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Charlie Watkins  
Foundation

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

A guide for students who have had  
adverse childhood experiences



## We're talking mental health

**Starting at 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 international students.
- A guide for students who feel they might not fit in.

## Students with adverse childhood experiences

**The start of your time at college or 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, some students have gone through things in their life which can complicate this experience and affect their capacity to benefit in the same way.

You may have had experiences or difficulties during your childhood such as:

- Emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- Physical or emotional neglect.
- Living with violence, either experiencing or witnessing it.
- Growing up with alcohol or substance abuse.
- Extreme economic instability, including food poverty and homelessness.
- Loss of a parent or sibling, including through suicide or going to prison.
- Any other traumatic event or series of events.

Sometimes, it is not until we are away from the situation that we recognise what we've actually been through. Or it may have been picked up at the time and you may have had support and help already.

For most people who have lived through an adverse childhood experience, coming to university feels like a significant break from the past; it's a new beginning and something you have worked hard to achieve. However, change and transition can be hard and unsettling, no matter how positive and exciting, especially if you're moving away from home to a completely new environment. This can often feel confusing: *if this is something I wanted so badly, how come it seems so difficult?*

# Understanding your situation

Everybody is different, everybody's situation is different, and the way people cope is also different, so it's hard to generalise. However, there are some common responses to living through adverse childhood experiences, which you may identify with:

- **Low self-esteem**, feeling you're not good enough.
- **Shame and guilt**, as if what happened is somehow your fault, or you may have got into the habit of covering up and pretending all is well because you are ashamed of what's going on at home. You might feel guilty about leaving your family behind and over-responsible for them all.
- **A sense of not belonging**; you might feel like an outsider, set apart from the others because of what you've been through.
- **Anxiety or dread**; it's very common for people who have lived through trauma to have a constant sense of anxiety or dread that something is going to go wrong.
- **Low mood or depression**; periods of low mood, depression and even feeling suicidal are also common. Sometimes people manage these feelings by self-harming, self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, overeating or controlling eating,

using sex, gambling or other behaviours that could become addictive. This, in turn, can often feed your sense of shame and low self-esteem.

- **Need to be in control/fear of losing control**; if you lived in a chaotic environment or a situation where you had no control, it can be very scary to feel you're losing control now. This can develop into a strong need to feel in control all the time. It can lead to 'all or nothing' thinking or fear that if you're not totally *in control*, you could end up spiralling totally *out of control*.
- **Difficulty trusting people/fear of abandonment**; when you've been let down by people who were supposed to take care of you, it is very common to develop trust issues and/or a fear of abandonment, fearing people will inevitably leave you or let you down.
- **Unhelpful perfectionism**; feeling you have to be perfect to be acceptable. This can be about your work but also about you as a person, how you look and how you are. This can feed off the sense of shame, need to be in control and fear of abandonment. It can also fuel anxiety and depression.



- **Imposter syndrome**; having a sense you shouldn't be where you are, that you're not good enough or that some mistake has been made and any minute now you'll be found out and exposed.
- **Poor relationships with food, alcohol or drugs**; where you may have developed unhealthy dependencies on drugs or alcohol, or control your eating in an unhealthy way as a way of managing your feelings.

Managing some or even all of these feelings might impact on your ability to settle into university socially, academically or both.

## Some helpful steps

- **Recognise your strengths and inner resources**. You will have developed a wide range of these in order to overcome some difficult obstacles and get to where you are. Learn to notice and value them.
- **Practise self-compassion**; too often we beat ourselves up when we feel we've done something wrong, made a mistake or are having a hard time. This is especially common if you were bullied or didn't have the experience of kindly comfort and support growing up. Being self-compassionate is learning how 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.
- **Practise self-care**; it's easy to neglect yourself, especially if you came from a home where being cared for was inconsistent. You might feel you're not worth looking after in terms of good diet, exercise, having proper breaks and taking time to attend to your own needs. Self-care is not a luxury or an indulgence. It's an essential life-skill that will help you thrive at university and for the rest of your life. Like all skills, it takes practice.
- **Open up to people you trust**; it's good to allow yourself to be yourself and open up to others. However, this can be hard, and you may have experienced shock, rejection or disbelief when describing what you've been through. So make sure the people you talk to are appropriate and you feel safe with them. You don't have to tell the whole story at once. You could, for example, try talking about your feelings of being an imposter. You'd be amazed how many people feel the same but are too ashamed and scared to say. If you're not sure how to open up, you could try talking to a university counsellor first.
- **Get help and support**; this may be from the university (their website is a good starting point) or search for relevant online support, for example if you are worried about alcohol or drug use, or your relationship with food (there are specific online resources listed at the end of this guide).





## 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'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 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're 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 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, then the wellbeing team can offer a range of services to help, which might include counselling. Many wellbeing teams offer specific support, often either one-to-one or in group form, meeting either online or in person, to help you find other students who may 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're 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're expecting a parental contribution and there may be a delay or problem with this. Perhaps you're 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 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.

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

# Support agencies

Below is a list of organisations that offer mental health support to students with adverse childhood experiences.

## 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.



**GET IN TOUCH**

hello@charliewaller.org  
01635 869754

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Charlie Watkins  
Foundation

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hello@cwfoundation.co.uk  
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