



The Open
University



Studying and Staying Mentally Healthy

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Edited, designed and typeset by The Open University.

SUP 032472

Studying and Staying Mentally Healthy

Mental health difficulties can present real challenges to OU students. This booklet contains advice and tips to help your study become an enjoyable and worthwhile experience, and to help you stay mentally healthy.



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1 Introduction

The starting point for this booklet is the recognition that good mental health plays an important part in everyone's ability to study effectively. The skills involved in studying take time and effort to master. Studying can bring stresses which contribute to or increase a vulnerability to mental distress.

Students who experience periods of mental health difficulty can face particular challenges in their studies and their everyday lives. In this booklet there are opportunities for you to reflect on how best to respond to your course demands and the study pressure points you will encounter.

Suggestions are made for developing techniques to enhance your learning experience and for seeking further support to help you maintain mental well-being.

Use the sections you need and write on the book or add ideas wherever you like. It's yours to use in the best way for you.

2 Studying and mental health

2.1 Terminology

There is no one universal term for mental health difficulties that is accepted by everyone in every situation. There are commonly used terms which tend to be associated with different perspectives. Definitions change over time – today the term ‘disability’ covers a range of physical and mental health concerns.

Disabled students are entitled to support under the Equality Act 2010.

In generally favouring the phrase ‘mental health difficulties’ in this booklet, we want to acknowledge the reality of distressing experiences. In addition, we recognise that not all problems of the mind are diagnosed or even appropriate for medical intervention; to learn, concentrate and be confident can be hard processes at the best of times. All students need to be able to identify what sort of support they need and to be able to ask for and receive that support in order to help them to study successfully. This is particularly important for you if you have a mental health difficulty.



2.2 The mental health continuum

Mental health difficulties come in many different forms and are experienced differently by each individual.

You may be dealing with more extreme examples of relatively common feelings and behaviours such as anxiety and depression. Or you may be experiencing extremely distressing thoughts and distorted perceptions which you find difficult to deal with and which people around you find difficult to understand.

Most of us locate ourselves at differing points on a mental health continuum depending on our circumstances.

Where do you see yourself?



Figure 1 The mental health continuum

2.3 Taking an holistic approach

This booklet explores the challenges of study for you wherever you are on the continuum. It considers how you can best meet your needs by sharing responsibility for your health and by drawing on a number of resources to support an effective learning experience.

We also include a chapter on recognising signs in yourself of becoming too ill to study, and offer suggestions of what to do.

Remember that physical and mental health are interrelated. Working to stay happy and healthy while you study will involve many areas of your life.

