

FATIGUE GROUP RESOURCE PACK

Top Tips for Managing Fatigue at University



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THANK YOU!

A million thanks to all the students who have contributed to this pack and have shared their stories and their wisdom at the Fatigue Group.

INTRODUCTION

This pack is designed for students who have a health condition which causes them to experience fatigue and was put together by AccessAbility in collaboration with students who attend the University of Exeter's Fatigue Group. We hope their advice, as current students with fatigue living away from home, will be useful to students who are new to university life, have a new diagnosis or are waiting for a diagnosis.

The Fatigue Group started in September 2018 and welcomes any student who experiences fatigue, whether or not they have a formal diagnosis. More information about meeting times and places can be found here: www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/groups

Attending university while experiencing fatigue can be a challenging, and, sometimes isolating experience; however, there is a community of students at Exeter who are making it work for them. We have asked them to share some of their top tips about how to enjoy life, achieve their goals but not at a cost to their health. We hope you find it useful!

DECLARING A DISABILITY

'Get to grips with the support the university provides as soon as you can. In particular, having access to the accessible study rooms in the library was great as it saved me a lot of energy trekking around the university for a place to work, and allows you to take a break from the high energy atmosphere on campus which can feel overwhelming when you're tired'

Anna, second year student

You may not consider yourself to have a 'disability' but if you have a long-term health condition which impacts on your studies, there's a lot of support you could be entitled to.

First of all, AccessAbility will require some medical evidence from your GP; then they can set up an individual learning plan (ILP) for you which will suggest 'reasonable adjustments' to your college. These might include time tabling requests, supporting extensions to deadlines, and a note about attendance. AccessAbility might also be able to issue you with an accessible parking permit to enable you to park on campus in disabled parking spaces.

In addition, they can help you to apply for Disabled Students' Allowances and discuss Fatigue Mentoring sessions with you.

To book an AccessAbility appointment contact SID in person in the Forum or you can telephone them on [0300 555 0444](tel:03005550444).

STUDYING AND STAYING HEALTHY: SELF-HELP IDEAS

'Knowing when I am tired, and being able to walk away as I will not get anymore good work done in a tired state, is important,' James, second year student

People will talk to you about 'pacing' and this is important but can be really hard to do. It calls on you to be aware of your limitations, and rest accordingly. This requires patience and self-discipline which is not second-nature to most people. However, the alternative is summed up by the expression 'boom and bust,' where you use up every ounce of energy available to you and then cannot do anything for a prolonged period. Planning is crucial so that you can prioritise your use of energy.

Here is an online booklet which explains more about pacing for chronic fatigue: www.actionforme.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/pacing-for-people-with-me-booklet.pdf

The key things to staying healthy are going to be slightly different for everyone but here are some suggestions to consider...



LOOKING AFTER YOU

'Be kind to yourself, ask for help when you need it, set attainable goals, plan ahead, prioritise, keep it all in perspective,' Cerys, second year student

- Start to recognise the different triggers that cause you to feel fatigued: physical activity, studying, emotional stress. It's easy to forget that an argument with someone can fatigue you as much as a physical activity.
- Screen time will make you tired (TV and phone included, not just computers) – consider limiting your exposure to allow yourself to recharge, particularly in the hours before bed to ensure you can switch off and sleep.
- Try not to compare yourself to how you were before you were ill.

'Seeking out others who have had similar experiences can make you feel less alone,' Annabel, first year student

- Remember the Fatigue Group is a way of connecting with other students who experience fatigue and understand the challenges.
- Social media can be both a positive and negative influence. It can give you a sense of connection and community but it can also lead to people comparing themselves to others and wondering if their experience of university life matches up.
- Don't be afraid to try new things. It's easy to narrow your options when you experience fatigue but managing it without missing out is the ideal scenario and something to work towards.
- Don't be afraid to impose your needs on a situation (albeit politely!) Ask for a seat, leave the room for a break if you need to, and discuss any concerns with your tutor.

