



Produced in partnership with:



Charlie Watkins
Foundation

Making the move to university: looking after your mental health

A guide for care leavers



We're talking mental health

Starting university can be an exciting time, with lots of new experiences and a chance to develop your independence and find out more about yourself.

Some students have had a straightforward time leading up to this moment, but others have had experiences and difficulties that may affect their time at university.

Our guides look at some of the issues that might have affected students, to help them think about their circumstances, their mental health, and how best they can support themselves and be supported by their education institution.

OTHER GUIDES IN THIS SERIES:

- A guide for international students.
- A guide for young carers.
- A guide for LGBTQ+ students.
- A guide for students who've had adverse childhood experiences.
- A guide for students who feel they might not fit in.



Care leavers

The start of your time at university is full of new possibilities and, while it can be exciting, it can also be daunting. Many students attend university ready for the challenge, eager to sample all that university has to give. However, some students have gone through things in their life which can complicate this experience and can affect their capacity to benefit in the same way.

If you're a young person who has been in the care system, either supported in foster care, or in a residential setting, starting university can be a daunting prospect. You're embarking on a new journey in a new environment, possibly with students from very different backgrounds; it may all be very different from the life you've experienced so far. You may have had a difficult time growing up and may have experienced some traumatic events. You may have mental health conditions as a consequence of the difficulties you've had, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or other issues. University presents a unique situation. In addition to the difficulties faced by all young people during this transition, you may have no safety net, there may be accommodation difficulties during the long vacations, or minimal family support.

This guide looks at how you can best access support at university and offers guidance on how to look after your mental health and emotional wellbeing so you can make the most of your time at university.

Understanding your situation

It's hard to fit care leavers under one label. There are so many situations that may have been part of your experience. However, there are links and similarities. The fact that your parents were not able to take care of you, whatever the reason, may have a long-term impact on your emotional and mental health. When you were growing up, you may have accepted this as 'just the way it is' or you may have seen how other families live and felt sad or resentful that you didn't have the support or freedom that your friends and peers may have had.

Unfortunately, it may have impacted on you in different ways. Perhaps you're prone to anxiety or low mood. Perhaps you find it hard to socialise or relate to people of your own age. You may have developed coping strategies that are not helpful such as drinking or self-harm. There may be significant impact on your functioning:

Self-esteem

Your self-esteem may be low, and you may not value yourself. This can present in many ways – poor self-care, struggling to make friends, finding it hard to fit in, wondering when people are going to work out that you're not a good person, or not clever enough. You may have a difficult relationship with food, alcohol or drugs. You may take risks or use sex as a way of self-harm. You may ask yourself if your parents couldn't love you, how can you love yourself?

Attachment

You may struggle to make secure attachments to people or find that you tend to break relationships because you don't feel worthy of love. You may struggle to be your authentic self in situations, which affects your ability to make friends.





Adverse childhood experiences

It's likely that you have experienced some trauma, either because of your living situation, or because of the way you have been treated or neglected growing up. You may have some symptoms of PTSD such as being hypervigilant, struggling with sleep, flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, feeling anger or being irritable.

Unhelpful coping styles

As mentioned, you may use alcohol, drugs or sex as a way to numb your feelings. You may self-harm in other ways or have had thoughts of suicide.

Now that you're at university, these things may improve on their own, or may worsen as you may have less support than your peers.

If you recognise any of these symptoms, now would be a good time to start to look after yourself in a new way, to take good care of yourself and take advantage of the support that's available to you at university.

As a young care leaver, you will be entitled to extra support until you're 25; what this means varies depending on your situation but a good starting point would be to look at the website **www.careleavers.com**, which has a wealth of legal and financial information to support you.



How can you support your own mental health?

Where do you start?

Self-awareness is a good starting point, something you may be good at, or may have avoided because it is uncomfortable. Checking in with yourself at the start of each day can be really helpful.

Some good questions to ask yourself each day:

- How am I feeling?
- What do I need today?





HOW AM I FEELING?

This question is not always as easy as it looks, especially if you're used to answering 'fine'. Take a breath, close your eyes and really notice what is going on for you. Start with noticing any physical symptoms – tightness in the chest or limbs, tension, heavy in the heart, or perhaps lightness. What can you do to help these physical symptoms?

There's a tightness in my chest, I will take some slow gentle breaths, or maybe listen to a short, guided meditation or soothing music.

Then try to name any feelings you have – for example sadness, anxiety, emptiness, happiness. Accept these feelings, all emotions have value. Think about how you can look after these feelings.

I'm feeling sad today, ok, so I need to take care and be gentle today.

WHAT DO I NEED TODAY?

You need to look after your basic needs every day. Eating, resting, exercise, staying hydrated, being sociable... think about how you will fulfil these needs each morning. Just reminding yourself that you need to do this can help you improve or develop good habits for self-care.

Ask yourself: "What do I have to do and what can wait for another day?" You may have university work to complete, lectures to attend, seminars to prepare – be realistic about your work goals, and how you will use your time. You may have laundry to do, or a bill to pay. Think about how best you can fit it in to the day or ask yourself if it can wait until the next day.

This is all about being kind to yourself, something which you may not be used to.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by the things you need to do, try to prioritise the most important and allow yourself to rest and take time out – you will manage better if you're rested.

Academic support

If you're feeling daunted by the new way of learning or overwhelmed by the amount of work you need to do, don't ignore these worries. You have already achieved so much by getting a place at university – it is a fact that care leavers often struggle to achieve their potential due to the barriers to learning they have experienced. This is recognised by universities, and they should have systems in place to support you.

