

# Heading to university? This toolkit is for you.



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**Firstly, we'd like to say congratulations. It's a real achievement to get a place at university.**

**Take a moment to reflect on how hard you've worked and the exciting new chapter ahead.**

The transition from school to university can be a difficult one. It typically comes at a point in life when many individuals are at a higher risk of developing a mental health issue, such as an eating disorder.

Eating disorders often arise during transitional phases. This is because experiencing transitions – or change – can bring about challenges or illuminate vulnerabilities that have the potential to overwhelm us and our ability to cope.

For many people, the experience of challenge or uncertainty can amplify the 'voice' of the eating disorder. It can seem louder as you attempt to navigate your emotional experience and find ways to cope.

*But challenge is merely an **opportunity** to demonstrate your commitment to your recovery and yourself.*

Some of you reading this may have already been diagnosed with an eating disorder. Others may suspect they have a problem. Wherever you're at in your journey, preparing for university whilst struggling with your relationship to food and your body is a unique challenge.

**We've compiled practical tips from our specialist team for you to take away with you.**

## Preparing for this new transition.

You probably have a lot of expectations, hopes and fears for the coming weeks and months.

For some, going to university feels like a “rite of passage” and the stories of our siblings and elders can help paint a picture of what to expect.

Despite this, your experience of university will be your **own**. Whilst it may feel like turning over a new leaf, **you will still be you**. And that's a really positive thing.

As you prepare for the transition, take a moment to reflect on what's ahead and ask yourself the following questions as prompts:

- How do I feel around new groups of people?
- How am I feeling about preparing and eating meals by myself? With others?
- Do I grant myself permission to say “no” when I don’t have the energy?
- How will I create a safe space for myself in my new accommodation?

Take a few moments to write down any fears or uncertainties that arise on a piece of paper (**without judgement** and **with compassion** for the fact that we all struggle at times). On the corresponding page, respond to each note with kindness and gentleness, like that of the perspective of a friend.

This process helps to **frame** our thoughts and consider alternative ways to think, feel and prepare for change.

***“To prepare is half the victory”***



# Creating a routine that works for you.

A big part of recovery involves holding yourself accountable to your goals and taking proactive steps towards creating an environment that fosters recovery.

As you take time to pack your university essentials (such as clothes, toiletries and books), it's equally important to consider your **mental wellbeing**, and what you need to 'pack' for this.

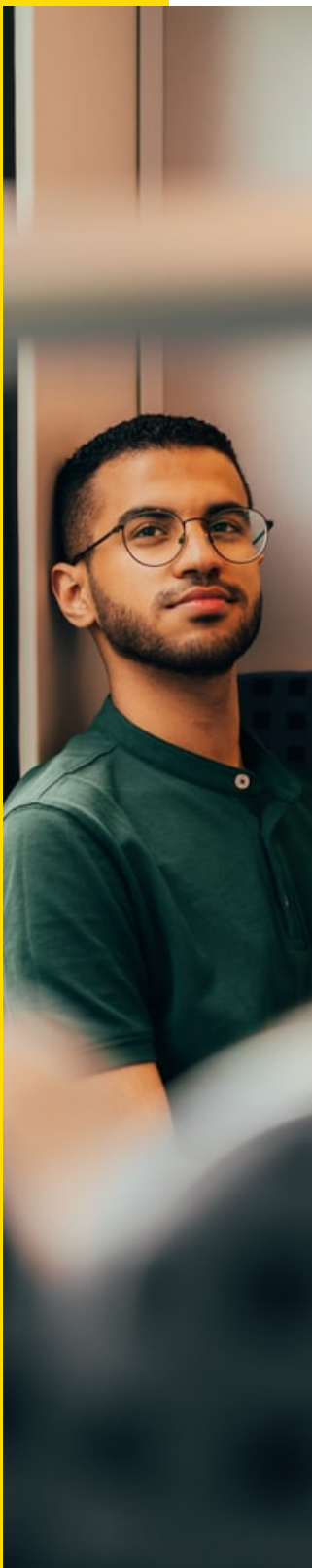
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**Recovery is a mindset, and it's possible to cultivate it wherever you are. If there's one thing to pack in your suitcase to take to uni – it's self-confidence and belief that you can, and will, recover. And this university chapter might just be the place that you do it in.**

*Orri Guest Blogger*

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On the next page is a checklist that you can print out and refer to when considering how you'll support your mental wellbeing at university.



