

# GUIDE TO BALANCING YOUR CAREER AND MENTAL HEALTH



Explore  
Experience  
Progress



# CONTENTS

- 1 What is mental health?
- 1 Influences on career planning
- 2 Success
- 2 Career planning tool - DOTS
- 3 Understanding yourself
- 4 Opportunities
- 5 Decisions
- 6 Transition
- 7 Motivation
- 8 Disclosing poor mental health
- 9 Reasonable adjustments for mental health at work
- 9 Conclusion
- 10 Resources

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

*"Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices."*

## MIND

Awareness and understanding of your mental health can empower you to thrive in your career.

There can be feelings of shame and embarrassment around poor mental health, however it is incredibly common, particularly in young people.

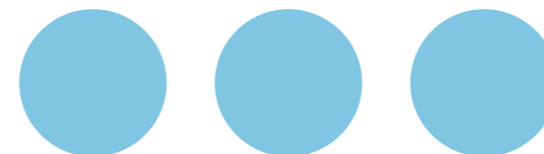
It is important to be aware that a mental health condition is considered a disability if it has a long-term effect on your typical day-to-day activities. Long-term, in this instance, is defined as a condition that lasts, or is likely to last, 12 months or more. Where an individual has a mental health condition that can be defined as a disability, they are also protected under the Equality Act (2010). **The MIND website** has further information on disability discrimination.

Mental health is separate from mental illness. Mental health refers to an individual's emotional wellbeing and mental state, whereas mental illnesses are medically diagnosed conditions affecting thoughts and behaviours. If you suspect you may have a mental illness, please contact your GP.

# INFLUENCES ON CAREER PLANNING

There are a whole host of factors which can influence your career planning. This can be positive or negative, in your control or outside of your control. Some examples include; location, finances, qualifications, skills, global events, self awareness, culture, available support, confidence, family, attitude, social circle and physical health.

These are all factors to consider on top of managing your mental health! This guide is designed to get you thinking about how you can approach and manage your career planning and its various influences whilst maintaining good mental health.



# SUCCESS

It is common for students and graduates to feel pressure to achieve a traditional version of success, recognised by the world. This could be getting a paid placement year, a graduate scheme, a 1st class degree, high numbers of followers on social media, earning above a certain salary etc. However, success is broad and does not simply happen overnight, often it has taken many unseen small steps to get there.

Generally speaking, confidence and success go hand in hand... but when you're feeling low or your mental health is not great, you probably won't feel at your most confident. It is therefore essential to learn to look out for

these smaller but more frequent successes which allow confidence to slowly grow. This is where our focus should be, particularly when starting a career, rather than aiming for a perfect traditional view of success. Success does not have to mean perfection and always trying to achieve a perfect goal can have a negative impact on your mental health.

It may sound cheesy but confidence is about self belief within you, it can not be seen or heard. The loudest people in the room are not necessarily the most confident. The best advice that we can give you, is to stop comparing yourself to your peers and their career paths!

# CAREER PLANNING TOOL - DOTS

When your mind is struggling it can be even more of a challenge to figure out a route to move forward with your career planning. The Career Planning model, DOTS provides a practical approach to your career planning and research which you may find useful. You can see in this diagram of the model that there are four stages – these are presented as a cycle but, you might move across and between stages in different ways depending on your progress with your career planning and exploration. It is highly likely that you will end up working through this cycle repeatedly throughout your career. This is not a one and done approach.



# UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF

There is power in understanding yourself and how your mental health affects you individually. You may have a widely known condition (for example, anxiety) but the way that it affects you is unique to you and your experience. For an employer to be able to support you fully when you are struggling with poor mental health, it is important that you have spent time reflecting holistically on who you are and how your mental health may challenge your career goals. By doing this you are better equipped to tell the employer specifically what they need to do to support you.

## What are some good habits when building up a better understanding of yourself during your career research?

- **QUESTION YOUR THOUGHTS** E.g. all or nothing thinking (if I do not get this job I will never get a job like it), fortune telling (negative predictions about events which have not happened yet), emotional reasoning (interpreting what is happening / about to happen based exclusively on how you feel), making demands of yourself (using words such as 'must', 'should', 'need', 'got to' and 'have to' when anticipating an event or action). If you find yourself having these thoughts, ask yourself if you can think about them in another way and adopt a different mindset which will facilitate good mental health.
- **GROWTH MINDSET** Practice reflecting on a situation and learning from it for next time. Take feedback onboard and change your approach to the situation next time based on what your experience has taught you.
- **HARNESS THE POWER OF "YET"** By adding 'yet' to the end of statements you are turning a pessimistic outlook into a positive one. E.g. I have not found a placement...yet.
- **DO NOT COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS** (or other people's personal circumstances). The key when getting to know yourself is to focus on you. Don't get distracted by how others are behaving, particularly when you are surrounded by lots of other individuals at a similar life stage as you and are also likely just getting to know themselves too! As Albert Einstein once said; "Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree it will spend its whole life believing it is stupid".