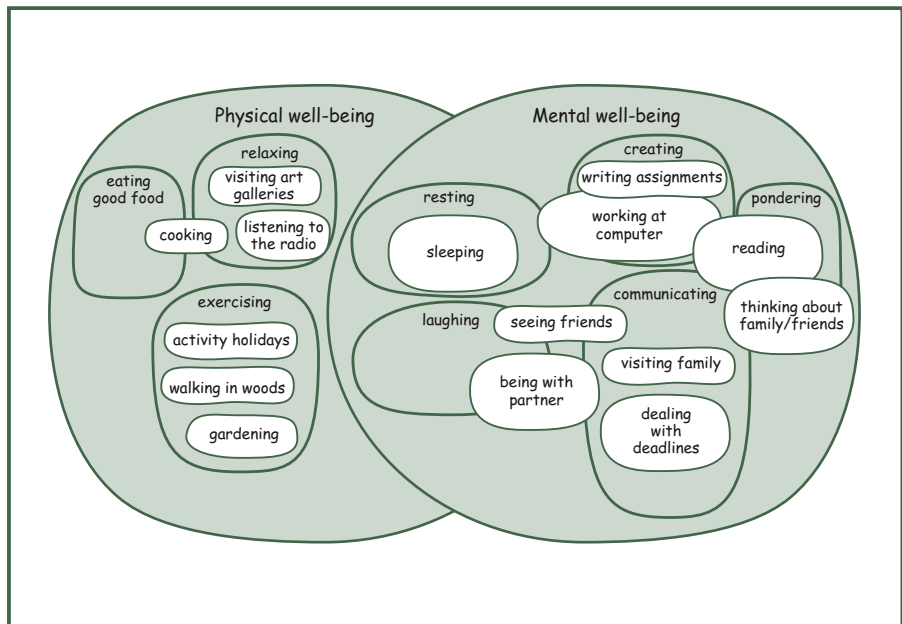


Figure 2 Our mental and physical well-being is composed of many different elements. It is helpful to be aware of how these combine to keep us healthy.

3 Studying and the OU

As a student with mental health difficulties you may have chosen to study with the OU because of the ways in which it differs from campus-based universities. The OU's flexibility for study suits students who may be unable to attend lectures or seminars if they have problems with some aspects of everyday living. For instance you may be dealing with the effects of an obsessive-compulsive disorder:

‘Getting dressed in the morning was difficult because I had a routine, and if I deviated from the routine I’d have to get dressed again.’

Students who take medication to alleviate or control mental health difficulties find that they can fit their study into times of the day when they feel at their best.

At the start of your studies you may be excited at the prospect, yet slightly apprehensive about potential obstacles to study. These might include:

- the impact of taking prescribed or non-prescribed drugs
- a problematic home or domestic situation impacting on your study time
- anxiety or lack of confidence about your ability to cope with your mental health difficulties and study
- issues of physical health or well-being.



Course materials

You will be sent the required course materials before the course start date, either through the post or electronically. They may include media such as DVDs, audio CDs or computer software packages. You will need to make sure that when you need it, you can have uninterrupted use of a computer that is connected to the internet, or access to one in a library or internet café.

Working with others

OU courses normally encourage interaction with your tutor or fellow students. This may be in an online forum where you can discuss your work, or there may be optional face-to-face and online tutorials scheduled for your course. There may be a short residential school associated with your course.

How you will learn

You will learn by:

- studying course material
- working on course activities
- writing assignments
- perhaps working with other students.

Try this exercise

Here are some questions that might help you develop an understanding of how you feel about your studies.

- What do I feel about doing this course?
- Are there study requirements which worry me?
- Do my life experiences make me feel vulnerable at this stage?
- How should I take care of my mental well-being?
- Who would I turn to for help and support?

Perhaps it might help you to write some of your thoughts down.

