

Introduction to resilience and wellbeing

A guide for undergraduate physics students



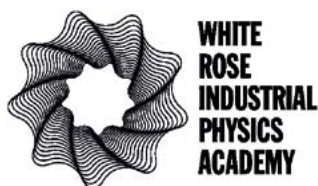
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IOP Institute of Physics

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Introduction

Your time at university should be a great experience – it is an opportunity to forge new and lasting friendships, gain new skills, and develop a deeper and richer knowledge of physics. The perception is that you'll work hard and play hard, join some clubs, gain those all-important employability skills, and mostly, you'll be happy. However, we recognise at times you may encounter stressful and challenging situations and, with support, you can take action to positively overcome these.

The Institute of Physics (IOP) and the White Rose Industrial Academy (WRIPA) have collaborated to produce this Resilience and Wellbeing Guide for undergraduate physics students. This short guide contains information to help you develop and maintain your resilience and wellbeing. It will support you to deal with setbacks, embrace change and make the most of your time at university. There are many things and reasons that can test your resilience at university – for me it was working more or less full-time, having caring responsibilities at home, feeling less academic, and struggling with my identity. And, on top of that, I didn't know what my degree would lead to. I was fortunate enough to have one good friend who helped me through all of this. However, I wish I had known of some of the resources featured in this guide because I could have understood the importance of, and benefited from, the support and expertise that were available to me.

Bumblng along is something that I don't recommend. Speak to experts because their support and advice will help you emerge from your struggles with more clarity, focus, and deeper self-understanding. Often, such professionals will help you deep dive into your feelings. Feelings should not be dismissed without resolving how you'll carry them with you throughout life, as they will resurface in times of stress – I know as I've experienced this. If your stress is temporary, for example, you're looking for accommodation for a placement, or you're not doing so well in a particular module, don't bottle it up. Talking and taking action is hugely important to help you come up with your own solutions and better understand how to respond differently to similar circumstances in the future.

So, if you, or someone you know, are feeling overwhelmed please take time out to seek help. At the moment, I am learning the art of deep breathing, how to be kind to myself, and how to understand myself better. Remember no thought or struggle is insignificant – you and your wellbeing matters.

Vishanti Fox

CPD Manager, Institute of Physics

What is resilience and wellbeing?

Resilience is not something you are born with or without, it is your ability to cope and bounce back from difficult situations. We all face challenges throughout our lives and while they can be difficult at the time, they provide an opportunity to develop our resilience and grow as a person.

This short guide contains information to help you develop and maintain your wellbeing and resilience. It is not intended to be a definitive list, and what may seem like contradictory advice to you might be beneficial to someone else.

Wellbeing is about being healthy, happy and feeling good about yourself. Maintaining your wellbeing will allow you to flourish and develop a high level of resilience.

Identifying the triggers that disrupt your wellbeing can help you too manage and mitigate them. Whether you have exams, a job interview, or a deadline on the horizon, it can all add up and create a sense of pressure. Other triggers might be when there is not enough clarity about what you should be doing, when you or your work is being criticised, or when your workload is too high. Triggers can also arise from your personal life which can affect your wellbeing. In order to maintain your wellbeing and bounce back from difficult situations or set-backs, you will need to embrace change which could include: eating more healthily, exercising regularly, practising mindfulness and connecting with others.

Even if you feel comfortable and in control at the moment, you may face challenges in the future. Developing an understanding of what triggers problems for you, and thinking in advance of how to deal with them, should help you to manage them more effectively. By cultivating a positive mindset and having an optimistic outlook to life you can minimise negative thoughts, and become better able to cope and adapt to changes as and when they arise. If you practice positive thinking, you will be more open to opportunities and make the most of any situation.

When things do not go to plan...

It is important to take time to reflect when the outcomes are not as you expected. Reflection is a key tool for success – it will enable you to identify why things did not work out, learn from it.

Reflect on your successes, too – they are hard earned and forgotten easily when focusing on problems.

Take action to build your resilience

Time management

Plan your time effectively. To do this you will need to prioritise your workload and factor in regular breaks and opportunities to reflect. You may need to adjust your plans and mindset to accommodate unexpected interruptions to keep on track. Good time management will allow you to assess progress and identify when you need to communicate a potential delay to others.

