



# COUNSELLING AND GUIDANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA:

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHING STAFF

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Raquel Caballero Pacheco  
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“In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student’s learning curve, but it is not an outcome”

- Proficiency -  
Based Instruction and Assessment Oregon Education Roundtable-



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## **FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH VERSION OF THIS GUIDE**

The University of Granada, within the framework of actions led by the Campus of International Excellence (CEI BioTic Granada), and as part of its active commitment to promoting internationalisation, is pleased to present this new English edition of *Counselling and Guidance in the European Higher Education Area: A Guide for Students and Teaching Staff*.

Created by the University's Counselling and Guidance Unit (the Gabinete Psicopedagógico or GPP in Spanish) and edited in 2009, the Guide is the result of the Unit's extensive experience of providing advice and guidance services within a wide range of contexts – personal, academic, and vocational. It has proved to be an extremely useful and effective tool for both students and teaching staff, offering invaluable pointers with which to understand, prevent and deal with some of the key difficulties encountered in adjusting to university life and their impact on academic performance and personal wellbeing.

The Guide has received a tremendous welcome by the university community, achieving considerable success thanks to its proven usefulness in designing strategies to improve learning and academic performance. In light of this impact there was a clear case for translating it into English, so as to reach and benefit an even wider audience. The production of this English version also underlines the University of Granada's



leadership on an international scale, as one of the key players world-wide in terms of attracting ERASMUS students and those from Eastern Europe and from beyond the European Union, without forgetting of course its emerging presence in the East.

With this new publication, the team of professionals at the Counselling and Guidance Unit demonstrate once again their vocation to serve the entire university community, particularly the student base, and their commitment to the objective of achieving international excellence that is embodied within the CEI BioTic project led by the University of Granada.

Rosa María García Pérez  
*Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student Services*  
*University of Granada*





## **PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH VERSION OF THIS GUIDE**

According to the European Commission study Mapping Mobility in European Higher Education (2011), more than half of all foreign students worldwide are enrolled at European universities. Over the past nine years, their overall number has risen by over 80%, to more than 1.5 million. This phenomenon has created a tremendous demand for (and supply of) courses delivered in the English lingua franca amongst European universities. Within this context, thousands of students on both European and non-EU programmes make Spain, and particularly the University of Granada (UGR), their top choice for studying abroad.

This continual influx of foreign students to the UGR brings with it not only increased numbers of subjects delivered in English but also greater demand for support services and materials to help visiting students navigate a new country, culture and education system, as well as their own particular line of study. As part of its commitment to addressing this growing demand for support, the UGR has developed its own Internationalisation Plan, together with a programme designed to foster multilingualism in the university's services. This Guide is a further strand of this international impulse.

Aimed not only at the UGR's own university community but at a much wider public, this book, entitled *Counselling and Guidance in the European Higher Education Area: a Guide for Students and Teaching Staff*, is a translated and adapted version of the 2009 Spanish version,

*the Guía Psicopedagógica para Estudiantes y Profesores Universitarios en el Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior.*

It is our sincere wish that the material it contains will be of great use to all students who have begun – or who are about to begin – their university adventure. Regardless of whether they are Spanish or not, whether they are monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, or whether they are studying and living in Granada or further afield, they can call on this Guide as a kind of ‘navigation chart’, should they ever need a helpful steer at any point in their learning journey.

José L. Arco Tirado  
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## 18 BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (EHEA) AND THE EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM (ECTS)

1. In 1999, the Ministers of Education of the European Union (E.U.) met in the Italian city of Bologna to sign the so-called *Bologna Declaration*. Since then, European universities have been immersed in the Bologna Process, which is the planning framework behind the EHEA.
2. The creation of the EHEA addresses the E.U.'s need to develop and strengthen a strategic sector as important as Higher Education. The EHEA seeks to improve the quality and effectiveness of universities, increase student *mobility* within and between countries, improve the *comparability* of studies, and attract more students from other parts of the world, amongst other objectives.
3. To make understanding and *comparing* different universities' curricula easier, it was necessary to develop a credit system that would facilitate the systematic description of any given curriculum based on common parameters such as students' workload, modules and learning objectives, learning outcomes, and classroom contact hours.



4. The European Credit Transfer and Credit Accumulation System, ECTS, is the credit system adopted by the E.U. for this purpose. Its distinguishing feature is that it is student-centred. In other words, it is based on the workload that the student has to complete in order to achieve the objectives of a given course of study.
5. These objectives are preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and *competencies* that have to be acquired, i.e., what the student will *understand* or will be able to do after completing a short or long learning process.
6. The ECTS was adopted in 1989, in the context of the Erasmus Program, which now, in turn, forms part of the Socrates Program. It is the only credit system that has been trialled and used successfully throughout Europe. It was initially established to facilitate the validation of academic studies undertaken abroad, thus enhancing the quality and scale of European students' mobility.
7. In the ECTS, the student *workload* consists of the time spent in lectures, seminars, personal study, studying for and sitting exams, and so on. This represents an important change with respect to the previous Spanish credit system – established by the University Reform Law of 1983 – which only quantified student workload in terms of classroom contact hours.
8. The ECTS is based on the convention that 60 credits measure a full-time student's workload for one academic year. The student workload for a full-time course of study in Europe is usually equivalent to 1,500-1,800 hours per year, and one credit represents 25-30 hours' work.
9. Credits are allocated to all the educational components of a given curriculum (i.e. subjects, modules, courses, work placements, workplace training, dissertations, and so on). Credits reflect the volume of work each component requires in relation to the total workload needed to complete a full academic year.

10. This new organisation of teaching and learning in Higher Education is provoking *substantial changes in the roles, attitudes, and academic behaviour* of teaching staff, students, and administrative and service staff, all of whom have a part to play in universities' achievement of the important teaching, research and social functions they fulfil in society.
11. For the Institution, this change means greater autonomy in defining its own identity as an institution for Higher Education, in innovating, and in its continuous growth and development. However, it also means greater responsibility when publicly offering up-to-date curricular knowledge connected to professional practice. This includes opportunities for training in practical knowledge and skills such as in modern foreign languages, office software, use of the Internet, use of e-mail, and so on, as well as other resources, made available to all employees including non-academic staff. It also means the university must have in place mechanisms that guarantee continuous quality assessment of its processes and results – results that will no longer be measured by student passes or fails but in terms of success rates, graduation, employability, and so on.
12. In the case of teaching staff, instead of simply giving lectures, assigning tasks, and setting exercises and exams, lecturers will become facilitators, collaborators, and mediators in the student's active learning process. Lecturers are expected to improve the impact of their teaching and research, to work more on coordinating activities with students, and to show more flexibility and understanding towards them. Basically, this means: (a) substantially improving curricula so that these reflect the specific activities to be undertaken, the out-of-class time students will need to complete them, and the objective of each proposed activity; (b) diversifying teaching methods (e.g. learning based on problem solving, oral presentation of individual or group projects, participative research based in the community, project-based learning, and so on); and (c) improving assessment systems (e.g. using portfolios, peer-assessment, self-assessment, evaluation based on practical tasks or workplace observation, and so on).

13. For students this means being expected to show greater co-responsibility for their own learning process, approaching their studies as they would a paid job – applying dedication, persistence and commitment to attain results. This involves developing skills in self-assessment and self-regulation, both of which are needed to adequately manage time, money, social and personal relations, workload, and so on. If they do not possess these skills, they should at least know where, when, and how they can learn them. What is more, they are expected to make the most of such skills by being more active in lectures, seminars, or other activities such as voluntary work, and so on. It is essential that students establish their own learning and professional goals so they can generate the motivation they need to successfully deal with any situations that may hinder their progress in adapting to university life.
14. By 2010-2012, the range of degree qualifications throughout Europe will look very different. Some will disappear and other new qualifications will take their place as a result of the process of harmonizing degree qualifications in the European Union (E.U.) known as ‘tuning’.
15. In Spain, the current difference between the three-year diploma level (‘Diplomatura’) and the five-year first degree level (‘Licenciatura’) courses will disappear, being replaced by a four-year degree (‘Título de Grado’) (60 credits a year) with more obligatory core subjects, which will qualify students to practice a profession in all E.U. countries.
16. The qualifications awarded, valid throughout the E.U., will be accompanied by a Diploma Supplement (DS). This will be a standardized description of the nature, level, context, content, and range of the studies carried out and successfully fulfilled by the title-holder. The DS provides transparency and makes academic and professional validation of qualifications (i.e. diplomas, degrees, certificates, and so on) easier.
17. Universities will also offer Post-graduate studies, such as Masters, that are geared towards specialization or professional training. Masters programmes will be specific to each university

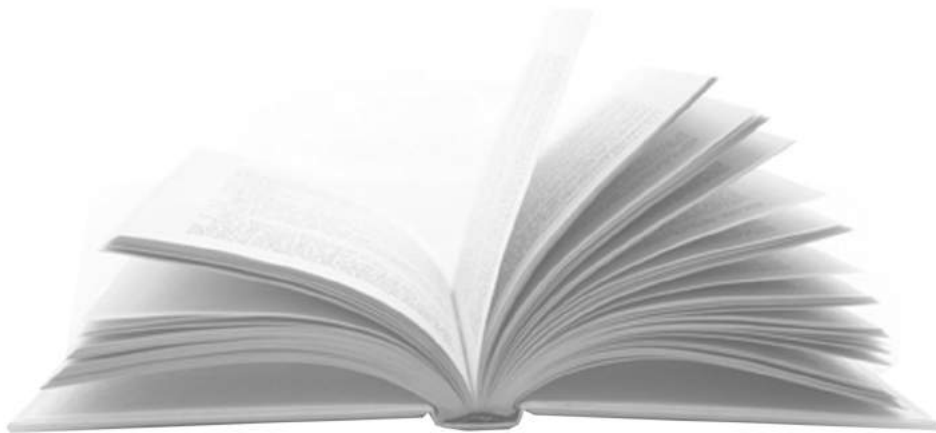
and this will stimulate mobility amongst students wishing to study a particular topic.