- ☐ *Register at your local GP and share your eating disorder treatment plan with them*
- ☐ *Contact your university Wellbeing Department. You can disclose your eating disorder so that you are on their radar*
- ☐ *When you know who they are, schedule a meeting with your Personal Tutor. They can support you with wellbeing and academic concerns*
- ☐ *Get to know the campus and research your local area for food shops in advance*
- ☐ *With a loved one (if needed), compile a food shopping list - more on this later!*
- ☐ *Create a budget that considers all spending areas including food, travel, uni supplies, social spending, etc. Make sure to plan for unexpected expenses too*
- ☐ *Review your university timetable and highlight gaps that you can use for self-care (such as therapy, journaling, reading, meditation, gentle movement, etc)*
- ☐ *Alongside this, it may be helpful to map out how your meal plan will fit in with your day-to-day schedule. Perhaps you'll need to bring a snack to a lecture?*
- ☐ *If it helps, schedule times to chat with loved ones/family members at home. Having regular touchpoints in the diary provides ensures there's space to be heard*
- ☐ *Consider what you need to make your room and study space a calm and grounding space. Perhaps you want to print off affirmations in advance?*
- ☐ *If needed, write up a safety plan that includes a list of activities you can lean on for those really difficult days*
- ☐ *Browse the societies on offer and sign up to any that appeal to you and that will keep you connected to others*
- ☐ *Consider what help you can take with you. You've already done a lot of work in recovery - what tools will you be taking with you?*
- ☐ *Have a list of support services or helplines that you can turn to during difficult times. We've included some at the end of this workbook*

# Planning Mealtimes

Depending upon where you're at in recovery, you may have some worries around food and handling mealtimes as a student.

Moving away from loved ones, an established support network, and a familiar routine will be an adjustment. It might take a bit of time to get used to your flatmates and how food and mealtimes will be handled as a group. Every flat is different, so take it day by day.

Despite how daunting and anxiety-provoking these transitional experiences can be, knowing and owning our challenges is a huge step forward in recovery...and finding a new structure can actually illuminate new, important areas to work on in our recovery.

**Our Senior Dietitian, Paula, shares her suggestions for navigating mealtimes as a student...**

## Plan ahead – and do so with the support of loved ones

As much as you probably don't want to think about food and mealtimes, "to prepare is half the victory".

Take a moment to sit with a loved one and discuss your anxieties and what your triggers might be whilst at university. The more predictability you can create, the more secure you'll feel in your choices and goals for recovery.

Finding safe foods and meals – and learning how to cook and prepare them – will take some of the difficult decision-making out of the process and you can hold yourself accountable to your loved ones.





## Take time to consider how to handle portions

Assessing hunger levels or knowing a “normal” portion size is often skewed when eating disorder thoughts take over.

Take a moment to consider the best way to ensure your portions are right for you and your recovery: perhaps a loved one can help you, or you could receive guidance in advance from your therapist and/or dietitian. The eating disorder may rear its head when plating food, but know that this is merely an opportunity for victory over an illness that’s already taken far too much away from you. *Stay strong.*

### **Activity: Draw up a good old fashioned shopping list!**

- 1) Fold your paper into 4 and label each section – Protein, Carbohydrates, Fruit & Veg & Dairy**
- 2) Make sure that when you write your list, there is something in each section**

# Spanish Tomato Rice with Fried Chickpeas and Roasted Vegetables

A recipe to take with you from our Chef, Ben!

