



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

headstart





Headstart

These cards are designed to give you some ideas on how to help yourself or stop problems escalating while you wait for your first counselling appointment. Looking at the cards might also help you prepare for, and make the most of, your counselling.

You may find the one card that deals with your problem is enough or you may want to use several together.

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Please remember these cards are not a substitute for counselling. If you feel that you are becoming seriously depressed or suicidal please go and see your GP and/or come to a drop-in session at the Student Counselling Centre, 19 Clarendon Place, LS29 6PJ, Telephone 0113 343 4107.

FURTHER HELP

In an emergency contact:

- Your GP or Leeds Student Medical Practice (0113 295 4488).
www.leedstudentmedicalpractice.co.uk
- The Samaritans 0845 790 9090.
www.samaritans.org.uk
- Or go the A & E department of your local hospital.

WEBSITES

You will find more detailed self-help on the following websites:

www.leeds.ac.uk/studentcounselling

www.leeds.ac.uk/uk/ahead4health

www.studentdepression.org

FLASH

FLASH (Focused Learning and Self-Help) is an NHS initiative which runs every Wednesday afternoon at the Student Counselling Centre.

Self-help material on a variety of common problems is available at a 1.00pm drop-in and there is also the option of one to one appointments. Please contact 0113 305 8581 or 0113 305 9850 for further details or to book an appointment.



1

Dealing with Stress and Anxiety

Stress is the body's natural response to a potentially dangerous or challenging situation. It gives us the ability to perform as effectively as possible when facing a challenge or danger by confronting it or running away — the 'fight or flight' response.

So the stress response can be a beneficial thing — we all need enough to allow us to achieve peak performance when required, and to help us be more aware, concentrated and effective.

Too much stress, however, can be harmful. This happens when the demands made on us outstrip our resources, strengths or time, or when we can't act upon our natural stress responses. This is when we experience the negative reactions to stress, and what is generally meant when we say we are 'stressed'.

KEY THINGS TO HELP MANAGE STRESS AND ANXIETY

- Eat and drink healthily (see card 7).
- Exercise — even three 20 minute sessions of moderate exercise per week will help keep you healthy and reduce stress and anxiety.
- Make sure you are sleeping well (see card 6).
- Build in time for relaxation and fun.
- Talk to people you trust — don't bottle things up.

We can also create stress and anxiety by thinking and saying negative (and usually untrue) things to and about ourselves. To develop a positive, more realistic (and less stressful!) approach, think of the following:

- Notice when you are thinking and saying negative things to yourself. If you are experiencing unpleasant feelings such as anxiety or sadness, try checking out what you are thinking or saying to yourself at the time.
- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - Is there really any evidence for thinking this way?
 - Are there other ways of thinking about this situation?
 - Is my thinking faulty? (e.g. am I concentrating on my weaknesses and ignoring my strengths?)
 - How is thinking in this way affecting me?
- Replace the negative thought with a realistic positive thought — something you can believe in.

Finally: Tackling and eliminating the things in our lives that cause us unnecessary stress is a good thing, but it is important that you go about it in the right way, otherwise you will be adding to your stress burden, rather than reducing it. So remember:

- **deal with one problem at a time.**
- **take it steadily.**
- **and stick to it!**



2 Dealing with Low Moods

Some miserable times come to everyone — how we manage ourselves in the face of painful emotions is the key to how much and how long we suffer.

To manage the biological aspects of low moods, GET ACTIVE even if you don't feel like it. Your mood will slowly change as a consequence:

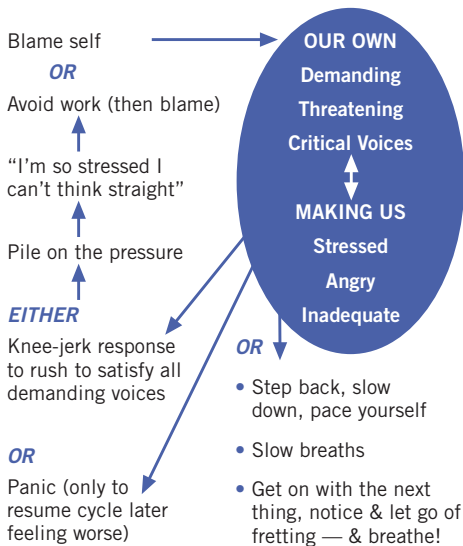
- Do half an hour's aerobic exercise most days (running, dancing, swimming, fast cycling).
- Get into sensible routines for sleep, eating, drinking (see cards 6 and 7).
- Set specific times to work, relax, socialise. Don't judge the results!