18. Only graduates who have achieved a minimum of 300 credits during their degree and Master studies will be able to access Doctoral studies. Postgraduate studies (Master and doctorate) will be allowed to differ radically from one university to another, and this will favour diversity for students and quality derived from healthy competition.

You can find more information about the EHEA, ECTS, and DS, together with the list of ECTS/DS advisors and a good course guide on the European Commission website:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects\\_es.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects_es.html)





## INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The way you use this Guide may differ depending on your needs. After reading the 18-point summary of the new European Credit System, we recommend you study the flow chart in Section I, page 30. As outlined in the Preface, the flow chart shows the main determining factors that cause poor performance in a student's academic life, and the interdependent relations most commonly found between these variables, as identified by research.

The information is represented according to the Functional Analysis (FA) Model of behaviour known as the A-B-C model, where A represents the set of Antecedent variables (or possible causes), B represents the Behaviour or problem behaviours, and C the Consequences that follow these behaviours. The sets of variables are linked by a system of arrows that show the directionality and continuity – or lack thereof – in the relationships between the variables. FA is a psychological evaluation and intervention technique widely used by specialists in this context. It was chosen for this task because of its proven usefulness and validity in interventions such as these, its simplicity, and its teaching potential when used in a population with a high level of cognitive development, as in this case. To this end, we aim to provide students and teaching staff with access to sufficient information and substantiated data to understand that the key to students achieving their academic objectives lies, broadly-speaking, in their behaviour, which can be controlled by either modifying the consequences (C) or modifying the antecedents (A) or, better still, through a combination of both strategies.

To continue with our description of the flow chart, in the horizontal rectangles in the middle section we have the chain of dysfunctional behaviours that students with poor academic performance present. On the right-hand side, and sequentially related to the problematic behaviours, we have the consequences (in the ellipses) – that is, the gains and losses normally associated with each behaviour. Finally, on the left we have the different antecedent variables clustered by topic (in the circles). These variables, together with their consequences, support the dysfunctional behaviours.

In the lower part of the diagram, another group of variables appears. Amongst these are two extremely important, interdependent constructs: 'Metacognition' and 'Motivation'. The first refers to human beings' ability to pay conscious attention to their own thoughts. For instance, this is the ability that enables us to process, understand and use information, including this very text that you are reading right now. Psychology finds it more difficult to define the second variable, although a consensus does exist on the central role motivation plays in the learning process. In plain language, motivation is what makes us move, makes us behave, and makes you, for instance, want to read this text now rather than a different one. In the FA model of behaviour that we present here, both play the role of a mediating variable. In the case of students, they mediate between the identification, analysis, and understanding of their current academic situation (depicted in the A-B-C variables) and the set of variables that appear within diamond shapes in the chart and that represent the basic components that the 'new' learning model recommended by the EHEA must include. These basic components constitute what is known as Self-Regulated Learning (SRL).

### ***First level of intervention***

In order to facilitate and optimise the use of this flow chart, or, FA, it is recommended that students use it as if it were an 'X-ray' of their life at university. To do so, in the central column students should start by underlining or colouring those behaviours they consider to be present to a certain extent in their everyday life. They should then identify the consequences these behaviours have in their personal and academic lives, and whether or not these more or less match the consequences the model proposes for each behaviour. Finally, they should choose, from the four sets of variables to the left of the chart, those that have any kind of negative influence on their current situation. By doing this they will end up with the 'map' or the set of variables and behaviours that constitute their life and their current academic needs.

To respond to the possible information needs that this self-assessment may generate, in Section II we present 25 helpful pointers. Section II covers those factors that, over the years, our students and our own research have revealed to be the most common and significant in helping them to adjust to the demands of university life. In this section we aim to offer you, if not all the information available on the different topics, at least the most useful in terms of your possible needs. The content relating to the majority of the issues we cover is organised into five sections: (a) a short introduction with a brief definition and some epidemiological data (if applicable) that justifies the value of each topic; (b) a list of symptoms, signs, or questions that serve as a self-assessment tool in relation to that specific condition or problem; (c) a simplified cause-effect model to help in understanding the nature of the variables that generate or maintain the problem or condition; (d) information about misconceptions or myths that are commonly held amongst young people, the corresponding scientific explanation, and/or guidelines and strategies to follow to alleviate or resolve the problem; and (e) in some cases, a list of telephone numbers, Web addresses and/or associations to consult for more information.



## ***Second level of intervention***

After identifying the antecedents, behaviours and dysfunctional consequences that can potentially affect your current academic and personal life, the individual differences in thinking skills and in the ability to create strategies and specific responses to handle these problems become more evident. In this sense, many students will find it sufficient to read thoroughly the topic or topics explained and clarified in Section II for their self-regulatory skills (i.e. cognitive, motivational, social, and so on) to start to function and help them towards their academic objectives. Other students, however, will need to make more effort (and possibly receive more help) so as to understand and ‘visualise’ the interdependent relationship between their academic objectives and the results they achieve, and the links or components that connect both ends of the process. These are the links or intermediate stages that the SRL model identifies and highlights, as can be seen at the bottom of the flow chart.

Thus, the model establishes that when a student is making a decision about which academic objectives to pursue, or how to plan their time so as to include hobbies, classes, studies or sports, depending on their values, needs, capabilities, and so on, they are really exercising the right to self-determination, that is, the first SRL component that all students undertake more or less consciously and intentionally. However, the model also explains, and perhaps in this lies its potential and added value, that in order to increase their chance of achieving these objectives, they also have to establish some means of monitoring their actions and undertaking appropriate self-instruction to achieve the necessary tasks. They then have to self-assess their learning process and the results they achieve, and, finally, commit to imposing on themselves the appropriate consequences – in line with the extent to which they achieve their objectives. If their behaviour develops within these parameters term-by-term, they will be increasing their co-responsibility for the process and results of their learning, maximizing their chances of attaining their academic objectives, and improving the extent of their control over events, their drive to achieve, their self-concept, their effectiveness, and consequently, their level of self-esteem.

However, we should say that over the years in the GPP we have witnessed the fact that most students with poor levels of performance (credits passed/credits registered) and/or success rates (credits passed/credit hours), do not exactly fit the standard SRL pattern. Moreover, typically they present deficits (sometimes severe) in basic SRL components, such as their study and work habits, and in particular, their ability to plan, organise, and make the most of their time. For instance, the lengthy period between the university exam sessions in February, June, and September, together with a low level of family control and the absence of any institutional control, usually magnify the negative effects of these deficits. This is why planning work and study is even more important in order to avoid academic failure. But creating a study plan and timetable, which gathers together and appropriately combines all the student's needs and simultaneously directs their academic behaviour, is not easy. This is due to the large number of variables they must simultaneously take into account, or the rejection many students feel when they have to adjust to a timetable, justifying with 'arguments' such as "I know what I have to do", "I don't need to write it down", "I still have plenty of time until the exams", or "Why should I do that if I'm not going to stick to it later?" The reason may be that they anticipate the disadvantages it will have for their day-to-day life, without seeing the mid- and long-term advantages of this approach. So, in order to monitor this complex process and prevent possible difficulties and mistakes when creating tools as important as a study plan and timetable, we have written a chapter entitled 'Study Habits: Planning and Organising your Time', together with support materials in Section III, which we will now describe.

If you are sure of the criteria you need to apply when creating a realistic study plan and timetable, then go directly to Support Materials<sup>3</sup>. There you will find a model study plan and timetable that includes the daily tasks and activities you will have to include in your day-to-day diary each week. If, on the other hand, you are not clear about the key factors to take into account in order to build up a good timetable, or you are not entirely convinced of the usefulness of doing so, then we suggest you go through the process described earlier step-by-step. To do this, you should first complete the time management record sheet in Support Materials 1 (page 176). In other words, before finalizing your timetable you should reflect, as accurately as possible for

at least one average week (i.e. one without any bank holidays), on the tasks and activities you undertake every day, and on how long they take, by using the following examples and those on page 177.

Example a correctly completed record sheet:

17:00 h. Coffee with flatmates  
 17:30 h. Read and wrote up class notes  
 18:00 h. Did summary of Geodynamics chapter 1  
 19:30 h. Tried to solve Mathematics II problem  
 21:00 h. Had dinner and watched TV with flatmates  
 24:00 h. Went to bed

Example of poorly recorded time management sheet:

17:00 h. Had coffee  
 17:30 h.  
 18:00 h.  
 19:30 h.  
 20:30 h.  
 21:00 h. Had dinner

**STUDIED!!**

After writing up this record following the instructions on length, accuracy and so on, you should calculate the hours you spend each week on activities such as sleeping, cooking, cleaning, getting out and about, and leisure. The model in the exercise entitled 'Where the Time Goes' (in Support Materials 2, page 178) will help you achieve a more realistic idea of how you spend your time and, therefore, the priorities you have to set and how you should distribute your time, as a function of your academic objectives and the time remaining. Often, students are surprised when they calculate and see for themselves how they actually do spend their time during the week and how many hours they have left for study. It is at this point that they should make realistic decisions based on the evidence of numerical data, specialists' recommendations, and common sense, concerning the timetable they should follow during the week. Otherwise, it is highly likely that they will want to leap from two hours' study a week to 20 hours, whereas it is more sensible to gradually increase the number of study hours little by little and to be consistent. Otherwise, there is risk of increasing the number of study and work hours during the first week, pushing oneself too hard, and then performing poorly the week after, with performance levels reverting back to the two hours (or fewer) per week that one studied before. With this in mind, and taking into account the data on the hours available for you to study, and the information given in the chapter about study habits, you should complete the exercise in

Support Materials 3 (page 180), the study plan and timetable, and test it for a couple of days to check whether it works or needs some adjustments.

Support Materials 4 (page 182) consists of a brief list of the most important steps and issues to take into account when studying if you want *your intellectual efforts to be effective*. Students should also remember they can find more information and tips about efficient study techniques in this Guide.