Find out who will assist you in your department. There may be an academic adviser, personal tutor or learning support staff. They can help you with deadlines or extensions, but only if they're aware of your situation. If you are worried about how they will see you or that you might be judged, try to remember that results are important to them, so it's in their interests to help you – you are entitled to support.


Wellbeing support

Universities are investing a lot of money into supporting the wellbeing of their students. There are specialist teams that can help with finances, disability, careers, the particular concerns of international students and emotional wellbeing.

There should be information on the website to explain how to access support and you can usually make an appointment to discuss your needs, and, if you need one, create a support plan.

If your feelings are overwhelming and you are struggling with the demands of academic or independent living, or with juggling your responsibilities, the wellbeing team can offer services to help, which might include counselling. Many wellbeing teams offer specific support, often in group form, meeting either online or in person, to help you find other students who may have had similar experiences, so you can encourage and learn from each other and perhaps develop friendships.





The wellbeing team at your university will have all the information you need about what's available and how to access it. You're entitled to support and staff are there to help you find your way.

Finances

Financial worries can badly affect your mental health. It's easy to ignore them and hope they go away but this will not help. Take prompt action and seek advice before you feel overwhelmed or distressed

You may have applied for student finance before attending university. Waiting for the first loan to come into your bank account can be quite stressful, so if it's late, be sure to check with student finance (they usually give a date when it will be paid).

Perhaps you're expecting a parental contribution and there may be a delay or problem with this. Perhaps you're an international student who is being sponsored by your government or an organisation and have worries about this. Do not suffer alone but speak to the finance team at your university for advice.

It can be difficult to learn to budget if you're not used to it. If you find that you're not managing, there is online advice and support:

studentminds.org.uk/studentfinance

In some situations, some universities offer a bursary to help you financially, so ask the finance team if you think you may be entitled to extra financial support.

Most universities have a hardship fund. Ask at the student union or finance team for advice.

Don't let your money worries mount up until you feel you can't cope. You're not alone and support and guidance are available.

List of online services to access for support

www.nhs.uk

studentminds.org.uk

studentsagainstd Depression.org

mind.org.uk

giveusashout.org

[beateatingdisorders.org.uk/recovery-information/
help-treatment](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/recovery-information/help-treatment)

talktofrank.com

[www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/
Drug-addiction-support/LocationSearch/339](http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Drug-addiction-support/LocationSearch/339)

[drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/
mental-health/alcohol-dependence](http://drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-dependence)

www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support

Your university website

If you need help now

If you have any suicidal feelings at any point it is important to talk to someone you trust, or seek help from a GP or a counsellor. Getting the right support early can play an important part in preventing things from becoming worse.

It is important to act immediately if:

- You feel that your suicidal thoughts are immediate and/or beyond your control.
- Your thoughts about suicide might inadvertently put others at risk.
- You have already done something that might put your life at risk, eg overdosed.

What to do

Call 999 and ask for immediate help, telling the emergency operator your name, date of birth, address, any actions you have already taken, and about your feelings of suicide. If you can safely get to an Accident and Emergency Department yourself, do so immediately.

You can also ring one of these helplines if you need to talk to someone now, or while you wait for help to arrive:

SAMARITANS

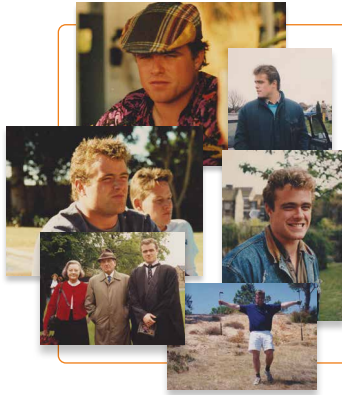
Telephone: 116 123 (free line)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

PAPYRUS HOPELINE

Telephone: 0800 068 41 41 (free line)

This guide, and the other five in the series, is the result of a collaboration between the Charlie Waller Trust and the Charlie Watkins Foundation. Both are charities founded by families bereaved by suicide whose aim is to help young people look after their mental health.



Remembering Charlie Waller

Charlie Waller was a strong, funny, popular, good-looking and kind young man, with a close and loving family. To the outside world, he had everything to live for. Yet in 1997, at the age of 28, Charlie took his own life. He was suffering from depression.

In response to this tragedy, his family founded the Charlie Waller Trust, to open up the conversation around depression, and to ensure that young people are able to understand and look after their mental health and to spot the signs in others.

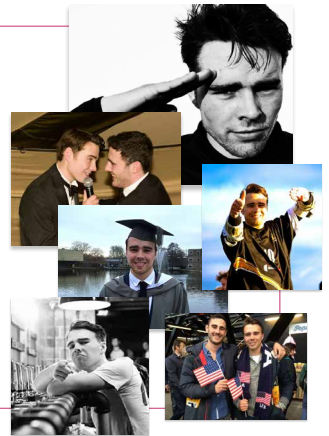
Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

Remembering Charlie Watkins

Charlie Watkins was loved by all who knew him. He was bright, charismatic, entertaining, popular and, above all, kind.

Charlie's mother died when he was just nine. Despite outward appearances he never recovered from the catastrophic loss and was unable to overcome the hidden depression that haunted him. In 2017 he tragically took his own life aged 22.

His twin brother Harry and his father Tim founded the Charlie Watkins Foundation to help young people facing mental health challenges. The foundation raises funds to support charities and initiatives whose primary focus is to support young people with their mental health.



GET IN TOUCH

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