Common psychological aspects of low moods are shown on the diagram overleaf. To lessen your suffering:

- Lay off criticising yourself.
- Treat yourself as a good friend might.
- Drop your impatience and perfectionism, simplify your life.
- Focus on all small positive things in your day.
- Just take the next small step, one step at a time.
- Seek help from reliable people.

Challenge yourself using online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): <http://moodgym.anu.edu.au/> and www.livinglifetothefull.com

HOW THINKING STYLES KEEP LOW MOOD GOING



RECOGNISE THESE?

Pressurising:

Hurry up! Get it all done! Do it right!

Future-gazing:

You will...(fail, mess it up, never manage, be brilliant if...)

Gazing at past:

I haven’t, could’ve, should’ve, last time...

Generalising:

You always/never...

Catastrophising:

If not successful, then CATASTROPHE

Awfulising: I feel

100% AWFUL

3

Becoming More Confident

Confidence depends on having a healthy level of self esteem and being able to employ skills to help us perform in challenging situations.

SELF ESTEEM

Self esteem is the concept we have about ourselves. We are not born with negative beliefs but these often develop as a result of life experiences. Low self esteem can lead us to believe we are not as good others, or that we must behave in a certain way to maintain the approval of significant people. Because of such beliefs, we adopt biased ways of thinking about the world and behave in unhelpful ways.

BEHAVIOUR ASSOCIATED WITH LOW SELF ESTEEM

- Playing down our achievements, or not even noticing them.
- Focusing on what's gone wrong, rather than being pleased about what went well.
- Being self critical and comparing ourselves unfavourably to others.
- Imagining that others think and feel negatively about us.

RAISING SELF ESTEEM

In order to feel better about ourselves we need to recognise and celebrate our positive qualities.

- Write a list of your positive qualities and some evidence for each. Read the list everyday and add new items.
- At the end of each day, think about 3 good things that have happened, rather dwell on disappointments and what went wrong.
- Start challenging that negative parrot on your shoulder — the one that says ‘you’re no good’, ‘you screwed that up’, etc. Counteract what it says about you by providing evidence to the contrary.

DEVELOP NEW SKILLS TO RAISE YOUR CONFIDENCE

- Visit the Mental Health Resource Room on the Student Counselling Centre website. Check out the booklist and self help materials in the confidence and self esteem section.
- Look out for groups and workshops on confidence related topics at the Counselling Centre, Library and LUU.
- Get out of your comfort zone and start practising. If we lack confidence we often avoid situations we feel anxious in, but this reinforces our belief we can’t succeed and our confidence remains low.
- Lower your expectations. Set yourself small, specific, achievable goals you can succeed at, rather than vague, over ambitious ones that are unrealistic.



4

Panic Attacks

PANIC IS ...

A form of fear. It is the body's alarm system signalling threat, preparing us for fight or run away from danger.

See card 1 (Dealing with Stress and Anxiety).

A PANIC ATTACK IS ...

A strong feeling of terror that comes on very suddenly, often out of the blue, when there is no obvious threat or danger. Physical symptoms include pounding heart, fast breathing, shaking, numbness or tingling in fingers or toes. You might have frightening thoughts or think that something awful is happening. For example, many people think they are having a heart attack and may even call an ambulance.

Panic attacks are very common. They are not dangerous and are not a sign of serious mental or physical illness. They are not harmful and, although very unpleasant, are self-limiting.

Panic attacks can occur for various reasons including:

- Stress or because of difficult emotions.
- Health worries or during a mild illness.
- Or just out of the blue.

They can be kept going because of a vicious circle of physical symptoms, frightening thoughts and avoidant behaviour.

