



Produced in partnership with:



Charlie Watkins
Foundation

Making the move to university: looking after your mental health

A guide for students who
feel they might not fit in



We're talking mental health

Starting university can be an exciting time, with lots of new experiences and a chance to develop your independence and find out more about yourself.

Some students have had a straightforward time leading up to this moment, but others have had experiences and difficulties that may affect their time at university.

Our guides look at some of the issues that might have affected students, to help them think about their circumstances, their mental health, and how best they can support themselves and be supported by their education institution.

OTHER GUIDES IN THIS SERIES:

- A guide for care leavers.
- A guide for young carers.
- A guide for LGBTQ+ students.
- A guide for students who've had adverse childhood experiences.
- A guide for international students.



The start of your time at university is full of new possibilities and while it can be exciting it can also be daunting. Many students attend university ready for the challenge, keen to sample all that university has to give. However, for some students finding yourself in a new and unfamiliar situation can be difficult, especially if, for a variety of reasons, you feel like you don't belong.

Universities are generally diverse places where people from a wide range of nationalities, ethnicities, religions and backgrounds can come together to learn, study and do research. However, some students or groups of students can often feel as if they don't fit in. If this is happening to you, it can have a profound impact on your sense of self, your mental health and your ability to study to your full potential.

There are many reasons you might feel you don't fit in:

- Race, ethnicity, skin colour.
- Religion.
- Background/class.
- Where you come from/nationality.
- Language/accent.
- Sexuality.
- Gender.
- Disability.
- Mental health diagnosis.

People don't fit neatly into one box, so you may identify with several of these categories.

Understanding your situation

Coming to university might be the first time you have come up against the experience of feeling you don't belong and/or being at the receiving end of 'microaggressions' (a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude).

Or you may have been dealing with this all your life and hoped it would be different at university. The importance of belonging and connection is a very basic human need. If this is threatened or compromised it can have a serious impact, often leading to:

- **Loneliness and isolation;** this can feel especially hard if everyone else looks like they are making friends.

- **Reduced confidence and self-doubt.**
- **Low self-esteem.**
- **Shame.**
- **Confusion.**
- **Imposter syndrome;** where you have a sense that you shouldn't be where you are, that you are not good enough or that some mistake has been made and that any minute now you will get found out and exposed.
- **Anxiety.**
- **Depression.**
- **A feeling of alienation.**



What can you do?

Remember that there will be many people feeling exactly the same as you. Very often people are good at putting on a front, especially when they first arrive at university.

- **Keep optimistic.** It may take a little while, but things should settle down for you and you should find people you can connect with and a sense of belonging. In the meantime, be extra kind to yourself and get as much help and support as you need.
- **Nurture and develop your difference** rather than trying to 'fit in'. Be proud of who you are.
- **Surround yourself, where possible, with people who appreciate overlapping cultural identities.** This might feel hard when you first arrive, and it could take a while before you settle down and find people you gel with.

- **Recognise that you have as much right to be studying at this university as anyone else.**
- **Remember that you are protected by the Equality Act** and that harassment on the grounds of race, sexuality, gender, age or disability is against the law. If you feel that subtle microaggressions are turning into bullying or harassment, your university will have a policy about this. The student union should be able to advise you on this.
- **Practise self-compassion;** all too often we're in the habit of beating ourselves up when we're feeling down. Being self-compassionate is learning to recognise when you are giving yourself unkind, harsh messages and changing them into something gentle and accepting. It's about learning how to be a good friend to yourself and recognising we're not alone in our suffering.



How can you support your own mental health?

Where do you start?

Self-awareness is a good starting point, something you may be good at, or may have avoided because it is uncomfortable. Checking in with yourself at the start of each day can be really helpful.

Some good questions to ask yourself each day:

- How am I feeling?
- What do I need today?



HOW AM I FEELING?

This question is not always as easy as it looks, especially if you're used to answering 'fine'. Take a breath, close your eyes and really notice what is going on for you. Start with noticing any physical symptoms – tightness in the chest or limbs, tension, heavy in the heart, or perhaps lightness. What can you do to help these physical symptoms?

There's a tightness in my chest, I will take some slow gentle breaths, or maybe listen to a short, guided meditation or soothing music.

Then try to name any feelings you have – for example sadness, anxiety, emptiness, happiness. Accept these feelings, all emotions have value. Think about how you can look after these feelings.

I'm feeling sad today, ok, so I need to take care and be gentle today.



WHAT DO I NEED TODAY?

You need to look after your basic needs every day. Eating, resting, exercise, staying hydrated, being sociable... think about how you will fulfil these needs each morning. Just reminding yourself that you need to do this can help you improve or develop good habits for self-care.

Ask yourself: "What do I have to do and what can wait for another day?" You may have university work to complete, lectures to attend, seminars to prepare for – be realistic about your work goals, and how you will use your time. You may have laundry to do, or a bill to pay. Think about how best you can fit it in to the day or ask yourself if it can wait until the next day.

This is all about being kind to yourself, something which you may not be used to.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the things you need to do, try to prioritise the most important and allow yourself to rest and take time out – you will manage better if you're rested.

What support can university offer?

Once you've enrolled, your university wants you to stay until you complete your course. However, your university understands that some students face challenges to achieving this, so there will be academic support, and a range of wellbeing support – you just have to ask for it.

A search of your university website should give you an idea of the extra support you may be able to access. If you explain your circumstances, they may offer tailored support, outreach programmes or specific individual or group support.

