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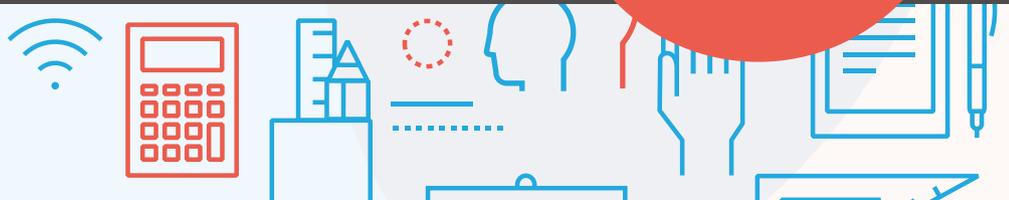


# Preparing for University

A guide for those recovering from an eating disorder

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## About this guide

**Starting university is exciting, with lots of opportunities and new experiences. But change brings challenges and there are common difficulties faced by people recovering from an eating disorder.**

Whether you are starting university for the first time, or returning after taking some time out, this guide aims to give you tips about how to cope. Then again, being at university is not all about worries and problems, there are so many things to look forward to, so we have focused on all the positives too.

This guide was developed jointly by clinicians and young adults who have gone through university whilst living with or recovering from an eating disorder. They have been where you are now and were keen to pass on their advice.



Throughout this guide, you will see quotes and nuggets of advice from these young people – exactly as they said it.

“

“Looking back, I think I would’ve really benefited from knowing in advance that starting university is not all sunshine and daisies, and that so many of my peers were actually struggling too - something I only found out later, when I plucked up the courage to ask people how they really felt about starting uni”.

Ellie

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“I would encourage anyone with current or past experience of eating problems to think more than I did about the challenges of university life and not be as ashamed as I felt for many years to seek help.”

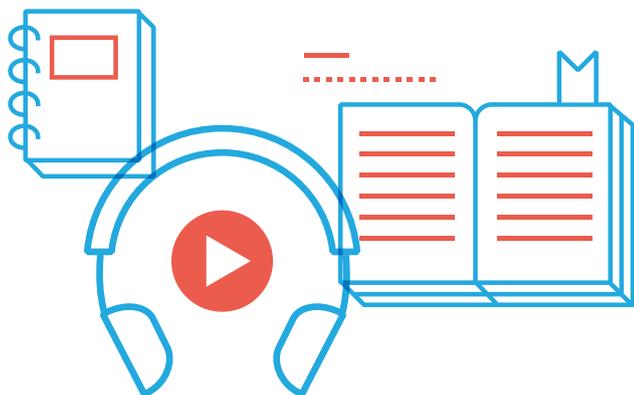
James

“

“You deserve to do what you want and get the most out of life, don’t let your mental health define who you are or hold you back.”

You got this!

Sophia



We would like to thank all our patients who have brought this guide alive with their personal experiences and inspiration.

# Am I ready?

**It is important to consider whether now is a good time in your recovery for you to start university. Starting at the right time gives you the best chance of enjoying the experience and successfully navigating any challenges that come up.**

**When deciding if you are ready, you may want to ask yourself:**

- Can you take responsibility for feeding yourself? If you see living away from family as an opportunity to increase eating disorder behaviours, it may be hard for you to look after yourself when at university.
  - What you are most excited about? What are you looking forward to? Can you see yourself managing your eating disorder so you are able to do these things?
  - What do the people close to you think? Starting university needs to be your decision. However, you don't have to make that decision on your own. It can be really helpful to have honest conversations with family, friends and health professionals about the pros and cons of university for you at this point in time.
  - Do I meet university 'fit to study' guidelines? You can find these at [www.heops.org.uk](http://www.heops.org.uk)
- Remember that you don't have to be 100% sure of yourself to start – in fact, it is normal to feel a bit unsure!
- At the same time, if you think your health will suffer, taking time out to pursue recovery could help you to have a more enjoyable university experience when you do begin.

“

**“I know it's easy to say, but try not to worry about going to university, things always seem much scarier and more difficult before you get to go through it.”**

**Katrin**

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# Getting ready

**Before starting university you need to think about your living situation. Consider your pros and cons for the options below.**

**Should I choose a university close to home or further afield?**

## **Near home**

### **Molly's Pros**

- My family are nearby if I need some support
- I would spend less money on travel

### **Molly's Cons**

- My mum might want to see me all the time!
- It's not my first-choice course

## **Far away**

### **Molly's Pros**

- I love the look of the course
- I'll have to throw myself into meeting new people

### **Molly's Cons**

- I might get homesick
- I'll miss all my school friends



**“Register with your GP when you move and also check out which (if any) eating disorder services are available at your university.”**

**Lydia**

**F:RE:ED**

## Should I go for self-catering accommodation or catered halls?

### Self-catered

#### Tom's Pros

- More freedom!
- I want to get better at cooking

### Catered

#### Tom's Pros

- Everyone will eat together
- I don't need to think about what to cook

#### Tom's Cons

- I'll have to budget for food
- The kitchen could be a mess!

