

A photograph of two young men in a university setting. The man on the left is smiling and looking towards the man on the right. Both are wearing blue lanyards with ID badges. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a university event.

STUDENT GUIDE: MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE AT UNIVERSITY



Addiction
ADVOCATES

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1

DRUG ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN STUDENTS | WHAT'S THE LINK?

Drug abuse and mental health are intertwined in more ways than one. The relationship between substance addiction and mental health are often both a product of one another.

For instance, having a deteriorating mental state is a driving force of resorting to recreational drug use. Similarly, what begins as drug use for 'social' or 'experimental' purposes can very easily turn into something more serious.

One of the more prominent issues is the normalisation of drug culture in university settings, as this can lead to a serious impact on mental health and following this - personal studies are affected.

In fact, within a study from the NUS on students and drug use, it's said that over half of respondents (57%) say they have no problem with recreational drug use, while 27% say taking drugs is simply a part of university culture.¹

This normalisation of drug and alcohol misuse can lead to a dangerous level of peer pressure, instigating negative mental health. Even with such a broad opinion on the acceptance of drugs, remind yourself that it is not something you need to take part in.

To ensure that immediate help and advice can be sought, here at Addiction Advocates, we have launched a free and confidential service that enables those struggling with or affected by addiction to secure the support they need.

The risks of drug use on mental health include, but are not limited to:

Paranoia

Depression

Anxiety

Psychosis

Substance-induced bipolar disorder

Addiction

Cognitive impairment & decline

These are serious and debilitating mental health conditions that can be triggered by substance abuse or, if you're already suffering, contribute to the worsening of said conditions.

“Students who drink unhealthy amounts of alcohol are also less likely to seek professional help for their mental health problem. Call our support helpline on 0800 012 6088 for advice and guidance.”



2.

WHY ARE STUDENTS AT A HIGHER RISK OF DEVELOPING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AS A RESULT OF DRUG & ALCOHOL ABUSE?

During this mental health awareness week, think about how you as a student could be more susceptible to addiction, as research suggests the notion that the developing mind is more vulnerable to uncontrollable addiction when compared to that of an adult.

Essentially, students are still young adults, meaning the developing brains of students are more susceptible to addiction due to the interference it can cause on the brain configuring its reward system.

To put this simply, our brain has reactions to particular actions, in this case drugs and / or alcohol. When this makes us feel good, naturally, this reward system we've built up makes us look for more of what is making us trigger these feelings.

It is called dopamine. You may have heard of this neurotransmitter before - it is a neurotransmitter that becomes over-produced when using substances. When continued use of a substance becomes a part of daily life, more of the substance is needed to reach the euphoria you may have once felt.

This soon leads to addiction which can lead to a debilitating mental state. While this is something that is also true with adults, young students have a higher chance of falling victim to addiction.

This is due to the fact that not only are illegal and addictive substances often widely used throughout university culture, but younger adults have a stronger urge to seek functions of pleasure.

So, while pleasure can come easily from drug and alcohol abuse, the developing brain isn't equipped nor ready to combat the weight of addiction that follows soon after.

3.

IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH A BIG PROBLEM AT UNIVERSITY?

Alcohol and drug use is common in younger age groups, with binge drinking mostly affecting adults aged 18–34.² This means that students at university are the most likely group to binge drink or use drugs.

Alcohol misuse is a strong signal of students' mental health and has been found to increase the likelihood or contribute to depressive symptoms such as drinking to cope with mental health, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and self-harm behaviors.³

Not only is abuse of alcohol or drugs dangerous, it is also used for a number of different reasons.

The main reasons cited for using drugs by those that use them are recreation (57%), stress relief (21%) and boredom (21%) women.⁴

The casual use of drugs is common among university students, and can lead to mental health problems as a result. Cannabis is a widely used drug in young people, and can cause depression and anxiety with excessive use.