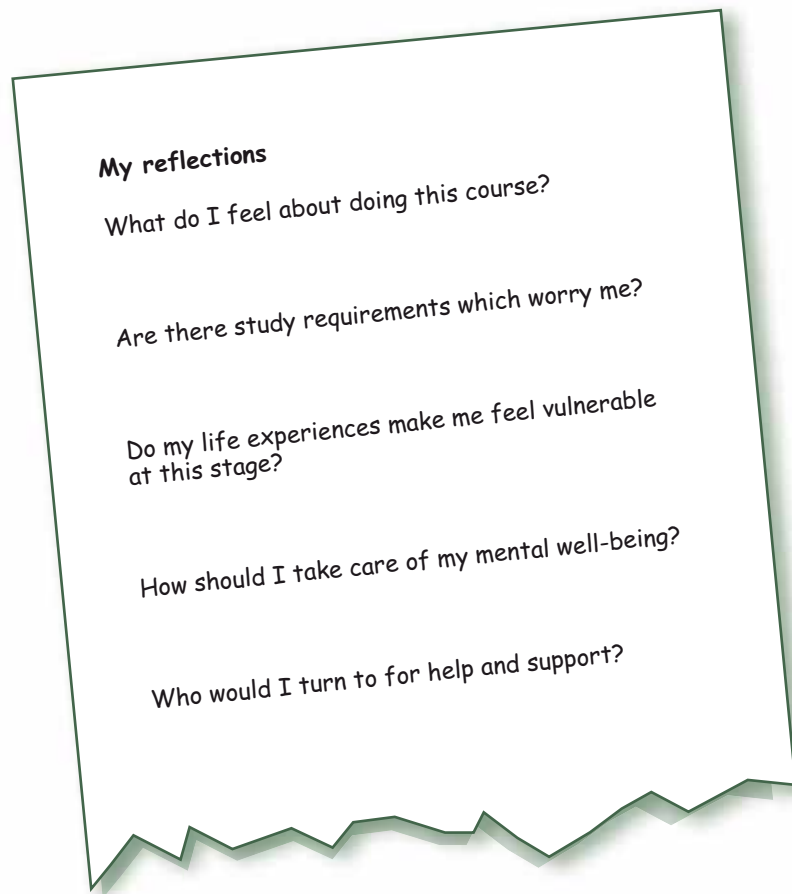


Figure 3 Reflecting on how you feel about your studies can help you prepare for the study experience

3.1 What may be helpful for you

Your answers to the above exercise are important for both your experience as a student and for your mental health.

Think carefully about what you are looking forward to, and the different kinds of support that will help you with your study. Plan time for relaxation and having fun too.

You may wish to tell us if you have a family member (or a professional mental health support worker) who we can talk to about your studies if you think you might experience an episode of severe mental ill health during your course.

3.2 How the OU can help



Tell us you have mental health difficulties and complete the online [Disability Support Form](#) (student login required) to let us know what support you need.

Contact an adviser in your student support team to discuss any of the following issues:

- A Disabled Student's Allowance – this could possibly finance additional personal support during your studies
- Alternative formats of course materials
- Course assessment requirements: flexibility with these might help you if your mental health fluctuates
- Tutorials and day schools – taking a friend could be helpful, or some additional individual course-related support may be appropriate
- Residential school needs – you can take a helper and we have experienced staff on site
- Mapping a more realistic study timetable in consultation with your tutor, depending on your health
- Revision support
- Examination arrangements – based on medical evidence, we can offer alternatives to a main exam centre if attending there would be difficult for you
- Taking a break from study

Top tips

Keep essential OU phone/email details and a copy of your course calendar to hand so that you can quickly check your course requirements and study needs.

Disclosing mental health needs

The OU encourages you to disclose your mental health needs as this enables you to identify areas of shared support and responsibilities.