#### Tom's Cons

- I might not like the meal options

## What should I bring to University?

It can be tempting to bring everything you own, but it's likely that your new bedroom won't be very big.

You might like to check out The Student Room's really comprehensive list of what to pack [www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk)

#### Also remember:

- Health Documents (such as letters from your treatment team)
- Medications - check that you have a prescription that will cover you until you've had a chance to register with a doctor at university.



# Freshers week survival guide

## Here are a few tips to help you through week one:

- **Leave your door open when you unpack** – someone is much more likely to pop in and say hello!
- **Know your limits** – your eating disorder may make drinking lots of alcohol risky, especially if you are underweight or struggle with binge eating.

Try to find a balance - you don't need to do it all, but avoid isolating yourself.



**“When I first started university I loved that everyone was in the same boat - we were all new together!”**

**Lydia**



**“Although alcohol can be challenging for some, try a few nights out or perhaps just light social drinking - it's a great way to meet people and you might surprise yourself at how much fun you have :)”**

**Abi**

- **Do it your way** - this is your experience of university and no-one else's. It is often a time that people find out lots about who they are and who they want to be. Everyone is different, so try not to feel pressured to 'do' university a certain way, be open to what your path might be.
- **Focus on your own eating** - because of all the partying, people's eating habits might be erratic, such as skipping meals, eating late at night or going for big fry-ups in the middle of the day! Remind yourself what you need to do to stay well – join in when you can, but maintaining some structure to your eating is going to help you keep on track with your recovery.
- **Research your university societies** - It's not all about drinking! What are your passions and interests? Joining a society is a great way to meet people and an opportunity to do more of what you love.



**“The best thing about university was having the opportunity to break away from who I thought I was, and start exploring who I could be.”**

**Erin**



**“I would definitely recommend going to fresher's fair. There are countless different societies - and having these can be a valuable distraction and support network during anxious times. If you don't drink or struggle with alcohol there are lots of different societies without that focus so look into joining one of those!”**

**Abi**



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# Telling people about your eating disorder

## Telling your university

- There are lots of ways your university can support you.
- You can reach out to your personal tutor, student counselling service or Disability Advisory Service.
- We would really encourage you to let the university know as early as possible. It is best to have these in place as a precaution, rather than waiting until when you really need them.



**“If you are struggling in any shape or form, even if you feel like it’s embarrassing or awkward to flag up, reach out to someone sooner rather than late.”**

**Erin**

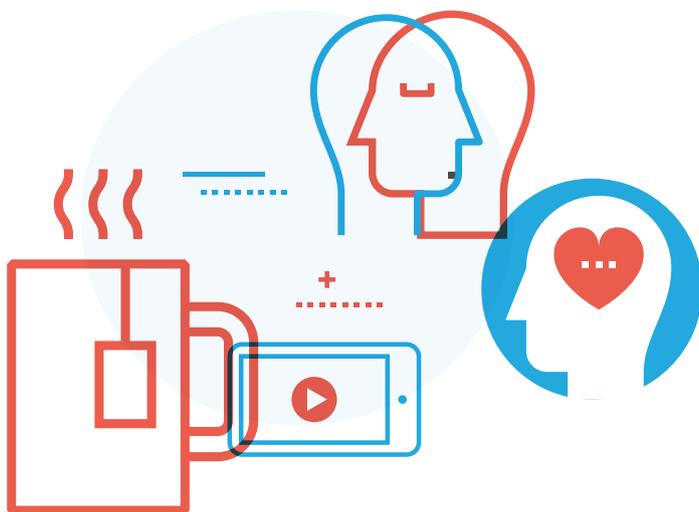


**“They can help you to get extended deadlines, mental health advisors and extra support. Look into getting some kind of ‘Disabled Student Allowance’ (DSA) in place (helps with costs) and don’t be afraid to email or talk to your tutors about the problems you are facing regarding work and your ED. They understand.”**

**Sophia**

## Telling your friends

- Telling friends about your eating disorder can be a huge relief, especially if you've been putting a lot of effort into hiding it.
- Talk to someone you can trust, and with whom you can speak openly and comfortably.
- It might take you a little while to figure out who you feel able to trust, no need to rush it.
- It's up to you what information you share with friends. It can be helpful to plan what you want to say beforehand and think about how you'd like them to support you, as friends can feel unsure about what they can do to help.



**“If you seem to struggle more than those around you, that is no sign of weakness, and they may well be struggling inside too. If you need to do different things to look after yourself and ask for study and personal support to make things work for you, then do, without feeling ashamed.”**

**“We don’t chose to face barriers to participating in our learning or lives at university, but you can choose to do everything you can to make it easier.”**

**James**

# Eating at university

## Make an eating plan for university

Following a plan helps you to meet your nutritional needs and lets you be aware of what you are eating without feeling stressed about it.

