

Looking after yourself and others – for students



Fact Sheet

As a university student, or when you begin working in schools, you may find yourself in circumstances which are distressing or in which you need additional support. Most students and people entering a new career experience stress. Students of education also need to talk about troubling issues - such as child abuse or suicide - and this can be very difficult for some people. This fact sheet discusses how university students can look after themselves and others.

Discussion and disclosure

It is important to recognise that a number of students on campus will have had some experience of difficult life events or mental illness, either in their own lives or through someone close to them. People around you may have had personal experiences with abuse, violence or mental illness. They may know someone who has attempted or completed suicide.

When issues like this come up in tutorial discussions, or even when talking with friends, it is important to be sensitive to the needs of others and to issues they may not have disclosed. While it is important to explore these topics, keep some guidelines in mind:

- Always show respect for the views of others – you can disagree constructively and calmly and explain your perspective, but do not ridicule anyone for their beliefs.
- In general, a lecture or tutorial is not the best place to disclose in-depth personal information or distressing experiences, even if you feel fine about it, others may not. Talk about the issue more broadly in class, then talk to trusted friends or a professional privately if you feel the need.
- If you know you might be distressed by a particular lecture or tutorial – perhaps because you have had difficult personal experiences yourself – do not simply skip the session. If you feel unable to attend, explain this to your lecturer or tutor. It may still be important for you to learn about the issue in some other way as part of your professional

development, particularly if you want to be able to help others in the future.

- If a discussion brings up difficult issues for you, talk to your lecturer or tutor afterward, or to a professional. Most university campuses have a confidential counselling service that can be readily accessed by students.

Dealing with stress

Everyone experiences stress from time to time, and the experiences that trigger it are different for each person. An event that someone else finds stressful might not trouble you at all; on the other hand, you might find certain things difficult when others do not. Do not judge or blame yourself (or other people) for feeling stressed; we all have different personalities and experiences that contribute to who we are. Both positive and negative events can seem stressful, because they force us to change or respond to a challenge.

Signs of stress include:

- Feelings - feeling anxious, scared, upset, irritable or moody.
- Thoughts - low self-esteem, worry, fear of failure, difficulty concentrating.
- Behaviour - crying, acting impulsively, being easily startled, laughing nervously, teeth grinding, increased use of drugs or alcohol.
- Physical responses - sweaty hands, perspiration, shaking, racing heart, fast shallow breathing, physical tension, headaches, dry mouth, 'butterflies' and stomach problems.

A certain amount of stress can motivate us and have a positive effect. However severe or ongoing stress can be distressing and overwhelming. It can 'paralyse' us with fear and prevent us from working constructively on what we are trying to achieve. It is important to develop positive strategies for dealing with stress.





Strategies for dealing with stress:

- Monitor your stress – recognise your own signs of stress and identify situations you find difficult, so you can be more pro-active about managing stress during these times.
- Set goals and priorities – be realistic, focus on what you want to achieve rather than comparing yourself with others. Accept that there are some circumstances outside your control.
- Manage your time – avoid procrastination, plan ahead, make a schedule and follow it. Evaluate how you are spending your time.
- Be positive – do not put yourself down, challenge negative thoughts that pop into your mind (*I'm no good, I can't do this*) with positive ones, and remind yourself of past success.
- Have fun – schedule some 'time out' for yourself, pursue your hobbies or interests, spend time with friends – focussing too intensely on something can lead to burnout.
- Look after your body – exercise (e.g. 20-30 minutes of walking or swimming most days), eat healthy food, get regular sleep and avoid frequent or heavy use of drugs or alcohol.
- Relax – learn and use breathing techniques, progressive relaxation, visualisations or meditation to consciously relax your mind and body. Practice mindfulness by focusing your awareness on the present moment.
- Be mindful and self-aware – focus on how you are feeling and how you act, and the impact that can have on your colleagues and your students. Be supportive of others without passing judgement.
- Ask for help – if these approaches do not work and you feel overwhelmed or unable to manage your stress, seek advice from a lecturer, counsellor or health professional, and explore some self-help strategies.

- Universities also have policies regarding academic flexibility when students experience health or personal problems. If in doubt, start by speaking privately with a lecturer, tutor or school-based mentor who you feel comfortable with. They will be able to let you know more about options for managing your study commitments.

If you or someone you know is experiencing distress to an extent that it is interfering with study or everyday life, help is available. Most university campuses have an on-site counselling or student assistance service. Alternatively, a person could speak with their GP or contact an online or telephone counselling service such as:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14 or www.lifeline.org.au
- Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 www.kidshelp.com.au
- SANE Australia: 1800 18 7263 www.sane.org
- beyondblue: 1300 22 4636 www.beyondblue.org.au
- headspace: www.headspace.org.au

Sources and Links

The Desk (supported by beyondblue):
www.thedesk.org.au

The Smiling Mind: www.smilingmind.com.au

The Mindfulnet: www.mindfulnet.org

ReachOut: au.reachout.com/Wellbeing/Mental-Fitness