

# mental health peer support



*here to help*



CUMSA

## guidebook

By Cambridge University Malaysia & Singapore Association (CUMSA)  
In association with Silver Ribbon (Singapore)





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We are also particularly grateful to two of our fellow CUMSA members who have been instrumental in the setting up of this project. They have been incredibly generous in sharing their experiences with depression and in offering advice, this has allowed us to better understand how to help our friends who may be facing similar problems. The use of a bulldog in our logo is not just a reference to the “black dog” of depression, but is also modelled after a dog belonging to one of the above members, in acknowledgement of the help she has given us.

In the development of this guidebook, we have made use of various resources. We have adapted material from Mental Health Matters: Handbook for Employers & Employees ([http://www.silverribbonsingapore.com/matters/Mental\\_Health\\_Matters\\_-\\_Handbook\\_for\\_Employers\\_and\\_Employees\\_271112.pdf](http://www.silverribbonsingapore.com/matters/Mental_Health_Matters_-_Handbook_for_Employers_and_Employees_271112.pdf)) as well as from a list of useful contacts by Alternative Welcome.





## OBJECTIVE

The purpose of the Mental Health Peer Support scheme is to connect those members of CUMSA who have experienced mental health issues in the past and moved on with their lives (Supporters), to those who may be, or are experiencing such conditions (Peers). This is to enable Peers to receive moral support and to have their concerns allayed by being able to speak to somebody who has had such an experience before and understands what they are going through.

If you are reading this, you are most probably a Supporter – thus the reason this booklet is addressed to Supporters. We cannot pretend to know what it's like, but we know that even those close to you may be hard pressed to understand the true nature of mental illness. We hope you can give people the empathy they might require.

Mental health issues are more common than we might initially believe. With CUMSA as the go-between, we hope that the effort and experience of caring members of the Singaporean community can channel their help towards those who need it most.

In addition, by addressing the issue in an open manner, we hope to relieve some of the stigma attached to mental illness, and to spread the word that mental illness is just like a physical illness – it is treatable, and people who experience it are no less than people who don't.



## OVERVIEW

- Peers will anonymously (only 2 members of the Committee will know their identity for administrative purposes) register at the 'Mental Health Supporter Support' portal on CUMSA's website ([www.cumsa.org](http://www.cumsa.org)). They will then be linked to a Supporter, with respective contact details sent to both parties. A Supporter should then **initiate contact**.
- At this point, and throughout all the following points, a Supporter should **provide moral support** to the Peer. Using analogy with their own experiences, it is an effective way to allay the concerns of the Peer. A guide to the '*Signs and Symptoms of Common Medical Disorders*' (see section 4) can help a Supporter better tailor his/her advice to the specific Peer. **Note that as stated above, this advice should not be medical in nature – more akin to friendship than counselling.**
- A Supporter should, as soon as possible, **encourage the Peer to seek professional care**. To facilitate this process, there follows in this booklet a list of '*Contacts in Cambridge*' regarding mental health (see section 2), and a guide to the '*Procedures for Getting Professional Help*' (see section 3).
- Once the Peer has sought out help, Supporters should continue to provide moral support to the Peer (especially in the intervals between visiting a professional), and should always **urge adherence to professional advice**.
- Supporters are the most effective way **to raise awareness** (having first-hand experience), so it would certainly be beneficial (though not necessary) for the Supporter to talk openly about such conditions so as to reduce the stigma.
- A Supporter might also **recommend others to themselves become Supporters** so the programme can continue after the current crop of Supporters has left the university.



## NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Please do not be worried about your problems being too “trivial” to see a doctor, or fear they may be “wasting people’s time”. Seeking professional help is a positive choice, and professionals would prefer you to seek help when a problem is less serious so that it can be resolved more easily!

The following is a bare outline of the procedures for getting help in Cambridge. Not everyone reacts to treatment in the same way, so please keep trying, even when the treatment seems to be failing. Again, all are different, so the perfect doctor, or medication, or form of treatment may only come after a number of unsuccessful attempts.

You should ***seek out your tutor and/or college nurse*** (initially, one may refer you to the other). They will be able to provide further advice (and often contacts) about pursuing further help.

**Note:** If you are having trouble keeping up with work, he/she should not be afraid to inform their tutor. You will not be stigmatised nor academically discriminated against. A tutor can speak to your Director of Studies and help put work on hold until you feel better able to cope.

College staff may then refer you to a ***GP in town***, or indeed you may go of your own volition. You should not expect to receive treatment at this stage. You will most likely be referred to a mental health professional in Cambridge.

**Note:** Seeing a GP is sometimes a precondition to seeking more specialised help (a form of triage if you will). Although it may seem ineffectual, it is an important part of the process.



It is at this stage that you should ***seek out a mental health professional in Cambridge***. This will probably be on referral from the doctor, or less conventionally, on the advice of your tutor. Additionally, some seek out a professional themselves.

**Note:** Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in Cambridge tend to be very busy. It is at this stage very easy to become disheartened or discouraged. It is thus important to be patient, and if need be (and this is heartily recommended) make appointments with a number of professionals, not just the one you were referred to. An time slot may become free sooner than you expect!

One may find that the mental health professionals in Cambridge are too busy, or simply do not meet your personal needs. In such a case, ***seeing a professional outside Cambridge*** may be a good option. They will often be more expensive, but one may often receive better treatment (though this is certainly not a guarantee)

## **Other Issues:**

### **NHS vs Private**

An NHS doctor will almost certainly be cheaper not only as regards up front fees, but will also be able to provide prescriptions for which the medicine will cost much less.

However, NHS psychiatrists might be busy and require a longer waiting time, so even with a referral, it may take a great deal of time to get a slot.