'Ultimately, I think every person will have a different experience at university, but it shouldn't be overshadowed by disability, because we are not defined by our disabilities. Rather than viewing my conditions as limitations, I remember that I have my own goals and methods of dealing with things,'

Cerys, third year student

'Meal planning and healthy eating in general are important for me. It took me far too long to get into a routine, but cooking extra food in the evening for the next day or freezing portions has helped me to keep eating when I am too tired to cook,' Anna, second year student

- Try eating a substantial breakfast and regular meals to regulate your blood sugar levels. Keep snacks nearby (e.g. energy bars) so you can give yourself small boosts, since fatigue feels worse when you are hungry.

'This might just be me but cutting down on caffeine and sugar has helped me to avoid crashing later in the day,' Anna, second year student

- Make time to get outside; daylight is important and will make you feel better whatever the weather.
- Try and do some form of exercise each day. That could be a 10 minute walk, just to get outside and get some fresh air.
- Exeter is a hilly place so walking to lectures drains a lot of energy. I try to get to lectures 20 minutes early and wait outside to rest.
- Giving yourself a routine is important. It can be weird starting uni and not having one so bear this in mind.
- Try earplugs to shut out unwanted noise, whether you are trying to rest or study.
- A regular sleeping pattern can help your body to feel more awake during the day and sleep better at night. Experiment with regular getting up and going to bed times – even at the weekend.

STUDYING

- Get organised with deadlines is a must for me. At the beginning of term, I try to identify when the big exams and deadlines are. This allows me to pace my work avoiding any massive crams and crashes.
- Being organised will help you to focus on doing a task without thinking about other things you need to do. These are some ways I stay organised:
 - I use a diary where I write all the things I am told to do/or realised I need to do during the day
 - I have a wall calendar to put all the diary info on to, it means you can visualise better what needs to be done.
 - Make to-do lists and prioritise – think, 'what do I need to do right now?'
 - Put reminders on your phone
 - Consider making a study time-table to ensure you don't overwork and factor in regular rest times.
- Break tasks down into smaller jobs so that even if you are tired you feel you can achieve something.
- Consider applying for mitigation, particularly where deadlines are piling up. See AccessAbility to discuss having extensions to deadlines added to your ILP.
- Make use of recorded lectures if you are not feeling well enough to attend them.
- Don't be afraid to take a nap but try to keep it short so that you don't wake up too groggy.
- Remember to factor in wind-down time before you try to sleep.
- Find the right environment for you to study in. This might mean finding quiet places on campus or you might actually prefer to have people around you, for example in a café.
- Don't forget that AccessAbility can give you access to the quiet AccessAbility rooms in the library which you can book in advance.

BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK

Experiencing fatigue is likely to affect your resilience at least some of the time; this may mean that you feel stress more acutely than some of your friends and can feel overwhelmed at times. It's important to have people to turn to when you're living away from home. You may have left a supportive network of people behind, but even if that is not the case, it's a good idea to start to build a support network for yourself in Exeter.

Your support network can be made up of friends, family and professionals; it doesn't really matter, the most important thing is that you have people you can turn to if you are feeling low and exhausted. It is a common phenomenon that you forget all the really useful stuff you can do to help yourself at the times you most need to use it! Sometimes you need someone to remind you.

Widening your social circle:

- It's good to remember that you can have friends for different aspects of your life. Not everyone has to be a BFF. You may have people that you like to study with but don't hang out with otherwise, people that you know from societies and friends that you live with.
- However, remember that managing friendships can be part of the energy balancing act so be careful not to offer too much of yourself to others if you are feeling exhausted.
- Having said that, sharing a little bit of yourself can be a way of deepening a friendship: don't be afraid to share how you are feeling and what you are experiencing.
- It can be useful to meet others who have had some similar experiences and really get what living with fatigue is like.

See Social Life for more ideas on this topic.

