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# Transition to university

Although major transitions such as starting at university, moving to a new city or a new country can be exciting, they can also produce feelings of uncertainty. Transitions can be stressful as they involve adapting to a new environment and lifestyle very different to the one you have been used to. Meeting new people, coping with peer pressure and becoming more independent can seem daunting.

If you are an international student, you may also find the changes in culture, climate and social interactions an additional challenge. Without familiar surroundings and support, you can find yourself struggling to cope with tasks you would have normally coped with easily.

You may have had high expectations for university. After being here for a while, the differences between your expectations and the realities begin to become clear - some things may be better than you expected, some may not have lived up to your expectations, and others may just be different.

## **Coping with change**

The first step in coping with change is to try and identify what aspects you are finding most difficult. Adjusting to major transitions takes time and it is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed. You may be familiar with some of the following feelings often experienced by students:

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## **Academic**

- Others seem more intelligent than you, perhaps you feel like an 'imposter.' If you have been used to being the 'best' you may now feel like a small fish in a large pool. Adapting to this change can take time.
- Fear of failure, particularly if you feel under pressure from others to succeed, can affect your ability to focus and maintain a sustainable work routine. Perhaps you are questioning your choice of course or subject, particularly if you made this choice partly to satisfy others' expectations.
- Managing an increased academic workload and adapting to different working schedules can seem daunting at first. It is important to remember that everyone's working routines differ, and you may need to experiment before you find the best way of managing your own academic workload.

## **Social**

- If this is the first time you have left home, adapting to increased freedom and independence can be more difficult in reality than you may have expected. In addition, finding the balance between the demands of academic work and developing new friendships can be challenging at first.
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- You might find yourself trying to cope with increased peer pressure, both socially and academically. If you find it difficult to form new friendships you can experience feelings of isolation, particularly if others appear to be socialising more than you.
  - If you are an international student, social life at university can be very different culturally to what you have been used to. Part of coping with this transition is to allow yourself time to adjust to the differences and not to feel pressured into joining social activities that may not suit you.

## ***Emotional***

- You may find yourself feeling more homesick than you anticipated, and more anxious than usual. Even if you have started to form new friendships, you can feel isolated when your usual support networks are no longer immediately available.
  - Some people experience behavioural changes such as difficulty concentrating or making decisions, and changes in your appetite or sleep.
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## **Some general strategies**

### ***Relax***

It takes time to get to adjust to major transitions and to know other people, and for them to get to know you. This means that it is unlikely that others will really know how you are feeling or what you are thinking. Consequently, you need to look after yourself.

### ***Confront difficulties***

When everything is new, you may find yourself spending endless time worrying about things you don't understand or don't know. Don't be afraid to ask; you can save yourself a lot of time and energy by finding out or asking. At the start of the year others will be feeling the same. Begin to see these occasions as a challenge rather than a problem - what can you do to change the situation?

### ***Get fit/stay fit***

It is much easier to cope with new challenges when you are fit and healthy, have a good diet and adequate sleep. If you don't already take part in sports activities consider joining something new. Try and develop a routine and think about the best ways to structure your days for you.

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## Managing pressure

There are times during the term when most people feel pressured. This is a common experience, and is not just you. 'Listen' to your body and feelings and work with them rather than against them. Try to:

- Plan ahead to reduce pressure.
- Use pressure positively - to motivate.
- Separate others' expectations from your own.
- Put it all into perspective.
- Reward yourself - give yourself praise for what you have achieved.

## Maintain some balance in life

### ***Don't work all the time***

Make sure you find a sustainable balance between work, leisure, physical and social activity. Ensure that you make some time every day to relax. A strategy that can be helpful is to ensure that you take some time off work **every day** and a whole day off work **every week**.

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## ***Maintain a balance between time alone and time with others***

Friends can be a great support, they can also be a great excuse or distraction not to work. Try to organise in advance when you will be able to do things together so that you can manage your working time more effectively.

## ***Create a routine/pattern for your day/week***

Having some regular structure to your day/week is helpful. Depending on your subject and timetable, there can be little structure in student life, so it is important to create this structure for yourself. Everyone works effectively in different ways and at different times of day, so develop a pattern that works for you and keep this as your normal routine.

## ***Separate out work and non-work times and spaces***

Try to be clear with yourself about when you are, and are not working. You may find it helps to separate your room(s) into working and non-working areas, however tiny these areas may be. This can help you to work more effectively when you have decided to and are in your 'work-place' and similarly help you to relax when you want to, away from your work. Consider working in different locations for part of the day so that you do not become isolated in your room. Experiment with working in libraries and coffee shops to see what works for you.

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## **If you wonder if Cambridge is right for you after all...**

It is very common for new students to wonder if they have made the right decisions about their choice of university or subject. However, after a period of adjustment, many students do enjoy their work and time here. For some, though, it may be that this isn't the right place or subject. If you are seriously wondering about this, it is important that you speak to your tutor before you make any final decisions. The Careers Service or Counselling Service may also be able to help you find the direction that is best for you - whether this is at Cambridge or elsewhere.

## **Finally, don't avoid the problem**

There is a wide range of excellent support available in the university, and beyond. You don't have to maintain an 'I'm OK' image all of the time. If you feel that you need to talk over how you are getting on in Cambridge, talk to someone sooner rather than later. This could include:

- Friends or family
  - Tutor or supervisor
  - Careers Service
  - College nurse
  - Chaplain
  - Student Union or Graduate Union
  - University Counselling Service
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## **Other sources of help**

There is a wide selection of self-help resources listed on the University Counselling Service website. These can be found at: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp)

Tel: 01223 332865  
Fax: 01223 760990  
Email: [counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk)  
Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>