MANAGING A PANIC ATTACK

- Use distraction, relaxation and slow breathing to help you to get the panic to subside. If you are hyperventilating, breathe into a paper bag, or breathe in for a count of 4 and out for 7.
- Remind yourself that this has happened before and nothing awful is going to happen. You are not having a heart attack. It will pass.
- Challenge unrealistic thoughts, using more realistic ones.
- Try and stick with it and test out what really happens.
- What underlying worries or troubles do you have? Address them.
- Practice relaxation, slow breathing, distraction and thought challenging when you are feeling OK, so that you can master the techniques to use during a panic attack.

Remember that by avoiding or running away from panic attacks you may:

- Never find out that nothing terrible was going to happen.
- Dread going back into the situation, because you fear another attack.
- Lose confidence in your ability to cope alone.



5

Action Plan to Counter Exam Stress

- **Expect the presence of stress hormones;** we need them to be attentive and ready for the challenge of exams. However, if stress stays around for long periods, you can do something about it. See also card 1.
- **Physical exercise** is often one of the first victims of the exam period. Keep going to the gym, walking, cycling etc. Exercise helps to relax tense muscles, think more clearly and provides time when you are not concentrating completely on exams. It doesn't have to be strenuous; try walking vigorously from your accommodation to university.
- **Get as much sleep** as you can. Try to resist working late into the night fearing there are not enough hours in the day to study effectively. It is important to protect your sleep hours (6–8 per night) as this is when the body regenerates. Leave space between revising and going to bed so you don't take exam pressures with you. Have some time for yourself before going to bed e.g. talk to friends, have a bath, use relaxation techniques.
- **Relaxation;** finding a relaxation technique that works for you can be a powerful way to manage stress. Try the download on our website. This takes 15 minutes and if used once or twice a day, can give a cumulative sense of calm and wellbeing.
- **Spend time on interests not related to course or exams;** allow yourself a night out with friends or a few hours at the weekend to relax. This will allow you to realise there is life beyond exams and help you return to study feeling more refreshed.

- **Reward yourself;** exam preparation is tough — give yourself a reward every few days e.g. watch your favourite soap opera, eat your favourite food — try including it as a part of your revision timetable!
- **Create Support Networks;** take time out to talk with friends and family. Arrange to meet in natural breaks such as during lunchtimes or evening meals. Agree to not talk about exams. This will allow you to think about other concerns and interests.
- **Know how you study best** and plan accordingly. Be honest and realistic about how long you can effectively concentrate for e.g. 45–60 mins and allow short (10–15 mins) breaks between each period of study. This helps build a ‘wall of knowledge’ with each study period being a brick in the wall.
- **Time Management Skills;** training available from the Skills Centre www.skillscentre.leeds.ac.uk.
- **Avoid large quantities of alcohol** and caffeine as a means of dealing with stress or keeping going.
- **Eat a good diet;** often during stressful periods we are tempted to reach for the fast food like pizzas, chips and chocolate. Your body, however, needs the restorative power of proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and fibre. What better fast food is there than fruit or pasta? See card 7.



6 Trouble Sleeping?

Sleep problems are very common. Some people become distressed when they feel they are not getting a good night's sleep but they may have unrealistic expectations or incorrect assumptions about sleep.

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO WE NEED?

This depends on several factors including our age, temperament and the amount of physical activity we do.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SLEEP

There are different stages of sleep and while it can feel particularly refreshing when we experience the deeper stages, this isn't essential to our wellbeing. Sometimes people are actually in the lighter stages of sleep when they think they are still awake.

RECIPES FOR IMPROVING SLEEP

Identify the Reason and Take Action

- If medical, e.g. pain or a possible side effect of medication, consult your doctor.
- If emotional, e.g. preoccupied with events going on in your life now or in the past, access counselling or self help material.

- Lifestyle, e.g. over use of caffeine, cigarettes, alcohol or drugs: adjust your intake. Consider taking more exercise during the day so you feel tired at night.