The exercise in Support Materials 5 (page 183) consists of choosing and prioritizing the main variables you have to focus on during the process and writing them down in the table provided. Amongst the many possible variables you can choose from in order to monitor your progress, we suggest you focus on the variable 'intense study hours', because it is more attainable and easier to measure and represent, and because it is one of the best predictors of efficiency in this kind of intervention. Although it has a higher associated psychological cost, that is, it is more difficult for you to achieve, we suggest you begin by setting manageable 15-minute goals for this kind of study. In this way, you will be able to increase them progressively. Some other possible variables to monitor that can contribute substantially to the correct development of this change process are 'study hours', 'preparation time' and 'leisure time'. In this sense, representing the values of these variables in the graph suggested (see examples A and B in Support Materials 5, Section III, pages 185 and 186) will give you invaluable feedback that will help you to control, monitor and, successfully complete the proposed process of improvement and change.

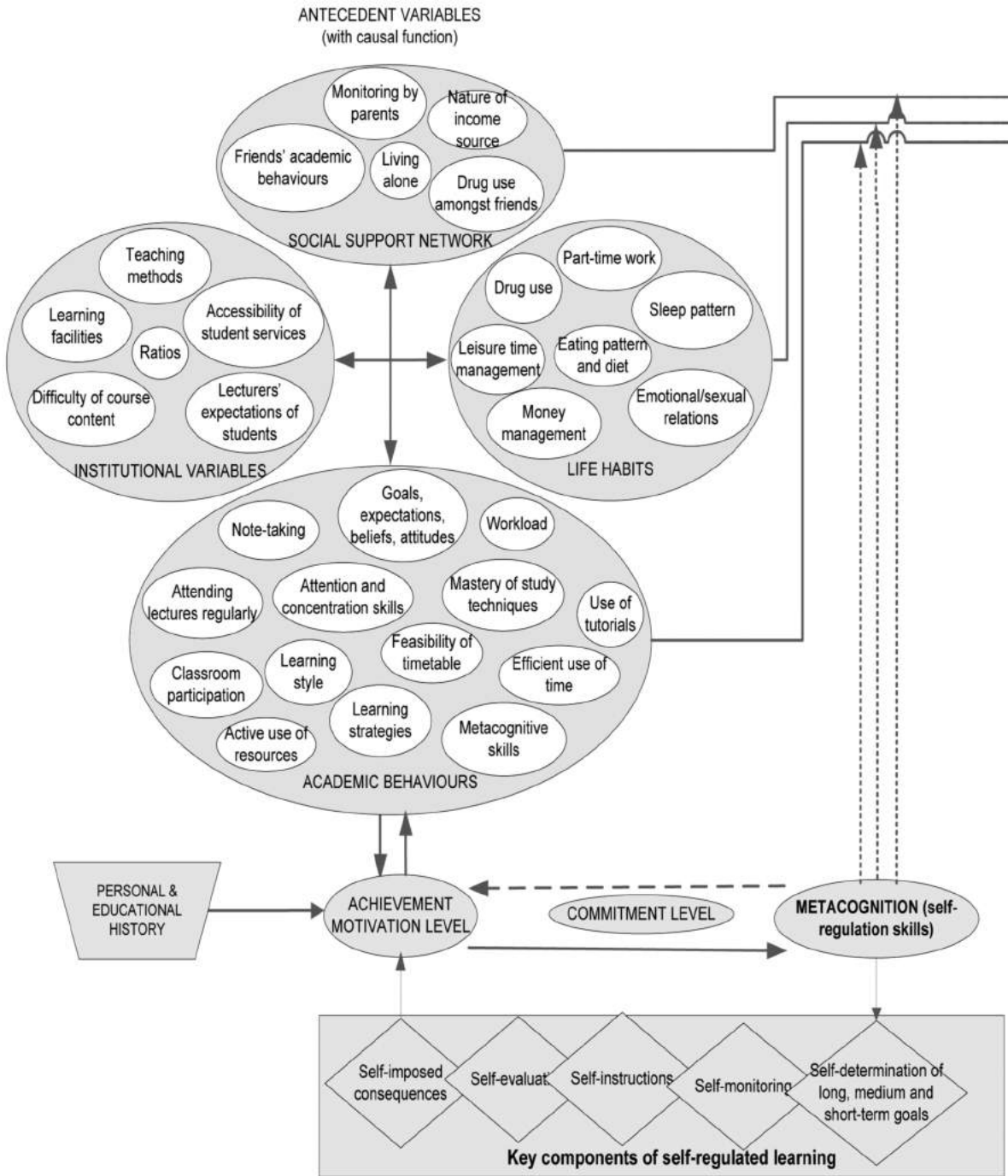
### ***Third level of intervention***

Finally, we should add that there are other cases when neither of the two previous levels may be enough for the student to regain control over their academic life in sufficient time to improve their performance and, consequently, their self-esteem. Typically, in these cases the behavioural patterns have been part of the student's life for a long time, either because of difficulties in their family (such as separation, divorce, unemployment, chronic illness, emotional loss, and so on), and/or in the institution (such as unethical or unprofessional behaviour on the part of teachers, abuse of authority, or academic or institutional malpractice). In such cases, as the root causes are beyond the student's control, we recommend talking to one of our specialists at the GPP for more information and/or to request advice about a possible third level of intervention which would be more individualized and more likely to effectively address a change process of this nature and magnitude. In other cases the best solution is to signpost students to other services, inside or outside the university, depending on their circumstances.

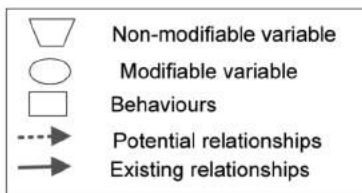
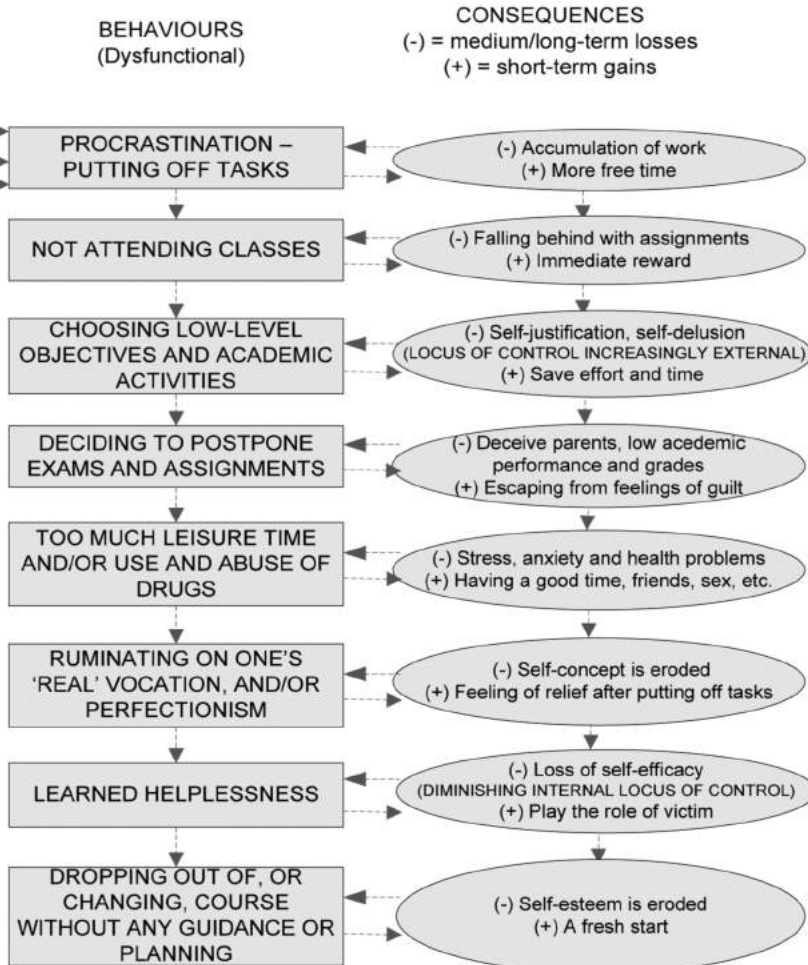
To sum up, either on their own or with the help of a lecturer or the right university service, the student must understand the importance of progressing in their studies as best they can, making the most of their time, being persistent, strengthening their instrumental skills (e.g. languages, computing, or social skills), or simply increasing their 'intense' study hours. Equally important is their enjoyment of time spent with friends, time for work to earn a little 'pocket money', and time for leisure. Without their commitment to this approach, the entire endeavour is in risk of failing.

**SECTION I**  
**A Functional Analysis Model of Behaviour in University Students  
with Difficulties Adjusting to University Life**

## FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' BEHAVIOURS AND



## VARIABLES AFFECTING THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE







**SECTION II**  
**List of Determining Factors in  
Adjusting to University Life**





## **STUDY HABITS: PLANNING AND ORGANISING YOUR TIME**

Study habits are the most effective predictor of academic success – more so, even, than intelligence or memory. The way in which we plan and organise our time is a matter of habit, and it largely shapes to what extent we make the best of our time and, therefore, our academic performance.

In Secondary and Further Education, we usually compensate for a lack of proper study habits by employing other strategies or skills such as memorising or ‘cramming’, one or two days before the exam. However, once at university there are a number of factors that can influence whether a student succeeds or effectively wastes an entire year, including: the greater level of content and higher demands in terms of performance; less external control (students live on their own and have no tutor/lecturer supervision); more potential sources of distraction (more cultural and leisure time opportunities are available); changes in the student-lecturer relationship (more impersonal, teaching staff may be less accessible); teaching methods (fewer exams spaced out over a longer period); and greater self-management skills required (managing time, money, social and emotional relationships, for example, as well as study).

### **Strategies for planning and organising your time efficiently**

1. Check whether the level of commitment and effort you are willing

to make matches the demands of the objectives you have set yourself at university.