It is important that your plan is flexible, so you can adjust it to fit in with activities and to join in with eating with other people.

It might be helpful to check out your plan with someone you trust before you go.



**“One real difficulty that I experienced was being the sole person responsible for managing my diet, as before I had always shared meals with family and constantly had their input and guidance, but this was the first time I was left to figure out meals and portioning alone.”**

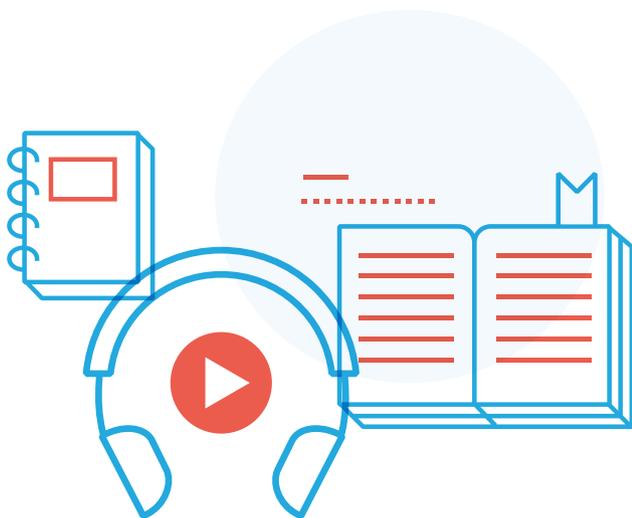
**Erin**



**“Try and prevent yourself from comparing your food intake or body image to the people who surround you; be conscious of doing what is healthiest for you, even if that means not always following the crowd.”**

**Erin**

- **Get into a good eating routine from day one.** It might be tempting to think that you will sort out other important things first and come back to thinking about your eating later but people often find this difficult to do in practice. It may be helpful to take supplies of food for the early days. If you are in catered accommodation be careful not to avoid the dining room – go from day one!
- **Practice cooking** - Make a list of 6-10 main courses and practice making these for yourself at home before you go. These don't need to be complicated, just balanced meals that you enjoy. Once you have settled in, you can experiment and add to your list of meals so that you have more variety.



**“Learn to cook a few meals before you start - it can be very helpful to have some familiarity!”**

**Abi**

**If binge eating is a worry for you there are steps that you can take to make this less of a problem:**

- Do not to miss any meals or snacks so that you are hungry.
- Be cautious about ‘bulk’ buying food or storing food in your room.
- Drinking alcohol can be a powerful trigger for binge eating, so when you do drink, make sure you have eaten well beforehand and perhaps plan what you will eat the next day.

## Living with other people

Living in shared accommodation can be a really fun part of university life, but there are some common pitfalls to communal living, try these tips:

- Whether you tend to be messy or super tidy, other people will have different standards to you when it comes to cleaning. Remember it is not your responsibility to do other people's share.



**“I loved being in halls and being more independent.”**

**Lydia**



**“What you value isn't necessarily the same as other people. People might not care if the surfaces aren't clean or the floor isn't swept.”**

**Issy**

- Do you find it difficult to cook or eat with others? The best way to overcome such anxieties, is to face your fears and experiment with eating or cooking with others – what usually happens is that when given lots of practice and time the anxiety reduces.
- It is not uncommon for people to eat others' food, or maybe you are worried you might lose control and take your flatmate's supplies. Perhaps there are some foods your flatmates could buy together using a kitty or have an agreement that any food eaten will be replaced.
- Are you someone who might shy away in your room? Challenge yourself to spend time in communal areas.
- Whether you are living in a party house or with a quieter crowd, you might want to do things differently from your flatmates – that's fine, this is your experience of university. Know your boundaries and learn to say no or yes a bit more!



**“Overall I would say try to trust yourself and assert yourself, you know you better than anyone else!”**

**Issy**



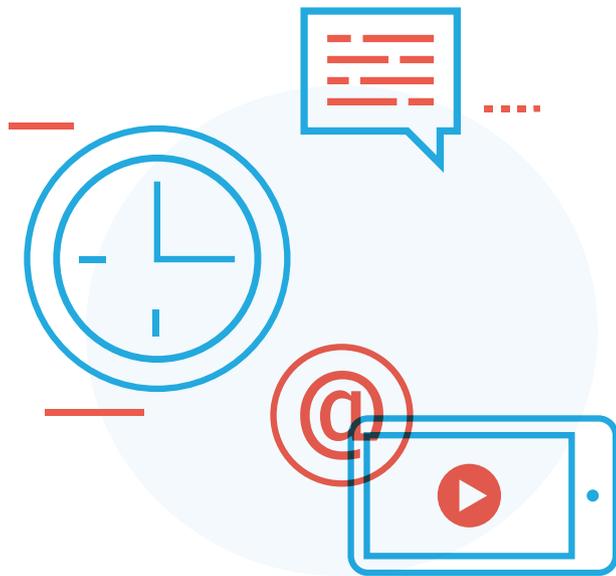
**“Ask to move flats/accommodation if you don't like where/ who you've been put with because uni are more than happy to help and there's no point being stuck somewhere you hate for a year!”**

**Lydia**

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# Managing exercise

University offers many opportunities to be active, whether playing team sports, joining a club, trying new activities or simply from a busy social life. Keeping active is healthy, but it can go too far.