DEVELOP GOOD SLEEP HABITS

- Try to make your surroundings conducive for sleep: e.g. temperature, noise and light levels, comfort of mattress.
- Get into a pre sleep routine when you wind down and prepare for bed. Reading a book, having a bath, listening to relaxing music or a relaxation CD can help. Herbal or milky drinks may too, but not if you will then need to visit the toilet later.
- If you can't sleep, don't watch the clock and become agitated. Get up and do something else, not too stimulating, until you feel sleepy.
- Don't stay in bed late to compensate for a disrupted night, or go to bed really early the next night. You need to teach your body when to fall asleep and when to get up. Establishing a consistent pattern is key to this.
- Taking naps during the day can also make it more difficult to sleep at night and mitigates against forming a regular sleeping pattern.



7

Food and Mood

It's not always easy to think about a balanced diet when you're busy, have to shop and cook for yourself, manage on a tight budget etc. But eating healthily is very important for psychological as well as physical wellbeing. If you keep your body healthy it will have a positive effect on how you feel.

So check out how your eating habits might be affecting your mood for better or worse. Here are some guidelines:

DO:

Eat Regularly. This will help keep blood sugar and energy levels stable throughout the day. Include foods that release energy slowly such as wholegrains (and other low Glycaemic Index foods). Eat breakfast! Take time to taste, digest and enjoy your food if you can.

Eat Healthy Foods and a Balanced Diet. Include:

- Fruit and Vegetables: 5 a day for health-giving vitamins and minerals.
- Some protein e.g. meat, fish, dairy, pulses, soya products.
- Some complex carbohydrates e.g. wholegrain bread, pasta, rice, oats etc.
- Food containing essential fatty acids: oily fish, seeds, nuts etc. These have been shown to have nutrients that may boost mood.

Drink plenty of Water — easy, cheap, and important for physical and mental wellbeing.

Many of us may benefit from eating/drinking less of certain things, so:

DON'T:

- Eat lots of food containing additives (E numbers).
- Eat too many foods containing saturated or hydrogenated fats (burgers, chips, pizzas etc.).
- Eat too many foods containing refined sugar (cakes, biscuits, chocolate etc.).
- Rely too much on take-aways or ready-meals (likely to contain unhealthy fats, sugars and additives). If you don't want to cook, try the university Refectory for inexpensive healthy meals.
- Drink too much coffee or drinks containing caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant, triggers a stress response, & can impair sleep. Not a great idea if you are already stressed or not sleeping well!
- Drink too much alcohol. As well as risks to your health, excess alcohol has a depressant effect, so can make you feel worse, rather than better.
- Be too obsessional; remember that being healthy doesn't mean completely depriving yourself of things you like, so be moderate rather than puritanical!

Following these principles will help smooth the negative effects of fluctuating blood-sugar levels, which include irritability, poor concentration, fatigue, depression and food cravings.

For more information go to:

www.foodandmood.org

www.mind.org.uk



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8

Worried About your Drinking?

ARE YOU ALWAYS THE ONE WHO OVERDOES IT?

Do you find yourself getting aggressive?
Or getting into risky situations?

Do you feel horribly ashamed the next day or, worse,
don't remember what you did or said?

Is all your money going on booze?
Are hangovers stopping you working?

You need to cut down! Not easy but it can be done.

HERE ARE SOME PAINLESS TIPS

Eat before you drink; food slows down alcohol absorption.

Make your first drink a soft drink or water;
this quenches your thirst and slows you down.

Alternate drinks with water or a soft drink; this means you drink less alcohol, keeps you hydrated and helps you feel better the next day. It will also save money.
Or maybe **don't drink alcohol at all.** If you're drinking at home, experiment with different soft drinks or teas. You might find they're just as good and you're going for booze out of habit.

Sip and enjoy; drinking for speed and quantity might get you drunk quicker but it also diminishes the pleasurable effects of alcohol and increases the negative effects.

Stop when you've had enough.

Don't mix; stay with the same drink.

Keep an eye on how much you are drinking; count your drinks — this will make you more aware of how much you are consuming.

Take a break from boozing; set aside an alcohol-free period every now and then. This respite will boost your health no end and help break the habit.

All your social life revolves around drink (or drugs)?

Spend time with other friends; find an activity that isn't alcohol related. You'll be surprised that it is possible to have fun and not be drunk (or stoned).

You need a drink to boost your confidence?