2. Create a personal space free from distractions (e.g. telephone, Internet, flatmates, television, and so on).
3. Establish limits to avoid frequent interruptions during your study time. Your obligations are as important as others' needs and requirements.
4. Use a diary or calendar (visible all the time) to make a note of all your personal and academic commitments and obligations.
5. Design a study/work plan (you can use a table with columns for the days of the week and rows for the hours in the day, like the one in Section III, Support Materials 1, page 176) as follows:
  - *Establish how much time you really* can dedicate to studying each week. To do so, make detailed notes in your timetable of every compulsory or regular activity, i.e. your fixed timetable (e.g. sleeping hours, classes, cleaning the flat, paid work, and so on). Once you have done that, you can easily see how much time you can dedicate to studying or any other activities.
  - *Analyse your subjects*, paying attention to the amount of work they entail, their level of difficulty, deadlines and exams, your lecturer's expectations, your own aims, and your motivation for each subject.
  - *Make a distinction* between 'light' and 'intense' study. The first refers to those activities that come prior to studying, such as writing up lecture notes (not recommended!) or filling in gaps in notes, reviewing or browsing through materials, summarizing or drawing outline schema from lecture notes, and so on. The second refers to the studying itself, which requires greater effort and concentration and a higher level of cognitive processing in order to solve problems, memorise comprehensively, revise, etc.

- *Establish the order in which you study* the different subjects. Keep in mind your *personal skills* and aptitudes when studying. If you are able to concentrate quickly, start with the most difficult subjects and end with the easier ones. If it takes you longer to achieve full concentration, start with subjects that are of average difficulty, continue with the most difficult ones, and end with the easiest ones. Alternate between subjects and different study activities (such as reading and highlighting texts versus memorising). Divide assignments into different parts if they are too long or complex and start with the more difficult tasks, leaving the ones you like the most until last.
  - *Set realistic and well-defined objectives.* Sometimes students tend to get carried away by excessive enthusiasm and overload their timetable, making it almost impossible to accomplish. Don't forget to leave some free time for the unexpected, assign some time for leisure, extra-curricular activities, sports activities, and so on. They are important in order to keep your life balanced.
  - Taking all of the above into account, *programme daily study/work sessions* by filling in the empty spaces in your timetable.
6. Be flexible with your timetable, adjusting it to allow for things that crop up. For instance, if you have an unexpected visit during your planned study time, you will have to study later during part of your leisure time to catch up.
  7. Constancy is important. Use your timetable until you have acquired the correct study/work habits. Studying six days a week, for the same number of hours and at the same time, helps you acquire and reinforce good study habits. Combine longer study periods with short breaks (5-10 minutes). Don't go even one day without some 'intense' study time, even if it's only for 15 minutes!
  8. Remember that you have to make progress. Start with short study periods – depending on how 'out of shape' you are – and increase them progressively until you manage to meet your objectives.

9. Try out the timetable you have designed. As you are trying something new, you may need to adjust it after a week or so. Remember not to write down anything that you are not prepared to do.
  
10. Reward yourself for your hard work and for complying with the timetable you have set. If you don't manage to stick to the timetable, be careful not to 'punish yourself' by staying at home on a Saturday night and ending up watching TV or chatting with your friends. Time lost today CANNOT be regained tomorrow. Time is not like money.

### **Difficulties you may encounter when planning and organising your time**

#### ***Miscalculating your time and overloading your agenda***

- Although it can be tedious, try to observe yourself and estimate exactly how long it takes to carry out each activity.
  
- Go over your priorities. Sometimes we tend to start with low priority tasks rather than doing the more important things (e.g. cleaning the house instead of studying).
  
- From time to time, ask yourself "What is the best thing I can do with my time?"

#### ***Being too available***

- Try to control the 'traffic': close the door, use a 'Do Not Disturb' sign if necessary, and don't answer the phone.
  
- Examine your motives for being available: Are you trying to please everybody in order to be accepted? Are you afraid of not fitting in? Try to distinguish what is most important.
  
- Try to communicate assertively: "I'd really like to go out with you tonight but I must read these chapters without fail".

### ***The tyranny of urgency***

- Both tomorrow's exam and a phone call require our immediate attention. They are both urgent, but which is more important?
- If you are always running around trying to finish urgent tasks, it probably means either you're having trouble identifying your priorities or you're getting used to wasting time and putting things off.
- Learn to delegate or ignore those tasks that are urgent but not a priority (e.g. if a friend needs a book urgently, get them to come to your house or let them wait until tomorrow. Right now you can't just drop everything to take it to them).

### ***Getting distracted***

Maintaining high levels of attention and concentration sometimes requires a lot of effort.

- Try to train your concentration through short periods of intense attention and effort. Ten minutes of effort with short-term objectives can be very productive.
- Observe your level of anxiety: Do you know why you are so anxious? Can you control anxiety? Do you know how to relax?
- Pay attention to your tolerance for frustration. Are you facing a difficult task that requires more time? If you try to do everything at the same time you will probably fail. Achieving objectives is a progressive process. Try to establish your own routine and if you need to, find someone who can help.

### ***The procrastination habit: 'leaving things until later' all too often***

We all procrastinate over our responsibilities from time to time. The key is knowing which tasks we 'leave for later', how, and why. Which tasks do you try to avoid? What is your favourite excuse for avoiding them?



- Some tasks are easily postponed because they're relatively unimportant; others we postpone because we're not sure how to handle them; and others we postpone because they're highly important or particularly difficult. Look again at your motivation.
- Some people are afraid of failure because of the importance or difficulty of the task. Some are afraid of succeeding, because doing so would lead to further, greater demands being put on them. Others reject authority and resist fulfilling the demands they've had imposed on them. Some people are just perfectionists and refuse to try something unless they're sure they will get perfect results. Some cannot tolerate frustration and prefer to avoid having a hard time. Do you identify with any of these types?
- If procrastinating or putting off tasks becomes a serious problem, you should seek professional advice.

### ***Fear of failure***

“If I fail my parents will kill me! I'm a bad student! I'm not up to it! I'll never finish my degree! I'll never get a job!” Are you familiar with these thoughts?

- Your 'automatic' self-criticism and negative remarks or that critical voice in your head increase stress and diminish motivation and action. They can distract you and reduce your efficiency, as well as giving you an excuse for a bad result.
- Analyse whatever it is you tell yourself. Does it motivate you or does it make you more anxious? Does it draw you closer to your objective? Or does it push you further away from it?
- Replace these automatic criticisms and mental in-fighting with action (“Just sit down and do it!”). It is the only way to move forward and feel at ease with yourself.

## **Perfectionism**

- Perfectionism inhibits action, avoids complications, releases anxiety and gives you a perfect excuse for bad performance (for example “I haven’t really tried so it’s not a true indicator of my ability”). It reflects an ‘all or nothing’ attitude (for example “any result lower than a 1st might as well be a fail, so why should I make the effort?” Or “I won’t be able to concentrate so why bother?”).
- Examine the underlying reasons for your perfectionism. Are you trying to avoid action because you feel insecure or afraid?
- Examine the relative value of what you are trying to achieve. Some tasks are important enough for us to want to do them perfectly but most can be resolved by making a ‘reasonable’ effort.

## **Some tips to save time**

- Always carry something to read in your rucksack.
- Protect yourself from Parkinson’s Law: “Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.”
- Take breaks while you study (and not the opposite). A five-minute break is motivating and helps you assimilate what you’ve been studying. Review before every break.
- Use reminders so that you know where to start when you go back to your work and don’t forget what you have to do.





## PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination, or ‘putting things off’, is the habit of ‘leaving for tomorrow’ tasks or assignments that should be done today, and doing others that are easier and more pleasant, instead. That is, to mull over what you have to do and then worry about it, but without doing anything – in other words, not making the most of your time, or dedicating it to unnecessary tasks. We all procrastinate from time to time but if this behaviour becomes a habit we start feeling a twinge of guilt, laziness, ineptitude, or anxiety, we have problems organising ourselves and, finally, this affects our self-esteem.

Here are some examples of procrastination that may sound familiar to you:

### Ways of procrastinating

1. *Do you trick yourself into believing that poor performance – below your capabilities – is acceptable?* For instance, telling yourself that if your average grade is a Pass then you will still be able to get the job you want, will reduce your chances of choosing what you really want from life.
2. *Do you trick yourself into replacing one task with another?* For instance, instead of studying for an exam or doing your homework, you decide to clean your flat or your bedroom. Although it is

important to have a clean house, if you decide to clean right before an exam, you are procrastinating.

3. *Do you think small, repeated delays are harmless?* For instance, taking a break to watch your favourite programme can mean you waste the whole afternoon and/or lead you produce poor quality work.
4. *Are you continually 'dramatizing' your commitment to complete a particular activity instead of getting on and doing it?* One good example is if you go on an excursion, take your books with you and then don't even open them. Or if you don't take them you feel bad about it or punish yourself by not going out with friends and staying at home watching TV instead. That is the best way of keeping yourself permanently unwilling to work.
5. *Do you only persist with part of your homework?* For instance, you spend a lot of time on the cover page, correcting and rewriting the introduction but without working on the discussion and conclusions. Or you spend your time re-writing your lecture notes more neatly instead of studying them.
6. *Do you freeze when having to choose between different options?* For instance, you spend so much time trying to decide on the topic for an assignment that you end up without enough time to actually do it.
7. *Are you put off from doing course work because you're not sure you will be able to make it 'perfect'?* Demanding too much of yourself only discourages you. It is impossible to be perfect at everything

### **Causes of procrastination and strategies for handling it**

We will now suggest some possible causes of procrastination and useful strategies to help you turn things around.

- Cause: *Lack of interest in an assignment.* Strategy: Think of some personal reward for doing the task well.

