



www.mindingyourhead.info

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What is good mental health?

Having good mental health means feeling positive about yourself, being able to cope with everyday pressures and being able to form and maintain relationships.

We accept the importance of looking after physical health. But it's just as important to look after mental health. In fact, physical health and mental health are closely related. Poor mental health can lead to poor physical health and physical health problems can affect your mental health.



Useful information, including a directory of services, is available at: www.mindingyourhead.info

Inspire provide a range of wellbeing support services for students - find out more on page 27.

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Student life

Most of us go to university or college hoping that it will lead to a good career and enjoyable job for us somewhere in the future. Our more immediate priorities, though, are usually leaving home for the first time, settling into a new place, making friends and going out. For some, finding time for work to help support their income is an extra factor to add to the balance. There are many reasons you could find yourself getting stressed out. These stresses may cause different emotions.

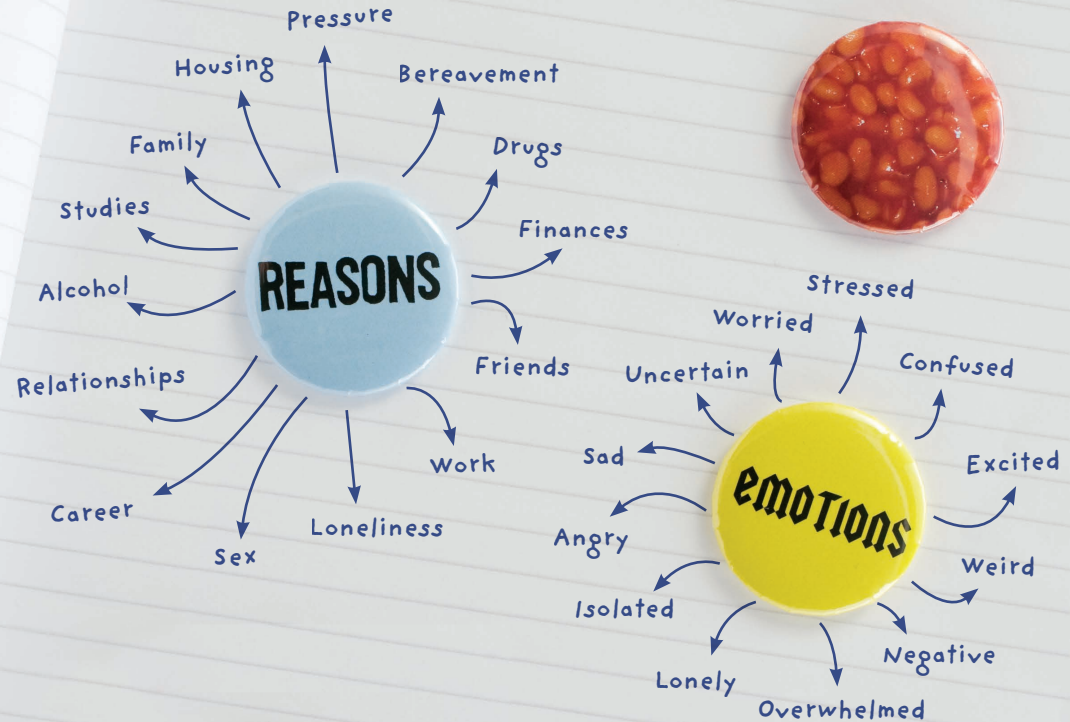
**Can't concentrate? Short tempered? Lacking energy?
Panicking? Not eating right? Can't sleep?**

These can be normal, but how do you recognise a problem? Anyone can experience a range of emotions, from being on top of the world to feeling like things can't get any worse. It's when these feelings become extreme, are present more often than not or when they adversely affect your life that they start to become a problem.



Don't be afraid to live life your way.

Make your own decisions for yourself – not because you think it's what others expect of you.



Example: Dan's on a downer because he's just been dumped. **Normal!**

Three months later Dan's stopped going out with his mates and rarely leaves the house.

Problem!



Money

Learning to live on the cheap can be what student life is about for many people, and most students find that funds are limited.

