

Student counselling and support services have reported that the number of students who are having mental health problems during their time in higher education (such as at University) is increasing. This experience can also be made much harder to deal with due to the added stresses from changes to lifestyle that this time can involve; such as through moving away from home and family and friends, exams and academic work pressures and financial worries that all are common experiences as a student.

Studying is also a popular option for people recovering and learning to live with mental illness, as during this time many people decide to go back to further education. For some a spell of mental illness may lead them to decide to train for a profession or to train for a change in job – as a result of the experience of mental illness many people wish to become more involved in this line of work, and in supporting others with similar problems.

This fact sheet covers the following topics:

1. Choosing to study
2. Finding a college or university
3. Difficulties while studying
4. Benefits, mental illness and studying

1. Choosing to study

When you decide to study you will need to know what you want to study, whether you have the right qualification and capabilities to study that subject. Also if you are not studying just for enjoyment or as a hobby, what are your chances and options of employment after you have completed the course? This is important if you are studying for a job or profession, as sometimes very specific courses are needed and change on a job-by-job basis.

Why not use the following questions as a guide to formulate your own careers action plan:

- What areas of study am I most interested in?
- What career options can I identify in these areas? Am I aware of all the options?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- What grades can I aspire to at GCSE / A-Level or other qualification levels?
- Which sectors offer the best employment prospects?

A suggested action plan may include talking to a careers advisor. Careers advisors can be contacted via the Job Centre. You could also try reading through some prospectuses or looking up different subjects on the Internet to see what you are interested in. You should also take into consideration whether you want to study full-time or part-time, and carefully consider the costs and lifestyle requirements associated with this.

2. Finding a college or university

Everyone who decides to go into further education has to decide where they want to study. There are many factors to consider:

- Where do they do the course or subject you are interested in?
- Do you want to move or stay at home?
- What is the reputation of the place?
- Do you think you will be happy there?
- What facilities do they have?

You may need to visit the college or university to be able to make an informed decision.

Facilities for people with mental health problems

All universities and colleges have student support services which usually offer counselling. However, some are more specialised and are able to provide additional support to people who have suffered with mental health problems. In some universities you may be asked to visit a disability adviser who can work with you to determine your needs if you should start studying there.

Extra help can come in the form of:

- exams in a separate room
- seating near a door or a window in exams
- exams with time allowances for taking medication
- a lap top computer to allow work from home when a student is too ill to attend University
- personal support where the student may have a particular person to go to if difficulties arise - the person may be a member of staff or a postgraduate student as chosen by you and someone from the University
- a period of counselling with the a University or equivalent counselling service
- benefits advice

Extra help can also mean that you may get extra time to do assignments, and help in other areas. In some Universities a mentor scheme exists where you will be paired up with someone, usually another student, who understands mental illness or your particular disability. Many people with mental illness have reported this to be very beneficial and have both prevented relapses and kept them in their studies. The mentor can be around as and when you need them so when you are well you may not see them a lot but if you begin to feel unwell or just want to talk they can be there for you.

What next?

When you have decided where you want to go you will need to apply. There are some courses where a history of mental illness may affect your application. These courses include training to become a nurse, and training to become a teacher. For other courses it is usually advantageous to declare that you have a disability. The positives to disclosing your mental illness are:

- you may be entitled to the extra help in living at Uni and your studies, even if you do not need it to start with
- you may be entitled to extra top up benefits
- you may have one less worry to think about when you set off for Uni

"I think I've been discriminated against"

Access to education is addressed by the Disability Discrimination Act. 'Skill' is the national bureau for students with disabilities. They produce a booklet 'The Five Step Test' which takes you through a series of questions to ascertain if you have been discriminated against. If you think that you may have been discriminated against the Disability Law Service may be able to help you challenge the college or university. For contact details for both of these see the end of this document.

3. Difficulties while studying

Studying at university can be a stressful time. Factors such as academic, social or financial pressure and lack of familiar surroundings can trigger the onset of mental health conditions in some people. Students with existing mental health conditions may also find themselves more severely affected than most by these pressures, which may worsen any existing symptoms. You may already know how your mental illness affects your ability to study however if you do not, here are some of the ways that may alert you that you should seek additional help and support.

