



Produced in partnership with:



Charlie Watkins
Foundation

Making the move to university: looking after your mental health

A guide for LGBTQ+ students



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



LGBTQ+

Scientific research and a revaluing of lived experience has led to widespread acknowledgement in the UK that considerable diversity exists in relation to gender, sex, bodies and sexual attraction. New terms and changes in our use of language have emerged to reflect this and sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment are among the nine characteristics protected from discrimination, harassment and victimisation by the 2010 Equality Act.

While this doesn't guarantee that people who identify as LGBTQ+ won't encounter any hostility in their lives, there is greater enlightenment in many aspects of life and universities are at the forefront of this. **Most universities declare in their mission statements that they embrace, respect and celebrate difference, and their policies, practices and the support services they offer reinforce this.**

Understanding your situation

If you've had adverse reactions from peers, school staff or family members because of your sexual or gender identity, or seen someone else experience this, you may fear the same thing could happen to you at university. Even if you received supportive reactions after coming out the first time, you may be apprehensive about coming out again at university.

Starting university is a major transition for everybody. For most undergraduates, it will be the first time they've lived away from home, with strangers. You won't be the only one thinking about how to present yourself or worrying if you will fit in. People may sound very confident on social media before starting university or at freshers' events in the first week, but most will have things they feel uncertain or apprehensive about.

Coming out

Remember that deciding whether to come out should be entirely your own choice and you never owe it to anyone to tell them. If you are not sure you feel safe, it is best not to come out. If you know you are safe and would like to come out, choose a method that makes you feel most comfortable. Using social

media may feel less daunting, or alternatively slipping it into an in-person conversation would allow you to gauge reactions. There is no right or wrong way to come out. The important thing is that it feels comfortable for you.

There's a good chance peers and university staff will be accepting and supportive. Most students come to university expecting to meet people from diverse backgrounds who will broaden their horizons. People choose to work in universities because they are inclusive, liberal places and LGBTQ+ staff usually feel comfortable being out to cisgender or heterosexual colleagues. They are protected by antidiscrimination policies, as students are.

Managing reactions

It's likely you'll receive a variety of reactions from people you come out to. Many will have LGBTQ+ friends and be happy to meet new ones; some will identify as LGBTQ+ themselves. Others may be more cautious, perhaps because they haven't lived or studied with LGBTQ+ people before and are unsure how to respond.

British universities recruit students from all over the world. In some countries LGBTQ+ relationships are illegal and people who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community face persecution, so it can take a while for students from those countries to get used to more liberal attitudes here. Some students may want to ask you questions; others may not say much, perhaps because they don't know what to say.

You can't control how people will react if you are open with them about your sexuality or gender, and some need time to process information. If you encounter bullying and discrimination, seek advice and support – from your hall warden if you have one in university-owned accommodation, or from your tutor or a wellbeing practitioner if it's on your course.

Sexuality

Many students view university as a chance to explore their sexuality. Educate yourself about safe sex and practise it. Be clear about consent; try not to let yourself be pressured into doing things you don't want to and don't pressurise others. If you experience sexual harassment or assault, there will be reporting procedures and support services to help you. You should be able to find these on the university website. If you're unsure where to go, your students' union probably has an advice service that will signpost you.

What support can your university offer?

Your university wants you to complete your course. However, they understand that some students face challenges in achieving this, so there is academic support and wellbeing support – you just have to ask for it. The people offering this support will probably have received training on LGBTQ+ issues, so have some understanding of your situation, even if they're not part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves. A search of your university website should help you find the extra support available. If you explain your circumstances, they may offer tailored support, outreach programmes or specific individual or group support.

Peer support

Most universities have an LGBTQ+ society funded by the students' union and run by LGBTQ+ students; this could be a useful part of your support network. Typically, they organise social events and introduce groups of freshers to local LGBTQ+ friendly pubs and clubs. LGBTQ+ societies usually offer peer support to their members; this may include drop-in sessions and buddying arrangements for new students. Societies also organise Pride and LGBTQ+ History Month events, campaign for LGBTQ+ rights, and contribute to university committees.





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 day. 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 for – 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're 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've already achieved so much by getting a place at university. 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're 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 for LGBTQ+ students. This is 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.

Support agencies

Below is a list of organisations that offer mental health support to LGBTQ+ people.

Shout

Text: SHOUT to 85258

24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere.

The Mix

Call: 0808 808 4994

Text: THEMIX to 85258

Visit: themix.org.uk

Support and advice for under 25s, including a helpline, crisis messenger service and webchat.

Student Space (from Student Minds)

Text: STUDENT to 85258

studentspace.org.uk

Free, 24/7 text support for students in the UK with trained volunteers. The website provides lots of information and resources about getting support at university, and advice about student life.

Consortium

consortium.lgbt

A membership organisation that works to support LGBTQ+ organisations and projects around the country. You can use the site's members' directory to find local mental health services.

Imaan

imaanlondon.wordpress.com

Support for LGBTQ+ Muslims, with an online forum where you can share experiences and ask for help.

LGBT Foundation

lgbt.foundation

Offers information, advice and support services, including a talking therapies programme, to LGBTQ+ people.

Pink Therapy

pinktherapy.com

An online directory of therapists who work with LGBTQ+ people and those who are gender- and sexual-diverse.

Switchboard LGBTQ+ Helpline

switchboard.lgbt

A listening service over the phone, email or online chat and can provide contact details of LGBTQ+-friendly therapists.

Your university website may also have useful information.

These websites may offer you useful advice and guidance but are not endorsed by CWT.

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

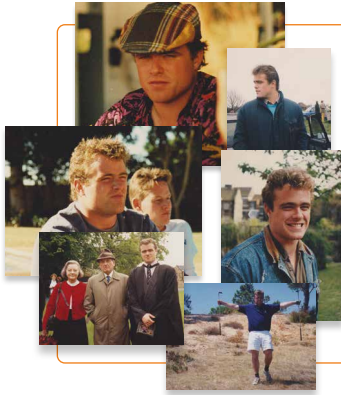
Telephone: 116 123 (free line)

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.

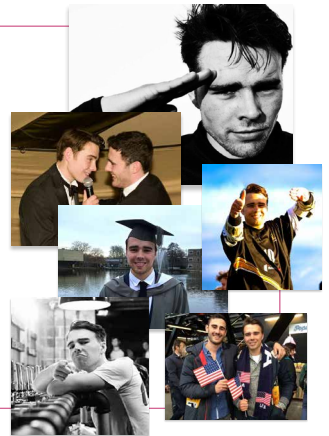
Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

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.



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