Don't forget people at home:

- If you have a supportive family at home, talking to them regularly can provide some TLC.
- For many people friends become family so don't forget the old friends that you grew up with. They may be the people that know you best.

'Skyping my family a lot was helpful, even if it was only for 10 minutes in the evening; they'd sometimes eat dinner whilst I was skyping and I'd do the same which was nice,' Ani, second year student

Find out what support you can access at University:

- Personal tutor
- Wellbeing Services: made up of AccessAbility, the Mental Health Team and Psychological Therapies
- ESAW – welfare person at your Hub
- Doctor
- Fatigue Group
- Student Guild Advice Unit
- Fatigue Mentoring – part of AccessAbility
- Peer Mentoring
- Nightline

'I've maintained great communication with my personal tutor who is aware of everything going on in my life and is supportive of my struggles. Just dropping your tutor a line or two to update them about anything significant that may be impacting your performance is worthwhile' Cerys, third year student

For more information about different services and support check out the Who to Go to for Help page.

SOCIAL LIFE

'Be open-minded about making friends and try different activities to meet people,'

James, second year student

Managing fatigue is a constant balancing act that requires you to prioritise your available energy. Putting all of that energy into academic work may seem logical – you are at university after all – but neglecting your social life could leave you feeling isolated. If your friends and flatmates' free time involves going out late into the night, and this isn't something you can manage on a regular basis, try suggesting some daytime or early evening activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Invite some people to Board, the board game café in town: www.boardexeter.co.uk
- Meet friends for a coffee or lunch
- Go for a walk and explore the area
- Potter around one of the bookshops in town
- Stay in and watch a film.

Finding your crowd at university involves meeting like-minded people. You may be lucky and find that you are living with people who are a good match for you, or you might have to seek them out. Joining societies is a good way of meeting like-minded people. It can feel like there is a pressure to drink alcohol at university but it is important to walk your own path:



'Don't feel pressure to socialise all the time. Explain to your flatmates your situation. In my case, my flatmates were amazing and fully respected when I said I could not go out'

Anna, second year student

- Stick to your guns when you don't feel up to doing something. People will learn to accept that.
- A little bit of alcohol can seem to help people to relax and feel more confident in social situations but it is a depressant and drinking too much can increase stress and fatigue.
- Try not to dwell on the things you are missing out on. Instead, look out for societies that are suited to you. Societies have to make themselves accessible and many have a Disability Officer. If in doubt, ask them if they can help you.

'I hardly drink at all and socials and society events should have a non-drinking option so don't be put off going to socials for that reason (they're really fun).'

Sophie, second year student

MANAGING STRESS

Unfortunately a degree of stress is an almost inevitable part of academic life – who actually enjoys exams? However, many people who experience fatigue find that they are more adversely affected by stress than their peers. It's easy to get into a vicious circle because feeling fatigued can make you feel stressed, and feeling stressed is likely to make you feel tired! Remember, stress weakens the immune system so managing stress effectively is an important aspect of staying healthy.

First of all it is useful to take notice of when you are feeling stressed. Physical symptoms can include:

- Headaches
- Aches, pains and tense muscles
- Insomnia
- Upset stomach

And, you guessed it, fatigue!

Once you have identified that you are stressed out, you can start to do something about it. Here are some ideas for when you feel your stress levels are rising:

- Make time to come out of the academic bubble and do things you enjoy.
- Find distractions:
 - Listen to the radio
 - Arrange to meet up with a friend
 - Go for a walk in nature
 - Binge on a box-set
 - Feed yourself some good food
 - Exercise
- Watch out for social media and other things that make you feel negative or drain your energy.
- Share course stress with people on your course; the chances are that they will be feeling the same.
- Try studying with other people.
- Exercise – this one can be difficult if you are very tired but a gentle walk and some fresh air can be helpful. Gentle classes like body balance, yoga or tai chi are other possibilities.
- Try meditation – it can be difficult to motivate yourself to make the time but people who meditate regularly report big changes to their stress levels and all round wellbeing. Check out YouTube or SoundCloud for free guided meditations. See the Resources pages for links to apps and mindfulness tools.