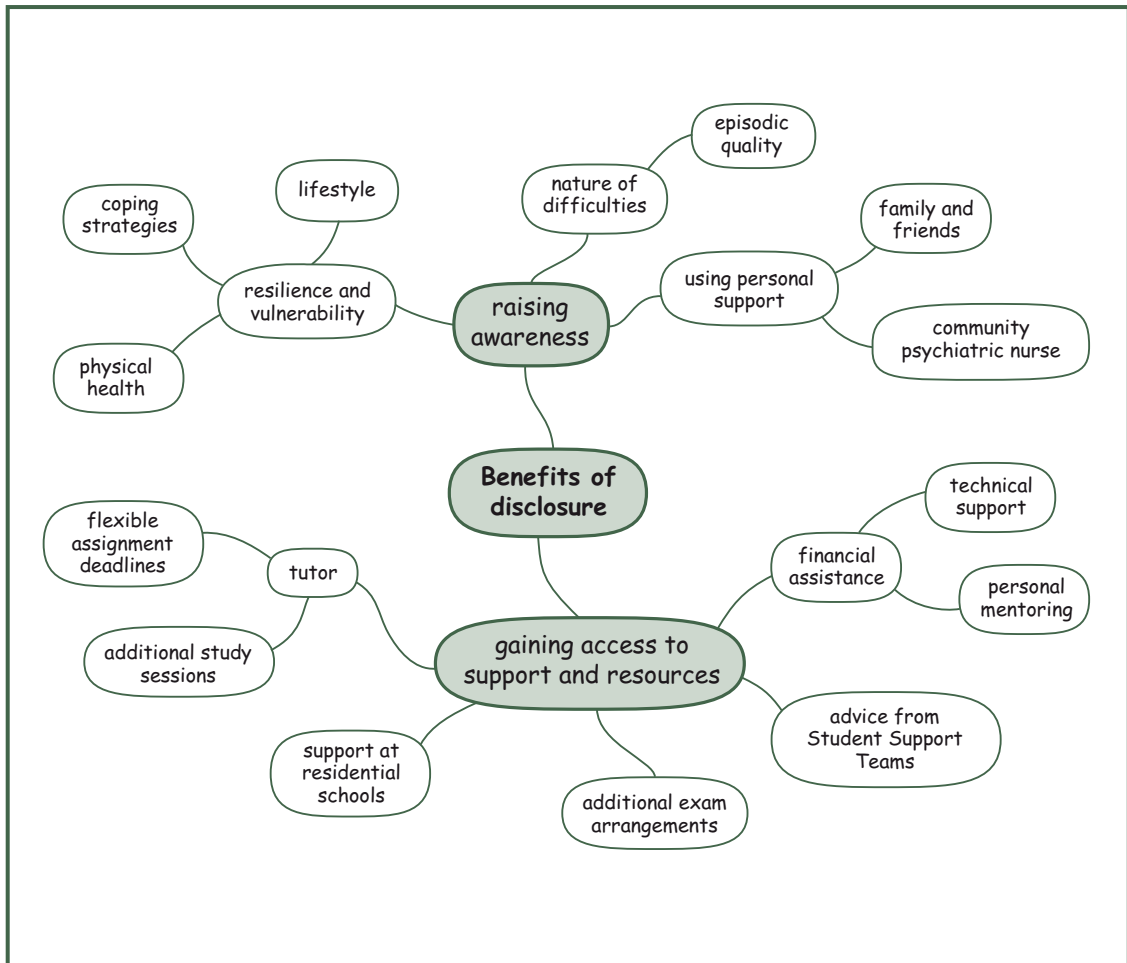


Figure 4 There are many benefits of disclosing your mental health difficulties to The Open University

Applying for a Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

Students with mental health difficulties do not always think of themselves as disabled. However, mental health problems are covered under the Equality Act 2010 and you should consider whether a DSA would help you to maintain your mental well-being during your studies.

The Disabled Students' Allowance is a government grant to help with additional study costs if you have a disability.



DSAs are not means tested and are intended to cover additional study costs associated with disability. If you are eligible the assessor will discuss your needs with you. You could decide that a personal mentor (often called 'non-medical helper') would give you the consistent encouraging support that is needed. Personal mentors help students to keep on track by talking through the sticking points, helping with motivation, listening, and helping students to prioritise. You could also benefit from technical support. Many students find that the mindmapping software helps them to organise their thoughts.

Check if you are [eligible for a DSA](#) in Help Centre.

Note that DSAs are not available in the Republic of Ireland or continental Europe; the procedures for applying in Scotland are different from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

If you are not eligible for a DSA, contact your student support team to see if it's possible to access other funds to help you to stay mentally healthy while studying. Alternatively, depending on your needs, your tutor could give you some additional course-related support.

Further information

If you want to talk to somebody about additional needs connected with your study, ask to speak to an adviser from your student support team.

You can also go to [StudentHome](#) for information about your personal study record, and other useful information. The student [Help Centre](#) also contains lots of information and resources, including study skills and what to do if you encounter difficulties.

4 Organisation and time management

Having good organisational and time-management skills is beneficial to the whole process of studying, to your everyday life, and to future career prospects. Developing good strategies helps you to look after your mental well-being and to get the most out of your study, because you stay in control.

4.1 Challenges you might face

It is essential to keep track of OU administrative papers, the main course materials, the course guide and the assignment booklet. Everything will then be to hand when you need it.