## **Don't give up!**

This has been mentioned before, but it is important to stay determined try as many doctors as possible should symptoms persist. Apart from the fact that it is hard to get an appointment:

There is naturally a tendency to under-diagnose mental health issues, because of how prolific these problems are. Symptoms might be attributed to academic stress or homesickness (as would be the case with fellow Singaporeans). While these can sometimes be at the root of it, genuine mental health symptoms can be mistaken for these more benign feelings.



# SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF COMMON MENTAL DISORDERS

Mental health issues are just like physical illnesses – they can strike anyone, they often have detectable symptoms, and they are treatable. By being aware of common signs of mental illnesses, you may be able to encourage your friends to seek professional help if they appear to be experiencing a mental health issue that goes beyond just being “stressed out”.

## *Depression*

People who are depressed may

- Be tearful, nervous or irritable
- Have low confidence
- Lose interest in their work and find it difficult to concentrate
- Feel overwhelmed and unable to deliver what is expected of them
- Lose their appetite
- Get tired easily

At worst, they may feel suicidal.



## *Bipolar disorder*

Bipolar disorder is also known as “manic depression” and is characterized by the constant changing of moods. A person with bipolar experiences highs and lows, and the period may vary from person to person. People with bipolar may experience

- Extreme mood swings
- Rash spending sprees
- Poor concentration and be easily distracted
- Poor appetite and weight loss
- Heightened sense of self-importance
- Decreased need for sleep

## *Anxiety*

Anxiety takes many forms, from general anxiety to anxiety triggered by a particular situation (phobia). People experiencing anxiety may seem unusually worried or fearful in most situations. They may

- Appear pale and tense
- Be easily startled by everyday sounds
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Be irritable
- Try to avoid certain situations



## *Panic attacks*

Someone experiencing panic attacks may breathe rapidly, sweat, feel very hot or cold, feel sick or feel faint. A task that other people consider simple may seem impossible to them. The symptoms of a severe panic attack can be quite similar to a heart attack, and someone experiencing one may be convinced they are going to die.

## *Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)*

OCD is a common form of anxiety involving distressing repetitive thoughts. Compulsions are the actions which people feel they must repeat to feel less anxious or stop their obsessive thoughts. For example, some people cannot stop thinking about germs and the diseases they could catch. To cope with this anxiety, they may start washing their hands over and over again. Compulsions commonly involve checking, cleaning, counting or dressing rituals.

## *Schizophrenia*

Schizophrenia is a common and debilitating disorder characterized by the inability to distinguish between what is real and what isn't. From the outsider's point of view, a Peer's behaviour might seem odd or outrageous. They may include

- Seeing, hearing, smelling or feeling things that aren't really there
- Showing no emotion or expressing inappropriate effect (eg giggling at a funeral)
- Showing little interest or drive in daily activities
- Exhibiting disorganized speech or behaviour
- Inability to remember things
- Inability to process information



## *Signs of relapse*

Just as there are warning signs of mental health issues, there are also warning signs to its relapse. A percentage of relapse is to be expected; recognizing early signs and being proactive can help prevent or minimize a relapse. Prior to a relapse, people will often experience changes in their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Here are some observable signs that can be taken note of:

- Loss of interest/motivation
- Difficulty sleeping or change in sleeping habits
- Neglecting personal care and seeming to be more distant
- Alcohol/drug use
- Extreme anger outburst



## USEFUL CONTACTS

This is a list of people you may approach for help if you think you, or your friend, may be experiencing mental health issues.

**We have not listed any specific psychiatrists below.** This is because we don't feel it within our capability to recommend any in particular, nor would we be able to provide a comprehensive list true of the date you are reading this. This is also in the understanding that each case is unique and it is for the Peer to choose their own psychiatrist on the advice of their Tutor or nurse. In addition, the experience of the Supporter is more relevant to the choice than anything we can provide here.

### *Cambridge University helplines*

- Your JCR welfare rep
- Your JCR Women's Officer, International Officer or LGBT Officer
- Your tutor, DOS, Senior Tutor, or dean
- Your college nurse, college counselor, or college chaplain
- The CUSU Welfare Officer, CUSU Women's Officer, the Graduate Union President, the LGBT President
- CUSU Eating Disorders support: 01223 (7)4055, open 8pm to 10pm, Mon and Wed during full term, or e-mail at [eds@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:eds@cusu.cam.ac.uk)
- CUSU Student Advice Service: 01223 (7)46999, [www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk)
- The Student Advisory Service
- University Counselling (01223 332 865) or [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk)



## *Non-university helplines*

- Linkline (anonymous listeners on 01223 367 575, from 7pm to 7am)
- Samaritans (24 hours): 08457 90 90 90
- NHS Direct (24 hours): 0845 46 47
- B-eat Eating Disorders: 0845 634 14 14 (Monday to Friday 10.30am to 8.30pm and Saturdays 1.00pm - 4.30pm)
- B-eat Youth Helpline: 0845 634 7650 (Monday to Friday evenings from 4.30pm to 8.30pm and Saturdays 1.00pm - 4.30pm.) If you are 25 or under, this offers a call back service, so if you want to save the cost of the call please ask.
- Saneline: 0845 767 8000 (6pm to 11pm)
- Mind Info line: 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 6.00pm)
- Self Harm UK:  
<http://www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm>
- Centre 33 offers free counselling for young people aged between 12 and 25. Helpline at 01223 316 488, website at [www.centre33.org.uk](http://www.centre33.org.uk).
- Rethink offers advice and information on mental health issues. Advice line at 0845 456 0455, website at <http://www.rethink.org>