



Sep 19, 2018 12:11 BST

University students: how to manage the stress of studying for your degree

According to the recently published [Natwest Student Living Index](#), 64% of university students rated the stress of studying for their degree as seven or above out of ten. [Other studies](#) have estimated that up to 82% of UK university students suffer from stress and anxiety, and the number of students dropping out of university due to [mental health problems is increasing](#).

The National Union of Students reports that [the top three sources of stress among students](#) are coursework deadlines, exams, and balancing study with

other commitments. Going to university can also mean living away from home for the first time, less sleep, poor eating habits and money worries.

It's clear that the majority of university students experience high levels of stress during their degree. But a few simple stress reduction techniques and small lifestyle changes can help with this. So if you're a student, or heading off to university for the first time, here's what you need to know about managing stress.

Talk or write about it

A major source of stress for university students living away from home for the first time can be a lack of perceived social support, if friends and family are no longer close by for a chat.

The most important thing if you start to feel stressed is that you don't bottle up those feelings. Talk about it – with a parent, other family member, friend or a tutor. Or contact your university's student well-being service.

Another approach could be to write about your feelings if nobody is around to talk to. Studies have suggested that writing about your emotions can be [useful for managing stress](#).

Stay organised

A key source of stress is a perceived [lack of control over a situation](#). Coursework deadlines and exams are an inevitable part of life for a university student, but by managing your time wisely, and not leaving your assessment tasks and revision to the last minute you can stay in control of these deadlines.

Rebecca Sharp, a psychologist from the University of Bangor, [suggests](#) that splitting a task into smaller, more easily manageable goals is a good way of organising your time and staying on top of university work.

Making time in your schedule to relax and socialise is also very important. Socialising may help you to build a network of people you can rely upon for social support. Creating some “me time” for socialising, relaxing and exercise [is key to managing stress](#).

Look after yourself

University students often have a [comparatively poor diet](#). During those first few weeks of living away from home, it can take some time to adjust to having to [plan and prepare your own meals](#), and bad eating habits can creep in.

University students also report getting [fewer hours of sleep](#) than the [recommended eight hours a night](#). This is problematic because irregular sleep patterns are associated with [poor academic performance at university](#) and [poor sleep quality is associated with increased stress](#).

All of this means that it is important to look after yourself, by exercising regularly, establishing a pattern of good quality sleep and eating healthily. A balanced breakfast, plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, and [limited sugary and fatty snacks](#) can help to optimise your brain function. This will help to keep your stress levels in check, and also help with your concentration in lectures and when revising.

One issue though, is that when our stress levels increase, it is easy to engage in “[emotional eating](#)” – consuming more sugary and fatty snacks and less fruit and vegetables. It’s important to try to avoid this vicious cycle where possible, and maintain a healthy diet through these periods.

Be mindful

[Being mindful](#) – paying more attention to yourself and the world around you by being “in the moment” – is known to reduce stress, and helps us to notice the signs of stress earlier. [Research has shown](#) that mindfulness training can reduce levels of distress in university students during exam periods.

Even if you haven’t had any formal training in mindfulness, it can be beneficial to practice mindfulness techniques by sitting quietly and paying attention to your body and your surroundings. Mindful breathing exercises can help with relaxation and reducing negative thoughts. Although not for everyone, activities such as yoga can also help with being mindful and being more aware of your breathing.

Is stress all bad?

It is important to remember that the feelings we experience when we're stressed are due to hormone responses that have evolved to help us survive by [fighting off or fleeing from a predator](#). University life can be thought of as that predator – the stress response helps us to cope with and manage demanding periods such as exams and coursework deadlines. So a little stress is fine, and probably [even beneficial](#), but if you're experiencing frequent, high levels of stress, then do something about it.

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