## Ingredients

### Rice

2 cups easy cook long grain rice (rinsed 5 times)  
2.5 cups of vegetable stock (625ml)  
1 tin peeled tomatoes  
1 tsp tomato paste  
1 tsp paprika  
2 bay leaves  
1 bunch of thyme  
1 onion peeled and diced  
2 garlic cloves peeled and finely chopped  
1 cup frozen peas  
handful of picked basil leaves  
dried mixed herbs  
1 lemon quartered  
2 tbsp olive oil  
salt  
pepper

### Chickpeas and Roasted Veg

2 tins of chickpeas (drained and rinsed)  
1 pepper (deseeded and diced)  
1 aubergine (diced into 2 cm chunks)  
1 courgette (diced into 2 cm chunks)  
dried mixed herbs  
salt  
pepper  
2 tbsp olive oil

**Serves 4**

**Prep time: 30 mins**

**Cook time: 45 mins**

## Method

1. Preheat the oven to 200 degrees C. First, start by heating the olive oil in medium saucepan over a medium high heat. Put in the onions and 1 tsp of salt and fry until the onions have darkened and gone very soft (10 minutes). Add the chopped garlic and fry for another 2 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent anything from burning
2. Meanwhile, toss all the ingredients for the Chickpeas and Roasted Veg into a mixing bowl and then empty onto a lined baking tray big enough to hold everything without any ingredients overlapping. Bake for 20 minutes until the chickpeas are golden brown and the vegetables are slightly charred
3. Back in the saucepan, add the paprika and tomato paste and fry for a further 2 minutes. This gets rid of any bitter, raw flavours in the tomato paste and paprika. Now add the tin of tomatoes, bay leaves, thyme and bring to the boil and then cook over a medium heat for an additional 10-15 minutes or until reduced by half and darkened in colour
4. Add the rice and mix thoroughly into the reduced tomato. Now add the stock, frozen peas and bring to the boil. Once boiling, cover with a lid and turn the heat down to the lowest flame and leave to simmer (without removing the lid) for 18 minutes
5. Once the 18 minutes is up, remove the lid and turn over the rice with a wide spoon to break the grains apart and fluff it up. Add the basil and stir it through, season with salt and pepper to your taste and serve with the chickpeas and roasted veg on top with a lemon wedge on the side

# Socialising and social eating.

University is a time of **exploration** and **connection**. As you start making friendships and exploring your new area, you may find that eating out - and eating as a group - is a regular occurrence.

If the thought of this fills you with dread, that is ok. Acknowledge the emotions that arise and, with **compassion**, let them pass through you.

As we've said before, this is simply another opportunity to challenge the eating disorder. By taking the leap and accepting invitations to socialise is how you prove your **courage** and **resilience** in the face of adversity.

**When you're having fun with friends, there's no room for an eating disorder.**

**We spoke to Kendra, Orri's Senior Occupational Therapist, to hear her tips for coping with social eating:**



## Plan, plan, plan

Check in with where you are going and what food will be on the menu. The key here is to feel as prepared as possible whilst mitigating any moments of feeling too overwhelmed.

*"Often we try and control those things that are external to us: instead think about our internal locus of control - our attitude, our behaviours."*

There's only so much we can control that's external to us, but we often forget our **internal** locus of control, and how this can also support us in challenging situations.

**Ask yourself:** *What could I do differently that could help ease myself into the change? How could I (personally) approach it differently?*

## Communication is key

Speak to the people you are socialising with - those important individuals that you trust - and discuss your fears and concerns to ensure that you can get support when you need it.

Remember, **it is ok to say no!** If you feel you're not ready for a big brunch celebration, then voice this. Your friends and family will understand that you need to take things at your pace, and it is really self-aware of you to understand your limitations.

On this note, if you feel you want to push yourself a little to attend a social event but need a helping hand, know that it is ok to ask for support. **Remember, you have your safety network of people around you - use them.**

## Forgive yourself

Perhaps the thought of parties, social events and virtual meet-ups is overwhelming. If so, we ask that you **forgive** yourself for having these concerns.

Often, at the root of the concern is a **protective intent**, so have **compassion** for the part of you that's simply trying to keep you **safe**.

You do not need to attend *all* the events - especially if this makes you feel unhappy, uneasy or drained.

Being **true to who you are** is so much more important.

## Practise...

Pace yourself, approach it all **gently**, and in an environment that you're familiar with.

When you feel ready, gradually grade it by increasing the uncertainty and level of unknown.