It can be easy to lose sight of what your course is actually about when faced with lots of different information. You might be a very organised person, but you might also like to reflect on what happens:

- if your mental health deteriorates at times of stress
- if you have other commitments that suddenly become very demanding
- if you have a physical illness and/or your medication fails.

4.2 What may be helpful for you

Know yourself and work out the best way to get organised with the following parts of your study.

The course – see the course guide for learning outcomes and course themes. Check the course calendar and assignment booklet for deadlines. Being clear about what you'll be learning is reassuring and alleviates anxieties.

Studying at the computer – sort out an electronic filing system

‘I learned that asking for help with IT was not a weakness. It helped me to get organised and was worth the effort.’

Get everything ready for your course in good time.

Your time and space – you may need to allow much more time at first, or at particular times, for example when you are struggling with difficult emotions or when your concentration is poorer. Work out when the best times are in the day or week for your studies, but also try experimenting with different times.

Try to find a study space that:

- is relatively quiet
- you can call your own
- has a suitable work surface
- has somewhere to store your OU materials
- you feel comfortable with.

Of course, you will be able to study much of your course in different places, and some students who need to spend time in bed because of ill health find that that works too!



Search the [Help Centre](#) for useful advice on time management and organisation.

4.3 How your OU tutor can help

Your course tutor (or study adviser) may have some general awareness of mental health difficulties. However, as you know, everyone experiences mental ill health differently. It will be particularly useful if you can explain to your tutor what obstacles you personally might face, and what works especially well for you, so you can work together on strategies to help you study effectively.

5 Reading and taking notes

Studying with the OU will involve you in a considerable amount of reading. You could be reading course texts on paper and on your computer screen. To get the most from reading for study you have to think actively about it.

You will also recognise that the kind of reading and note taking you do varies according to the purpose. There's a difference between the reading and underlining you might do when getting the gist of a section, or undertaking a course activity, and the focused reading and notes you do with an assignment question in mind.

5.1 Challenges you might face

Learning about your subject and developing your own views about it can be exciting. But OU study can sometimes feel an isolating experience. There may also be times when aspects of your social, emotional and physical well-being affect your learning.

There could be things going on in your life that are particularly troublesome and cause extreme anxiety.

- If you are severely depressed it can affect your motivation to study.
- Interference from obsessive thoughts can distort the information you are trying to take in.
- Compulsive behaviours can be problematic:
 - ‘It takes me longer to read a text book because I have to count the lines in a paragraph.’
- There may be unwanted effects from medication you take, bringing excessive fatigue, for example.

Your concentration and memory could be adversely affected by any of the above. At times you may feel that ‘nothing is going in’ no matter how often you re-read a section. The process of taking notes, however, helps you to understand and remember what you are reading.



Try to develop active learning strategies.

5.2 What may be helpful for you

Vary your approach to reading and taking notes according to your needs.

- Read actively – try highlighting or underlining, compile a glossary of key concepts, try not to worry about needing to re-read sections
- Remind yourself why you are taking notes and tailor them accordingly – use abbreviations, annotate your course book, use index cards or system maps
- When your motivation is at a low ebb set yourself short-term goals – commit to a certain amount of reading then have a break for relaxation, listening to music or getting fresh air
- Develop a positive attitude – you’ve chosen to study to open up new opportunities for yourself
- Visit an Open University Students Association (OUSA) online conference – some are devoted to specific mental health areas, and students share their tips for when studying gets tough
- Talk things over with your DSA-funded personal mentor (if you have one) – you can be helped to get back on track, or you may need to take a complete break from study for a few days
- See our website for suggestions for enlisting the help of [friends and family](#)

Search the [Help Centre](#) for reading and note-taking strategies, and for stress-busting techniques which will help at any stage of your OU study.