- Cause: *Feeling the need to fulfil other people's expectations (parents, friends, lecturers, and so on)*. Strategy: Analyse, reflect, discuss and get some advice about what you really want to do.
- Cause: *Perfectionism*. Strategy: Take the first step and get to work. This will boost your motivation and self-confidence. If you are persistent, you will achieve good results.
- Cause: *Anxiety when being evaluated*. Strategy: Instead of giving so much importance to other people's opinions, concentrate on finishing tasks in order to learn and to cut down your workload. In this way you will reduce your level of anxiety.
- Cause: *Ambiguity or uncertainty over the task you've been assigned*. Strategy: If possible, ask your lecturer for more information on the task and what is expected of you.
- Cause: *You feel overwhelmed by the task you've been assigned because of its size or complexity*. Strategy: Divide your assignments into chunks or more manageable tasks, and do them one by one. Start doing the assignment and deal with problems as they arise, either by yourself, or asking for help.
- Cause: *Poor time management skills*. Strategy: Prioritize your tasks and assignments starting with the most important. Try to resist the temptation of getting distracted by easier tasks instead of starting on the 'real' work.
- Cause: *Poor quality leisure activities and/or lack of sleep*. Strategy: Be realistic and admit you need physical and mental rest from time to time. Remember that you need social, sport or artistic activities in order to remain balanced.
- Cause: *Too many commitments*. Strategy: Review your agenda. Prioritize, delegate or let go of some tasks (at least for the time being).
- Cause: *Magic thinking: 'If I ignore it, it will go away'*. Strategy: Review your experience and work out how often ignoring your

obligations has made them disappear or if, on the contrary, they stay put and you simply have less time in which to fulfil them.

- Cause: *Avoiding negative experiences*. Strategy: If you cannot find a way of making your work more pleasant, try to start on the tasks you like the least and leave those you like best to last.
- Cause: *Low tolerance of frustration*. Strategy: Once you break through the barrier of sitting down and starting to work, the next step is to be persistent. This will not only reduce your risk of failing but will also help you to feel better.

Although there are many strategies that can be useful when trying not to procrastinate, the most invaluable and efficient is the commitment to doing a good job and feeling happy with the work you do and with yourself. For that to happen we propose the following:

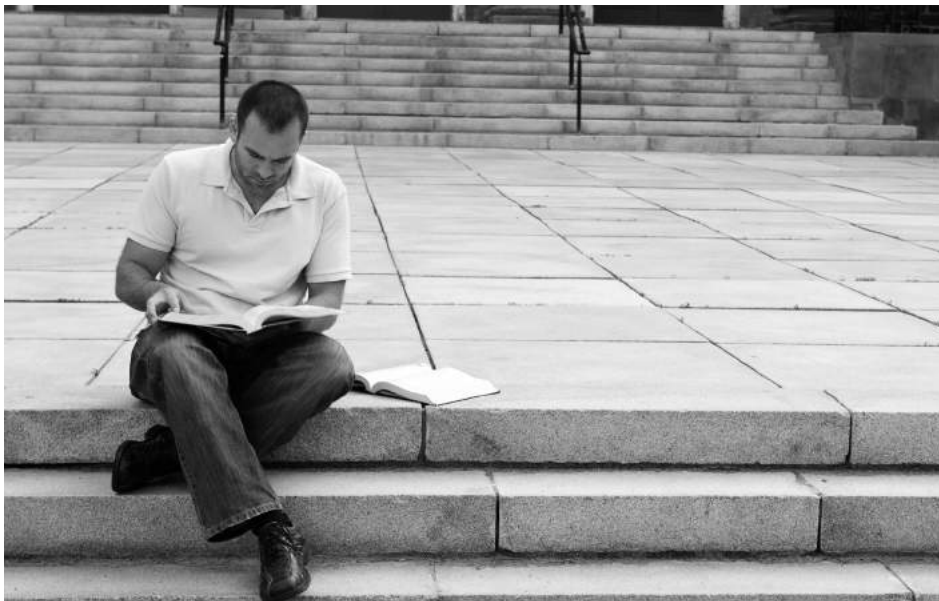
- Create your own personal, distraction-free space, (i.e. no telephone, flatmates, television, and so on) and commit yourself to working for 1-2 hour periods.
- Recognise that your obligations are as important as other people's needs and requirements. Establish limits so you don't have any interruptions or unwanted alterations to your timetable.
- Design a personal timetable and use a calendar that is plainly visible. Follow these guidelines:
  1. *List all your assignments*, exams and deadlines, with their corresponding dates.
  2. *Divide complex tasks* into phases or sub-tasks with more easily achievable objectives and assign deadlines for completing them.
  3. *Prioritize your activities*. Arrange tasks according to their importance.
  4. *Monitor your progress* with these sub-tasks. If you encounter

problems try to solve them quickly. If necessary, reconsider your own deadlines.

5. *Identify when your energy level is highest.* Plan those tasks and activities that require more effort for your high-energy time and leave the rest of the time for resting and doing more relaxed tasks (e.g. doing the washing).
6. *Plan your time by the hour.* Remember to leave time for sleeping, eating, your social life, a bit of exercise and/or other relaxing activities. It is important to set yourself a realistic timetable.
7. *Be reasonable with what you expect of yourself.* Perfectionist expectations and requirements that are too strict mean you may sabotage your own progress.
8. *Try out your new timetable.* As you are trying something new, logically you will need to adjust it after a one-week trial.
9. *Reward yourself* after a job well done and after keeping up with your timetable. It will help you to avoid developing an aversion towards the task and towards what you still have to do.







## OPTIMAL CONDITIONS FOR STUDYING

Although you have to remember that studying requires effort, you should also be aware that the conditions under which you study have a big impact on your learning and final performance. By conditions for work and study we're not just referring to aspects of the environment where you study (such as temperature, noise, light, suitable furniture, and ventilation) but also to personal conditions (fatigue, sleep, worries, and so on) that can affect the learning process.

If work and study conditions are inappropriate, you should change or modify them to the best of your ability to make studying and learning easier.

### Some myths frequently held by students

- *"You can study better with music"*. FALSE. Music is sometimes used to bury other annoying noises which can distract you and interfere when you are studying but it usually becomes just another distraction. If you have to use music to block out other noises, use appropriate music, avoid your favourite bands or lyrics in your own language, because you may end up singing while you study!
- *"It is better to study at night" "What's important is getting 7 or 8 hours' sleep but it doesn't matter when"*. FALSE. Normally, studying at night means changing your timetable, which is tiring. It is

best to study during daylight hours and, if you have to study at night, never do so at the expense of your sleeping hours.

- *"You can study better after a 1 or 2-hour nap"*. FALSE. A 'siesta' of more than 20 minutes will alter your sleep pattern and can make you more tired. Control your 'siesta time', using an alarm clock if you need to.
- *"Young people don't need so much rest"*. FALSE. Just the opposite, in fact. Young people need to rest more than those over 30. Sleeping is fundamental to good health. Moreover, it's been proven that when young, intellectual performance and knowledge assimilation are encouraged when you sleep for the recommended number of hours. Although sleeping needs differ from one person to another, it is generally recommended that you sleep around seven or eight hours a day.
- *"You study better after a coffee and/or some other stimulating drink"*. FALSE. Such drinks can sometimes perk you up but they don't eliminate fatigue. Remember that stimulants are no substitute for sleep.
- *"You study better in a relaxed posture"*. FALSE. Adopting a posture in which the neck muscles are relaxed can make you sleepy. It is best to study in a comfortable but upright posture.

## **What are the most appropriate study conditions?**

### ***Environment***

1. You should always study in the same space. It should be big enough for you to be able to set out everything you need. This will help you to acquire a daily study routine and save you unnecessary effort. You also need to keep it clean and tidy as it reflects your mental structure when learning.
2. The *furniture* must be appropriate. It should allow you to adopt a posture that is comfortable but not too relaxed. It is best if the table and chair are adjustable so you can move them to suit your height.

Keep the table tidy (avoid objects that could distract you while studying) and everything you use should be within easy reach (put shelves near the table, for example), giving you a sense of visual control. Ideally you should use an office/swivel chair with a five-point base for maximum stability. You should sit well back on the seat, keeping your back firmly against the backrest with your feet firmly on the floor. It's also helpful to use a noticeboard to design and plan tasks. Use 'warning' notes to help you remember important tasks and dates. For instance, you could use this system: [pending] for unfinished tasks, [important] for tasks with deadlines and [urgent] for those that are extremely important in your studies. If you find it makes reading easier, use a book-rest.

3. It must be a *quiet and calm place* where no one can interrupt you, away from noises and distractions (e.g. radios, televisions, your computer, MS Messenger, mobile phone, traffic, or noise from others coming and going). Also, it's best not to study to music. Music interferes with your study: it means you take longer over it and you're more likely to make mistakes. Even if you are 'not really' listening to it, your attention moves between the music and what you are studying. That's why background music is recommended when performing automated tasks but not for those that require attention, processing, and reasoning. Make the most of libraries and study facilities in your Faculty, School and/or local area.
4. *Perfectly well-lit*, preferably with natural light entering from the side opposite the direction you write in so as to avoid shadows. If you use artificial light (such as an angle poise lamp), the light should ideally enter from the side, should not be too dim or too bright (a blue-tone 60W bulb is ideal as it won't dazzle you), and should always be below eye-level. Try to avoid having glossy materials on the desk so as to avoid reflections that could distract you or cause visual fatigue.
5. Ensure the temperature is suitable – 21°C to 24°C – with good ventilation (open the doors and windows when you're not studying). Wear comfortable clothes that will help you regulate your body temperature, keeping you warm in winter and cool in sum-

mer. It is important to feel physically comfortable – neither cold nor hot. If you feel cold you are more likely to be agitated and uncomfortable, while excessive heat favours inactivity, making it more difficult to concentrate when studying.

### ***Personal conditions***

6. *What happens when you feel fatigue?* Physical or psychological fatigue is a normal process of adaptation that takes place when your body is subjected to physical and/or mental activity that is more frequent or more intense than your norm. You may notice that you have problems keeping your eyes open, your concentration fails, you get forgetful or irritable, and so on. Sometimes, it appears as a consequence of other unhealthy factors such as an inadequate diet, dehydration, or disturbed sleep. The only way to combat fatigue is by regulating your resting hours, improving your eating habits and planning your time carefully to include your study assignments, leisure activities and work, without overburdening yourself physically or mentally.
  