- **Plan ahead** - Be honest with yourself before you go to university, are you someone who is likely to have difficulties with excessive or compulsive exercise? Try to decide some appropriate limits before you go, perhaps discuss these with a professional or loved one.
- **Look out for warning signs** - are you exercising even when injured or sick? Are friends voicing concerns? Do you get anxious if you can't exercise or have to follow a set route when walking? Are you cutting out social events or even lectures to exercise?

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- Find a balance – avoid exercise taking over your life by exploring other interests and making time for them. You could do less intensive exercise (such as pilates or yoga) or try a team based sport rather than exercising by yourself.
- Be mindful of your health - if you are underweight or not eating regularly, hold in mind that you may not have as much energy as your friends – an active day on campus or working followed by a night out clubbing may be too much.
- If you want to play competitive level sport, it is advisable to let your coach know about your eating disorder so that they can support you.



**“There is so much on offer more widely to tend to your wellbeing, from exercise classes to mindfulness meditation, with the most important thing being to do what works for you, irrespective of feeling the need to conform to traditions and timetables or any particular student lifestyle.”**

**James**



## Body image

**Try to focus on who you are as a person, not your appearance.**

**University offers opportunities to try many new things and meet new people. What are you interested in? What would you like to be involved in?**

- Remember that other people, whether or not they have an eating disorder, will have some degree of worry about their appearance, it is normal.
- It can be very common for people to talk about 'feeling fat' or wanting to lose weight. Think about how you can best manage 'body talk' – do you feel able to say that you find it unhelpful? Can you try and change the subject or remove yourself from the conversation?



**“University was the opportunity to engage in more of the things I loved...Take every opportunity.**

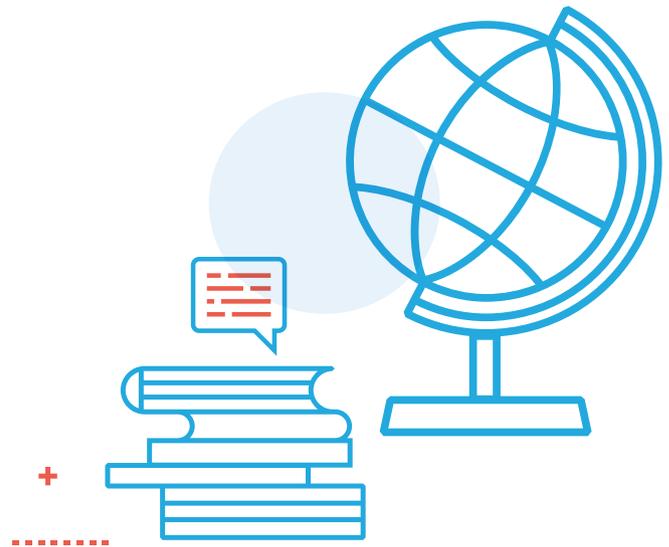
**I know people say this all the time and I was told this time and time again and I wish I'd listened.”**

**Anna**

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“At university there may be a lot of focus on body image – through elements such as social media, or the ritual of getting ready for club nights with friends, or detrimental statements others make about their own self-image – and so it is key to be aware of how your self-perception and self-esteem is being influenced in those moments.”

Erin



- Though hard, try not to compare yourself to others, generally people feel worse, not better after doing this.
- Think carefully about social media – it can be a great way to keep in touch, follow interests and be inspired!  
However, remember that many of the images you see will be filtered and not real-life – people only post their best pictures on social media.  
Have a look at our social media guide at [www.freedfromed.co.uk](http://www.freedfromed.co.uk) to find out more.

# Budgeting your money

**The key thing with budgeting is to know how much money you have to spend, and then how much money you need to allocate to different expenses.**

**You want these to balance! There are lots of websites and apps designed to help students manage money. You could try 'Goodbudget', 'Money Lover', and 'Money Dashboard', all are free.**