Student loans and overdrafts can help, but make sure you think carefully before getting into debt and that you understand the terms of any loan or credit card before agreeing.

Work

Work can help your finances, but try not to take on so much that it affects your studies.

Money problems can be stressful, but don't let them get you down. Take control of your financial situation by:

- applying for your funding early;
- working out a realistic budget (and sticking to it);
- finding out if you're entitled to a student grant;
- keeping track of your finances.

Get help!

If things do start to go a bit pear-shaped and you find you can't manage your finances, don't ignore the situation. Talk to student support services or your bank manager as soon as you can – they are there to help.



For more information about budgeting and financial support go to:
www.studentfinancenl.co.uk
or www.advicenl.net

Body image

Being happy and at ease with the way we look is a healthy body image. There are a number of factors that influence our body image, and many of these come from the media and from society. Sometimes these influences can be unrealistic and can have a negative impact on our body image, making us think that we are worth less than we are. We are all individuals, we are all different. Be healthy, have a positive body image and learn to accept and embrace who you are.

A healthy diet and plenty of physical activity can improve your health, confidence and wellbeing.



For further information visit
www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk or www.amh.org.uk
or call the Eating Disorders Association NI on 028 9023 5959



Eating disorders

Eating disorders are a group of illnesses where a person's perception of their body shape and weight becomes distorted. Avoid using food to deal with feelings of stress, loneliness, boredom, anxiousness, anger or sadness, as this can lead to problems with food.

- People with eating disorders often have a very poor body image as well as low self-esteem.
- People with eating disorders often see the use of food as a way of staying in control of their life, but over time, similar to the misuse of alcohol or drugs, the eating disorder takes control.
- Eating disorders can stem from relationships, abuse, bereavement, problems with study or work, low self-esteem or low confidence.

While eating disorders most often affect young women between 15 and 25, they can affect anyone regardless of age, gender or cultural or religious background.

Home life

Whether you live at home or with other students you might find your home life is becoming hard work. Living at home with your family may ease the financial burden but mean you're having trouble fitting in to university or college life and making new friends. Or maybe you feel you're still being treated like a kid.

Sharing with other students can be exciting but it can also bring added pressures such as being new to an area, dealing with landlords, paying bills, or never getting any space or time to yourself.

Each situation has its advantages so try to focus on the positives and strike a balance.

Communication

- respect the people you live with, whether they're your parents, family or flatmates;
- be aware of other people's concerns about your safety and the stuff you get up to inside and outside the house;
- remember it's a changing time for everyone so some new ground rules could help get the right mix for all.

Arguments

Disagreements are normal and can even be healthy, but too much conflict can become a big burden. Approach arguments sensibly and you'll find a solution more easily.

- Talk the issue through calmly and listen to their point of view.
- Be prepared to make deals and meet them half-way.



For further information on housing and accommodation visit www.nihestudentpad.co.uk

Getting involved

Whatever your living situation, you might feel alone, isolated and lonely. Universities and colleges have clubs, groups and societies for just about everything. They are an excellent way to get involved with campus life and make new friends. Whether it's music, drama, dance, politics, sport or religion, whatever, there's likely to be a club for it (or why not start one?). If you join one of these clubs then chances are you'll meet some like-minded people.

Attending induction courses and receptions run by your department is another opportunity for getting to know people on your course who you already have something in common with.



For further information on your local clubs, groups and societies visit www.nus-usi.org or call into your students' union on campus.

Family issues

Whether you live at home or not, family problems such as parental break-ups or domestic violence affect how you feel and your work.

Parental break-ups

- Arguments, moving house and the prospect of seeing less of one or both of them can make it especially tough on you.
- Let your college or university know what's going on. They may make allowances if your grades are slipping.
- It is normal to feel angry, sad and generally upset. Get extra support from other relatives, mates and tutors.
- Don't end up being a go-between or try to do the talking for them – you've got enough on your plate.