Remember, this is *your* journey and your energy towards socialising will wax and wane in response to how you're feeling - **you're human!**

**It is important to create a safe space for YOU and know that you can escape to it when things begin to feel "too much".**

## Paula, Senior Dietitian, highlights how normal it is to feel overwhelmed in social situations...

*"Socialising can be overwhelming for people regardless of whether they're suffering with an eating disorder or not! Take a moment to consider what and where your safe space is and know that you can return to for reflection and peace and quiet. Self-care is mighty important."*

**All of these actions are ways of ensuring you can keep your recovery the priority - it is not "needy" or "weak" to need time out.**



# Disclosing your eating disorder to friends or flatmates

Eating disorders can be extremely isolating illnesses, and the secrecy that often comes with them can keep a person trapped within their illness. This can make it harder for people on the outside to identify that there's a problem and to intervene.

Right now, you might be considering whether or not you'll disclose your eating disorder to university friends or flatmates. Perhaps you're wondering what to say, how you'll say it, and what the person's reaction might be.

The fact of the matter is: **you don't have to share anything that you don't feel comfortable sharing.**

Mental health is an extremely **personal** thing, and how much we share will be entirely dependent upon where we're at in our journeys and who we're communicating with.

It takes time to settle into university and find good friends that we trust and can talk openly with. If the thought of disclosure is giving rise to feelings of anxiety, shame, and fear of rejection - take it **slowly**. Have **compassion** for the part of you that might be fearful, respond with **kindness**, and go at your **pace**.

Disclosing what we're going through can be helpful for 1) holding us accountable to our goals for recovery, and 2) ensuring we're being looked after by our support network.

As they say, *"a problem shared is a problem halved"* - there will be people who actively want to help and support you, and it may be that keeping the eating disorder a secret only serves to exacerbate the hold that it has over you. Opening up, as scary as that may be, could represent a big step in the direction of letting go of the illness, so that more **love** and **kindness** can come in and take its place.

## Coping with exams.

You may notice during exam and assessment periods that your eating disorder feels amplified.

When we're in a situation that feels out of control and overwhelming - such as during exams - we can look outside of ourselves to cope.

For people with an eating disorder diagnosis, this coping can often turn towards controlling food or body weight.

## It is normal to feel stress - it's our response to it that matters.

When we talk about stress, we're talking about cortisol and the nervous system.

As humans, when we experience something that is stressful, our body responds by releasing a natural hormone called cortisol. It is released by the adrenal glands as part of our fight or flight nervous system response.

Stress is a **normal** feeling that arises in response to 'stressors'. In this case, exams would be the stressor.

What's important is how we respond when we're feeling stressed - the compulsions and preoccupations we might develop in an attempt to cope.

**Here are our tips for coping with stress...**



## Bring awareness to eating disorder compulsions

It is important to bring **compassionate awareness** to how we may be coping during moments of overwhelm.

Notice any urges to behave in a certain way and, without judgement, compassionately respond to the underlying trigger – which is often related to stress or fear.

Know that you can **always** reach out for help – from loved ones or treatment teams – when things feel too overwhelming.

## Challenge the pull towards perfectionism

People with eating disorders are often high-functioning individuals and can have perfectionist tendencies.

Exams and assessments may exacerbate the pull towards perfectionism – why?

People with eating disorders can struggle with their sense of self-worth and may therefore look to external things or achievements in the hope of finding a sense of security and worth. For some, this may include performing well in exams and assessments. Here, self-worth is conditional, i.e. dependent upon something.

Know that **your exams do not define you. There is so much more to you** than your performance at school, college or university. In recovery, you'll uncover this unconditional self-worth and self-trust.

***Recognise the incredible work you've already done – a challenging time doesn't undo any of that work.***

# Coping with expectations.

Going to university may be one of your goals for recovery.

Expectations and goals can be important motivating factors in recovery, but the moment they become be-all-and-end-all, we can put ourselves in a space where we're adding extra pressure and extra stress.

This is significant because recovery itself can already be very stressful. When someone engages in therapy, the therapist is asking that person to participate in a **transitional change**. And when we're firmly attached to a way of thinking or behaving, the prospect of change can be really challenging.

As such, expectations when in recovery have to be held very **gently**. When they are motivating and encouraging positive and constructive actions, they can really support our recovery journey. But the moment the expectation is combined with the self-critic – the part of us that says we're 'never doing or achieving enough' – we tend to engage in self-sabotage and undermine our healing journey of recovery.