How your OU tutor can help

If you feel stuck with a particular section of your course, asking your tutor or study adviser to confirm that you are on the right lines can be encouraging. If you are behind with your reading because you are having an episode of mental ill health, ask your tutor about the essential reading to help you prepare for your next assignment. You can often come back later to bits of the course that you have missed. Your tutor may also be able to support you individually with an additional support session, by telephone or email.

Look again at Chapter 3 to see what help your student support team can offer.

6 Working with others

There will be opportunities for you to interact with fellow students during your course. Although many students find such forums helpful and supportive, they are usually not compulsory.

6.1 Tutorials, day schools and e-learning

Working with others face to face

You may have some tutorials, so give some thought to whether you might have specific requirements for attending. If it's a face-to-face tutorial you might like to be accompanied by a friend.

‘I arranged to sit near the door at tutorials and to leave the room if I feel over-anxious.’

Working with others online

Some tutorials are conducted on the computer using ‘online rooms’. These online tutorials are convenient because you don't have to travel to a venue. You may also find online tutorials an easier medium than face-to-face.

Many courses have online forums. Some are designed for sharing information and for social networking purposes. Others are led by a course tutor and include teaching and learning activities. You might find that communicating online is a useful way of keeping in touch.

6.2 Residential school

Working with others at residential school

Some courses have a compulsory residential element to meet certain award requirements. If you plan to attend residential school, make sure you have disclosed your mental health difficulties to the OU.



You can request the support services you need through the [Request support for Residential School](#) webpage. Your student login will be required to access this page.

If it is too difficult for you to attend residential school in person, an online alternative learning experience (ALE) may be the answer.

It's essential to discuss this possibility with your student support team as early in your course as possible.

7 Writing assignments

Writing your course assignments is an essential part of the study process. You bring together the different learning skills that you've begun to acquire.

Writing an assignment is intended to be challenging, but it can also be a stimulating and exciting experience. If you feel lost or slightly overwhelmed at the thought of your first OU assignment you will not be alone. Writing assignments involves skills that improve with practice.

7.1 Challenges you might face

You may not feel confident about your ability to produce work that meets the required standard. Low self-esteem can accompany mental health difficulties and can be particularly problematic when an assignment is due. You may have had previous negative learning experiences, or interrupted education associated with mental or physical ill health. These issues can play a part in making students lose faith in their abilities.



Your mental health difficulties could produce fears about not understanding what the assignment is asking of you. Certain health conditions lead to a tendency to interpret statements or questions extremely literally, and it may be difficult to get used to academic

conventions in the phrasing of questions, or the problems which have been set in assignments.

If you are feeling severely depressed, extremely anxious or are perhaps experiencing visual or auditory hallucinations, you are likely to find it difficult to keep focused on the task at hand.

You may recognise in yourself a tendency towards perfectionism. This can prevent you putting pen to paper or letting go of your assignment. A consequence can be that anxiety is created through missing deadlines, and you can fall behind with your study schedule.

It is quite common for students with mental health difficulties to have physical health problems too. You may be in a good deal of pain or feeling exhausted and this can affect your ability to concentrate on writing your assignment.

7.2 What may be helpful for you

Remember that it is never essential to pass a course with a distinction.

Reflect on your reasons for choosing to study. Be clear about whether you are studying purely for enjoyment, whether your aim is to pass your course comfortably with some career goal in mind, or whether you want to achieve a grade which gives you a sense of personal accomplishment.

Your approach to your course and its assignments is likely to be affected by a number of things, including the content and level of the course, the time you have available and your current mental health. You may be studying with the OU partly for rehabilitative reasons. Having an effective strategy and knowing your course's assessment requirements will help to keep you focused so that you can achieve your goals.

Writing your assignment could be a short-term goal. You will find it easier to keep motivated if you break down the tasks. Create an action plan to help you through the stages in planning and writing your assignment so that you meet the deadline.



Search for assignments in the [Help Centre](#) for more action plans.

Here are some more ideas.

