

# Looking After ‘Me’

**Taking** care of yourself is important to help maintain a healthy body and mind which can lead to academic success, a greater sense of wellbeing and increased resilience to help overcome the obstacles in life that face us all.

Although it may sound simple, there are a number of small changes that we can all make in our daily routines that are likely to help us take care of ourselves, and these basic steps can make a real difference.

**Eating and drinking** well while living away from home for the first time can often be more difficult than it sounds. With irregular meal times, perhaps an increase in fast or junk food and more alcohol, it can be easy to fall out of a healthy pattern.

To help raise your energy levels and improve motivation it is important to maintain a balanced diet that includes food with enough nutritional value to keep you healthy. Junk foods contain little nutritional value and over time can make you feel lethargic and run down, so remember to eat fresh fruit and vegetables each day. Why not make a smoothie for breakfast, or find a simple recipe for a hearty vegetable soup.

The old saying that “*if you feel thirsty, you are already dehydrated*” is true, so make sure you drink water or other low sugar soft drinks regularly. Two thirds of our bodies are made up of water so it’s important to keep topped up. Dehydration is one of the main reasons for low energy and tiredness, you can tell if you are dehydrated if you have a dry mouth, feel lightheaded or pass dark coloured urine. The amount you should drink depends on a number of things but a good indication is to drink enough fluids so that you don’t feel thirsty for long periods. Passing clear urine is also a good sign that you are well hydrated!

**Sleeping** is essential to our general wellbeing, but the amount and type of sleep can vary from person to person. Scientists have studied sleep for a number of years now and there is no definitive advice on how much sleep we should get. For many of us, 8 hours is recommended, but others may feel that they need far less or far more to be able to function normally.

Being sleep deprived can inhibit our ability to carry out activities such as driving, studying or staying active so it is important to make sure that you are rested. This can be difficult with deadlines, part time work and a busy social life but it is a good idea to adopt a routine and to ensure that you allow your body and mind enough time to rest and recover. For good and restorative sleep remember:

- to listen to your body and adopt a natural rhythm, try to get up at the same time every day and avoid sleeping in late;
- to avoid bright screens an hour or two before bed, make sure that the room you sleep in is nice and dark;
- to get regular exercise, but not too close to bed time as the natural hormones it activates may keep you awake;
- to cut back on caffeine and alcohol, don’t eat big meals before bed time;
- to keep the noise levels down, keep the room cool and make sure the bed is comfortable (clean sheets can make a huge difference!).

**Exercise** can help to regulate our appetite, sleep and energy levels so is really important to staying healthy, but not everyone is able, or wants to join a sports team or train for a marathon. Luckily, it has never been easier to get active and to stay fit and healthy in a way that suits you; with informal clubs, classes and free weekly public events such as ParkRun (which takes place in Eaton Park), as well as free online workouts and regular low intensity sessions such as Yoga and Pilates here on campus there is something for everyone.

Exercising regularly can also help improve your motivation and reduce anxiety. Recommendations on the type and amount of exercise vary but a good estimate is three periods of high intensity activity per week, or 20 minutes of medium intensity exercise per day. However, **any exercise is better than none**, so even a small amount will do you good. Why not walk to Uni rather than getting the bus!

**Stress and anxiety** are extremely common issues for many students during their time at University. For some, it may be your first experience of this while others may have managed for some time. It is important to understand that anxiety can be experienced at many levels, from a very low level of worry to severe panic, but there are ways in which you can help yourself in the first instance.

We all experience stress from time to time and it can be due to a host of reasons such as a relationship break-up, exam deadlines or job interview. Healthy levels of stress can in fact be beneficial in helping us to perform to the best of our ability, however, it is when the balance tips that it can reduce our ability to cope with the situations of everyday life. The following points can help to manage feelings of stress and anxiety:

**Identify** the situations you find stressful by taking note of when you begin to feel tension and take steps to tackle the cause. For example, make an appointment with a Learning Enhancement Tutor in the Student Support Centre if you are struggling with statistics, talk to your close friends about a personal relationship or simply say “no” when being asked to take on commitments that you are unable to meet.

**Challenge** your own thoughts by pretending to be an outsider looking in on your own situation. What advice would you give yourself or a friend in the same situation?

**Don’t** be too hard on yourself. None of us are perfect and no-one expects you to be. Be realistic and set realistic goals for yourself.

**Comparing** yourself to others is a quick way to make yourself feel unhappy. Focus on yourself and try to be comfortable with how you do things.

It is useful to have a strategy of how to manage your anxiety if you feel that it is beginning to set in. Try:

**Breathing exercises** can really help to calm adrenaline and relax the physical effects of anxiety. If you feel your anxiety rising focus on deep breathing. Imagine you are filling your lungs from the bottom first by taking a deep and slow breath through your nose while counting to 6. Then breathe out slowly and steadily through your mouth while counting to 8. Repeat this several times until you begin to feel calmer.

**Distracting** yourself and focussing on something completely unrelated can help to combat unwanted thoughts. Why not phone a friend, go out for a walk or play a game.

**Deep muscle relaxation** is a great way of focussing on your body to help relieve the feelings of stress and tension that can build up and lead to feeling anxious. Take a few moments to lie down and concentrate on tensing and then relaxing each part of your body in turn starting at your feet and working up to your head. You should be able to feel each part of your body relax.

**Smartphone apps** are increasingly popular and offer another alternative to help manage stress and anxiety in a safe and constructive way.

[Flowy](https://www.flowygame.com/) is a useful app to help with breathing exercises while providing a positive distraction. The app can help to restore calm when anxiety builds. (<https://www.flowygame.com/>)

[SAM](http://sam-app.org.uk/) app has been developed to help students understand and manage anxiety by identifying what the prime causes are and provide self-help exercises and information. (<http://sam-app.org.uk/>)