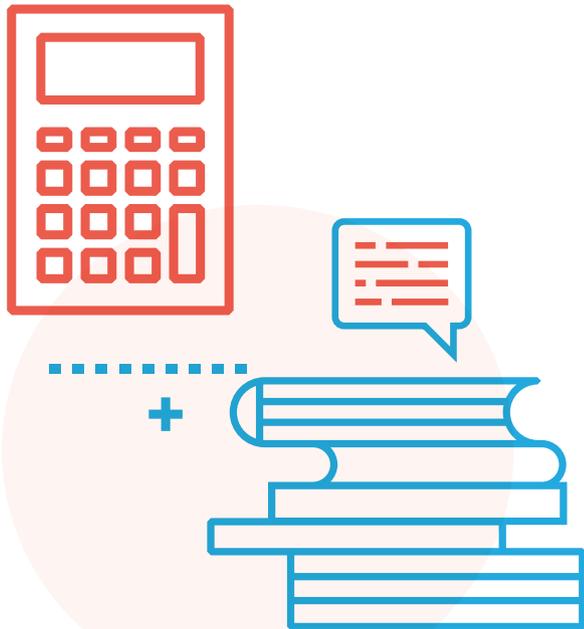
**When planning your budget, you may want to think about:**

- Course materials (check out second hand options and the library too).
- Printing and photocopying costs.
- Transport (locally and for visits home).
- Utility bills, internet and insurance.
- Entertainment / extracurricular activities – factor alcohol in here too.
- Clothes.
- Toiletries / cleaning products.
- Food – at the supermarket and eating out.

Budgeting money for food can be hard when you have an eating disorder – some people find it hard to spend money on food, whereas others can spend a lot of money on food (especially if you have difficulties with binge eating or eating certain types of food).

Planning out your meals and snacks in advance may help. Surveys suggest that most university students spend between £20 and £30 per week on food at the supermarket, plus up to £15 per week on eating out.

If you find you spend much more or much less than this, it may be worth considering how your eating disorder is affecting your spending and nutrition.



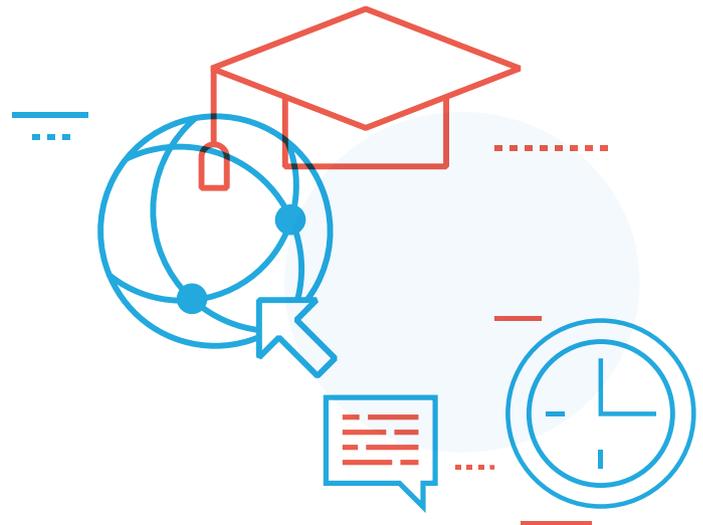
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**“Write a list before food shopping - the amount of choice can be daunting and it can help to budget!”**

**Abi**

Some students with eating disorders struggle with shoplifting. This can be distressing and often people keep their shoplifting a secret. However, we would urge you to seek support if this is something you experience.

You aren't alone and you can work on this in treatment if you have a treatment team in place.



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## Finding time to work, play and recover

### Are you a perfectionist?

**Perfectionism is exhausting! Look out for warning signs, like setting unrealistic goals, difficulty sharing tasks, taking on too much, fear of failure or worries about being judged.**

#### Try:

- Setting realistic targets which are achievable and motivating – you might need some support for this from your tutor or peers
- Be kind to yourself if you make mistakes, we all do! Beating yourself up won't help.



**“Prioritise! If you feel pressured by a heavy workload, do what is most essential and focus on the assignments you find interesting.”**

**Ellie**



**“My biggest challenge at university was juggling work, play, and recovery... part of my recovery involved learning to work less and allow myself to relax.”**

**Ellie**

## Managing lack of structure

You may have much more 'free time' at university and no longer be in an environment with clear routines around eating and sleeping.

- Try planning your day to create some structure
- Be flexible – don't miss out on a great opportunity, just because you had planned to do something else.
- Allow time for relaxation and fun
- Don't panic if an arrangement with friends falls through. Always have a plan B.



**“It was a privilege to be surrounded by engaging professors and tutors who wanted to share their knowledge with you... My biggest challenge was to lower my expectations of myself in order to cope and appreciate my studies.”**

**Erica**



**“Possibly the most important piece of advice I could share, is give yourself permission to have fun! University is a time for intellectual growth, but it's also about finding yourself and enjoying being independent. Don't spend your whole time in the library - try new things, embrace unfamiliar experiences, and seek out what makes you happy. You never know what you might learn about yourself in the process.”**

**Ellie**



**“I was already quite independent before but living without routine was the biggest challenge.**

**Routines can be great, to-do lists and agendas are helpful but they can restrict and control your life too much and when there is so much happiness and opportunity around you, you have to let it go a bit.”**

**Anna**

## Building social networks

**An obvious place to meet new people is in your student halls. But if you don't feel like you get on with the people you live with, there are lots of other places and opportunities to meet people.**

- Freshers events and university societies are a great place to meet new people, everyone will be in the same boat!
- People often make friends with people from their course – you know you have a least one thing in common! It can be hard to start conversations in big lecture halls, but this can be a bit easier in smaller groups, such as seminars or lab sessions.
- If you decide to get a part-time job, you might make friends at your work
- Most university halls and courses have Facebook pages or chats, so social media can be another place to link up with new people.