In the long run this doesn't work — you can get into a vicious circle which increases your anxiety. Check out cards 1 (Stress and Anxiety) and 2 (Low Mood).

Tried all this and none of it works?

Contact Alcoholics Anonymous: 0845 769 7555

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk or

www.1421.co.uk

www.unitcheck.co.uk

www.drinkaware.co.uk

Worried about doing too many drugs?

Contact narcotics anonymous: www.ukna.org

Leeds Addiction Unit www.lau.org.uk

Frank (National Drugs Helpline)

www.talktofrank.com



9

After Someone Dies.....

Everyone experiences grief differently – there is no ‘right’ way to feel. Feelings can include shock, disbelief, numbness, despair, intense sadness, guilt, depression, relief, fear or anger. It can sometimes feel as though we are on a roller coaster of emotions

Even if the death of the person happened years ago, it is quite common to experience unfamiliar or renewed feelings of intense grief and loss, especially during stressful periods at university.

‘HOW CAN I COPE WITH IT ALL.....?’

It can feel like the bottom has dropped out of your world and it is hard to imagine anything good ever happening again.

It might help to talk and explain to someone how you are feeling:

- a friend.
- family member.
- a counsellor.
- a tutor.

‘I FEEL SO ALONE.....’

It can be hard to believe that anyone else can understand the pain you are experiencing — this can result in feelings of isolation.

Not everyone will understand but many people will.

WHAT CAN HELP?

There is no magic wand to make the pain go away or to bring life back to normal.

Some people have found the following activities helpful in easing their pain:

- Writing poetry, keeping a diary.
- Making a memory box.
- Marking the anniversary of the death in some way — watching a favourite film or visiting a special place.
- Writing a letter to the person who has died.
- Recording favourite songs of the person who has died.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

Grieving is such an individual process that it's impossible to say.

You need to:

- Give yourself time and grieve at your own pace.
- Allow yourself to have fun, to laugh and to cry.

Useful websites:

www.rd4u.org.uk Helpline: 0844 477 9400

www.cruse.org.uk



10

Traumatic Events: Common Reactions

A traumatic event is one that causes someone to experience unusually strong reactions, especially if the person involved feared for their life or felt they had no control over what was happening e.g.:

- A violent or sexual attack.
- The sudden or traumatic death of someone close.
- A road traffic accident — even a ‘minor’ one.
- Witnessing a horrific death or incident, even if you did not know the people involved.
- A frightening or unexpected event.
- Prolonged exposure to intense or repeated stress. This can include bullying and harassment, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

The aftershocks can occur immediately after the incident or hours, days, weeks or even months later. The symptoms can affect thinking, feeling and behaviour and feel very unnerving for all those concerned.

SOME COMMON REACTIONS

- **Shock:** numbness, disbelief, the experience appearing unreal with a dreamlike quality.
- **Fear:** of danger to yourself and those you love, of being left alone or having to leave loved ones, of ‘breaking down’ or ‘losing control’.
- **Sadness or Despair:** for death, injuries and losses of every kind, for the loss of belief that the world is a safe and predictable place.

- **Helplessness:** powerlessness and vulnerability.
- **Anger:** at what has happened, at whoever caused it or who allowed it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all, at the lack of proper understanding by others, that this happened to you — ‘why me?’
- **Shame and Guilt:** for not having done certain things you possibly could have done, for having been exposed as helpless, ‘emotional’, needing others, for not having acted or reacted as you would have wished or expected to, for surviving.
- **Physical Reactions:** you may have physical sensations with or without the feelings described above, which may appear straight away or come some time later. For example:
 - Tiredness, dizziness, muscular tension.
 - Loss of memory or concentration.
 - Palpitations or shakes, difficulty in breathing and/or tightness in the throat or chest.
 - Nausea or diarrhoea; menstrual disorders.
 - Disturbed sleep, sometimes due to intrusive memories or dreams, which may or may not correspond to the actual event.
 - Lack of sexual interest.

It is important to remember that these responses are not unusual after a traumatic event. Headstart cards may help.

Counselling will help you to process the event and find ways to help you manage the symptoms.

If symptoms persist, you might also consider going to your GP.