7. *Do not study just after lunch.* When you're digesting food, the flow of blood to your brain diminishes. That's why we feel sleepy after eating and we find it more difficult to memorise concepts, understand ideas and acquire new knowledge.



## MULTIPLE CHOICE TESTS

Multiple choice tests are very common at university. The ability to deal with this type of test improves with practice. Nevertheless, the following specific suggestions may help you transform everything you have studied and learned into good exam results.

### Some study strategies

1. *Make sure you know what the exam will be about.* Do this by reviewing the course curriculum, lecture notes and books. Pay special attention to the most important themes and the concepts the lecturer gave particular emphasis to.
2. *Ask to see your lecturer* to clarify anything you did not fully understand, well in advance of the exam.
3. *Study as much as you would for any other type of exam.* This way you will avoid the 'it all sounds familiar but I don't actually know anything' phenomenon. This type of exam usually covers most of the concepts studied in class.
4. *Ask yourself questions while you study.* Try to understand all the main points in detail.

5. Once you've finished studying everything systematically, *start to memorise the information*. Be sure you understand and use all the basic terminology of the subject. Memorizing methods include:
  - *Cards*: learn to link keywords to related information.
  - *Diagrams*: prepare a visual schema, add a title and try to remember the image.
  - *Mnemonics*: construct words or phrases using the first letters of the words designating a series of events or concepts; relate words with places or images; construct stories, and so on.
6. When studying, group together ideas or facts with similar meanings. Pay special attention to differences between the facts or ideas within each group. It can be useful to think about what each idea or fact means, includes, or doesn't include.

### **Strategies and guidelines when doing a multiple choice test**

1. *Pay attention to the time you have for the exam*. It is best to use a watch.
2. *Find out whether there's a penalty* for incorrect responses.
3. *Browse through the exam paper*. Note which items are easier and which are more difficult while you read through the paper.
4. *Start with the easiest questions*. When you start, don't waste time trying to answer the most difficult questions. Make sure you score the points for the questions you're confident about.
5. *Go back to the questions you couldn't answer at first*. Maybe you can answer them now that you feel more relaxed after having answered other questions. Sometimes the answer to one question can give you clues to answer the next one.

6. *Read, and try to fully understand, the wording of the question before reading the different options and choosing one. Avoid jumping to conclusions before you've read the full question.*
7. *Underline key terms and keywords that give you clues about the answer. When you find terms that are ambiguous, rephrase them in your own words.*
8. *First think what the correct answer might be, and then try to find it amongst the different options.*
9. *If some options differ by just one or two words or in the order of one or two terms, it may be useful to read the question stem followed by one of the options (while you cover up the others). This way it will be easier to choose between options and discount those that don't fit the question stem.*
10. *You can also answer all the questions about one subject, so as to avoid the mixing-up of different subjects that is inherent to this type of exam. If you take this approach, be extra careful to ensure that you do not accidentally skip some of the questions.*
11. *Pay attention to the terminology used when connecting options or questions with key content from the subject area, the lectures, or chapters. This can help you to narrow the field down to possible options and find the right answer.*
12. *You must choose an option not just because it is technically correct, but because it is the most correct alternative. Options such as 'all the above' or 'none of the above' are very inclusive and are more often correct than they are incorrect.*
13. *Use the information and knowledge acquired during the test to revise your answers to questions you weren't sure about.*
14. *When you find options such as 'all the above', 'none of the above' or 'neither A nor B are correct', consider each option as if it were a true/false question and then relate it back to the question stem.*



15. *Don't be impulsive when answering!* It is important to read all the options and not to stop when you think you've found the right one.

### **When things get tough and you decide to risk it ...**

1. Go for it, but... be 'methodical'. Discount the options that are clearly wrong and then relate the ones that are left to the question stem and see if they 'fit'. If you have to choose between two answers, compare them and identify the differences between them. Finally, make an 'informed guess'.
2. Options written in a style that's different to the rest are usually wrong because they're not coherent with the question stem or have nothing to do with the content of the item but are related to something else within the subject content.
3. Options including terms such as '*never*', '*always*', '*ensures*', '*guarantees*', and so on, are very restrictive and they are difficult to justify if you choose them. They are normally incorrect answers.
4. On the other hand, terms such as '*sometimes*', '*occasionally*', or '*may lead to*' are more often than not correct.
5. Take care of options that use slang or informal language. They are normally included to distract you and test whether you know the technical terminology, so you can distinguish what 'looks right' from what is right.
6. It can be very useful to know *suffixes, prefixes or roots of words* in order to make an intelligent guess about the meaning of terms you don't know. For instance, if you know the meaning of the prefix 'hyper', you can easily guess that hypertension refers to high blood pressure and not low blood pressure.
7. As a last resort, if you haven't got a clue about the correct answer, if none of the previous techniques can be applied, and there is no penalty for incorrect answers, options B or C are usually correct, according to research studies.

8. Do you think you've chosen an incorrect option? Do you want to change it? If you're going over your answers in the exam and start to have doubts about an option you've chosen, if you were reasonably certain about *it at first, it is better not to change it*.
9. Finally, remember: the best way to choose the correct answer is ... to know the right one!!

### **And after the exam...**

- Check the questions you got wrong and find out why.
- Find the correct answers in your books and lecture notes.
- If you're still in doubt, ask the lecturer.
- Learn which errors you commit most often and which questions you have most trouble with.





## STUDY TECHNIQUES

Studying efficiently, and thus understanding, assimilating and implementing content effectively, depends on having a methodological approach. If you don't study in an organised, logical, systematic way on a daily basis, you won't be able to assimilate the content properly and you will easily forget. The study techniques provided in this book are a set of tools – a method that will help you with the learning process and improve your academic performance. However, it is worth remembering that students must assimilate the need to study in the first place, otherwise none of the techniques or methods will work.

### **Taking notes**

This is a fundamental part of studying. It is strongly recommended that students take their own lecture notes. The aim is to take notes of every relevant point and explanation during lectures and to build on them afterwards, extending or completing the subject matter content by consulting other information sources (e.g. books, manuals, the lecturer, classmates, and so on) to facilitate understanding. It is not advisable to simply re-write lecture notes as in doing this you may lose visual information that your brain can later use as clues to recall and retrieve information.

### *Guidelines*

- Leave margins for making additional observations.
- Remember that the beginning of the explanation is usually important.
- Take notes that are clear and tidy.
- Make sure your notes show the logical structure of the lecturer's explanation (leave gaps if necessary).
- Use abbreviations if necessary.
- Don't fool yourself! Re-writing your lecture notes is not the same as studying.
- Pay attention to your lecturer's tone of voice and facial expressions; they are normally used to highlight the important parts of the explanation.
- Read through your notes again on the day of the lecture and underline the most important ideas.

### **Pre-reading**

This consists of an initial, quick reading that gives you a general idea of the content you have to learn. It comes before understanding and going into the subject in depth.

### *Guidelines*

- Pay attention to the titles and subtitles of each topic, words in italics, bold, and underlined, summaries and conclusions, notes in the margins and footnotes, illustrations, tables, graphs, and diagrams.

## **Intensive reading**

This is an essential stage in understanding the content and extracting the main ideas in the text. It also involves learning and making appropriate use of the terms that are specific to the topic.

### *Guidelines*

- Use a dictionary to find the words you don't know or understand.
- Read the beginning and end of each paragraph carefully; they usually contain the most important ideas. Mark the primary and secondary topics and try to draw out the main idea of the whole text.
- Try to relate the new topic you have just read about to other topics you have already studied, analysing similarities and differences between them, common points, and so on. We also suggest you look for examples or practical applications.

## **Notes in the margins**

Use the margins of the text to write important ideas, brief summaries, clarifications, doubts, comments, and so on. They are useful when analysing and reflecting on what you are studying.

### *Guidelines*

- Take notes during intensive reading
- Try to make your notes clear and concise

## **Underlining**

The aim is to highlight the important ideas in the text to improve your understanding. This makes your studying more active and contributes to better concentration and comprehension.

### *Guidelines*

- Do this after your intensive reading.
- Underline main ideas, important details, technical words, data, dates, and so on. Begin by underlining in pencil in case you need to change things.
- Make sure that the information you underline makes sense and is related, even though it may make the text read like a telegram.
- Use vertical lines to mark those paragraphs which contain important information.
- Use one colour only when underlining, two at most. Red is best for memorising information.

### **Write a summary**

This implies writing, in the briefest and clearest way, the main ideas in a text, without losing its original meaning. Though it's best to use your own words, it is also good to combine with the author's words as this allows you to widen your vocabulary and familiarize yourself with the subject terminology. The result is a shorter text that contains only what's essential to learn.

### *Guidelines*

- After underlining the important ideas, re-write the text in your own words.
- Read your summary and check that the key ideas match those of the original text.
- Make sure the ideas are well-developed and give you an overview of the text.

## Schema

This is a visual synthesis of the content and structure of a text, made up of key words, sentences, and other data which sum up the most significant ideas and the connections between them. Because it is a simple diagram, the visual impact and greater synthesis of information, in contrast to the summary, help you recall the subject at a glance.

### *Guidelines*

- Identify the principal and secondary themes of what you want to study, and capture them on paper.
- Organise the information around these themes, ensuring that the principal themes always include the secondary ones, and not the other way round.
- Group together related ideas, using bullet points for example, and represent the relationships between them, for instance with brackets.

## Mind maps

These are made by selecting the main concepts of the subjects you want to study, and representing them visually in a hierarchy, showing the relationships between them. The advantage of mind maps is that they make a visual impression which helps you to retrieve and recall information.

### *Guidelines*

- Identify key concepts (begin with easy texts until you master the technique).
- Make a list of these concepts.
- Organise the concepts from the most general to the most specific.
- Put the most general concept at the top of the map and from this



add the remaining concepts until you reach the most specific ones. Examples will be located in the lower part of the map.

- Connect the concepts with lines and linking words that define the relationships between them.
- Also mark any crossover relationships between concepts belonging to different hierarchical branches of the mind map.