# OPPORTUNITIES

*As you start to gain a deeper understanding of yourself and how your mental health may impact your career choices, you will become better prepared to start building up your awareness of what professional opportunities feel right for you.*

**COMFORT VS. COURAGE ZONES** These zones are dynamic and will flex and evolve over time. When your mental health is struggling, it is important to have your comfort zone to retreat to and to spend time recovering in. It is your safe place and gets you through day to day. Your courage zone though, tends to be where you have new experiences.

In this courage zone you may sometimes feel uncomfortable, more likely to fail or that it is risky, but often it results in lots of learning and professional development. Both zones are important to have in balance. As a result of understanding yourself more and how your mental health affects you, you will develop an instinct for how much time you can spend focusing on opportunities in each of the zones.

Some periods of your life, you may feel like you need the safety, security and predictability of your comfort zone which is absolutely okay. Other times you may feel better prepared to spend more time in your courage zone. However, be aware that sometimes we can spend too much time in one or the other so they are not balanced. Too much time in your comfort zone makes pushing yourself feel really challenging. Too much time in your courage zone can lead to burn out.

If you are struggling to leave your comfort zone, consider your support, strengths and sensibility to assist you moving into the courage zone.

**SUPPORT** - Who can support you and how can you ask for that support? Be specific and strategic about this. Your support network should ideally be multiple people or services who can offer you a range of different kinds of support. For example, you may have a family member or counsellor for emotional support, the Bath Spa University Careers Team for application support, your academic or fellow students / graduates for sector knowledge support, your GP for medical support etc.

**STRENGTHS** - What opportunities and experiences utilise your strengths? Using your strengths increases confidence. So, what opportunities and experiences can you initially look for which utilises your strengths whilst you are entering your courage zone?

**SENSIBILITY** - Know when it's the right time to be in your comfort zone and when you feel you have the capacity to be in your courage zone. Stretching your comfort zone when you are not ready can add more stress than skill. Don't feel pressured to move to the courage zone if it is detrimental to your mental health.

Some resources where you can build your opportunity awareness:

- [Prospects website \(Job profiles, sectors, what can I do with my degree?, planner tool\)](#)
- [TargetJobs Career Descriptions](#)
- [icould Career Videos](#) (search by 'job type' or 'subject')
- Live job adverts (see the [Guide to Finding Graduate Jobs and Opportunities](#) for a list of sites)
- Networking (Online e.g. LinkedIn)

# DECISIONS

When you reach a point where you are ready to start making decisions, awareness of your current mental health and how the decision may impact your mental health is crucial.

## How can you protect your mental health when making decisions?

- Avoid making decisions in isolation. Talk your ideas / the decision through with someone or a few different people. It can help to verbalise the decision and take in a few different points of view.
- Do not make impulsive permanent decisions when you're feeling low.
  - If you find an opportunity you want to apply for and the deadline allows, take your time.
  - If you hate your job at the moment try not to quit on an impulse, take time out and come back to that decision when you have thought it through
  - When you are offered a job/placement, before accepting ask yourself; how much have you researched the organisation? Do you feel confident that they can support you? Have you disclosed any conditions which would allow them to support you better?
- Review what you have learned so far about yourself and the opportunities available to you. How does what you have learned fit in with this decision? Could you benefit from additional information in order to make this decision or does it feel right and well informed? How comfortable do you feel with the most likely outcome? Does it line up with your values, motivations, goals etc.?
- Be aware of your risk readiness - See risk and approach it positively (links to comfort and courage zones)
  - Recognise the risk, what actually is the risk and how could it benefit my career?
  - Be realistic about the impact of that risk. What is the worst that could happen and how would you handle that?
  - What is my risk recovery plan? Risks are usually much bigger in our minds than they are in reality, so recognising the risk enables us to prepare for the risk, making it work best for us. If the worst happens what can you do about that? By being more confident about risk outcomes you can develop your potential.
- A pro/con list can help you to visually understand the decision you are facing.