10% of students reported using cannabis every day in a university survey from 2020-21.⁵

4. MENTAL HEALTH STATISTICS

1 in 5 students have a diagnosed mental health problem, with many more undiagnosed. It is important that any student who struggles with poor mental health seeks help before unhealthy substance abuse of drugs such as cannabis develops down the line.

You're not alone when it comes to struggling with your mental health, many students suffer from a range of mental health issues too, just look at these statistics that reinforce the importance of addressing the stigma attached to speaking out about mental health.

UCAS estimates that over 70,000 students may enter HE every year with a mental health condition, but 49% told a UCAS survey of first year students that they had not shared this information.⁶

Among 17 to 19 year olds, the proportion with a probable mental disorder increased from 17.4% in 2021 to 25.7% in 2022.⁷

50% of students have considered leaving their course because of their mental health.⁸

7 in every 10 students have either been diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition, are experiencing a short term mental health condition, or think they may have a condition that has not been diagnosed.⁸

5.

TIPS TO MANAGE MENTAL HEALTH FOR STUDENTS

When you suffer from poor mental health, it can sometimes feel like there is nothing you can do to help it. But this is not the case - we have listed a number of mental health tips which are backed up by science to help you manage your mental wellbeing.



1. Spend time outdoors

Spending time outside in nature is known to release endorphins which improves our mood and helps us to feel calm.



2. Try meditation techniques

Meditation can help you manage stress and focus on your own wellbeing.



3. Talk to loved ones about your feelings

Talking about your feelings is key to improving your health. Bottling up your emotions will make you feel worse in the long run, so talk to someone you trust.



4. Find a hobby that you enjoy

Finding a new interest that brings you joy will make you feel happier and keep you busy on days where you may be struggling.



5. Improve your sleep schedule

Sleep is such an important factor in our wellbeing, and adults should aim for 7-9 hours a night. Try setting a regular bedtime and wake up routine and unwind before going to bed.



6. Eat healthy foods to improve wellbeing

Our diet is another huge factor in our physical and mental wellbeing. Try to eat a balanced diet with reduced caffeine intake to help your anxiety. Also trying new recipes and eating with family or friends are known to boost your mood.



7. Exercise or get yourself moving

Physical exercise is a great way to release endorphins and improve your wellbeing. Even if you are unable to complete high intensity exercise, a walk, gardening or cleaning are great for your mental health.



8. Watch your drug and alcohol use

Falling in to drug or alcohol consumption may feel like a way to destress, but this can make mental health problems worse or lead to addiction. Limit your alcohol consumption or try going sober to see if this helps your head health.



6. WHERE TO GET HELP

There are a variety of resources available to students who need help with an addiction. Across the UK, there are various helpful alcohol and drug rehab charities who are there to help.

See the below list of services available for students in need of support.



FRANK offers detailed information about drugs and alcohol on their website and can provide confidential advice to those who need it.



We Are With You offers advice and guidance about drug and alcohol misuse as well as support for mental health.



Alcoholics Anonymous host local meetings across the UK for people with alcohol abuse problems. They also have a free helpline for immediate support.



Narcotics Anonymous is a free service which hosts meetings across the UK for people with drug addictions. They also offer a free helpline from 10AM-12AM for people needing support.

If you're looking for free national charities, you can visit these mental health charities and services:

- **Mind**
- **Your university health and wellbeing services**
- **StudentMinds**
- **Rethink**
- **Youngminds**



Addiction Advocates offers a free drug and alcohol support and advice helpline. This involves discussion of addiction and mental health, as well as signposting to relevant treatment.

Advice for Families and Staff.

There are also a number of charities available to help support family members, loved ones, academic staff and the friends of someone with a substance abuse or mental health issue. Some services include:



Adfam offers a variety of support for family and staff, such as their telephone helpline, support groups for families across the UK and information on their website.



Turning Point offers a variety of services for people in need, including mental health services, drug and alcohol services and support for learning disabilities. They offer both crisis mental health services as well as general therapies.

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