Resuming Your Rightful Place

A guide for University of Melbourne students returning to study following an absence involving mental ill health
Stress is a part of the University experience for all students. The transition to University, settling in and finding your way around, making new friends, the work load, and standard of work expected all contribute to students feeling higher than usual levels of stress. Many students also have to deal with the challenges of moving out of home and looking after themselves for the first time. How students cope with these pressures has a significant impact on their academic and social life at the University.

Some causes of stress are fairly widespread – problems with relationships, families, finances and friendships. For some students, however, there are extra difficulties. In Australia, of those who experience a mental health problem, half will have had their first episode by the age of 18, and 75% by age 25* – the biggest age group studying at the University.

This guide is aimed at students returning after a break to outline what services are available to them, some ideas of what to expect, and some study tips and strategies.

The University also provides assistance to aid in the identification of those who may need help, and workshops that can help those who might be struggling. The aim of this is to decrease the possibility of social isolation, poor marks, failure or dropping out, and increase the chances of a successful (re)engagement with study.


MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY

While stress and anxiety can’t be avoided at uni and in life generally, you can do a lot to monitor and manage them. You need a level of anxiety to operate – worry about exams motivates you to study. Useful levels of anxiety in exams helps you write faster and think faster, however too much anxiety and your brain starts to ‘shut down’ and you don’t think so clearly and things learnt become harder to recall.

Take a moment to think about how you know when you’re stressed – are the first signs in your body (butterflies in tummy), behaviour (withdrawing), or mood (short tempered and irritable)? Others may notice things before you do, so ask family and friends how they know when you’re stressed. When you’re getting too stressed or anxious you need to calm yourself down – both emotionally and physically. This may take a few minutes but is well worth the time as you’ll operate a lot better afterwards.

Luckily, the most useful way to calm down is also very easy - deeply and gently. The more you practice this the faster you’ll calm down when you really need to. There are solid biological reasons why this works. There are a few ways to slow down your breathing rate but one simple way is to breathe in to a count of ‘In-2-3-4, hold… Out-2-3-4, rest’ and repeat. Do this for 3-4 minutes about once every 3 hours or if you notice you’re getting anxious. Don’t worry if you feel a little dizzy when first doing this, it’s just your brain getting used the increase in oxygen it’s receiving. Remember to breathe slowly and deeply - filling your lungs. Other relaxation techniques that are proven to useful include Mindfulness and Guided Imagery.

Exercise is another great way to relax and refresh your brain and body, and it’s even better if you exercise with a friend or two. Exercising with others makes it more likely to happen and you’re socialising and having fun at the same time.
Start off gently! To ensure your return to university is as successful as possible please consider starting off with a modest workload. Be careful about taking on too much and overloading yourself. A half or one third load might be appropriate. If you are doing subjects that require a lot of reading, presentations and such, then just that one subject might be enough to start with. If unsure, speak to a Student Equity Officer at your Student Centre or the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) as there are specific dates by which subjects can be changed without fees or a ‘fail’ recorded, and some courses where part time study isn’t an option. If you are an international student then you need to consider possible Visa Implications. For advice with this you can contact International Student Services.

Balancing your commitments is really important. While you have returned to uni to finish a degree, we also want you to be as fit, mentally and physically, as possible, to enjoy your time here and take the opportunity to develop yourself as a person as well as developing your brain. You really do study better if you’re happy, calm and socially connected with others.

A personal timetable can help organise your valuable time so that there is enough time for enjoyment, work and study... even time to watch TV or go to the movies. If you are going out with friends then do it so you don’t feel guilty and can relax and enjoy yourself – this refreshes the brain. But to pass and do well you will need to study, deal with the repetitive reading and remember the material, so that time at your desk cannot be avoided! The aim is to keep a balance in your life - at uni, at work, and at home.

If you have a mental health professional you see regularly outside of the University, it might be a good idea to give permission to DLU or Counselling (if they are also supporting you) to liaise with this person as necessary.

If you have a Care Plan or have preferences about who you want notified etc in the event of a relapse, have a discussion with your Case Manager (or similar) about giving a copy to someone in your department, DLU or Counselling so your wishes can be followed.

If you have financial difficulties or Housing problems then please contact Financial Aid and Student Housing Services. The help offered by these services will depend on your situation so will need an appointment to discuss options and possibilities.

The Counselling Service or DLU may also be helpful in learning some pointers from why you decided to leave previously. While not wishing to dwell in the past, there might be things that could be done to make the return easier or make the chances of it happening again less likely and even give a sense of closure to past events so you can concentrate on the future.
CHECKLIST

Once your enrolment is confirmed:

- Contact Disability Liaison Unit to make an appointment to discuss possible options to help you get started (to be registered with DLU you’ll need a letter from your GP or specialist health professional to confirm your diagnosis or difficulty).

- Let the Student Equity Officer at your Student Centre know that you are returning, and that you may need to discuss course related issues with them from time to time. They work closely with the DLU and are a good connection to make.

- Consider an appointment with the Counselling Service to assist with planning for success and support, especially in the initial phase of your return.

- Make an appointment with Academic Skills Unit (ASU) if you need help to get organised or want a ‘refresher’ on how to write essays and read effectively.
The Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) is a free and confidential service for current, returning and prospective students at the University who have a disability, including those who have experienced mental health problems. Our Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) help put in place academic adjustments that can aid students in achieving independence and academic success during their time at the University.

In 2010 there were more than 1000 currently enrolled students who utilised the DLU. Mental health problems and long term medical condition make up the largest area of disability-related issues experienced by students at the University. The DLU does not believe that disability describes an inherent characteristic of the individual. Instead, we approach “disability” in terms of an interconnection between person and environment, with disability arising when a students’ participation in certain activities is constrained by the interaction of environmental factors (policies, attitudes, learning activities) with individual factors (physiological and mental functioning, and personal circumstances).