Domestic violence

If you are worried that you or someone close to you is a victim of domestic violence, contact the

Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline on 0808 802 1414

or go to dsahelpline.org

For further information on relationships
visit www.relateni.org



Feeling down

Sometimes our problems can seem so overwhelming that we can't see a way past them and start to lose hope in the future. If you or someone you know is so down that they can't cope with everyday life, help is needed – and more importantly available. Talk to someone you trust as soon as you can. Ignoring the problem can make it worse and can have serious consequences.



Signs of a potential mental health problem include:

- change in mood;
- disturbed sleep;
- disturbed eating patterns;
- lack of care for personal appearance or personal responsibilities;
- unusual behaviour;
- recurrent physical symptoms;
- increased use of alcohol or other drugs;
- thinking/talking about not wanting to live.

Self-harm

Sometimes people who are feeling very distressed can feel that they want to harm themselves. If you or someone you know is self-harming, it is important to get help to deal with whatever is causing the distressing feelings.



For further information on mental health issues visit
www.mindingyourhead.info or
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Suicide

It is very important to know that if you are having thoughts of suicide you need help and support to deal with whatever is causing you to feel this way.

Remember you are not alone and there are people who can help you find a solution and work through your problems, no matter how difficult they may seem – talk to someone you can trust and tell them how you are feeling. **This might be a friend, family member or your GP.**

If you feel that you can't talk to anyone you know or would prefer to talk to someone anonymously, phone a helpline such as

Lifeline on **0808 808 8000** or

Samaritans on **116 123** – both are available 24 hours a day and free from landlines and mobiles.

In an emergency situation you should call 999 or go to the nearest Emergency Department.



Worried about someone?

If someone tells you that they are thinking of suicide or harming themselves, take them seriously. Hearing this can make you feel overwhelmed especially if your friend is upset and angry.

- If you're worried that someone may be thinking about suicide or self-harming, talk to them. Ask them about how they're feeling and offer to help.
- You can help someone by listening to them without judging them.
- Tell them you will support them to find help. Get help straight away from a GP, mental health professional or by phoning Lifeline on 0808 808 8000. In a crisis call 999, remove potential means to suicide and don't leave the person alone.
- Helping someone who is thinking about suicide is likely to have a big impact on you. Find out what support is available to you.

Remember, it's important to look after your own mental health while supporting others. Don't take on more than you feel comfortable with, and talk to someone about your concerns.



If you have been affected by the death of someone through suicide and would like to talk about it, there are organisations that can help you. Speak to your GP or view the online directory of services at www.mindingyourhead.info

If you are in distress, call Lifeline on **0808 808 8000**. Deaf people and those with hearing difficulties can contact Lifeline on Textphone **18001 0808 808 8000**.



Talking and listening

Talking to someone can be a great way of putting your thoughts in order and getting problems off your chest. Talking can help you understand what's going on in your head. Find someone you can talk to. This might be a mate, a family member or your doctor, or you may prefer to contact a confidential helpline like

Lifeline on **0808 808 8000** or **Samaritans** on **116 123** (both 24/7).

Student support services are also available, see the back of this book for further information.

Part of being a mate is listening to your friends' worries and stresses, but know your limitations. Don't take on more than you can handle.

Tips

- talking about problems can be the first step to sorting them out;
- people talk when they are ready;
- don't interrupt – let them have their say;
- look at them while they talk;
- advice can be useful, but listening is often best;
- be prepared to help your mate access other forms of help;
- listen without judging.

Talking through problems with friends might be enough, but sometimes professional support such as counselling may be needed.



Stressed out?

Everyone needs some time out for themselves to do something they enjoy. It is easy to forget to make time for yourself when things get stressful.

Reduce stress and blow off some steam by:

- getting active;
- playing sport;
- playing a game of pool;
- going for a coffee;
- reading a book;
- listening to music;
- going for a walk;
- or whatever works for you!

Chilling out with mates is good, but be careful with alcohol and other drugs if you're feeling stressed. It may seem like they're helping, but they just mask the symptoms. They can't help deal with the problem and will just make things harder in the long run.

Alcohol

You may think that alcohol helps you cope with difficult situations and emotions, reduce stress or overcome inhibitions. However, alcohol is in fact a depressant and associated with a range of mental health problems including depression and anxiety.