# TRANSITION

Transition is different from change. Change is from and to. Transitions are the 'in between' state, the messy middle, where you are leaving something behind and you don't quite feel you are one thing or the other. For example, when you graduate university you still feel like a student but you're not and it takes a while to 'feel' like you are a graduate or professional. Transitions can be triggers for mental health struggles and cause anxiety because you are leaving something behind but you don't always know where you are going. Understanding how this could affect your mental health is powerful and can help you to prepare for the transition.

This period of 'in between', where you are holding on and letting go at the same time, can feel unsettling, but that is normal. It is important to be kind to yourself and slowly move towards letting go of the past more (for example, letting go of the identity of being a student and transitioning into being a graduate).

Transitions can be unexpected, sometimes forced, or they can be planned. Whatever the type of transition, activating your support network will help ease the process.

## How can you prepare for transition when you have poor mental health?

- Set up your support network before a transition
- Invest time to fully understand what you are transitioning into. For example, if you are applying for graduate roles or if you are offered a role, research what the company does to support its employees... Do they have a mental health policy in place? Do they actively promote wellbeing? Do they arrange work related social activities? Do they have any staff trained in mental health first aid? Do they have an Employee Assistance programme which provides a counselling service for its staff? Do they recognise a union? Can you visit the workplace ahead of time to understand the environment and culture more before you accept the role?
- Break the transition down into small steps to help build momentum and grow your confidence. Consistent small steps will get you to the same place eventually and may manage your mental health more effectively during the transition.
- Give yourself permission to pause - sometimes this is exactly what resilience looks like! Having compassion when transitioning to a new way of life can be really challenging but it is essential when trying to maintain positive mental health.

# MOTIVATION

Motivation is challenging for most people, but even more so when your mental health is not great.

## There are steps you can take to increase your motivation over time:

- **Structure your day**, schedule breaks and set time frames for activities such as looking for internships. Initially, this may just be dedicating 10 minutes to a career development focused activity then increasing this over time.
- Make a **to-do list** which encourages productivity. This means breaking down tasks so you are more likely to do them and you then get rewarded with a sense of accomplishment. Following a to-do list can help you to focus when your mind doesn't feel like it.
- **Analyse why** you're struggling with motivation in that moment. Are you tired, hungry, stressed, distracted? Try to take practical steps to remove barriers to your motivation.
- Remind yourself of **how far you have come**. The thought of starting your career can feel huge but it helps to take a moment to reflect on what you have achieved so far. For example, if you are looking for a graduate role, first, simply celebrate that you are (or nearly) a graduate!
- **Leave the screen** and try to spend a bit of **time outside**. Moving around and changing your environment for a bit can do wonders for refocusing the mind on a task. For some people this means going for a walk and for others it may be doing 10 minutes of yoga. You will likely find you feel refreshed and more motivated as a result.
- Create a **motivating playlist** which gets you in the right mindset to concentrate on getting the job done, for example building a LinkedIn profile, structuring your CV or researching a potential employer. Music is powerful for our emotions.
- Take a look at what you are **eating and drinking**. Are you fuelling your body with the right balance to have the energy to be productive? For example, if you are eating excess sugar and then having an energy crash, you're less likely to feel motivated.
- Do a **social media audit**, what content is regularly coming up in your feeds? How does this content make you feel? How can you change this to motivate you more?
- Have a **shower and get dressed everyday**, even if you are not leaving the house. What you wear and how you physically feel can have a big impact on your mental state. You are more likely to find motivation when you are dressed and ready for the day.

It can be challenging to remain motivated and at some point you may need to begin relying on **self discipline** to keep going in a positive direction. Finding the right balance of motivation and discipline when struggling with mental health is difficult and takes time but you can find that balance and make it work for you. Motivation gets you going but discipline keeps you growing!

# DISCLOSING POOR MENTAL HEALTH

*It is understandable to feel hesitant about disclosing that you struggle with your mental health to an employer.*

However, if you feel that your mental health is going to have a significant impact on the application process for an opportunity or on your ability to carry out the role, it is important to consider telling the employer. You do not need to tell the employer the specifics of your condition if you do not want to, but it can help if you share what steps the employer can take to make the application process or, once you get the role, your day to day life more accessible. This will ensure you are on the same level to other applicants / employees of a similar position in the organisation. To prepare for disclosing your mental health condition to an employer consider...

**HOW TO DO IT.** Be positive and focus on what you can do rather than what you can't or would find difficult. For example, you could focus on:

- What you have learnt from managing your mental health
- Your strengths and transferable skills (e.g. problem solving, adaptability)
- Your personal qualities and what you have learnt from your mental health in terms of your approach to work and life, such as how you may have had to overcome difficulties (e.g. determination, maturity, resilience)

**WHEN TO DO IT.** You can choose to disclose at application stage, before the interview, during an interview, when you are offered the role or once you have started the role.