You may find difficulties in:

- working in groups
- relating to and working with other people - peers or academics
- with time keeping and attendance
- being around large groups of people, for example, in lectures, libraries, examination
- too much concentration on detail
- tendency to overwork
- poor exam performance
- sustaining effort - academic performance may be erratic
- making choices and prioritising workloads
- poor timekeeping and attendance
- meeting assignment deadlines

If you feel that you are experiencing mental health problems you should contact someone as soon as possible. People you may consider contacting include:

Your GP, your psychiatrist, the student counselling service, a friend

Remember that the student counselling service or a friend may not have experience of severe mental health problems.

4. Benefits, mental illness and studying

There are a range of grants, loans and benefits that students can claim while in higher education. Among the sources of funds open to you are:

- Access Funds
- Student Loans
- Student Grants
- Sponsorship
- Career Development Loans
- Education Maintenance Allowance

The Department for Education and Skills provides a leaflet, "Financial Support for Higher Education students". This can be found online:

- <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/studentsupport/uploads/FSS-Purple-guide-04-05.pdf>

If you declare yourself as a disabled you may be entitled to additional benefits such as Disabled Student's Allowance and / or Income Support.

Information on disabled student's allowance is contained in the guide "Bridging the gap: A guide to the Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs) in higher education" which can be found at:

- <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/studentsupport/uploads/Bridge-the-Gap-04-05.pdf>

Information on Income Support for disabled students is covered by Skill in a document: Income Support for disabled students. It can be found at:

- http://www.skill.org.uk/info/infosheets/inc_supp.doc

For further information please contact the advisers at Skill (see further information section).

Because the benefits system is complicated you are recommended to contact an adviser at your local Citizens Advice or contact an organisation such as Skill.

In addition to grants, loans and benefits, as a student you will not have to pay Council tax (if you live with other students) or prescription charges, dental and opticians charges.

Further information

The **Rethink National Information and Advice Service** has proven expertise in dealing with benefits claims and appeals of both service users and carers. They can be contacted at:

Rethink National Information and Advice Service, 15th Floor, 89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TP

Tel: 0845 456 0455 or 020 7840 3188 Mon, Wed, Fri: 10am-3pm; Tues, Thurs:
10am-1pm

Email: advice@rethink.org

Web: www.rethink.org

The **Citizens Advice** offers free, confidential impartial and independent advice. It has expertise in dealing with benefits claims and appeals but not always expertise in claims involving mental illness. You can find details of your local office in the phone directory, at the library or at:

Web: www.nacab.org.uk/

The **Benefits Enquiry Line** provides: General information and advice on all benefits, personal benefit calculations, phone completion of Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance claim forms.

Tel: 0800 220 674 (free)

Minicom: 0800 243 787

Monday-Friday 9am -5pm

(Outside hours you can leave a request and you will hear back from them within a day)

Skill is a national bureau for students with disabilities. It provides information and support for students, colleges and Universities. A free information and advice line is available. It also produces a number of booklets including topics such as applying to college, financial assistance, examination arrangements, disclosing disability, looking for work and more.

Skill, Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1 3JW

Tel: 0207 450 0620

Email: skill@skill.org.uk

Web: www.skill.org.uk

Skill Information Service

Tel: 0800 328 5050 Tuesday 11.30 – 1.30pm & Thursday 1.30 – 3.30pm

Email: info@skill.org.uk

The **Disability Law Service** can provide information on all matter surrounding disability which includes education and discrimination. They may help you challenge decisions which discriminate against you as a disabled person.

Disability Law Service, 39-45 Cavell Street, London, E1 2BP

Tel: 020 7791 9800

We welcome your feedback on our information

The National Information & Advice Service welcomes your feedback on whether our information was helpful to you.

You can provide feedback in the following ways:

By email: Please email your feedback to us at feedback@rethink.org.

By post: You can write to us at the following address:

National Information & Advice Service
Rethink
15th Floor
89 Albert Embankment
London
SE1 7TP.

By telephone: You can call us on 0845 456 0455 or 020 7840 3188.

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