## **Memorising and memory**

In order to achieve effective recall, memorising must be thorough. That is, try to relate a new concept with what you have already learned and create logical or causal relations within the material you have to learn, and so on.

### *Guidelines*

- Increase your attention and concentration as much as you can; your sight and hearing are specially important.
- Keep a positive attitude towards the lecturer and the subject as this will improve your motivation when studying.
- Improve your understanding by using dictionaries, graphs, schema, and so on.
- Repeating the information a number of times, either out loud or in your head, can work well too.
- Associate the content you have to learn with the highest possible number of images and emotions by writing, drawing graphs, consulting books, making schema, finding logical associations, or relating it to a context that is familiar to you, for example.
- Rest. Prolonged study tires you, so it is best to take 5- or 10-minute breaks for every 55 or 60 minutes of study, or every time you change the subject you are studying.

## Mnemonics

These are techniques that make it easier to learn specific content that may be difficult to memorise such as lists of names, categories, characteristics, and the like. For instance, you can experiment with the following:

- Visualise the words you are going to memorise as images.
- Associate two ideas by creating two mental images, one per word/idea, and relating them to each other.
- Link concepts and words by first converting them into images.
- Integrate the elements, concepts, or words you want to memorise by creating an imaginative story with them.
- Associate the images of the concepts or words you want to memorise with the image of a familiar road or place.
- Create a coherent sentence or a short story with the data you have to memorise, create a sentence made up of the syllables or initial letters, or use a familiar song.
- Write rhyming verses with the data you need to remember.
- Replace ideas with graphics, pictures or illustrations that represent them.
- Mentally associate the image of the idea with a familiar object or place so that your memory of the image can lead you to the idea.





## STRESS

Stress is the natural, automatic response of the body to situations that are threatening or challenging. The continual changes in your life and your surroundings demand on-going adjustments; therefore, some degree of stress (in the sense of activation) is necessary.

In general, we tend to believe that stress is the consequence of external circumstances, but in fact it is a process of interaction between events in the environment and cognitive, physiological, and motor responses in the person. When stress is prolonged and/or intensified over a period of time, health, academic or professional practice, and even relationships may be affected.

Controlling stress involves four stages:

- Acknowledge and understand the signs of stress.
- Identify and understand the (controllable vs. uncontrollable) sources of stress.
- Learn how to handle the controllable sources of stress.
- Learn how to react to stress when the sources are uncontrollable.

## Signs of stress

- Physical: contracted muscles, neck-ache, back-ache, headaches, tics, quivering, cold, shaking or sweating hands, disturbed sleep routine, stomach-ache, infections, fatigue, agitated breathing, palpitations, tachycardia, polyuria, dry mouth, etc.
- Emotions/feelings: mood changes, nervousness, irritability, hostility, fear, confusion, etc.
- Cognitive/thoughts: excessive self-criticism, concern about the future and fear of failure, difficulty in concentrating and making decisions, forgetfulness, repetitive, recurrent thoughts about ideas or tasks, mental block, lack of interest, denial of problems, etc.
- Behavioural/motor: stuttering or other speech problems, crying for no apparent reason, impulsive reactions, giggling, brusque behaviour towards others, fighting (about everything and nothing), grinding your teeth or tightening your jaw, increased smoking, alcohol or other substance intake, increased or reduced appetite, working longer hours but with poor performance, etc

## How is stress produced?

External events that generate stress do not necessarily have to be particularly unpleasant or intense, but their effects can accumulate until you reach breaking point. The way we interpret and think about everything that happens to us affects our perspective and experience of stress. In this sense, it is our interpretation that frequently provokes or encourages a negative stress reaction, rather than the actual event or situation we are facing.

Take the example of a student who is accustomed to getting excellent marks who gets just a 'pass' in one particular subject. The fact that this result can affect their student record and their chances of getting the grant or job they aspire-to, may have a multiplying effect on their level of stress and turn it into anxiety.

Reactions to situations in your immediate environment are also

affected by your general level of health and welfare. A person who is always stressed, does not sleep very much, and does not eat properly, will probably have fewer resources with which to face difficult situations. The key is to strike a balance between rest, nutrition, exercise, work/study, and leisure.

### **Sources of stress during your university years**

As we have mentioned before, stress is part of our daily life, and the amount of pressure that everyone is able to bear is different. Furthermore, it varies according to each personal, work, and/or family situation.

During your university years, the main events that contribute to stress are usually related to leaving home, traveling constantly, being responsible for your own finances, sharing a flat or living alone, and at the same time, attending to other academic responsibilities and personal relationships. On top of this, you may also have to add positive events, such as falling in love or preparing a study trip that, though pleasant, may create some tension as well.

### **What to do when faced with stress?**

Strategies to deal with stress are aimed at preventing or controlling internal or external events that surpass certain limits. In cases where the situation that provokes the stress is unavoidable, such as an exam, the challenge is to face up to the situation in the healthiest way possible. This also means you should stop doing those things that you have tried before and haven't worked.

That said, there are certain strategies that may help you to deal with stressful situations:

- *Do everything you can to attend lectures having completed all your homework and related tasks.* The first sign of having academic problems is that you are not attending lessons.
- *If you don't understand something or have questions, just ask.* Use the tutorials with your lecturers and, if appropriate, talk to your

classmates in order to resolve doubts. Be aware that everything you do not yet know is the key to keeping on learning, as what really matters is to ask questions rather than remaining in the dark.

- *Write a study/work plan that allows you to organise and make the most of your time.* This must be realistic and balanced, including time for eating, sleeping, cleaning, keeping fit, going to lessons, studying, leisure, etc. Do not include anything you do not fully intend to do.
- *Set short-term goals* related to something you want to do today or in the coming days, contributing to your long-term goals. This way, you won't have to leave everything until the last minute. Thus, achieving an everyday task, even if it's a small one, will help you to feel that you are making progress.
- *Try to be open to new ideas or experiences.* We tend to do the same things in the same way, even if it doesn't always work. The more we do this, the more limited our vision and response to the world. Therefore, it is not ideal to make hasty judgments when you are in a situation in which something or someone challenges everything you believe or believed in.
- *Get involved in academic life, social activities, friends, and 'yourself'.* The more committed you are to your life, the more you will benefit from it. Of course, you should also remember that no one can do everything, all of the time – that's just not possible. Learn how to say "no" to others when you need to.
- *Find your own ways of relieving tension:* yoga, walking, going to the cinema, dancing, cycling, etc.

## Useful resources

### Spanish Society for Anxiety and Stress

<http://www.ucm.es/info/seas/faq>



## ANXIETY AND FEAR OF SPEAKING IN PUBLIC

Anxiety when speaking in public is quite widespread in the population at large. Studies indicate that anywhere between 20% and 85% of the population experience some level of anxiety in this situation.

The signs and symptoms that usually appear in situations in which public speaking is demanded include trembling, sweating hands, dry mouth, increasing heart rate, breathing difficulties, muscle tension, blushing, stomach-ache, vertigo, lapse of concentration, stuttering, shaky voice, unfinished expressions, repetitions, omissions, nonsense words, or not finding the right words (having something ‘on the tip of your tongue’), for instance. These situations usually come with different fears, such as being judged negatively by other people, not being listened-to, not having anything interesting to say, the embarrassment you may feel in the face of possible failure, fear of ‘going blank’, etc.

### Why does it happen?

By their very nature (that is, challenging or threatening), situations that involve public speaking activate your organism in order to deal with them. When you internally judge this natural reaction negatively, this provokes further anxiety, creating a vicious circle.

The first time a person is faced with public speaking, the anxiety may overwhelm them, and this is quite normal. Like with any other skill,



we need practice so that we can reach an optimal level of performance. It's possible that the individual may remember this reaction in future performances, and this can make them re-experience the symptoms in such a way that they cannot control them. This will prevent them from developing the skills that otherwise they would acquire with practice.

In other cases, they may not have had a previous negative experience of speaking in public, but in their daily life they may have observed others having difficulties, for instance, when a classmate is giving a talk. This may lead them to re-live their classmate's symptoms as if they were their own, recalling the experience when they have to face a similar situation.

### **How does it affect everyday life?**

As mentioned earlier, a certain level of stress activation is normal in public speaking, and it can even help the person to prepare to handle the situation. Even so, for many people, experiencing anxiety can block their capacity to perform. In addition, people often generalize this anxiety to other aspects of life, and end up adopting a pattern of behaviour based on avoiding situations that cause them anxiety. In the case of students, these behaviours can limit their probabilities of adapting well, both socially and academically.

### **What can be done about it?**

The following strategies can help you when addressing the anxiety that public speaking may provoke. The more committed you are to changing, and the greater the effort you are willing to make, the more useful these strategies will be to you.

### ***Key pointers for facing anxiety***

- *Expose yourself to the very situations that cause you anxiety.* This is a necessary step in the process of learning to deal with anxiety and increasing your skills day by day to manage it. If you wait until the moment of the 'great performance', such as an oral exam, to stand up in front of an audience, you may not be as successful as if you had practiced in daily situations, like asking a group of peo-

ple in the street for the time, ordering a coffee 'at the top of your voice' in a busy café, etc.

- *Learn to spot as soon as possible the particular reactions that arise in you when starting to feel anxious.* You will find the information that appears in the first section of help.
- *Develop strategies to face your anxiety.* For instance, practice abdominal breathing in order to prevent anxiety from overwhelming you. This consists of breathing slowly and filling your lungs completely from your abdomen – something we don't usually do when we breathe normally.

