ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Studying with a Chronic Condition

Many individuals experience long-term health problems that are severe and enduring in nature, and often necessitate regular medical intervention or ongoing medication regimes.

Once the acute phase of an illness is over, a period of adjustment occurs and it is then that people often feel ready to embark on longer-term plans such as going to university.

Having a chronic health condition need not be a barrier to successfully completing your studies if the right plans are in place. Learning how to manage your condition, and planning for the unexpected can help to ensure that you keep on track and make the most of your time at university and achieve the degree you deserve.

What is a Chronic Condition?

Examples of chronic conditions can include epilepsy, arthritis, asthma, M.E., diabetes, depression and HIV. This list is not exhaustive but intended to illustrate the kinds of illnesses that are long-term in nature, but can be successfully managed with appropriate support.

Managing your Condition

The key to living successfully with a chronic condition is being able to manage the symptoms so that you are able to lead as full a life as possible. It is therefore essential to know your own strengths and limitations and try not to push yourself too hard.

Pace yourself

- Look at your timetable and assessment schedule.
- See where there may be pressure points and factor in any pre-arranged appointments that you may have for treatment etc.
- If you know that your condition is exacerbated by stress, divide your workload into manageable chunks throughout the term in order to try and avoid last minute panics. This can also help to allow for any unexpected relapses in your condition as by pacing yourself you should be on top of your work and less likely to fall behind if you do have a few ‘off’ days.

Manage your expectations

- Having a chronic condition or disability can mean that individuals feel that they have to perform at a much higher level than their peers in order to prove themselves.
- Be realistic about what you can and cannot achieve. Bear in mind the impact that your condition has on your ability to study, and don’t be hard on yourself if you feel that you are not able to study or participate as much as your peers. (You may also like to read our leaflet on Perfectionism). There may be days when you feel unwell or unable to study or attend lectures.
- Remember that everyone is allowed to feel ill, and if you push yourself too hard you may find it harder to recover quickly. Better to take a few days out to recover in the short-term than jeopardise your health, and studies, in the long-term. Remember the adage ‘it’s a marathon, not a sprint!’
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Keep healthy

- Whilst it may be tempting to relax your usual regime in order to socialise and make the most of university life, it is important to keep to healthy routines, both in terms of eating and sleeping. There are many opportunities to participate in other non-academic activities at university and it can be an ideal time to try out other ways of managing your condition. Tai Chi or Yoga can be very good for managing stress and helping both mind and body.

Maintain contact

- Keep in touch with your Academic Tutor and let them know if you are struggling, or if you have had a relapse in your condition. They can advise you on the best way to catch up, and also support you in completing an Extenuating Circumstances Form if appropriate.
- You may also be in contact with the Disability Advisors or Counsellors. If you are registered with the Disability Service, the University is obliged to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to support you in your studies. This can involve practical adjustments such as giving you longer to complete assessments, or providing additional equipment. Remember that if you don’t tell people that you are having problems, people won’t be able to help!

Prepare for unexpected events.

- Once you have learned how to manage your condition effectively, prepare for the unexpected by having a ‘Plan B’. Unanticipated life events happen to everyone, be it a bereavement, accident or illness.
- Plan ahead by ensuring that you are organised. This could include:
  - ensuring sufficient stocks of medication;
  - having contact details of individuals and organisations that might be helpful in emergencies such as your Personal Tutor and self-help groups;
  - being up-to-date with your notes;
  - having photocopies of core book chapters at home in case you cannot make it onto campus.

Getting and Using Support

Individuals with chronic conditions often find it hard to allow themselves to look for and use support. This might be because of previous negative experiences, or because they are determined to be seen as the same as other students.

As a consequence, individuals can sometimes sabotage offers of support and push help away. Try to be open to support, or at least be aware of where you can access it if required. In some cases, you may also be able to access Disabled Students Allowance.

The Disability service can offer advice with regard to this.
Further Information:

The NHS runs Expert Patient Programmes which aim to help individuals manage their chronic conditions effectively: http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/doctors/Pages/expert-patients-programme.aspx

The Mental Health Foundation have a helpful website promoting mindfulness which is a mind-body approach to well-being that can help you change the way you think about experiences and reduce stress and anxiety: http://www.bemindful.co.uk/ www.reading.ac.uk/counselling www.reading.ac.uk/medicalpractice

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