Brighton and Hove Psychotherapy

Student mental health – how to stay healthy at university

After the long summer, thousands of new students are heading to university. The start of the academic year is an exciting time for many, but it can also be a difficult, worrying time for some. Students today are subject to different pressures from earlier generations – financial, academic, social – that didn't affect previous students to the same degree. Higher study costs means that an increasing number of students have to balance their study with part-time work. This means that they have less time to form and nurture close friendships and a social support network with their peers.

For those leaving home for the first time, it can be a stressful transition towards independent adulthood. If we look to wider society, the uncertain and competitive job market can put an inordinate amount of pressure on students to perform well as they face an uncertain future. In addition to this, many serious mental health conditions manifest themselves for the first time in young adulthood. The Higher Education Statistics Agency recently revealed that the number of students who drop out of university with mental health problems has more than trebled since 2009-10, with a record 1,180 university students with mental health problems abandoning their studies in 2014-15, the most recent year for which data was available.

It is important, therefore, to keep yourself healthy if you are heading off, or back to university. There are many good resources out there that will give good tips on how to look after your mental health while studying at uni, and here are a few tips that might point you in the right direction.

Physical health

Looking after your physical health is key, especially when you are entering a potentially stressful situation and experiencing big life changes. Having a regular routine of physical activity can be a great help in maintaining good emotional health. This could be team sports, the gym, walking rather than getting the bus – whatever works for you. Also, having a healthy diet and adequate nutrition will also help maintain the energy level that is needed when you are studying and partying hard!

Social health

Going to uni is a social experience. Creating new social networks is part of the attraction of studying in a new area. It can be a lot of fun, and a good social network is intrinsic to having good mental health. But don't underestimate the impact of not being around your close friends.

Keeping in contact with your existing friends who know you well is important too, as building deep friendships where you can open up about your inner world takes time.

Psychological and emotional health

Looking after your psychological and emotional health is obviously a key part in maintaining good mental health. Spend some time noticing your thoughts – what are you telling yourself? Notice also your emotions – how are you feeling on a day-day basis? Being able to identify your thoughts and feelings and to express them in some manner, whether through talking to friends or writing them down, can help you maintain a healthy inner world.

Spiritual health

People often forget about their spiritual health, but this is an important part of our lived experience. Looking after your spiritual health can be simple. You could spend some time alone on a regular basis, spend time in nature, or learn to meditate. Of course, if you are religious, then engage more with your religion. Spiritual health doesn't need to be about religion, and can be just spending time by yourself and noticing the amazing world that is around us.

Staying healthy at university

Keeping these four areas in mind on a daily basis can go a long way to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. However, when things get a little more difficult, then use the support services that will be available at your university. There will invariably be counselling services and learning support services who will be able to help in your university journey.

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