

**think<sup>+</sup>**

**positive about  
student mental health**



**SELF-MANAGEMENT  
RESOURCE**  
FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF

**nus** *scotland*  
national union of **students**

# THINK POSITIVE: STUDENT SELF-MANAGEMENT

## About Think Positive

Think Positive is NUS Scotland's student mental health project. The project aims to find ways to support students experiencing mental ill health, tackle stigma and discrimination, and promote wellbeing in colleges and universities.

You can follow our self-management projects and other work being carried out by Think Positive through our website. Visit – [thinkpositive.scot](http://thinkpositive.scot)

## About this report

Students and staff from universities and colleges across Scotland consistently tell us that support to improve student mental health needs to be a priority. Experiencing mental illness or poor mental wellbeing can have a pronounced impact on a student's attendance, attainment, and even result in them leaving their course before completion. We wanted to find out more about students' experience of managing mental ill health while studying.

With funding from the ALLIANCE we were able to undertake research on self-management with students experiencing mental illness. We hope that this report will allow students and staff to think about mental health from a new perspective and highlight the ways in which to best support students to self-manage.

## What is self-management?

Self-management is about an individual and any applicable services working together in an effort for that person to live with a long term condition (including mental illnesses like depression and anxiety disorders).

For students with lived experience of mental illness this means...

*...finding and using tools, techniques and skills to manage their mental health which allow them to achieve their potential in education, and to enjoy the experience of being a student, leaving equipped for the workplace or further study...*

This might also include seeking support from their university or college and any reasonable adjustments which can allow successful achievement and management of a long term condition. Self-management is not about students managing their studies and illness alone, but about them having choice and control over how and if they access support.

## What we did

We spoke to a diverse range of students about mental health, education and the support they have received. Speaking to students with lived experience of mental illness allowed us to paint a picture of what helps and what hinders students in maintaining better mental health and fully engaging with student life during their time at university or college.

We carried out an online survey that received over 50 responses, which asked students to describe the factors that supported their ability to manage their mental illness alongside their studies, and also what made that more difficult. Three workshops also took place with 30 students in total who identified as living with mental illness, where they were asked to design characters or personas based on their own, or a classmate/friend/peer's experience of university or college. Students used the characters to outline their day and describe what made self-management possible, the barriers or challenges they experiences as well as any additional elements of their life they wanted to tell us about.

They were also asked to give more detail about some of the more challenging parts of student life. The survey and workshops gave us an overview of the biggest challenges students face in managing illness alongside studies, and what makes self-management in student life possible. In addition, through stalls and discussions built in to mental health training with students, wider perspectives on how students currently self-manage were captured, with an additional 45 students involved in shaping this innovative project plan through such conversations.

We heard some positive examples of students accessing support but we also heard examples of students who faced unnecessary and avoidable barriers in accessing support, students who found no support when approaching staff and those who had to discontinue their studies due to mental ill health.

We then shared what these students had told us with staff at universities and colleges finding that staff were equally shocked by the lack of support some students had experienced. There were many staff who were self-reflective, recognising that they might previously missed opportunities to support students.

## What we've learned

Students in Scotland are not one homogenous group with the same needs – each individual might experience challenges to their mental health differently, take a different approach to wellness and recovery and do this through different means – including different efforts in self-management.

We have also learned that an open dialogue about mental illness, and the impact this can have on students, is key. Challenging the thinking and actions of students, peers and staff when dealing with mental ill health and poor mental wellbeing can have positive results.

Reasonable adjustments can mean small changes in the way a student has to engage with their classes or course work but can lead to great improvements in their ability to participate fully.



# What helps and what doesn't in self-management of mental health?



## What it might look like when students are:

### Managing well in education

Normal changes in mood, usual sleep patterns, physically well, enough energy, performing well, socially active.

### Experiencing challenges to managing their health/studies

Nervous, irritable, sad, tired/ low energy, muscle tension, headaches, procrastination, decreased social activity.