The DLU can make positive interventions in the teaching and learning environment that lessen the impact of disability. DLOs can help you plan strategies for study and mental health management, and can also advise you on the issues around disclosing personal information.

The kind of supports the DLU can offer may include:

- Extensions on assignments
- Alternative examination arrangements such as additional reading time, regular rest breaks, and sitting exams in a separate room
- Tape recorders to record classes if you have memory or concentration difficulties
- Providing note takers, lecture recordings (streaming lectures online), or copies of lecture notes
- Consideration of how you will manage group tasks, oral presentations, practical classes etc
- Preferential seating e.g. next to door and an understanding that you may need to leave room if experiencing a panic attack

If you are returning to study after an absence due to a mental health problem and believe that your condition may impact on your ability to study in the future, then you may like to make an appointment to discuss your needs with a DLO.
The Academic Skills Unit supports the learning of all University of Melbourne students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate. In collaboration with faculty Student Centres, we offer workshops and tutorials on a wide range of academic skills. These include how to research and write academic texts, how best to prepare for exams, and how to give oral presentations.

The ASU helps local and international students to maximise their independent learning abilities, further develop their academic skills, enhance their language proficiency, and develop some key graduate attributes.

A range of services are offered:
- Workshops and short courses
- Individual tutorial service
- Student centre information
- Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA)

Workshops and short courses
The Academic Skills Unit offers several workshops and short courses. Topics include essay and report writing, researching and referencing, oral presentations and tutorial participation, and exam preparation. These are Faculty based and graduate school based. Also there are online courses and resources.

Individual tutorial service
Individual tutorials with an academic skills adviser can help you develop the following skills:

Effective study: time and task management, reading and note-taking, and preparing for exams.

Communication skills: tutorial participation, seminar presentations, and English pronunciation.

Academic language and writing: vocabulary, grammar, style, essay structure, critical analysis, and appropriate use of sources.

Click on the above links to access material to aid your study. Read them online or print them out for later use. Active Learning, Effective Reading and Time Management are particularly recommended. There are other more topic specific notes as well.

Please note, however, that the Academic Skills Unit is not an ‘editing service’.

This means that we do not correct your text for errors. Rather, we identify areas of weakness, discuss these with you, and refer you to relevant resources.

We cannot advise on take-home exam papers.

Your access to the individual tutorial service is limited to a maximum of 4 appointments per semester (depending on availability).

To book an individual tutorial, contact your faculty student centre.
COUNSELLING SERVICE

People attend counselling to talk about issues which affect their study, relationships, work or emotions.

Each year over 2000 students access this service, sometimes for several episodes of contact. Counsellors can help you to gain a clearer understanding of your situation, and identify strategies or options for action.

Our Counsellors are experienced psychologists and social workers, who offer a confidential, responsive and respectful service, regardless of your cultural background, beliefs or lifestyle.

Counselling is available to all students and staff members of the University. In addition, family partners, and friends can attend sessions with you if you and the counsellor agree it would be helpful.

The service is free and appointments are usually up to an hour long. You can either ring to make an Intake appointment or use the ‘Drop In’ service that runs most days at 2pm for a half hour. This is on a ‘first come, first served’ basis.

The Service also runs a range of workshops for students and has an online question and answer website called Ask Counselling. The Counselling Service website has some podcasts about sleep, mindfulness and relaxation and look at our downloadable information sheets as well. Also worth a visit is the Healthy University mental health information site where more resources are available.

STUDENT CENTRES/PRECINCTS AND STUDENT EQUITY OFFICERS

Your relevant Student Centre knows about what is happening in your area of study and what can be done to help you if you need it. The Student Advisors are experienced professional staff who are familiar with the wide range of issues that you may encounter during your time as a student. They can offer help from basic administration right through to complex personal problems.

Student Advisors can help you get in touch with the enormous range of services available to students. They can help you with planning your studies, make decisions about how and what to do next, how to get involved or how to extend your experiences beyond the classroom.

Student Equity Officers are professional staff members based in a student centre or graduate school with primary responsibility for facilitating reasonable adjustments for students experiencing academic disadvantage. They work closely with the DLU and you will be referred to them when situations are complex and/or ongoing.
## Contact Information

*Click on the service to access their home web page*

### Academic Skills Unit

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<tr>
<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:asu-enquiries@unimelb.edu.au">asu-enquiries@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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<td>Book appointments through your Student Centre</td>
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### Counselling Service

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<tr>
<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm, Wednesday 9am - 7pm</th>
<th>Telephone: +61 3 8344 6927</th>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone: +61 3 8344 6927</td>
<td>Location: Level 2, 138 Cardigan St, Carlton</td>
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### Disability Liaison Service (DLU)

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<tr>
<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:dlu-enquiries@unimelb.edu.au">dlu-enquiries@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telephone: +61 3 8344 7068</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SMS Service: 0408 556 897</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Location: Baldwin Spencer Building</td>
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### Financial Aid

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<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 8.45am - 5pm</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:finaid-info@unimelb.edu.au">finaid-info@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone: +61 3 8344 6550</td>
<td>Location: Ground Floor Baldwin Spencer Building</td>
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### International Student Services

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<tr>
<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 8.30am - 5.30pm</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:iss-info@unimelb.edu.au">iss-info@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone: +61 3 8344 4505</td>
<td>Location: International Centre, Swanston St Gate 6</td>
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### Student Centre

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Telephone: 13 MELB (13 6352)</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:13melb@unimelb.edu.au">13melb@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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### Student Housing Service

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<th>Hours: Monday - Friday 8.45am - 5pm</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:housing-info@unimelb.edu.au">housing-info@unimelb.edu.au</a></th>
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