

General Support

Students' Unions' Advice Service

The Students' Unions' Advice Service is one of the major ways that CUSU and the GU can support you and your peers. They offer free, confidential and independent support to all students. If you would like advice, information, support or representation on any issue while you're in Cambridge then it's always worth checking in with the Advice Service to see how they can help. The service is also available for Welfare Officers to use to confidentially discuss cases and receive advice and support related to their welfare role.

The Students' Unions' Advice Service is made up of two professional Student Advisors, the Welfare and Rights Officer, Education Officer and Women's Officer. They are all trained to provide support and representation and the service is accredited by Advice UK.

SUAS can be of particular use if you feel you are receiving inadequate support from the college or University, or adjustments are not being made to ensure you have full access to your education.

www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk

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University Counselling Service

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The University Counselling Service can be a valuable resource for students at Cambridge. Not only does the UCS provide students with free counselling, it also organises group sessions, workshops and information leaflets on a wide range of specific student issues. Whether it's overcoming sleep problems, writing up your PhD or managing your mood, there are resources available at the UCS to help you out. The Counselling Service even provides its own Freshers Guide which has some useful advice about how to manage your transition to Cambridge. Take a look here:

www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/freshers

'Counselling' can seem a loaded term, but a counsellor simply aims to help people to understand issues concerning them and work through them in the best way for the individual. The counsellors are trained and experienced in helping people with various issues that affect university students, such as anxiety, stress, depression, family/relationship difficulties, sexual problems, addictions, eating disorders or identity issues. There's no need

to wait until something has become very serious – it's far better to approach the Service when something is minor to prevent it worsening. There can be a stigma in people's minds attached to the idea of going for counselling, so it is important to remember that the UCS exists to help people with a huge variety of issues and concerns. Many people from across the University use the Service – around 1 in 8 students. The service is completely confidential.

Bear in mind, however, that the service is only available during **term time to current** students. Often you will receive a maximum of 6 appointments, and depending on the urgency of your case you may have to spend up to an entire term on a waiting list. Students provide mixed reviews of the service, it is very effective for some but a survey from 2015 indicated that autistic people, transgender people and LGB people found the service 'inadequate'. Counsellors are not trained to support students in abusive relationships.

Appointments All you need to do is visit UCS's website and fill in a 'pre-counselling form' (<https://forms.counselling.cam.ac.uk/form>) or collect a copy from the Counselling service itself. You don't need to fill in the whole form if you don't feel comfortable doing so. Appointments are confidential and available free to all undergraduates and graduates in the University. Never put off contacting them because you think they're too busy: most students can be seen within a week or so if it's urgent.

Group Sessions As well as individual counselling, group sessions are available, both for specific issues and for unstructured sessions. Some of these require an initial consultation whereas you can simply book a place in reception for others. You can contact the Counselling Service in complete confidence for more details about these.

Information The University Counselling Service produces a large number of leaflets on common issues, such as homesickness, depression, bereavement or exam stress – you can drop into the UCS reception to pick these up for free or alternatively take a look at the website.

The university also has two Mental Health Advisors. Most students are not aware of this and some students never visit the counselling service if they have long-term or chronic mental health condition(s) which need more specialist treatment, specialist knowledge or aren't going to be helped by a 'talking' therapy. However, when this is the case the UCS will refer the student on to a Mental Health Advisor. You cannot self-refer to a MHA. Colleges can also refer a student to the Mental Health Advisor, and indeed some colleges have their own in-house Mental Health Advisors.

In Your College

Tutor

Apart from in a few select colleges, which operate their own unique welfare support structures, every student at Cambridge should be assigned a Tutor who is responsible for providing pastoral support. Issues brought to a Tutor might include worries about finance, mental health concerns or procedural questions. It's really good to keep your Tutor informed about how you are doing and let them know about any problems as they arise. Tutors are helpful in situations where you don't feel comfortable talking to your DoS or supervisor - for example if your relationship with your DoS (undergrads) or supervisor (grads) is what is causing you stress. Your tutor can help you to resolve the situation without requiring you to have any difficult conversations with your DoS. You don't necessarily have to ask your tutor for support if you don't feel comfortable doing so, but it's worthwhile just to check in and let them know if there's anything difficult happening in your life, because if you get into any academic difficulty later on as a result they can confirm that you were having a hard time. If you would like to change tutor due to a breakdown in relationship with your tutor or if you think you might have a better match with a different one. This can usually be done by speaking to your Senior Tutor, but if you're unsure you can always request to change tutor with the help of the Students' Unions' Advice Service.