“

**“There are hundreds of people going to university each year, if there's even a chance that in the three or four years you'll make one really good friend who you can completely be yourself around and who love you for you, isn't it worth it?”**

**Karin**

**Does the idea of starting conversation with someone new make you feel anxious?**

**Try some of these 'icebreaker' tips:**

- Leave your door open
- Offer someone a cup of tea
- Ask how they are finding university so far
- Suggest a trip to town or exploring the campus

### **Keeping in touch**

Making new friends doesn't mean that you have to lose contact with people already in your life. It can be helpful to have regular contact throughout term-time and remember you will probably be home every Christmas, Easter and summer holidays – so lots of opportunities to catch up with your family and old friends.

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**“Meeting new people with similar enjoyments to me has been great. Whether that's through societies, the course or evenings out there's lots of opportunities to get to know people and find people that resonant with me.”**

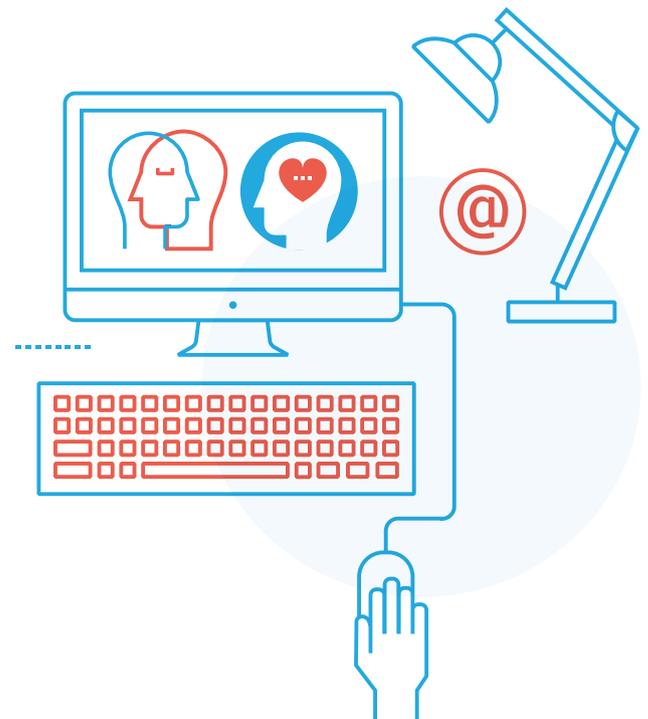
**Issy**

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**“Remember it's totally ok if you don't click with people straight away!**

**It took me over a year to find people I'd call “real” friends, and that's completely normal.”**

**Abi**



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# Keeping yourself safe

## Drugs and alcohol

Be mindful of how drinking and taking drugs affects your eating and make sure you balance your recovery with having fun!

Drugs and alcohol can be rife in student life. But it doesn't have to be a big part of your university experience, do what is right for you.

If you are worried about your drug use or concerned about a friend visit

**[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)**

or **call 0300 123 660**.

## Sexual health

You can find your local sexual health service at **[www.sxt.org.uk](http://www.sxt.org.uk)**

Another good website with lots of information is **[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)**

Try not to be embarrassed to ask for help, professionals at these clinics work with these issues all day long and it is best to get symptoms checked out as soon as they arise.

Remember that some sexually transmitted infections may not initially show any symptoms so it is a good idea to get regular sexual health checks.



**“If you don't drink or struggle with alcohol there are lots of different societies without that focus so look into joining one of those!”**

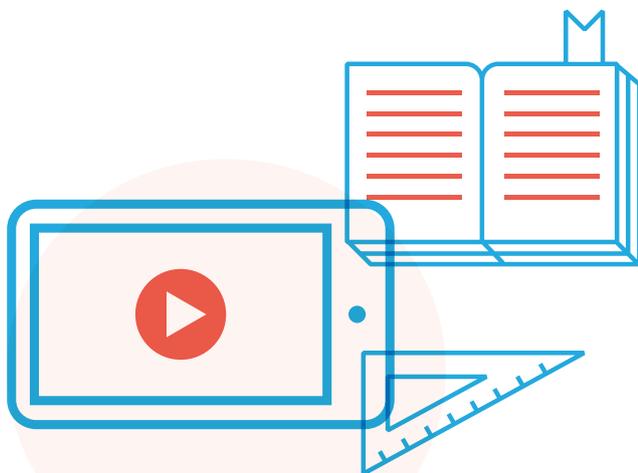
**Abi**

## Support for sexual assault

It is common for victims of sexual assault to blame themselves or minimise what has happened to them. We encourage you to seek help, even if you are unclear about what has happened.