*'As Mark Twain said, "comparison is the death of joy", and often it's about perspective ...
It may take me longer to get there, but as long as I reach that point it doesn't matter'*

Cerys, third year student

'I meditate whenever I feel too exhausted to study using a guided meditation to refresh myself; this is the CD I have – www.amazon.co.uk/Little-Meditation-Album-Clean/dp/B00AIY0UUI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1527934071&sr=8-1&keywords=the+little+meditation+album+philip+permutt'

James, second year student



- Practice 'Blue Sky Thinking' – this is all about putting a positive spin on events. Always focussing on the negative will add to your stress levels. It takes practice but you will feel better for it!
- Who's running your internal monologue? Develop a kind and forgiving inner voice. Caitlin Moran recommends talking to yourself like you are your own pet! This means nurturing yourself: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/letter-to-the-dark-place/#.XEHRPGngrIU
- Reward yourself for studying with things that you enjoy doing so that you have things to look forward to.
- Practice gratitude. What are the things that make you feel lucky? Think of five things every day. Sometimes you might have to rummage for these but think about the people who care about you, nice things to eat and drink, music that makes you feel good, access to education, living in a beautiful part of the world. Just examples but you get the idea.
- When you are feeling overwhelmed by work, pause, and think about what you have already learnt.
- Contextualise assessments – how much are they actually worth? What do you need to pass?
- Remind yourself of your Exeter support network – who can you call on?

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT)

This year University counsellor Kathy O'Connor has run some mini workshops for the Fatigue Group on using tools from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help us find a better balance between study and wellbeing. Find below a brief summary of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and a link to the University's online ACT resources. Sessions 4 and 5 may be particularly relevant.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is one of the recent mindfulness based therapies shown to be effective with a diverse range of clinical conditions.

ACT is firmly based in the tradition of empirical science, yet has a major emphasis on values, forgiveness, acceptance, compassion, living in the present moment and accessing a transcendent sense of self.

ACT FOR LIFE is an audio programme which aims to help you develop emotional and psychological skills to support you in:

- Overcoming procrastination and completing study tasks
- Starting and sustaining enjoyable relationships with your peers and friends
- Discovering your valued and meaningful life while studying at University
- Living a balanced and enjoyable life

Find ACT FOR LIFE here:

www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/support/self-helpandpeersupport/onlineselfhelp/act

WHO TO GO TO FOR HELP

'Some courses will consider allowing you to study part-time. My fatigue started in second year and was at its worst during midterm making keeping up with work very difficult. Although it was a difficult decision at the time, I am very relieved I went part-time; it was good for my grades and my health'

Anna, second year student

There may be times when you need help or advice. Moving away from home means that you will be further away from your home support network. There are many services at the University of Exeter who you can turn to for support. This is our guide to the main services you might need:

AccessAbility

AccessAbility support students who have physical disabilities, long-term health conditions, specific learning difficulties, sensory impairments and autistic spectrum conditions. The team is made up of advisors, mentors and study skills tutors. They offer advisor appointments and a drop-in service which runs during term-time on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 1–3pm. Go to the SID desk in the Forum to book an appointment or to check in for a drop-in.

SID

The Student Information Desk are there to answer any questions you might have and to signpost you to other services that might be able to help you. They can be found on the ground floor of the Forum and can also be contacted by phone and email.

Wellbeing Centre:

Mental Health Team

The Mental Health Team support students with long-term mental health conditions. The team is made up of advisors and mental health mentors. They offer advisor appointments and a drop-in service. You can find out more information about how to book an appointment or attend a drop-in here: www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/mental_health

Psychological Therapies Team

The Psychological Therapies Team support students who need some short-term support; this could be because of stress, low self-esteem or anxiety. They provide therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and counselling, and also run groups and workshops. If you want to find out what support you can access, you can arrange a short appointment, by telephone or face to face. To book an appointment, contact the Wellbeing Team on: **01392 724381** or wellbeing@exeter.ac.uk and ask for a TRA (telephone referral appointment). You will need to tell them if you would prefer to have this appointment face to face.