DoS

Undergrads will also be assigned a Director of Studies, or DoS, who will be familiar with your subject and provides you with academic support. You should be able to discuss your progress with them, along with any challenges you may have. If something happening in your life may impact your work, like getting ill during term, it's good to let them know. However, as previously explained, you can always go to your tutor if you don't feel confident approaching your DoS. If you would like to change DoS, this is possible under exceptional circumstances. The Students' Unions' Advice Service can provide advice and guidance with this.

College Nurse

Most colleges have access to a nurse who you can visit during full term. You can go to your nurse about any medical or personal problems confidentially, and it may be good to inform your nurse of any pre-existing medical problems you may have. Some nurses meet every incoming student at the beginning of each year, to have a chat about whether there's anything they should know about, times of the year that might be difficult, any family troubles happening, how you tend to cope in exam term, etc. Your college nurse will also be able to direct you to other sources of support, help you join a GP or find a dentist.

Mental Health Advisor

Some colleges have their own Mental Health Advisor, who usually takes on a lot of the work that the college nurses end up doing, as well as meeting students and identifying potential areas of difficulty over the upcoming year. MHAs giving the nurses more of a chance to focus on physical illness and supporting the welfare team, and also ensure that there is a member of staff in college who is a qualified mental health specialist.

College Chaplain

A chaplain is available at many of the colleges. The chaplain offers pastoral and spiritual support and guidance for all students on any issue, regardless of your religious affiliation or belief/non-belief.

College Counsellor

Many colleges have one or two in-house counsellors who you can visit during full term. This can be easier for students who would rather speak to someone close by rather than travelling to the UCS.

College Welfare Officers

Your JCR or MCR will have at least one Welfare Officer who can be a listening ear and provide you with information about support options available to you. Welfare Teams often put on a range of events to help you settle in, de-stress from work and stay healthy so look out for updates and bulletins to let you know what kinds of things they have planned! Welfare officers provide sexual health supplies as well as informal listening and support, and most officers will have a confidentiality policy that agrees never to share what you disclose to them beyond the welfare team and the Students' Unions' Advice Service (whom Officers are encouraged to consult if they're ever feeling unsure of what to do). If your JCR is affiliated to CUSU or your MCR is affiliated to the GU you can expect your Welfare Officer(s) to be well trained to do their job, as once elected they will receive specialist training every two weeks during term time. If you think that you'd be more comfortable if your Welfare Officer had more training in any particular areas, you can contact welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk who will discreetly arrange for this training to take place, or if it is already available investigate to see if there's anything stopping your Welfare Officer(s) from attending the fortnightly session.

Health and Wellbeing

Mental Health

1 in 4 people experience a mental health condition at some time during their lives and students are particularly prone to this experience, due to it being a transitional period in their lives (both biologically and socially) and the high stress environment we are thrown into. There are a wide range of mental health conditions that you may experience (or have already experienced) in your time as a student. More prevalent conditions include depression (difficult to define, but generally characterized by a very low mood for a long time), anxiety (which can manifest itself in many forms, from constant, low level anxiety to frequent panic attacks), self-harm, bipolar disorder(s) and eating disorders.

Promoting Mental Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is a general state of good mental health. Like regular exercise and good nutrition, promoting mental wellbeing is an important part of keeping healthy. Make sure you take steps to look after yourself, talk about how you are feeling and look out for 'welfare', 'chill-out' and 'relaxation' events throughout the year.

How to keep your mind healthy

Regular exercise, plenty of sleep and healthy food not only keep your body but also your mind healthy. Make sure that you always take breaks when working and that you allow time for socialising and relaxation, without letting work take over your life too much. Even if you take good care of yourself and keep fit and healthy, you may experience a mental health condition as a student. These should not be taboo conditions, but talked about, understood and effectively supported. If you are not receiving this support from your College or the University, it is worth speaking to the Students' Unions' Advice Service. The CUSU/GU Welfare and Rights Officer can provide information about mental health and wellbeing, and

later this year will be running campaigns regarding mental health, such as tackling stigma and prejudice. If you would like to get involved please email welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk.

Learning More

Mind, the mental health charity, produces advice on “How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing” which is well worth a read if you’re looking for suitable materials. It might sound strange, but a great step to looking after your mental health is to learn more about the issues and address your own misconceptions. Mind publishes a guide called ‘Understanding Mental Health Problems’ which can give important insights into different mental health conditions. If you’re happy speaking to someone (in person, over the phone or via email) you can get information from the Students’ Unions’ Advice Service. You can also talk to your Welfare Officer as they will have been offered training on Mental Health as part of their fortnightly sessions, or you may wish to speak to the University Counselling Service.

Accessing Support

If you do experience a mental health problem, you don’t need to be afraid to access help. Health services within the city are very used to seeing students with a broad range of mental health issues and there are many alternative forms of support. If you think you may be experiencing mental health problems, you could try talking to:

- The Students’ Unions’ Advice Service
- Your GP
- The University Counselling Service
- Your tutor
- College Welfare Officer
- College nurse
- College chaplain

Reasonable Adjustments

As a result of your condition, you may have access requirements and need to have adjustments made to your educational schedule and to aspects of your college life, and you have a right to have these met. Students with mental health conditions are disabled, and it is classed legally as a disability, so you have a legal right to reasonable adjustments.

This may include changes to your supervision schedule, being allowed a longer timeframe to complete your work or receiving study support from a trained advisor. It might also include exam adjustments, like having extra time, rest breaks, no more than one exam in one day, taking your exam in college or taking your exam in a room separate from the rest of your peers. You can talk to your college about this, or talk to the Disability Resource Centre (www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/disability/) or the Students’ Unions’ Advice Service (www.camstudentadvice.co.uk), as they can support you in ensuring that your course and your college is fully accessible and adjusted to your mental health condition. More information about this can be found from the Disabled Students’ Campaign.

Eating Problems

1 in 20 people have an eating disorder at some point in their lives, the majority between the ages of 16 and 25. Eating Disorders, also known as 'Disordered Eating', encompasses a wide range of different conditions, including binge-eating, bulimia, anorexia, orthorexia, and compulsive over-eating, although it is more often the case that an individual with an eating disorder does not clearly identify with any of these categories, but experiences elements of all three categories. It is important to understand that it's not your weight that defines an Eating Disorder, rather the diagnosis is based on your thoughts and habits around eating. You can be any weight, with any kind of disorder, and have an Eating Disorder. People of all and no genders can have an Eating Disorder.

Eating Disorders (EDs) are in no way a 'lifestyle choice', 'self indulgence' or solely prompted by the desire to be thin, and often an individual grappling with eating disorders is not clearly recognisable as such in their outwards appearance. EDs can have many causes and are often correlated with deeper underlying issues such as stress, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, a sense of loss or feeling of lack of control. To the outside world, people grappling with eating disorders can be extremely competent and composed, and excel in their day-to-day lives: it is often this which makes it hard to recognise or admit the problem, either to yourself or to others, and letting go of this coping mechanism may be a frightening step.

If you have an eating disorder, feel that you may be developing problems around eating and food or are worried about a friend, there are a number of different ways to access advice and support. People are often hesitant to seek help if they feel they are 'not disordered enough' but remember: if an eating problem is significant to you then it should be considered seriously by any support service you choose to access. If you are comfortable, you could try talking to your college welfare officer, college nurse, the UCS, a GP or other NHS services. If you are unsure who to approach and would like someone to discuss your options with, the Students' Unions' Advice Service can provide confidential, non-judgemental support and advice.

CUSU-GU B-Eat Group

The CUSU Eating Disorders Self Help and Support Group is a non-judgmental, non-critical, confidential group where anyone who feels they have been affected by eating disorders, issues with food or related issues can talk openly about their life, problems and issues regarding recovery. Each group is facilitated by at least two Beat-registered Group Facilitators and attendees support each other by sharing experiences, thoughts, successes and problems. The group is user-led so you can talk as much or as little as you want and you are welcome to bring a friend along if it makes you more comfortable.

This group is no longer active but is looking to restart soon, so do get in touch with me (welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk) if you're interested.

B-Eat Online Support Groups

If you would like to access a support group outside of term time or do not feel comfortable going to either of the groups above, you can access support groups online which are run by B-Eat. They operate under the same ethos as the CUSU-GU B-Eat group, aiming to provide a non-judgemental, non-critical, user-led environment. www.b-eat.co.uk/get-help

University Counselling Service

The UCS can support students with disordered eating through individual counselling and group sessions. Group sessions take a 'part experiential, part psycho-educational' approach.

Students wishing to attend will normally have a pre-group exploratory meeting with the group counsellor.