- Build in incentives and rewards

‘I find I can concentrate fully for about forty minutes then I have a short break and do something practical or relaxing before getting back to the essay.’

- If you are feeling stuck, having a chat with your personal mentor (if you have one) can help to move you on.

‘My mentor is lovely. She’s a real confidence booster when I need it most: she’s encouraging and helps me with my planning.’

- Using mind maps or other visual techniques can be useful, especially in the initial planning stages of an assignment. Inspirations computer software is used by many students – it can be purchased independently or as part of a DSA recommendation.
- Many students find positive self-talking really valuable. If you feel under stress, or if you have a tendency towards perfectionism and these experiences are preventing you making progress with your assignment, try searching for managing stress in the [Help Centre](#) to find some useful techniques.



Contact your student support team to discuss your options if your mental well-being is causing you particular concern.

The nature of your course determines the type of assignment you will face – for example, essays, multiple choice questions, reports, oral assignments or projects. Some courses have an end-of-course assignment (ECA) or project instead of an examination.

There are detailed suggestions to help with assignments (from interpreting the question and structuring your work according to course requirements, through to referencing conventions) in the [Help Centre](#).



Top tip

Always keep a copy of your assignments (and your ECA, if applicable)

7.3 How your tutor can help

Your course tutor (or study adviser) will provide you with constructive feedback on the work you submit to help you develop the required course skills, and will encourage you to use the advice in the next assignment. If you're uncertain about the comments, ask your tutor for clarification.

8 Revision and examinations

Examinations (or ECAs) assess your understanding of the key concepts and learning outcomes in your course. They allow you to show what you've learnt. Exams are not designed to trick you, but knowing what is required of you is essential to success.

For many students, the *process* of revising can be an enjoyable period of consolidation. However its association with the impending exam or ECA can mean that the whole revision and exams period is stressful.

As an OU student you need to pass both the continuous assessment component (assignments) and the examinable component to achieve an overall pass on a particular course. Even if you have not managed to submit all your assignments, you could still pass that element. Your course may enable you to benefit from the OU's substitution rule.

It is often useful to take your exam even if you are not feeling too confident as there can be re-sit possibilities, depending on your course and your exam result.

You can find an explanation of the substitution rule in your course assessment handbook.

Further information

If you need alternative exam arrangements because of your mental health difficulties, make enquiries as early in your course as possible. Contact your student support team.

Possible arrangements include:

- an alternative centre, or a home-based exam
- rest breaks during your exam
- extra time in the exam.

You will need to supply:

- relevant medical evidence
- a completed [request form for exam arrangements](#) (student login required).

8.1 Challenges you might face

Students with mental health difficulties can find the pressure of revising and taking examinations particularly stressful. Additional anxiety can come from any of the following.

- You may have previous negative exam experiences.
- Many mental health conditions can increase students' vulnerability and low self-esteem.
- You may have problems with everyday living which affect your progress during your course.
- An acute episode of mental ill health may prevent you from starting your revision.
- You may have worries about your concentration and memory.

Problems with concentration and memory are common amongst students with mental health difficulties.

8.2 What may be helpful for you

The most important thing is to take control of your revision as this will help you to stay positive and to get the most out of it. You will then approach the exam from a strong position.

A couple of points about you:

- Remind yourself again of your motives for studying – be realistic about what you can achieve in the time available, and keep the exam or ECA in perspective
- Look after yourself. Remember the connections between physical and mental health – eat well, get enough sleep, take exercise, plan relaxation time and practise your favourite stress-reducing activities

If you have serious concerns about any aspect of your health leading up to your exam or ECA, contact your student support team.

Revision and exam techniques

Try out several revision and exam techniques to see which suit you. Here are a few suggestions for where to start looking.