### Struggling to manage their health/studies

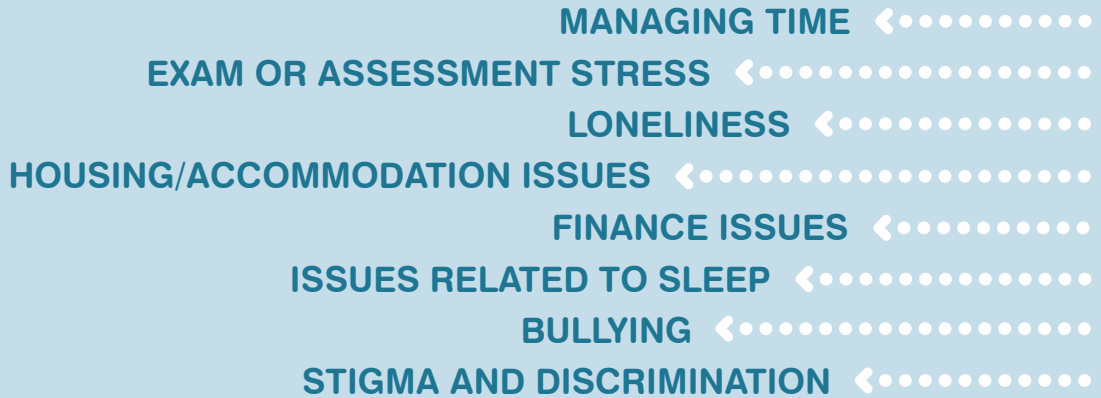
Excessive anxiety, easily angered, depressed mood, unable to fall or stay asleep, exhaustion, physical illness, unable to perform to their usual standards, absenteeism, isolation, avoiding social events.

## What helps students manage their health and their studies?

- .....> FRIENDSHIPS
- .....> EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
- .....> UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE FORMAL SUPPORTS
- .....> ROUTINE, INCLUDING EATING AND SLEEPING
- .....> SUPPORTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING STAFF
- .....> ORGANISATION AND PLANNING WELL
- .....> FLEXIBILITY IN COURSE STRUCTURE
- .....> INTEREST IN SUBJECTS STUDIED



## What challenges students in managing their health and their studies?



### What this means...

So the big worries such as money, housing and course work are all things affecting students' abilities to self-manage their conditions and the things they have told us can help are all quite small changes and adjustments which can have a big impact. Simple fixes then? Not quite! We need robust support systems within education to ensure that students know support is available, how to access it and what to expect.

We want to see campuses free from stigma and discrimination, functioning as places where it is okay to say "I'm not okay".

We need to recognise that there is no one size fits all approach to mental health support and that while the stressors mentioned above will be big issues for large numbers of students there are also many variances and nuances which will create divergent individual experiences.

The following case studies come from the real experiences of students, reported during our self-management workshops.

## case study 1

**Amber, 21**

### **Studying: Preparation for Health and Social Care**

#### **Health**

Feels stressed and under pressure. Has low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Often experiences anxiety.

#### **Personal info**

Amber is 21. She has a nine month old son, and lives with her partner. Amber left school at 16 and this is her first time returning to education since then.

#### **Responsibilities outside studying**

Amber has responsibility for taking care of her little boy, maintaining her three bedroom house.

#### **What do you like best about being a student?**

It gets me out of the house and gives me some time to work towards something for me. I get to meet new people, experience different things and learn something new almost every day. Taking part keeps me motivated to reaching my goals.