Student Health Centre

It is important to register with the Student Health Centre when you arrive: www.campusdoctor.org.uk/exeter/reg.html. They should be your first contact for any concerns about your health. You can make an appointment to see a GP and access advice about your health and wellbeing.

Residence Life

Residence Life provides support to students living in University accommodation. Every student in University accommodation is allocated a Residence Life Mentor who has experience of university life. Find out which team represents your residence here:

Team leaders are on duty every evening from 6pm during term time.

Estate Patrol

If you have concerns about your safety or someone else's on campus you can call the Estate Patrol who are the University's security team. However, if it is an emergency you should always call 999 and ask for the police.

Students' Guild Advice Unit

The Advice Unit are independent of the University and can offer advice on a wide range of issues including finance and funding advice. They provide an email and face to face service and run drop-ins from the Forum: www.exeterguild.org/advice

Nightline

Nightline is a confidential listening and information service run by students for students at the University of Exeter. Nightline is open from 20:00–08:00 every evening during term time: exeter.nightline.ac.uk

Your College

Each Hub has a Welfare Advisor (ESAW) who can act as a point of contact for any health or welfare concerns that you feel are affecting your studies. They can liaise with your tutors within the College on your behalf, and, with your permission, arrange a meeting (HWSS) to discuss any challenges you are facing. You can ask to speak to the Welfare Advisor by visiting the Info Point in your Hub.

Multi-Faith Chaplaincy

The Chaplaincy is a team of people from different faiths working together to serve the whole University community of students and staff.

For contact details of these services and some external agencies please see the back page of this booklet.

USEFUL CONTACTS

AccessAbility

The Forum
Tel: 01392 723880
Email: accessability@exeter.ac.uk

Chaplaincy – Multi Faith

In person: In the Forum and room 110 in the Old Library.
Email: chaplaincy@exeter.ac.uk

Estate Patrol

Northcote House
Queen's Drive
Ext: 2222

Mental Health Team and Psychological Therapies

Wellbeing Services
Reed Mews Wellbeing Centre
Tel: 01392 724381
Email: wellbeing@exeter.ac.uk

Student Health Centre

Reed Mews
Streatham Drive
Tel: 01392 676606
Email: studenthealth@ex.ac.uk

Students' Guild Advice Unit

The Forum
Email: advice@exeterguild.com

Nightline (term time only)

Tel: 01392 724000
Skype: [exeterstudentnightline](https://www.skype.com/join/exeterstudentnightline)
Email: exeternightline@gmail.com

Residence Life Team

Tel: 01392 722875
Email: residencelife@exeter.ac.uk

Samaritans

Tel: 116 123
Text: 07725909090
Email: jo@samaritans.org

NHS Direct

Tel: 111

The Moorings @ Devon

Out of hours mental health support
Tel: 07990 790 920
www.mhm.org.uk/the-moorings-devon

RESOURCES

M.E. Association: www.meassociation.org.uk

Action for M.E.: www.actionforme.org.uk

M.E. Action: www.meaction.net

Wellbeing self-help links:

www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/self-help

Wellbeing workshops:

www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/workshops

Free mindfulness resources:

www.freemindfulness.org/download

A TED talk by Jen Brea:

www.ted.com/talks/jen_brea_what_happens_when_you_have_a_disease_doctors_can_t_diagnose

You can also check out her film Unrest:
www.unrest.film

NHS Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Clinic Exeter:

northeast.devonformularyguidance.nhs.uk/referral-guidance/eastern-locality/pain-management/chronic-fatigue-service-rd-e

www.meassociation.org.uk/nhsspecialistservices

For more ideas about managing a disability while studying, visit the Wellbeing Blog: blogs.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeingservices