



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

University Counselling Service

Neurodiversity

Starting university

University life brings a wide range of opportunities, which can be both exciting and challenging. If you have a diagnosis of neurodiversity such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or you think you have some of the associated traits, you might need to take a more proactive approach to ensure that you get the most out of your time here.

Monitor your energy levels and take action

It is very normal to experience fluctuations in concentration and energy throughout the day, and this can be particularly common for neurodiverse students. If you have ADHD for example, you might experience a slight mood dip in the early evening or, if you are taking medication to help you focus, at the point when this starts to wear off.

Therefore, it is important to look after yourself physically during your time here. Getting enough sleep, eating well and doing some regular exercise can help you to build resilience and manage your mood.

Only you know how much social contact and stimulation from academic study or busy environments you can manage without feeling exhausted. Imagine your energy reserves as a phone charge icon. Think about how you know when your battery is beginning to drain, and what you might need to do at that point to recharge and reset.



If you are heading for the red charging zone, you may need to press pause. Head back to your room to listen to music, watch YouTube, play a video game or do something craft-related, or alternatively go for a walk around the University Lake or Wollaton Park – whatever helps you to unwind and reset.

Powering down

If you tend to have difficulty falling asleep because your mind is still busy, it is a good idea to make a few changes right from the start. Make sure you allow yourself enough time to ‘power down’ before bed by doing something relaxing such as breathing exercises, meditation or listening to music. You might find it helpful to download one of our suggested [apps](#) or follow some of the sleep hygiene advice [here](#)

Challenge yourself and know your limits

You may have heard the expression ‘if you always do the same thing, you’ll get the same results’. Instead, people often find they improve their confidence when they do

things slightly out of their comfort zone. If you are able to recognise when you feel most comfortable socially and then push yourself a little way beyond this, you may find that your comfort zone gradually expands. Think about where your limits are and why this might be. So, if for example you do not like parties, especially big noisy ones, you might feel able to go to a smaller gathering where you know most of the people.

WHATEVER WORKS BEST FOR YOU IS THE BEST WAY OF WORKING

Identify your learning style and build it into everything you do

Think about how you learn best, as this can help you approach your work in the most sustainable way. Traditional working methods taught at school such as condensing facts into revision notes are often not the most efficient way for neurodiverse students to retain information. Moreover, you may well have **strengths in other areas** that you can draw on to help with this.

If you are a visual learner, for example, trying to memorise pages of text before an exam is unlikely to be an effective method. Instead, you could create mind maps, flowcharts, slides or flashcard decks to facilitate your understanding and recall or, if drawing is a strength for you, you might find creating images will help you retain the information. If you are more of an auditory learner, try recording your work on your phone, using different soundtracks to help with instant recall or look for YouTube tutorials or podcasts to help cement your knowledge.

Variety is key

It can be a bit harder for neurodiverse students to get work done at a consistent pace, especially if you tend to become totally immersed in one aspect of a topic or, conversely, if your attention often wanders. It is important to be honest with yourself about your strengths and difficulties. Keeping your academic targets **realistic** and **achievable** can help you to avoid getting caught up in a cycle of perfectionism and procrastination.

Before you start, think about how you manage your space and possessions. If a computer is downloading several files at once, it slows down. Your concentration works in a similar way, so it is important to avoid unnecessary visual distractions by creating an **uncluttered** and **clearly defined workspace**. Leaving a **small box** near your door for your keys, phone, money etc. will reduce stress and help you leave on time.

You may find some of these strategies useful for managing your workload:

- If your mind tends to be very busy whenever you sit down to work, a simple **one-minute meditation** exercise like [this](#) or four-minute' **bullet journaling** can help you re-focus.

- Keep things simple and set small easily achievable **mini targets** instead of long 'to-do' lists.
- Use traffic lights to **colour-code tasks** so you can alternate them depending on your concentration and energy levels. This might mean tackling red tasks (those involving most focus) when you are at your most alert and switching to the least demanding activities (green) when you notice your attention waning.
- Manage predictable energy and focus dips by working in **short bursts of concentration** (use a timer to mark the end). In between each period of work, engage different senses, maybe by moving around or listening to music. This may help you re-charge and refocus. You might find it helpful to divide work into **bite size** chunks or use the [pomodoro](#) method.
- If you find you can only get work finished when a deadline is looming, try creating your own **mini-deadlines** using reminders on your phone or agreeing a schedule with another student on your course. Being accountable can help you make progress and limit procrastination.
- If you tend to get really absorbed in a particular aspect of your work leaving you short of time for other tasks, try **setting time limits** to ensure that you cover all the essentials. You can then **reward yourself** with a return to something you find more interesting later on.
- Use a **noise-cancelling headset** or try working in a library space if house noise is an issue. You may find using a background-music app like [Noisli](#) can you focus by tuning out distractions.
- Use **multi-dimensional methods** for exam revision, such as post-it notes, a whiteboard, voice recording, flashcard apps, or object recognition prompts etc.
- Your phone might be a distraction but used carefully **technology** can be helpful. If you find yourself constantly experiencing moments of clarity when out and about, download an app like [Evernote](#) to keep all your ideas in one place. A scheduling app like [Trello](#) can help you stay on top of coursework and multiple deadlines.

However you structure your work, remember that a good **work-life balance** is crucial to maintaining resilience and getting your work done. You will be far more focused and productive overall if you plan in plenty of breaks and non-academic activities.

Make friends through shared interests

University brings you into contact with many new people all at once. It can be difficult to know who you might click with and exhausting keeping up with new friends and different social events. If you find large groups overwhelming, or struggle to process a lot of information at once, it is worth focusing on environments where you are more likely to meet 'your tribe'. Think about what you enjoy doing the most, and then have a look to see if there are any related societies or clubs, you could join. There will usually be someone you can contact in advance so you know what to expect.

Tackle any accommodation issues early on

If you have trouble switching your mind off at the end of the day or find you are easily distracted when working, it can be tricky living in shared flats or busy corridors. You might also find other people's noise and everyday activities intrusive and difficult to live around if you are prone to sensory overload. Many students just will not be aware that the way they live can be particularly challenging for neurodiverse people. It can be helpful to explain what you find difficult as early as possible to prevent problems occurring later on.

If you continue to find the location of your room problematic, speak to residential support staff so that different options can be explored. Students often start thinking about where they will live in second year before the end of their very first term. This can feel a bit overwhelming, so if you feel things are moving too quickly take a bit of time to think about what is important for you in your accommodation so you can match your priorities with the options available.

Be your own advocate!

Teaching styles and expectations at university can be very different to school or college. If you tend to work best with clearly defined parameters, university coursework guidelines and feedback might seem too open-ended for you. Or there might be environmental factors such as noise or lighting that make concentration more challenging in lectures and seminars. Try to flag up any difficulties you are having as early as possible (perhaps in consultation with the Disability Support Team), so that your tutors can support you to develop your independent study skills and get the most out of your time here. It is always helpful if you can think of a potential solution alongside the problem.

Remember – you are not alone!

While you are discovering what is best for you and reflecting on how you would like your university experience to be, it can be tricky to know what is actually possible. There are support staff right across the university who can help you along the way including your personal tutor, the Support and Wellbeing team, and the Disability Support Team.

You might find these links useful too:

University of Nottingham study skills sessions and additional support:

[Libraries - Student academic skills](#)

[Student Services - Study support](#)

[Student services - Autistic spectrum disorder](#)

[UoN Autism Social and Research Group](#)

External Links

Made in Dyslexia –Recognising and focusing on your strengths:

[Made By Dyslexia](#)

Information about various aspects of ADHD and ADD and strategies for improving concentration:

Additudemag.com - [Additudemag](#)

AADD-UK - [Adults with ADHD](#)

Brainscape Academy - [10 Focus techniques](#)

How to ADHD - [How to ADHD YouTube Channel](#)