#### **What are the most difficult parts/ frustrating bits for you of being a student?**

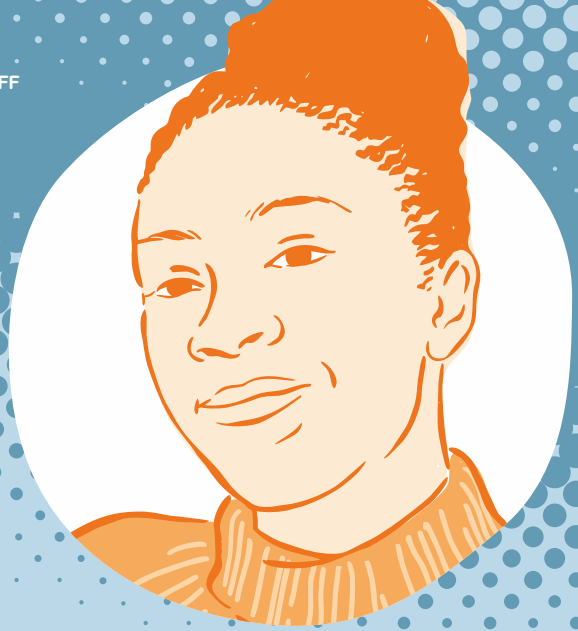
Juggling looking after my son and the stress of childcare can be tough. I find it difficult if my child is ill and I can't come into college. I often worry about assessments and find the waiting on results stressful.

#### **Hopes and dreams for the future**

I want to go on to study Access to Nursing next year and then move on to three years at university to study nursing. I want to become a nurse in A&E within the next five years.

#### **What does a typical day looks like?**

A usual day for me means waking up at 5am, getting washed and dressed. Then I will feed my child, wash him and get him dressed and ready for nursery. Once I have dropped him off I get the bus to college. I have to pick my child up after class and once I take him home it is time to prepare dinner for the three of us.



I will usually have some housework to do and will get everything organised for the next day for everyone. I will put my child to bed and if I have college work, I will try and get that done before heading to bed.

#### **What helps?**

Amber has a routine which is a good scaffolding to fit around her studies. However, it is a busy schedule with a lot of responsibility. Amber likes feeling motivated and this is something she could speak to her lectures about to make sure that she stays on track.

#### **What doesn't help?**

Amber might need a bit more flexibility than other students due to the possibility of absence due to childcare issues. Amber would probably benefit from timely feedback on her assessments to reduce the stress and anxiety she feels here.





## case study 2

**Julitta, 18**

**Studying: Nutrition and Food Science**

### Health

Problems with anxiety, confidence issues, depression from an early age and recently has experienced problems with eating.

### Personal info

Julitta is 18 and has moved into halls with five other people. This is her first time living away from home and she has come to university straight from high school.

### Responsibilities outside studying

Julitta's family live in the same city so she tries to see them when she can. She attends group therapy one a week on Thursday mornings and occasionally goes to a women's group on a Friday afternoon.

### What do you like best about being a student?

I am interested in my course and really value the opportunity studying has given me to be more independent, move out of home and I hope to get involved in student life.

### What are the most difficult parts/ frustrating bits for you of being a student?

I find it hard getting to lectures and classes because I am often lacking energy and my mood is really low a lot of the time. I find that just now I have a lack of balance really.

### Hopes and dreams for the future

I want to get my degree and would maybe like to do some post graduate studying too. I want to learn to manage my stress and anxiety, feel more confident and be happy!

### What does a typical day looks like?

A usual day for me would mean waking up about an hour before class. I don't usually eat before going but will make food at home after. Once classes are over for the day I might spend some time with my flatmates but often I just sit on my phone for hours. This makes me feel so unproductive! If it was the weekend I would usually try and see my family in my free time.



I am struggling with sleep just now so before bed I will usually try and write in my diary as this helps clear my head. I don't have enough energy to exercise just now so that is something I'd like to change.

### What helps?

Writing things down.  
Seeing family and friends.

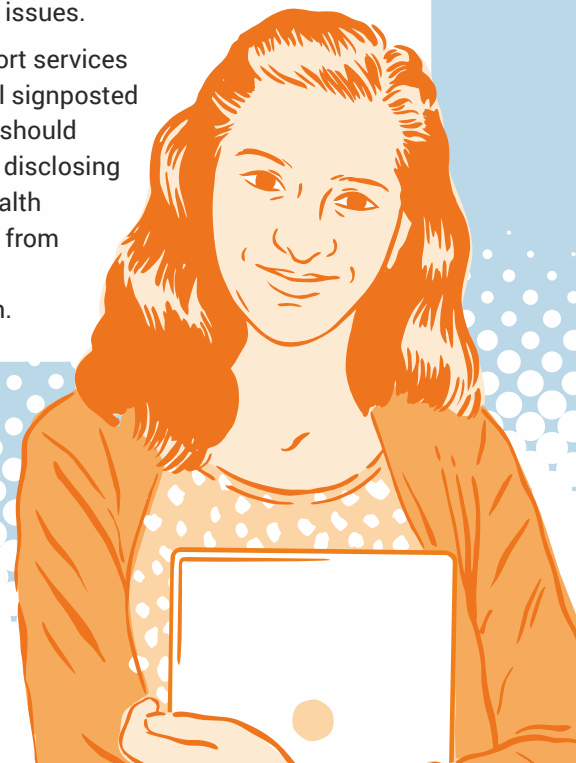
### What doesn't help?

Julitta could look at a healthy diet and routine-making time for breakfast within a day structured to allow time for study and socialising.

Julitta wants to get more involved in student life so joining a club or society could be a great step.

It is probably a good time for Julitta to speak to an academic advisor about more effective studying and to speak to a counsellor about the recent problems with eating and longer term mental health issues.

Student support services should be well signposted to and Julitta should feel confident disclosing her mental health problems free from stigma or discrimination.



## case study 3

**Richard, 43**

**Studying: Health and Social Care**

### Health

Anxiety and problems with his hearing.

### Personal info

Richard is 43 and lives with his mum who has ill health. He is a mature student returning to study after a long break.

### Responsibilities outside studying

Richard has to look after his mother and also volunteers with a local youth club.

### What do you like best about being a student?

I really like the new experience and making friends. I am really enjoying the course and appreciate the opportunity to challenge myself.

### What are the most difficult parts/ frustrating bits for you of being a student?

I don't like travelling to classes by bus as they are often late or don't turn up- this isn't a great start to my day and can leave me feeling really anxious. I am not very confident and do get stressed about assessments. Most other people seem to be coping a bit more than I am.

### Hopes and dreams for the future

I want to pass this year and next... that is as far as I can look just now. Thinking about what next makes me worried too.

### What does a typical day looks like?

My usual day would involve getting up at 5am and make my mum a cup of tea and some breakfast. I take the dog out for a walk then come back to have breakfast. I head off at 8am to get the bus to class. After class I will come home and do some gardening if I have time before making dinner for me and my mum. I will usually have some course work to do before going to bed. I usually watch TV until I fall asleep.



### What helps?

Richard makes time to do some physical activity outside when he is gardening and shares his skills through volunteering. He is also interested in his course which really makes a difference.

### What doesn't help?

Richard has caring responsibilities and this takes up a lot of his time and likely impedes on social commitments. The time passed since Richard last studied is having an impact on his confidence but this is something that the staff from his course should be able to help with. Since Richard likes being active, he could think about getting a bike and riding that to college rather than relying on the buses which contribute to his feelings of anxiety.





## case study 4

### Jannik, 25 Studying: Mechanical Engineering Masters

#### Health

Jannik experiences low mood and anxiety.

#### Personal info

Jannik is 25 and has moved here to study. He is an international student and will be returning home once he has completed his course. He lives in a private rented flat with one other person who works full-time. He doesn't know many people in Scotland but chats online with his friends back home when he can. He also has additional support needs arising from Asperger's Syndrome and dyspraxia.

#### Responsibilities outside studying

The course is funded by Jannik's employers so he feels a responsibility to keep on track and report back to them regularly.

#### What do you like best about being a student?

I really enjoy having access to the gym and sports clubs – I always try to make the most of that.

#### What are the most difficult parts/ frustrating bits for you of being a student?

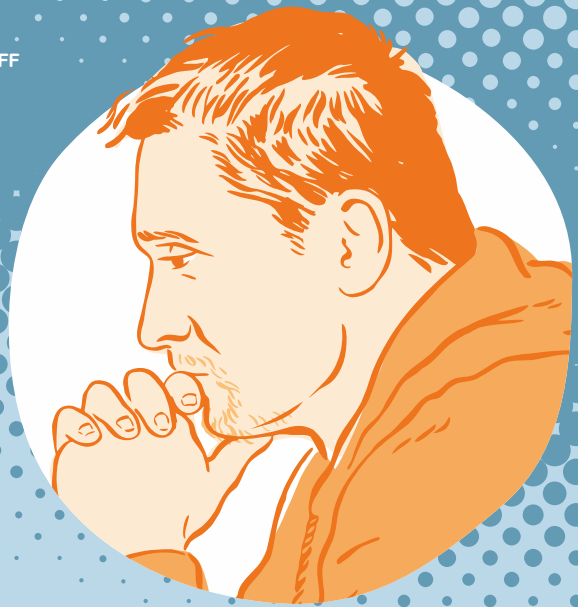
I feel a real pressure to achieve high grades. My course is very competitive so I am lucky to have a place but, as my employer is paying my international fees, there is a lot at stake. The course isn't really what I expected and I am not enjoying the work. I have to keep at it or it will really mess up my career.

#### Hopes and dreams for the future

I want to be a hands on engineer, this course seems more business led but I guess that is what my employers want.

#### What does a typical day look like?

At the moment I am struggling to get up in the morning. I have lost my motivation a bit but still feel so much pressure to do well. I don't sleep well so feel really tired in class when I do manage to turn up. It is a real effort.



I would actually say, that just now, each day is a struggle from start to finish and I am worried that this is going to start affecting my course work.

#### What helps?

Jannik really enjoys being active and going to the gym is a good way to get a break from the pressures of studying. Jannik makes time to speak with friends back home- it is good to connect with people close to you even when they aren't in the same city or country.

#### What doesn't help?

Jannik isn't enjoying his course but is under a lot of pressure to perform. He is completing post graduate education as an international postgraduate student so has the combined stressors of being in an unfamiliar culture and social setting with increased academic demands. Jannik might not be familiar with the support services available here in Scotland so having these clearly signposted to would be beneficial. Jannik also has Asperger's Syndrome so sometimes needs additional support in social activities or he might feel isolated while studying.



## Recommendations

University and college staff can play a huge part in supporting a student experiencing mental ill health. Students consistently state that having supportive lecturers, advisers and peers can make a huge difference in their ability to continue their education. Wellness and the ability to self-manage mental ill health while studying can be enhanced by staff in a number of ways, including:

- ***Being aware of the factors that might impact both positively and negatively on a student's wellbeing and ability to self-manage***
- ***The best support you can offer a student experiencing mental ill health will be individualised to their unique needs, and guided by them***
- ***In order to be able to fully inclusive, universities and colleges must continue to work to end stigma and discrimination in universities and colleges***
- ***Universities, colleges and students' associations should endeavour to find out what services and supports students find most helpful, and promote and signpost to these. It is vital that student support services and external advice and support agencies are clearly signposted to and accessible to all students.***

\*Our case studies were developed from workshops involving students with lived experience of mental health conditions. Names have been changed and we thank them for their contribution.

## Our funders

This work was funded by the ALLIANCE.

The ALLIANCE is a national members' organisation for third sector and voluntary organisations. Membership includes – volunteer led groups, people who are disabled, those living with long term health conditions, and many NHS boards. The ALLIANCE works to drive policy and service design which centres around people, supports change and partnership working while strengthening the voice of unpaid carers, disabled people and those living with a long term condition.

NUS Scotland were awarded a grant from the ALLIANCE self-management IMPACT fund to explore how students manage their mental health while studying.

## Glossary

### Long Term Condition

A long term condition is one which lasts or is expected to last more than 12 months.