### There are places you can go or numbers to call to get support:

- Any sexual assault can be reported to the police – call 999
- Sexual assault referral centres (SARC) offer medical, practical and emotional support. You can find your nearest through the NHS website.
- Victim support is an independent charity that aims to provide support for anyone affected by a traumatic event (**[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)** or call **08 08 16 89 111**)



## Campus safety

The usual rules to keeping safe at night apply to night-time on campuses – make sure someone knows where you are, keep an eye on your drinks so nothing is added, keep a track of your belongings, stay alert and trust your instincts.

Most universities will have security staff. It can be helpful to know where the security reception is or have the number stored in your phone.



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## How to help a friend

**Are you worried that one of your friends is having difficulties with eating?**

**Whether or not you have had difficulties yourself with eating, it can be really hard to know how to help. Here are ways you might be able to support your friend:**

- **Talk to them – easier said than done!**

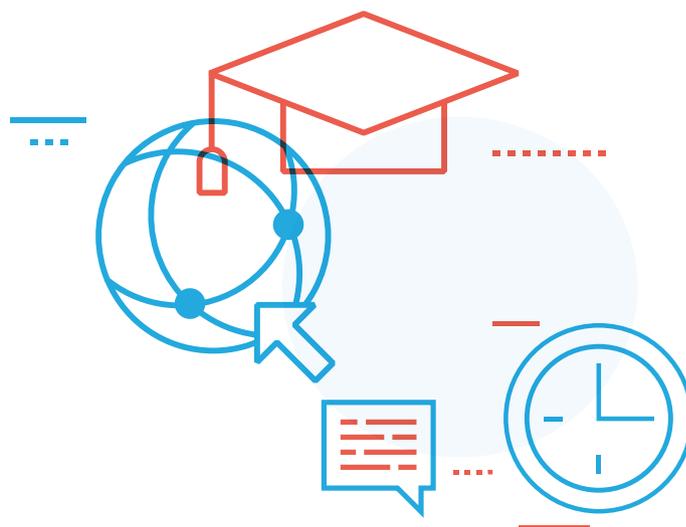
Raising the subject of eating difficulties with someone can be nerve racking (“will I make them worse?”, “what if I have it wrong?”, “will it affect our relationship?”), but in reality, talking to them could be a big step towards getting the help they need. Eating disorders are often secretive, so they may find it hard to be open with you, but you can let them know that you are there for them if they want to talk.

- **Suggest helpful websites** – learning about eating disorders can help people understand what is happening to them and there are some great websites designed to do just that.

We recommend

**[www.FREEDfromED.co.uk](http://www.FREEDfromED.co.uk)** and  
**[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)**

- Stop the diet and body talk – talk about losing weight and feeling fat is everywhere, but it can be a very sensitive topic for someone with an eating disorder.
- Encourage your friend to go to their GP – the first step to getting specialist help for an eating disorder is speaking with a GP. This can be a daunting prospect, so suggest your friend asks someone they trust to go with them.
- Look after yourself – supporting someone with an eating disorder can be exhausting, especially if you have had difficulties with eating yourself. Make sure you have someone you can talk to and know your limits - as much as you may want to help your friend, it is important to remind yourself it's not all your responsibility to make them better.



# Staying on track: Relapse prevention

**Recovery from an eating disorder is rarely a straight path.**

**It is common to have lapses in your eating. Remember lapses are different from full blown relapses - a slip up does not mean you are back at square one and there is lots you can do to get yourself back on track.**

## My relapse prevention plan

### What are my early signs?

Make a note of the signs that might indicate you are slipping back into your eating disorder:

You might consider factors like skipping meals or snacks, counting calories, increase in body image concerns or socially isolating yourself.

### What can I do to help myself?

Make a plan of things that might help you to get your eating back on track:

You might want to consider ideas like doing meal planning, stop body checking, see friends more, focusing on other interests, or setting recovery goals for yourself.

### What if I need more support?

Write down the contact details for people who could help should you need extra support. You might want to consider which friends or family you would speak to and who to contact at university. Also note down the contact details for your GP surgery and your local eating disorder service.

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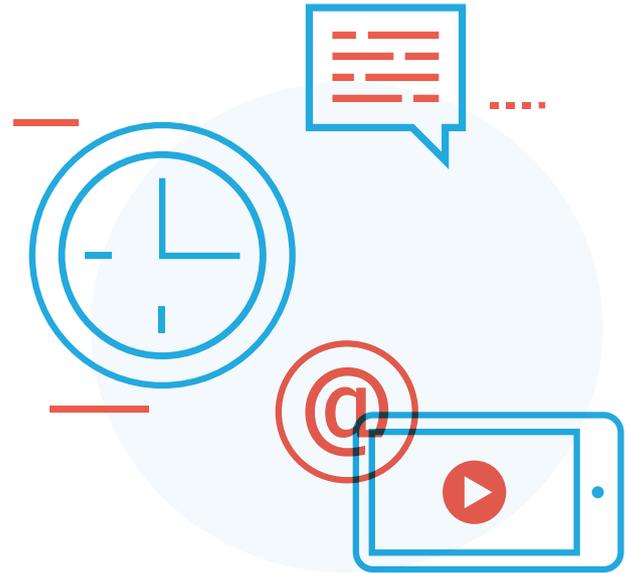
“By keeping yourself on track as much as possible, the experiences you have throughout this handful of years will become so much more rewarding for you, in both the present moment and in your future.”