**HOW MUCH INFORMATION** you want to share about your condition. Focus on how your mental health condition impacts your job.

**WHO** are you disclosing to? (Human Resources, Line Manager, Head of Department)

Disability Rights UK have a fact sheet called '[Telling people you are disabled: an easy and clear guide for students](#)' which can help.



# REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

A 'reasonable adjustment' is a change that must be made to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to disability in a job or when applying for a job. Reasonable adjustments are not about receiving preferential treatment but about allowing an individual to overcome difficulties that non-disabled candidates and employees don't face themselves.

ACAS, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, is an independent public body who work with millions of employers and employees every year to improve workplace relationships. They are a [good source of information about your rights at work](#).

## EXAMPLES OF REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS DURING THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

These will change depending on how your mental health affects you specifically.

- Availability of the interview questions in written format either before the interview or at the start.
- Allowing extra time for psychometric tests / recruitment tasks
- Ensuring an accessible interview room is available, for example for those who may feel overwhelmed or overstimulated in a brightly decorated room which may distract them from the questions being asked.

## EXAMPLES OF REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AS AN EMPLOYEE IN THE WORKPLACE

- Allowing for flexible work hours. This may include flexible start and end times and additional breaks.
- Allowing staff with a social anxiety disorder to work in isolation or from home
- Offering clear and consistent instructions
- Reducing workload
- Always providing descriptions for what meetings are about and the expectations of the employee
- Additional 1:1 meetings with the line manager
- Changes to the work environment - e.g.. minimise noise, increased personal space, provide a quiet and private space for breaks.

# CONCLUSION

Developing a career when you are struggling with your mental health can be a huge challenge. By reading this guide you are already making some great steps in the right direction. Take some time to reflect and consider what your next steps could now be.

If you would like further help getting started or understanding how to progress in your career you can book a **1:1 appointment** with a member of the Careers and Employability team. These can be online or in person and adjustments such as leaving the camera off, having the appointment outside and longer appointments can all be done.

If you have a suggestion on how we can better accommodate you for an appointment, please do let the team know by telling us in your booking notes or sending a message via **MyCareer**.



# RESOURCES

## BATH SPA UNIVERSITY CAREER RESOURCES

- [Guide to Disability and Work](#)
- [Guide to Career Direction](#)
- [Guide to Finding Graduate Jobs and Opportunities](#)
- [What are my graduate options?](#)
- [How do I make career decisions?](#)
- [Bath Spa YouTube Playlist e.g. dealing with interview nerves](#)

### Support available from Careers includes:

- [1:1 appointments](#)
- [CV and cover letter review service](#)
- Bath Spa University [Careers Events](#)
- [Opportunities](#) (Including paid placements)

## EXTERNAL CAREER RESOURCES

- [Prospects](#) a higher education level career advice website providing example [job profiles](#), [sector specific information](#) as well as articles, for example ['Looking after your mental health at university'](#)
- [Access to work government scheme](#)
- [Reasonable adjustments – Mind](#)
- [Advice for employers on workplace adjustments for mental health conditions](#)
- [Remploy](#)
- [What to do after university – Save the Graduate](#)
- [MyPlus+ Student's club events](#)
- [TargetJobs Career Descriptions](#)
- [icould Career Videos](#)

## MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES:

- Bath Spa University [Student Wellbeing Services](#)
- [Student Minds](#)
- [Local Mind services](#)
- [Mind - online mental health](#)
- [Shaw Trust](#) - social purpose organisation challenging inequality and breaking down barriers to enable social mobility
- [Anxiety UK](#) - offers support, advice and information on a range of anxiety, stress and anxiety-based depression conditions - visit [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk) to use Anxia - a chatbot that can help provide support.
- [Samaritans](#) - Mental health support by phone - call 116 123, support groups and online, open 365 days a year, 24 hours a day
- [The Mental Health Foundation](#) - A charitable organisation that aims to improve the lives of people with mental health problems or learning disabilities
- [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy \(BACP\)](#) - The professional association for members of the counselling professions in the UK

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Bath Spa Careers and Employability is here to help you get a great start to your career. We are open year round, so to find out more about how we can support you go to: [www.bathspa.ac.uk/careers](http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/careers)

As a student or recent graduate, *MyCareer* is your online portal for booking events, accessing appointments, submitting queries, and searching for jobs and placements.

You can also follow @bathspacareers on social media:  
[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Instagram](#)

Every effort has been made to ensure the information in this resource guide is accurate but we recommend that you check all details carefully.

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