## Make sure your goals are achievable

When crafting your goals for recovery, hold the idea of realism around your expectations, and remind yourself that you need to take things day-by-day.

It would be impossible to achieve everything in one day. And this is ok! **You are human!**

Pacing our recovery ensures that we are making **sustainable changes** that aren't going to cause too much overwhelm in the long run.

***Remember, the small steps still count  
and can lead to big changes. Pace  
yourself.***

## Setting intentions for recovery.

Recovery from an eating disorder does not happen overnight, nor is it a linear journey. Often, we start off on our recovery journeys holding onto a vague understand of what “recovery” is and looks like, but not really knowing what that yet means for us individually.

The start of the week can therefore be challenging as we get to grips with the prospect of a full week ahead of hard work at university or in therapy.

Finding motivation when we have so many goals or things to “work on” can be overwhelming, but one of the ways to combat this is by setting an intention for the week.

Intentions help give us direction, similar to getting on a bike with full knowledge of where you’re headed or how long you’re going to ride for. It adds a reassuring sense of certainty in your day-to-day

They help us to narrow our focus on one particular goal, therefore removing the complexity that comes with multiple goals – akin to many spinning plates!

They also help us to hold ourselves accountable to our goals for recovery. When we know what our one goal for the week is, we can communicate this to our wider support network with the knowledge that everyone is on board and rooting for our recovery

# How to set an intention

## **1. If nothing comes to mind right away – no worries! Pause for a few minutes and look to the memorable triad of: mind, body, spirit**

Where are you in your recovery under each of those categories?

With full honesty: what needs more work this week? What is the one thing you could do consistently this week that would most support your recovery?

## **2. Commit to it by saying it out loud, writing it down and/or telling someone close to you**

By voicing our wants and needs we're putting it out there to the universe and allowing it to manifest. We're also making a mini pact with ourselves and loved ones

## **3. Check in with yourself and your intention every morning.**

Notice, with gentle curiosity and kindness, whether your motivation wanes throughout the day.

As long as you're bringing awareness to this process, that's ok. Recognise that this checking in process is still a huge part of recovery, as well as learning to be mindfully aware and caring towards yourself

## **If inspiration is needed, here are some example recovery intentions:**

*I will be honest with my parent/partner/best friend/therapist about how I am feeling each day*

*I will communicate when I am struggling with my food plan*

*I will give myself rest when I feel that my body needs it*

*I will unfollow people on social media who bring me negative energy*

*I will say no to activities that I don't have the energy for*

# One last message from us.

The transition to student life is a big milestone. It represents a migration into a new, more independent chapter.

It's also a time of great exploration where we get to know ourselves on a deeper level and forge new connections.

But it's also an *adjustment*. Unfortunately we can't leave our eating disorders behind when we head to university, so we have to plan for how we'll manage recovery in a new setting, with new routines and social circles.

However, **with challenge, comes opportunity.**

As Senior Dietitian, Paula, highlighted: *"Recovering at university is no different from recovering at home. It's just different pressures that come into play. We have to plan for how we'll resist those pressures by asking, how will I honour my recovery plan?"*

***Remember, university is your experience to live and enjoy, so do so in your own way, at your own pace, whilst remaining connected to your support networks.***

***We hope this toolkit helps you to navigate your new chapter, with the reminder that you are not alone.***

## Some support services you may find helpful.

- Beat's student helpline: 0808 801 0811
- Beat's leaflet for informing a GP about your eating disorder:  
<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/resource-index-page/gp-leaflet-first-steps/>
- Student Minds peer support groups:  
<https://www.studentminds.org.uk/ourpeersupportprogrammes.html>
- Nightline's student helpline: <https://nightline.ac.uk/want-to-talk/>
- Samaritans helpline, available 365 days a year: 116 123
- PAPYRUS, a charity for the prevention of young suicide: 0800 068 4141
- Shout, mental health text service: <https://giveusashout.org/>
- The Mix, mental health support for under 25s:  
<https://www.themix.org.uk/mental-health>
- Orri's blog: <https://www.orri-uk.com/blog/>
- Orri's other downloadable workbooks: <https://www.orri-uk.com/workshops-events/>



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