Drugs

Similarly, using drugs often has unexpected negative consequences. Cannabis use, for example, has been linked to the development of mental health problems such as depression and schizophrenia.



For further information on alcohol or drugs including details of local support services, visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info



Sex and relationships

Enjoying a sexual relationship can be very rewarding and satisfying when it is consensual. If either person is not comfortable or isn't sure, there is nothing wrong with saying no. It is never acceptable for a person to force you into participating in sexual activity if you don't want to. Avoid any misunderstanding – talk about it first!

Lasting relationships thrive on good communication. Get talking – let each other know what you want, don't want and how you feel.

Contraception

Aside from STIs and HIV, unprotected sex can lead to unplanned pregnancy.

There are about a dozen contraception methods that can help prevent pregnancy. If used properly, the most effective forms are the pill, contraceptive injections, implants, IUD/IUS and condoms.

STIs and HIV

These are a very real danger, so always remember to look after yourself and reduce your risk of infection by:

- using a condom every time you have sex;
- limiting your number of sexual partners;
- having regular check ups.



For further information visit the PHA's website www.sexualhealthni.info or for advice on the best contraceptive method for you, visit your family planning clinic or your GP.



Sexual orientation relates to who you are attracted to.

It isn't uncommon to feel attracted to people you are close to or respect even if they are of the same gender. This may or may not mean that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some people may know from a young age that they are attracted to people of the same sex, but many others aren't sure until later in adolescence or even adulthood. This may even change with age. If you are confused, then you are not on your own!

Gender identity is not about who you are attracted to, it's about your sense of being male or female, the gender you identify with and your gender expression. Some young people struggle to come to terms with their gender identity, which can impact on their mental health and wellbeing. For more information about gender identity and to find out about support services available, visit www.transgenderni.org.uk



For further information visit www.cara-friend.org.uk or www.rainbow-project.org

Fight fear and prejudice

A lot has been done to address the stigma that previously existed around mental health. People are now speaking much more openly and finding that society is more accepting of mental health problems. However, some people may still feel too ashamed, embarrassed or frightened to seek care and support. As a result, many mental health problems that could be easily overcome go undiagnosed and untreated.

It's just as important to be there for your mates if they need it – knowing you're there just might make all the difference.



Taking control



We're all different

What's good for one person isn't always good for another. Don't give up until you find what's best for you.

Know yourself

Know your limits, strengths and weaknesses. What keeps you happy? What gets you down? Use this knowledge to plan ahead and take control of your mental health.

Check yourself

How do you feel? Identify any problems and take action to deal with them. If you feel you can't cope on your own, get help.

Choices

Think carefully about how the choices you make affect your life. Try and work out what's best for you, and don't let fear of mucking up stop you from doing things. Sometimes "mistakes" are unavoidable. Put it down to experience and move on.

Have a laugh!



Some useful contacts

Alcohol and drugs

Alcoholics Anonymous

Tel: 028 9035 1222

Web: www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie

Drugs and alcohol NI

Provides information on the 5 Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams, drug and alcohol initiatives and local treatment, support and prevention services.

Web: www.drugsandalcoholni.info

Bereavement

Cruse Bereavement Care

Provides support to people who have been bereaved by the death of someone close.

Helpline: 0808 808 1677

Web: www.cruse.org.uk

Young people: www.hopeagain.org.uk

Eating disorders

Eating Disorders Association Northern Ireland (EDANI)

Offers free support and understanding to people affected by an eating disorder, and also their family and friends.

Tel: 028 9023 5959

Web: www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk

Finance

Student Finance NI

Delivers financial support to students who normally live in Northern Ireland.

Tel: 0300 100 0077

Web: www.studentfinancenl.co.uk

Gambling

Dunlewey Addiction Services

Problem gambling helpline.

Tel: 0800 0886 725

Gam-Anon

Web: www.gamanon.org.uk

Housing & accommodation

Housing Advice NI

Tel: 028 9024 5640

Web: www.housingrights.org.uk



Housing Executive

Housing advice and a dedicated student accommodation search engine.