- See the section in your course devoted to exam (or ECA) preparation
- Buy a good study and revision guide, such as *The Good Study Guide*, by Andy Northedge



- Go to the [Help Centre](#) for **revision, exams** or **managing stress**
- Re-read earlier sections of this booklet for helpful strategies, including talking through your plans with your personal mentor if you have one



I learnt that regular reviewing of what I had been revising helped me to remember more, and this gave me confidence.

8.3 How your OU tutor can help

Your tutor (or study adviser) will be able to give you advice about what to prioritise in your revision, how to use the specimen exam paper to advantage, and the specific exam or ECA requirements for your course. Your tutor might also offer some revision tutorials, online or email revision notes.

9 What if I become too ill to study?

The OU will do its best to help you to study and to stay mentally healthy. But how do you know when you are becoming too ill to study, and what's the best thing to do?

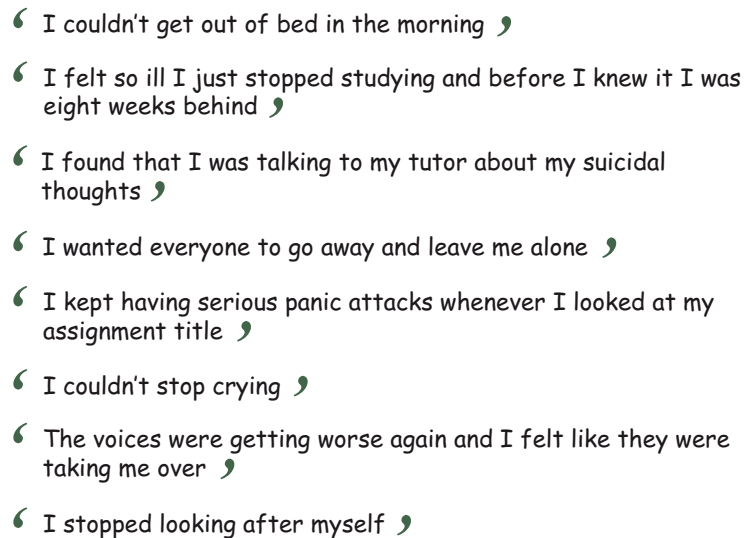
- 
- ‘ I couldn't get out of bed in the morning ’
 - ‘ I felt so ill I just stopped studying and before I knew it I was eight weeks behind ’
 - ‘ I found that I was talking to my tutor about my suicidal thoughts ’
 - ‘ I wanted everyone to go away and leave me alone ’
 - ‘ I kept having serious panic attacks whenever I looked at my assignment title ’
 - ‘ I couldn't stop crying ’
 - ‘ The voices were getting worse again and I felt like they were taking me over ’
 - ‘ I stopped looking after myself ’

Figure 5 What other students have said about being aware of their declining mental health

9.1 What may be helpful for you

You can phone your student support team or your personal mentor. They will be happy to listen and help you decide if a break from study is the best thing for you at the time.

If you sound seriously distressed, they will recommend that you speak to your GP, your mental health professional if you have contact with mental health services, or The Samaritans.

Here are some useful websites.

- [Mental Health Foundation; scotland@mhf.org.uk](#);
- [MIND](#)
- [Rethink](#)
- [Samaritans](#)
- [Mindfulness for students](#)

10 In conclusion

Studying can have a beneficial effect on your mental health.

Many students with mental health difficulties who study with The Open University have achieved success and found their experience rewarding.

If you do experience a problem while you study, talking it through can be the beginnings of its solution, and within the OU you will always find someone to listen. We have highlighted the nature of OU help for students with mental health difficulties at several points in this booklet.

- Your course tutor wants to help you with the academic elements of your studies.
- Student support teams with specialist disability teams will talk to you about anything from how to apply for a DSA and getting personal mentoring to meeting an assignment deadline, and including setting up alternative exam arrangements.
- Online and paper-based study support materials that help you develop your skills and keep you motivated.

We hope that you've found some helpful suggestions in this booklet so you can get support from the OU to help you to achieve the success you want.