Erin

“

“Select a trusted individual to hold you accountable, a person who will check in with you regularly to make sure you aren’t slipping into eating disorders habits or thought cycles, and someone who can be your sounding board whenever you are unsure or conflicted.”

Erin



## Seeking further support

**The first step to getting treatment in the NHS is seeing your GP, who can make a referral to a specialist service. This might feel like a big step, so here are our tips:**

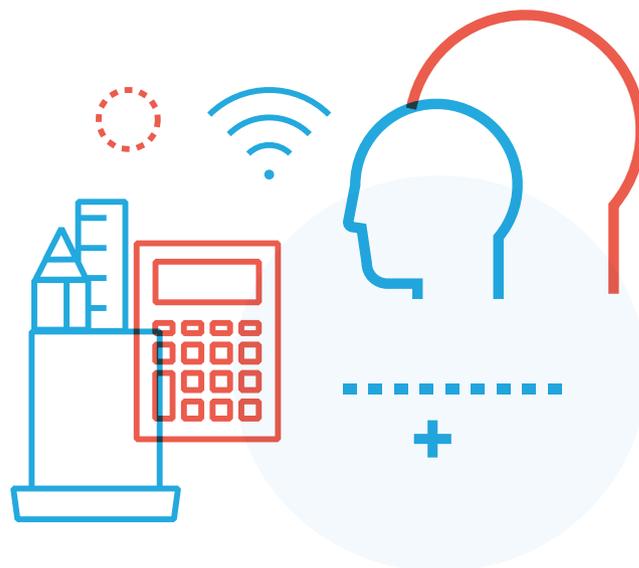
- Don't delay! We know that the earlier someone gets specialist help for their eating disorder the better their chances are of getting well and staying well.
  - Before the appointment, write down the symptoms or behaviours you are concerned about, and any questions you might want to ask your GP.
  - Ask someone you trust to come with you for support.
  - If you don't get the response from your GP you hoped for ask to see another GP.
- If you think you have a problem that needs support, you probably do, so trust yourself.



“

“Recovery wise I would advise reaching out for help as soon as you catch yourself slipping because it can be quite easy to convince yourself that you’re fine and to hide it!”

Lydia



### There are other places you can get support for your eating disorder:

- Speaking to your personal tutor, university support or counselling services might be a good first step.
- Beat ('beating eating disorders') is the UK's leading national charity supporting anyone affected by eating disorders. They have a great website with a section on 'support and services', including; helplines, message boards, online support groups and peer support groups. Check out their website at [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)
- Private treatment is also an option for those who can afford to pay.

## University: The best bits!

We asked - what was the best thing about university?

Here's what they said:

“

“Being able to choose a course I was really passionate about means that doing work is never really a chore. For me, there's always something interesting to look into that connects me to other captivating things.”

Issy

“

“It was through university that I really took the reins and my independence started to grow, and it was during this time that I realised I was much more capable than I had previously believed myself to be.”

Erin

“

“Being able to talk to people from all kinds of different backgrounds and take part in different activities and society helped me to see that there is more to life than my mental health difficulties.”

James

“

“I made some amazing friends in my first year and it was also a chance to study a subject I was truly passionate about.”

Lydia



**“University allowed me to explore my independence more and meet new people who are now my best friends.”**

**Sophia**



**“I was able to grow beyond the person I had been at home, which was full of associations with the illness, and create the kind of life I’d always wanted to lead.”**

**Ellie**



**“I’ve always known that staying at university is my number one priority - staying with my amazing friends, joining in with the things I love and working to the best of my ability on my course.”**

**Anna**



**“While you may be faced with a multitude of challenges everyday, from food and exercise, to socialising, these are ultimately gifts. Navigating your way through these, with support from family, services and friends can be invaluable to your recovery journey.”**

**Abi**



**“The best thing about going to university was realising I am stronger than I thought I was.”**

**Katrin**

**We would love to hear about your experiences of university!**

**Tweet us @FREEDfromED**









This booklet was developed by young people and staff from FREED – First Episode Rapid Early intervention for Eating Disorders. FREED services are based in NHS Trusts across the UK and aim to provide quick and effective early intervention for eating disorders.

For more information see [www.freedfromed.co.uk](http://www.freedfromed.co.uk)

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