Take action

There is a cycle to building up your self-confidence and it is this: the more you do something, the more competence you develop for it, which leads to inner self-belief and more confidence. Whenever you decide to take committed, intentional action 'fear of failure' is reduced. A daily action plan may help, so that actions or goals are achievable – for example, try to limit it to three per day. Tick off your goals when you have completed them because this will give you a sense of achievement.

Focus on what you can control

Often, when you focus on what you cannot control it can make you feel overwhelmed, lost or powerless. By focusing your time and energy on what you can control it can empower you to take action to improve your situation and boost confidence.

Focus on you

Focus on your aspiration and don't compare yourself with others. You can admire and learn from other people's success, but remain focused on you and your ambitions.

Embrace change

Change can be daunting as you may be forced to come out of your comfort zone. Focusing on one small change at a time can help overcome what seems as a daunting prospect to an enriching experience. Overcoming the fear of change allows you to develop new skills, gain experience, and build your confidence and self-belief. For example, when starting your studies or a new topic you may negatively view your competency or skill level. Remember to recognise the stage you are at. Taking one small step after another you will be surprised how your skills level or knowledge grow.



Be compassionate towards ourselves

Feeling stressed and being hard on ourselves is common. A good way to be kind to yourself is to ask what advice you would give to a friend in a similar situation. This approach helps you to reflect on your own behaviour patterns. Are my expectations too high? Am I being too hard on myself? It offers a way to be more objective and adopt a compassionate view of yourself and your situation. Self-compassion is an antidote to self-judgement.

Your identity

We are all different and need to accept and respect each other's uniqueness. However, we are aware that sometimes people may not be as accepting and this can make us feel vulnerable and isolated. If you experience prejudice or have been discriminated against, it is important to talk to someone as it is not acceptable and should not be tolerated.

Build relationships that work for you...

Networks and forums

You are not alone in experiencing challenge and frustration. Depending on your situation and the issue you want to address, online forums and networks can be a quick way to discover if others have experienced similar issues and how they have been resolved. Be careful what information you disclose, especially if it is personal and carefully assess it is appropriate to share publicly.

Leisure time

Make time for leisure activities. This can include walking, sports, hanging-out with friends or spending your time in a way that makes you feel happy. Check out your local area and Students' Union for societies and sports clubs you could get involved in – to either keep up your current hobbies or try something new.

Trust your instincts

Trust your instincts and say 'no' when the situation does not feel right for you or you do not have the time. You do not need to always explain why, but you should decline politely.



How am I feeling?

Everybody has days that just do not seem to go right, or you just do not feel great – we all experience this at times

There may be times when you are overly stressed and anxious and you might not enjoy things you usually do. If your mood struggles to lift, despite your best efforts to address this, it is important to seek help and advice.

How you are feeling today is okay and valid

Your feelings may change quickly and often, though you will know when things are not right for you. That is the time to find someone to talk to. Remember that asking for help is a sign of strength and not a sign of weakness. This can also reduce any feelings of isolation which can make situations feel worse.

Trust in yourself

It is important to acknowledge your intuition and trust your judgement. This will help you make choices in whether to engage in situations or circumstances that will have a positive or negative impact on your wellbeing.

And breathe...

Deep breathing exercises can help you to keep calm and reduce stress and anxiety. You can find more information via the organisations listed at the end of this guide.

Look to confide in a friend, trusted family member, personal tutor or a colleague at work. Contact a dedicated charity, or visit your local GP.

There are also national support services who offer free help and resources. See page 15 for more details.

Worried about a friend or colleague?

Do offer help and support if you see a friend in need and feel able to, or signpost them to support services.

...You might be just the person they needed to talk to today.

Don't be afraid to ask for help

The key is to find someone you can confide in, who will take the time to listen to you without judgement.

The more proactive you are about seeking help and taking action, the better you will feel. This will enable you to identify solutions that work for you.

Learning from the experience of others

Everyone manages their wellbeing differently and we can learn from each other's experiences.

Let's hear about one physics student's journey

"It was the 4th year exam season and I was really stressed and anxious about the exams. I've always had really bad imposter syndrome but during this period it was out of control and I wasn't able to eat or sleep at all due to the stress.

