



Produced in partnership with:



Charlie Watkins  
Foundation

## **Making the move to university: looking after your mental health**

A guide for international students



## 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:*

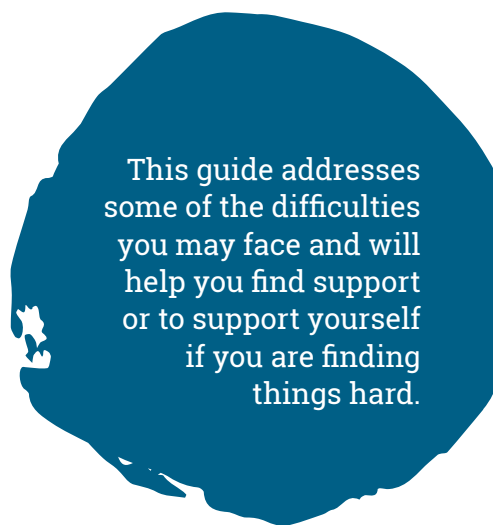
- A guide for care leavers.
- A guide for young carers.
- A guide for LGBTQ+ students.
- A guide for students who've had adverse childhood experiences.
- A guide for students who feel they might not fit in.



## International students

**The start of your time at university is full of new possibilities and while it can be exciting it can also be a bit stressful!** Many students attend university ready for the challenge, eager to sample all that university has to give, while some may struggle to take advantage of all the opportunities that university can offer.

If you are a student from outside the UK, this is possibly your first time away from home or without your family. This can sometimes affect how you are feeling and how you manage the demands of independent living or academic study.



This guide addresses some of the difficulties you may face and will help you find support or to support yourself if you are finding things hard.



# Understanding your situation

## Cultural differences

**Leaving home to live independently can be a challenge even in your own country.** Learning to find your way around a new city, managing finances, or domestic duties like washing and cooking can all be strange and seem hard at first for many students. If you are living in a new country there will be additional factors – language barriers, day to day routines, laws, food differences, not to mention differences in UK society such as cultural attitudes, daily routines and eating habits, and the student drinking culture.

You may feel overwhelmed at first, and so it is important to find out who you can turn to for help. If you are living in student accommodation, there may be wardens or residential support staff you can ask for advice.

Most universities have a wellbeing team who can offer specific guidance for international students, and the university website will have links and guidance on day-to-day living and what to expect from life in the UK.

## Feeling lonely or isolated

**This can affect all students, but the additional barriers faced by many international students can make it even more difficult to make friends.**

Staying alone in your room may make you lonely and sad. Although you may feel anxious or worried about talking to new people, it is important that you develop a social circle for support and socialising.

You may find other people from your country, which can be comforting; there may be societies or groups specifically for people who speak your language or follow your religion. However, it can be important to meet friends from other countries to make the most of your experience in the UK and university societies are groups of people who have a common interest – it could be a sport or cooking or dancing, for example. Ask at the student union or go to the freshers' fair to find out more. The university website should also have links to these. If you are musical there may be bands, choirs or music groups to join.



## Language barrier

**It can be difficult to communicate with people if you are struggling with the language.** This can be incredibly isolating. Your university may be able to provide extra lessons or support for English language learning.

It can be challenging, but talking to people is the best way to learn – you may make mistakes to begin with, but your language will improve daily the more you use it. There are many resources on the internet that can also help. Even watching popular TV shows improves your English and gives you something to talk about! If most of your English learning has been through reading, some local phrases may come as a surprise to you but they add colour to your language and cultural understanding.

## Mental health

**Different cultures have different ways of understanding about mental health, and it is not always a priority or considered good to talk about it.**

However, we all have mental health, sometimes it is good, and sometimes it is not, and we can feel sad, anxious or depressed – or worse, have thoughts of hurting ourselves.

If you are far from home, without your usual support networks, people that love you and things that comfort you, your mental health can really suffer, and your university will be able to help you with this. There are things you can do to help yourself (see below) but if they are not helping and you find you are struggling, please ask for help from the university wellbeing team.

## Physical health

**If you are an international student studying in the UK you will have a student visa in which you will have paid an extra charge for health care.** This entitles you to use the National Health Service. You should register with a GP (doctor) and you may use emergency services if you need to. Check the details of your visa or ask at the university to be sure.

## Money and finances

**Struggling for money can seriously affect how you feel, especially when you are far from home and support.** You may worry if you are not doing well on your course that your funding may be affected. Please speak to the finance support team or the international team at your university for advice – speaking to someone about your worries may help your situation and reduce your anxiety or low mood.



## 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 are 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 are 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 are rested.**

## Academic support

**If you are 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 is in their interests to help you – you are entitled to 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, to create a support plan.

If your feelings are overwhelming and you are struggling with the demands of academic or independent living, or of juggling your responsibilities, the wellbeing team can offer services to help, which might include counselling. Many wellbeing teams offer specific support, often in groups, either online or in person, to help you find other students who have had similar experiences so you can encourage and learn from each other and perhaps develop friendships.



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 is 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 is 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 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 are not used to it. If you find that you are not managing, there is online advice and support:

**[studentminds.org.uk/studentfinance](https://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.

**Do not 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 international students.

## 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.

## NHS

**nhs.uk**

The National Health Service in the UK, this website provides information on health services (general health, dentist, pharmacy, mental health and urgent care services) and information on illnesses and medicines.

## The UK Council for International Student Affairs

**ukcisa.org.uk**

The UK council of international student affairs offers support, advice and guidance around finance, immigration, and the wider student experience. This website has lots of information for international students and also offers training and events.

# 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.



**GET IN TOUCH**

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