the “cool” kids isn’t cool if it’s something that you’re not comfortable doing or partaking in decisions you’re not happy with.

Having the strength of character to say no takes guts. However it can also make you feel stronger in yourself and being calm, explaining your reasons for not wanting to do something may make you feel more confident and gain the respect of your peers.

If you find yourself in a negative peer pressure situation it can certainly be easier in an environment you feel comfortable in. Although standing up for yourself and others can be another way of feeling more comfortable and hopefully create positivity within a group.

**‘The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.’
-*William James***

Readers take note:

As with anything in life, starting at university can be not only a really exciting and positive experience but also a frightening one. Remember that you're not alone, there are lots of people who feel as you do and there is lots of help out there.

About the author

Dr Julie Scheiner is an experienced Chartered Psychologist. Julie works with clients from across the age span who present with a variety of difficulties. Julie is passionate about what she does and believes firmly in the therapeutic relationship. She is an experienced clinician having worked in the NHS, private and public sector for over 10 years.

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About Blackbullion

Blackbullion is a free learning platform with 4-minute lessons designed to empower you to make smarter financial decisions. Students at 20 UK institutions can access the platform at:

blackbullion.com

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