Web: www.nihestudentpad.co.uk

Mental health

Action Mental Health

Services for people with mental health difficulties.

Tel: 028 9182 8494

Web: www.amh.org.uk

Aware

Local support group for people suffering from depression.

Tel: 028 9035 7820 or 028 7126 0602

Web: www.aware-ni.org

CAUSE

Peer-led support to relatives and carers of persons with mental illness.

Tel: 028 9065 0650

Freephone helpline: 0800 103 2833

Web: www.cause.org.uk

Inspire

Inspire provide a range of wellbeing support services, training and interventions that help students to thrive including counselling and access to the digital wellbeing tool: the Support Hub.

Helpline: 0800 389 5362

Web: www.inspiresupporthub.org/students

Lifeline

Calls to the Lifeline crisis helpline are free and answered by qualified counsellors experienced in dealing with suicide, self-harm, abuse, trauma, depression and many other issues.

Crisis counsellors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Tel: 0808 808 8000

Web: www.lifelinehelpline.info

MindWise

Offers support for sufferers of severe mental illness and their carers and families.

Tel: 028 9040 2323

Web: www.mindwisenv.org

Praxis

A provider of services for people with a learning disability, mental ill health and acquired brain injury.

Tel: 028 9023 4555

Web: www.praxiscare.org

Samaritans

Confidential emotional support 24 hours a day to those in crisis and in danger of taking their own lives.

Helpline: 116 123

Web: www.samaritans.org



Sex and relationships

Genito urinary medicine (GUM) clinics

For information or advice on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or to discuss any issue on sexual health, contact your local GUM clinic. GUM clinics also provide check-ups and treatment.

Belfast Trust:

028 9615 2111

Northern Trust:

028 7034 6028

South Eastern Trust:

028 4483 8133

Southern Trust:

028 3756 2080

Western Trust:

028 7161 1269

SH:24

Free online sexual health service.

Web: sh24.org.uk

Informing Choices NI

Provides information and support across a range of sexual health issues, including contraception and sexually transmitted infections.

Tel: 028 9031 6100

Web: <https://informingchoicesni.org/>

Positive Life

Offers support and advice on HIV/AIDS and general sexual health.

Tel: 028 9024 9268

Helpline: 0800 137 437

Web: www.positivelifeni.com



Common Youth

Free confidential advice on sex and contraception for young people aged under 25 years.

Tel: 028 9032 8866

Web: www.commonyouth.com

Cara Friend / Cara-Friend LGBTQI+ Youth

Support and social spaces for LGBTQI+ young people.

Tel: 028 9089 0202

LGBTQI+ switchboard: 0808 8000 390

Web: www.cara-friend.org.uk

The Rainbow Project

Promoting the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ community.

Tel: 028 9031 9030

Web: www.rainbow-project.org

Mermaids NI

Support for families of transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people.

Tel: 0808 801 0400

Web: www.mermaidsuk.org.uk

TransgenderNI

Support and advocacy for trans people.

Tel: 0300 302 3202

Web: www.transgenderni.org.uk

Belfast Trans Resource Centre

The community centre for trans people, their friends and families in Belfast.

Web: www.belfasttrans.org.uk

NEXUS NI

Responding to the needs of adults and children who have experienced sexual abuse.

Tel: 028 9032 6803

Web: www.nexusni.org

Domestic & sexual abuse helpline

Open to all affected by domestic or sexual violence.

Helpline: 0808 802 1414 (24 Hour)

Web: dsahelpline.org

Women's Aid

Addressing domestic violence.

Web: www.womensaidni.org



Relate NI

Services include relationship counselling for individuals and couples, and counselling for children and young people.

Tel: 028 9032 3454

Web: www.relateni.org

Student support

NUS-USI (National Union of Students UK – Union of Students in Ireland)

NUS-USI represents the interests of over 200,000 students in Northern Ireland and campaigns on their behalf in many different fields such as student hardship, health, prejudice and accommodation. The website contains lots of information and advice for students.

Web: www.nui-usi.org