Academic support

If you're feeling daunted by the new way of learning or overwhelmed by the amount of work you need to do, don't ignore these worries. You have already achieved so much by getting a place at university. This is recognised by universities and they should have systems in place to support you.

Find out who will assist you in your department. There may be an academic adviser, personal tutor or learning support staff. They can help you with deadlines or extensions, but only if they are aware of your situation.

If you are worried about how they will see you or that you might be judged, try to remember that results are important to them, so it's in their interests to help you – you are entitled to access support.

Wellbeing support

Universities are investing a lot of money into supporting the wellbeing of their students. There are specialist teams that can help with finances, disability, careers, the particular concerns of international students and emotional wellbeing.

There should be information on the website to explain how to access support, and you can usually make an appointment to discuss your needs, and, if you need one, create a support plan.

If your feelings are overwhelming and you find yourself struggling with the demands of academic or independent living, or with juggling your responsibilities, the wellbeing team can offer services to help, possibly including counselling.



The wellbeing team at your university will have all the information you need about what's available and how to access it. You are entitled to support and staff are there to help you find your way.

Finances

Financial worries can badly affect your mental health. It's easy to ignore them and hope they go away but this will not help. Take prompt action and seek advice before you feel overwhelmed or distressed.

You may have applied for student finance before attending university. Waiting for the first loan to come into your bank account can be quite stressful, so if it's late, be sure to check with student finance (they usually give a date when it will be paid).

Perhaps you are expecting a parental contribution and there may be a delay or problem with this. Perhaps you are an international student who is being sponsored by your government or an organisation and have worries about this. Do not suffer alone but speak to the finance team at your university for advice.

It can be difficult to learn to budget if you're not used to it. If you find that you're not managing, there is online advice and support:

studentminds.org.uk/studentfinance

In some situations, some universities offer a bursary to help you financially, so ask the finance team if you think you may be entitled to extra financial support.

Most universities have a hardship fund. Ask at the student union or finance team for advice.

Don't let your money worries mount up until you feel you can't cope. You are not alone and support and guidance are available.



Support agencies

Below is a list of organisations that offer mental health support to students who feel they might not fit in.

Shout

Text: SHOUT to 85258

24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere.

The Mix

Call: 0808 808 4994

Text: THEMIX to 85258

Support and advice for under 25s, including a helpline, crisis messenger service and webchat.

Talk to Frank

talktofrank.com

Call: 0300 1236600

Text: 82111

A website that offers help and advice concerning drug use and alcohol. There is a find a support centre tool and other resources on their website.

Your university website may also have useful information.

These websites may offer you useful advice and guidance but are not endorsed by CWT.

Student Space (from Student Minds)

Text: STUDENT to 85258

studentspace.org.uk

Free, 24/7 text support for students in the UK with trained volunteers. The website provides lots of information and resources about getting support at university, and also advice about student life.

YoungMinds

Text: YM to 85258

youngminds.org.uk

Free, 24/7 text support for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis. Trained volunteers, with support from experienced clinical supervisors. Mental health resources and information for young adults.

If you need help now

If you have any suicidal feelings at any point it is important to talk to someone you trust, or seek help from a GP or a counsellor. Getting the right support early can play an important part in preventing things from becoming worse.

It is important to act immediately if:

- You feel that your suicidal thoughts are immediate and/or beyond your control.
- Your thoughts about suicide might inadvertently put others at risk.
- You have already done something that might put your life at risk, eg overdosed.

What to do

Call 999 and ask for immediate help, telling the emergency operator your name, date of birth, address, any actions you have already taken, and about your feelings of suicide. If you can safely get to an Accident and Emergency Department yourself, do so immediately.

You can also ring one of these helplines if you need to talk to someone now, or while you wait for help to arrive:

SAMARITANS

Telephone: 116 123 (free line)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

PAPYRUS HOPELINE

Telephone: 0800 068 41 41 (free line)

This guide, and the other five in the series, is the result of a collaboration between the Charlie Waller Trust and the Charlie Watkins Foundation. Both are charities founded by families bereaved by suicide whose aim is to help young people look after their mental health.



Remembering Charlie Waller

Charlie Waller was a strong, funny, popular, good-looking and kind young man, with a close and loving family. To the outside world, he had everything to live for. Yet in 1997, at the age of 28, Charlie took his own life. He was suffering from depression.

In response to this tragedy, his family founded the Charlie Waller Trust, to open up the conversation around depression, and to ensure that young people are able to understand and look after their mental health and to spot the signs in others.

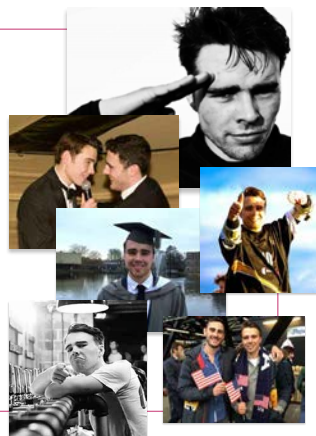
Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

Remembering Charlie Watkins

Charlie Watkins was loved by all who knew him. He was bright, charismatic, entertaining, popular and, above all, kind.

Charlie's mother died when he was just nine. Despite outward appearances he never recovered from the catastrophic loss and was unable to overcome the hidden depression that haunted him. In 2017 he tragically took his own life aged 22.

His twin brother Harry and his father Tim founded the Charlie Watkins Foundation to help young people facing mental health challenges. The foundation raises funds to support charities and initiatives whose primary focus is to support young people with their mental health.



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