

THE  TIMES

## Relationships

Students... a case for treatment



"It is so hard to ask for help when you are depressed, but that is the key"

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This group can be especially vulnerable to suicide and depression. Here are some of the ways that parents can help.

They are back. Within the next few weeks, students will flock home from university with a sackful of dirty washing, if not Christmas presents. But do you know if they are happy? And if not, will they tell you?

This term, three students at the University of Cambridge have taken their own lives. The university's counselling website receives 30,000 hits a month. Latest figures from Papyrus, a national charity dedicated to the prevention of young suicide, reveal that between 600 and 800 people under the age of 24 kill themselves each year. There are many more attempted suicides. Although it doesn't have specific statistics for students, when Papyrus conducted the first in-depth study of student suicide four years ago it found that students are often reluctant to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental illness, and prefer to confide in friends. As parents we can be the last to know about our children's problems. We assume that they are having a great time. University life is one long, alcohol-fuelled party, isn't it?

When I waved goodbye to my son and daughter, five and three years ago respectively, I hoped they would make friends, not be drunk too often and avoid freshers' flu. I did not consider that they might become depressed, or worse. Four weeks into the first term a female student in my son's hall killed herself.

Natalie, an 18-year-old student, managed only six weeks at Cambridge University. "I had been suffering from anxiety and mild agoraphobia before beginning my study, but started my course with confidence. Six weeks in I found I couldn't cope any more because of my agoraphobia worsening. I tried to change subject and accommodation — I was living far away from shops and friends. Both requests were refused."

The Association of University and College Counselling estimates that 20 to 25 per cent of students show raised levels of psychological distress during university years and the Royal College of Psychiatrists confirms: "Students have increased mental health symptoms compared with age-matched controls."

Students such as 19-year-old Tom, who were not accepted at their first choice university, can be particularly vulnerable. Rejected by Oxford, his parents' university, Tom felt a failure from Day 1 in his own eyes at Durham University. His mother insists that there was no parental pressure on him to go to Oxford. Tom set himself a target of obtaining a first. He rapidly fell behind with his work, as he spent too much time on essays, striving for perfection. He phoned his parents constantly, the first warning sign that he was in trouble. Depressed and prescribed antidepressants, counselling and parental support have helped him to persevere.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has also found that 60 per cent of first-year students felt homesick, but it is easy as parents to underestimate or trivialise the concerns of 18-year-olds who have never been away from home.

Anna, in her first term at Newcastle, says: "I still don't like cooking in front of my flatmates and the fact that we have different accents — I am from the North West— makes me feel different."

Living with strangers who have different lifestyles can be exhausting. Alex's experience as a 21-year-old student at Nottingham illustrates this clearly. "I worked for three years to fund my studies, so everyone is younger than me. They're loud and don't respect that not everyone appreciates screaming and shouting at 2am: I have insomnia. They have spoilt my first semester

and I am not going to speak to any of them again.” But has Alex told his parents? “No, I don’t want to worry them. It’s something I have to cope with.”

Dr Dominique Thompson, GP and director of student health services at the University of Bristol, has identified three factors that affect students’ emotional wellbeing: isolation in a new environment; social pressures, which include making new friends and peer pressure to drink, take drugs or have sex; and the demands of academic work.

Many students, says Thompson, “feel as if they have been hit by a brick” when faced with the quantity of academic work. This, along with unrealistic expectations of university life, can trigger anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health conditions, or exacerbate existing conditions.

Victoria, 18, at Sheffield University, has found the combination of homesickness and academic work hard to cope with. “After four months living in student halls I still constantly miss home. Only a week ago I abandoned the idea of transferring to a university closer to home. To make things worse the workload is piling up and I have no time to socialise. The stress, together with feeling insecure in terms of friendships, adds to the homesickness. I am counting the days till I go home for Christmas and the thought of coming back makes me highly miserable. My parents know and tell me to stick it out.”

What about students who suffered ill health before they began university? Contrary to parental optimism, pre-existing conditions such as anorexia or anxiety do not magically disappear in a new environment. According to Thompson, they usually become worse.

Dan, 19, had depression diagnosed during his first term at the University of York, linked to pre-existing chronic fatigue syndrome. He pays tribute to the way he has been helped by friends, but recognises that parents should know. “Two people living near me in halls have been crucial. One has had the experience of being friends with somebody suffering with depression and they often come knocking on my door when I don’t have the confidence to seek people out. They’ve asked about my progress and what I am dealing with. It reminds me that somebody cares, and means that I am not going days without contact.”

Dan reiterates how vital it is to get help. “This is incredibly hard when you are depressed. But that help is key, and if you don’t get it, depression can rapidly spiral. Once you know somebody is doing something about it, you get hope from that, which can drive you on.”

Parents want to help, yet how do they discern between normal teenage behaviour and something more serious? Aren’t most teenagers moody, irritable and taciturn, especially when they return after months of independence?

Thompson advises parents to “look for changes to behaviour; a marked change in weight can be linked to anorexia or comfort eating. Irritability and anger are signs of depression as much as sadness; sleep disturbances are common; secretive behaviour could mask drug-taking or binge eating; and deteriorating skin and hair can be a sign of a decline in overall health.”

Parents should take a tactful approach, such as saying, “You seem to be a bit down”, without pressing for an answer. and avoid outbursts of, “My goodness, look how skinny you are!”

Thompson says that parents must encourage young people to seek help from someone — friends, counsellors, helplines — and that universities regard student mental health as an issue to be taken seriously and are supportive.

Jamie O’Connell, Director of The Student Room, the UK’s largest online student community, says: “Never think you are alone. Reach out to students, join clubs and societies, use websites such as The Student Room.”

Nightline, a student helpline, provides support by trained student volunteers, from 7pm to 7am. Papyrus has a free helpline for anyone who is concerned about suicide. *Diagnosing Your Health Symptoms*, by Knut Schroeder, a GP, includes a chapter on mental health and is recommended by Thompson.

As parents we should be vigilant and encourage use of the support available, but remember that although six out of ten students feel homesick, the drop-out figure is around seven in a hundred, so most complete and enjoy university.

*Some names have been changed.*

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[nightline.ac.uk](http://nightline.ac.uk)

<http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/>

<http://www.papyrus-uk.org/>

Helpline 0800 0684141