"I spoke to multiple people in the physics department about how I was feeling. I told them I'd be able to continue with my course, because at the time I was scared of being a quitter and thought I would be a failure. But ultimately it got worse, and I found I couldn't sit the exams.

"It was suggested to me by my department and GP that I sign up for the university counselling service, and when I (finally) did I received regular 1-1 counselling sessions. These were super helpful, as I am naturally a very quiet person and keep my thoughts to myself, and it was nice to be able to talk about how I was feeling. This was very difficult at first but gradually became easier.

"I started going to the gym on a regular basis again which was a really good way of relaxing and taking my mind off things.

"I am generally more relaxed and a little bit more confident in myself. I also have a much better routine of food and sleep, and a better university to life balance – as before it felt like it was all university.

"I still struggle with comparing myself to others, but now I can generally notice myself doing it and know how to manage those feelings. To my surprise, I have even come out with 80s and 90s in my last set of exams!

"Now I always make sure I set aside some time each day to do something I want to do, such as going to the gym, seeing friends, playing football or just relaxing.

"I would say that I am a completely different person compared with before."

"If you find yourself in a similar situation, I would recommend talking to someone, whether someone professional or someone close to you. Sharing the problem helps to get it off your chest and out of your mind."

"Talking is good therapy and will often be a key part to recovery. Good diet, exercise and looking after yourself more could also help you improve your wellbeing."



How do you know when your resilience is low

Our resilience varies over time. It may dwindle or drop suddenly after experiencing a significant emotional event or a particularly stressful period.

Recognising the way stress affects you can help you respond early to take action and control of the situation.

Stress can impact our behaviour in many ways and disrupt our routines. By understanding your signs of stress, you can start to recognise the behaviours in yourself, or you can ask a trusted friend, or family member to help identify these behaviours. For example, when your resilience starts to drop, the first behaviour change you might notice is trouble sleeping.

Some common behaviours related to stress and having low resilience are:

Irritability/anger – irritability and being easily annoyed over what you would usually consider as small or incidental.

Loss of perspective – leading to an over-reaction to situations which could include frustration, disappointment, feeling demoralised, or negatively comparing yourself to others.

Changes to your routine – if your dietary, sleeping, or exercise pattern changes from what is typical for you.

Becoming isolated – feeling the need to isolate yourself from people you regularly have contact with. You might find yourself making excuses and withdrawing from your usual support network.

Take control

If you are concerned about your wellbeing and resilience and its impact on you or your studies, as well as using the suggestions in this guide, you can also access a range of support and services on hand to help you. If you are unsure of who to contact, your tutor, student support, or University Health Service. Can refer you to the relevant support available.

University academic support

Don't forget to contact your friendly and confidential university Disability and Dyslexia Support Service (DDSS) if you need to access academic support for a physical or mental health condition.

Get involved

There are lots of extracurricular activities for you to participate in, either through your student union or physics department. This is a great way to connect, stay active and learn new skills.

Where to find help

Some resources on building resilience:

Grit by Angela Duckworth

angeladuckworth.com

7 Habits of People With Remarkable Mental Toughness by Jeff Haden:

www.inc.com/jeff-haden/7-habits-of-people-with-remarkable-mental-toughness.html

Student Minds

Student Minds resources contain detailed information on different challenges that university life can bring.

<https://www.studentminds.org.uk/resources.html>

Nightline

Nightline is a student-run, confidential and anonymous non-advisory listening and information service.

nightline.ac.uk

NiteLine in Ireland

niteline.ie

Mental wellbeing support in Scotland:

nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing

iop.org

Registered Charity no. 293851 (England & Wales)
and SC040092 (Scotland)

Action for Happiness

Action for Happiness is a movement of people committed to building a happier and more caring society.

We want to see a fundamentally different way of life – where people care less about what they can get just for themselves and more about the happiness of others.

actionforhappiness.org

Togtherall

Togetherall is a digital mental health support service which is available online 24/7 and is completely anonymous, so you can express yourself freely and openly.

togetherall.com/en-gb/

Samaritans

The Samaritans are here to listen, no judgement, no pressure and to help you work through what's on your mind. The service is FREE to access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

samaritans.org

Call: 166 123



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