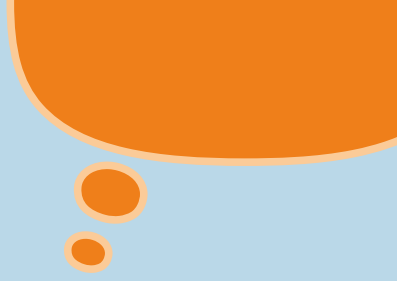
### Reasonable Adjustment

A reasonable adjustment is a change or allowance which a student and the institution can agree on which will reduce the impact of mental ill health on a student's ability to participate in further or higher education- an example of this could be allowing a student to attend classes scheduled in the afternoon or handing out lecture notes in advance.

### Self-management

Self-management is the successful outcome of an individual working with appropriate services to support living with a long term condition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Gaun Yersel' The Self Management Strategy for Long Term Conditions in Scotland, The ALLIANCE (2008)  
[http://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/download/library/lib\\_54b668b3d492a/](http://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/download/library/lib_54b668b3d492a/)

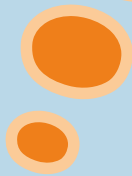


## Notes...



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## Think Positive

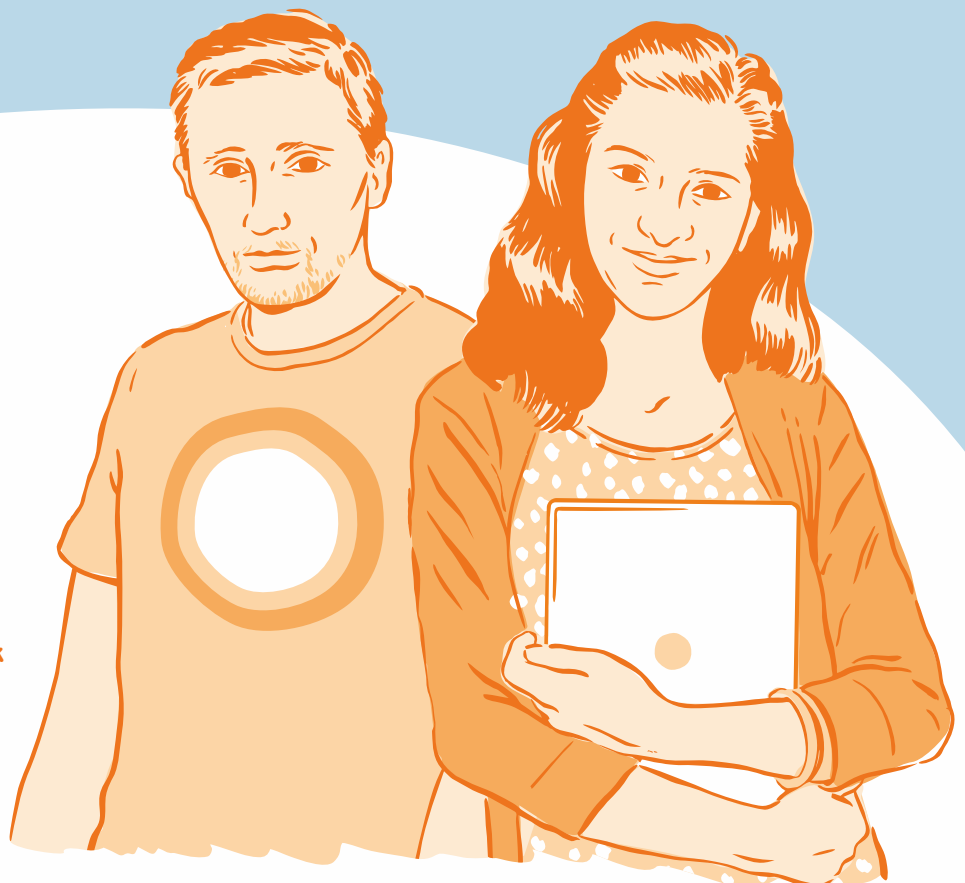
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