### ***When you are preparing a presentation***

- *Think about the audience.* Knowing the number of people you are going to be talking to, or their backgrounds, can help you to adapt your presentation accordingly.
- *Prepare the subject of the presentation.* Even if you know a lot about your topic, gathering more information on it will help you to feel more self-assured and give you more possible answers to the questions you may get from the audience.
- *Write out the presentation.* This will help you to prepare your input and, in addition, you can refer to your written notes during the presentation, should the need arise.
- *Draw up a schema with the main points.* This technique can be useful to guide you during the presentation, and it is also much more effective than reading the full original text as this may prove tedious for your audience.
- *Prepare some comments and jokes in advance.* Anyone can get lost during a presentation, so it is helpful to have some lines prepared as anecdotes or brief comments to give yourself some time while you pick up the thread of the presentation.
- *Practice the presentation with another person.* It's important to ask

them to be critical about your presentation, so you can identify your weak and strong points and, therefore, improve and consolidate them. It can also be useful to imagine the presentation as if you were there, practicing in front of a mirror, or even recording it on video.

### ***During the presentation***

- *Before you begin, if necessary ease any tension in your shoulders* as this causes discomfort in the neck and head and can make you feel more nervous during the presentation. One basic exercise consists of exaggerating the tension posture (by raising your shoulders towards your head) for a few seconds and then completely releasing your shoulders. Repeat this several times.
- *Talk to people in the audience before starting.* The more people you know, the easier it will be for you to see the audience as friendly. During the presentation you can then make eye contact with them, or with others you know, if you need to see a friendly face.
- *Start by introducing yourself.* Say your name and the title of the presentation before starting. This beginning usually has a good effect on the audience.
- *Move.* If you move around during the presentation, you will feel more relaxed and you will show the audience that you master the space and the situation.

### ***After the presentation***

- *Give yourself a pat on the back.* Regardless of how the presentation went, you should reward yourself for the effort you made. Treat yourself to a nice meal, for instance.
- *Assess yourself.* Evaluate how you did during the presentation. Remember everything you did well so that you can do it again next time. Then think about any mistakes and how you can avoid them in the future.

## **Useful resources**

**Spanish Society for Anxiety and Stress**

<http://www.ucm.es/info/seas/faq>





## EXAM NERVES

The term ‘exam nerves’ refers to a series of physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural reactions that may negatively affect your performance in your exams. This kind of anxiety can be either be ‘anticipatory’, if the feeling of discomfort starts when you begin to study or when you think of what is going to happen in the exam, or ‘situational’, if it arises during the exam.

Fear of exams is not irrational, as your performance very much determines your academic future. However, sometimes this anxiety can interfere with your performance or block your productivity, and even affect other aspects of your life. If that happens, you should adopt strategies and actions that help balance the effects out.

### **Why does anxiety arise during exams?**

Most of the time, there is some form of stimulus – a real or perceived threat – that activates the anxiety response. In this case, before an exam:

- If you have prepared properly, anxiety may be due to negative thoughts or concerns. Maybe you are thinking of previous exams, how your classmates are doing, or the negative consequences that a bad exam may have.

- Anxiety may also be due to inadequate preparation for the exams (which is still a good reason to be worried!). In these cases, mistakes when organising your time, bad study habits or ‘cramming’ the night before may considerably increase your levels of anxiety.

### **How does anxiety affect you during your exams?**

- In the physical sense: alterations to your sleeping pattern, stomach-ache, tachycardia, muscular tension, nausea, dry mouth, sweating, etc.
- In the emotional sense (feelings): nervousness, irritability, muscular tension, fear, etc.
- In the cognitive sense (thoughts): difficulties when reading and understanding questions, organising thoughts, or remembering words or concepts; mental block (or ‘going blank’), reflected in being unable to remember the answers even though you know them, repetitive or recurrent thoughts about failing, etc.
- In the behavioural/motor sense: increase in the intake of substances (such as stimulants, tranquilizers, certain foods, vitamin supplements, etc.), trembling, increased or reduced appetite, impulsive reactions such as walking out of the exam or answering without thinking, etc.

### **What can you do in order to reduce anxiety?**

The following strategies may help guide you in dealing with anxiety during your exams. The greater your commitment to making the necessary changes, the more useful these strategies will be.

#### ***Basic points about handling anxiety***

- *Expose yourself to situations that cause you anxiety.* This stage is needed to face up to it and increase your skills day by day so that you can handle it better. If you avoid going to an exam because you think you are going to go blank, you are compromising the development of the skills you need in order to confront them ade-

quately. Don't forget that it is a gradual process that you will master as you sit more and more exams.

- *Learn to spot as soon as possible the particular reactions that arise in you when starting to feel anxious.* You will find the information that appears in the first section of help.
- *Develop strategies to face it.* For instance, practice abdominal breathing in order to avoid the anxiety building up anxiety. This consists of deep breathing, filling your lungs completely from the abdomen. This is something we don't normally do when we breathe.

### **While studying**

- *Organise your study time* to do all the things you need before the exam (such as checking the study material, making schema, going over the subjects, etc.)
- *Check the material frequently.* This will increase your self-confidence.
- *Set study goals* and deal with them one by one in order to not overload yourself.
- If you feel nervous, *try to relax* using any of the following techniques:
  - *Abdominal breathing*, as mentioned before.
  - *Tense and relax the different muscle groups.* For instance, tense your shoulders for a few seconds and then relax them. Notice the feeling this causes and learn how to identify states of tension in the muscles in order to relax them.
  - *If you have distracting and recurrent thoughts that threaten your concentration and/or self-esteem* (e.g. "I'm going to fail", "I won't have enough time", "I'm won't be able to...", etc.), you can replace them with rational answers (e.g. "I'm capable of pas-



sing", "I just need to work more"), thoughts that will help you to manage your stress (e.g. "I'll do the best I can", etc.), and thoughts that help you concentrate (e.g. "I can respond to the question perfectly well if I divide my answer into short sub-sections"). If these strategies don't work, 'park' your thoughts by writing them down on a separate piece of paper and telling yourself you will come back to them later. You can then carry on working without the thoughts distracting you.

### ***Before the exam***

- Arrive early enough* to find yourself a seat where you feel comfortable.
- Avoid people who make you doubt your preparation.*
- Once you have the exam paper, *read the instructions a couple of times* and organise your time efficiently.

### ***During the exam***

- Some of the relaxation techniques you used while studying can also be useful during the exam itself. Take a couple of minutes' break if you think you need to relax.
- Start with the easiest questions.* This will help you feel capable and will reinforce your confidence to deal with the more difficult questions.
- Don't be afraid to ask the invigilator* about anything you are unsure of during the exam.
- Don't hurry unnecessarily* just because you see your classmates finish before you do: work at your own pace.
- Think before you write*, draw a schema to organise your ideas and remember the relevant aspects you must include.
- Write briefly and precisely*, start with key concepts and develop

them. Justify your answer if needed.

- Take care of the presentation.* Clarity, order, and accurate spelling are essential.
- Make sure you have answered all the questions you wanted to.*
- Treat yourself to something nice after the exam if you feel like it.*

### **Useful resources**

#### **Spanish Society for Anxiety and Stress**

<http://www.ucm.es/info/seas/faq>





## DEPRESSION

After a major loss or disappointment, it is normal to feel sad or listless, or to want to be left alone. Nevertheless, when these episodes are very frequent, they last over time and they interfere with your daily habits, it's probably something more serious than 'feeling a bit down' and you should contact a specialist.

Data about the exponential increase in depression shows that it will be the most widespread illness of the 21st Century. Recognising the signs and symptoms may help you prevent possible consequences that are more difficult to address, such as professional or academic problems, or even attempts to self-harm.

### **Some signs and symptoms**

#### ***Changes in feelings and perceptions***

- Sudden bouts of crying or lack of emotional response (emotional fatigue).
- Defencelessness, self-neglect and/or gloom.
- Loss of pleasure and interest even in those activities that were pleasurable before.

- Loss of affection for family and friends.
- Hesitancy, confusion, inability to concentrate and retain information.
- Feeling stressed easily (decreased capacity to face daily tasks and activities).
- Feelings of loneliness or desire to be alone.
- Guilty conscience (sometimes exaggerated).
- Low self-esteem (feeling you are not worthy).
- Loss of sexual desire.

### ***Changes in behaviour***

- Distancing yourself from important or significant people.
- Being careless about physical appearance/hygiene.
- Abandoning your social, professional, and/or academic responsibilities.
- Irritability; complaining about situations that were not a problem before.
- Being moody most of the time.

### ***Physical complaints***

- Lethargy, constant feeling of fatigue.
- Disturbed sleep pattern (e.g. difficulties getting to sleep, poor sleep quality, sleeping more hours, waking up during the night or very early in the morning, etc.).
- Pronounced increase in, or loss of, appetite.

- Digestive problems: stomach-ache, nausea, indigestion, diarrhoea, constipation, etc.
- Persistent headaches for no apparent reason.

### **What causes depression?**

Being at university, like many other life stages, involves facing stressful situations that, if you are not able to confront and resolve them properly, may generate and/or prolong depression. Amongst others, we would highlight:

- Being separated from your family.
- Dealing with increased freedom and independence.
- Facing success and difficulties in academic, sporting, and extra-mural activities.
- Starting or ending relationships.
- Making decisions concerning your future (such as choosing a degree course or applying for a job).
- Leaving the security of a familiar student lifestyle in order to face the 'real world' after finishing university.

However, it is often difficult to describe the reason why you feel bad or depressed, and it may not be caused by one reason but by many factors with negative effects that accumulate and ultimately lead to a bout of depression.

### **Influencing factors**

- Situational*: financial problems, difficulties with lessons, job loss, death of someone important, difficult or stressful life conditions, being a victim of assault or theft, situations in which you feel helpless, etc.

- *Interpersonal*: problems with friends or breaking up with your partner, family conflicts, bad relationship with flatmates, difficulties in expressing needs or setting boundaries in relation to other people.
- *Medical/biological*: food allergy, chemical imbalance, presence of illness or infection, etc.
- *Unhealthy habits*: inappropriate nutrition (e.g. fast food abuse), bad sleep habits (e.g. sleeping a lot some days, and very little others), use/abuse of substances, (e.g. caffeine, alcohol, cannabis, etc.), and a sedentary lifestyle.
- *Cognitive*: criticizing and constantly denigrating everything you think, feel, or do (low self-esteem), pessimistic or catastrophic thoughts, excessive, recurring worry about the future, disproportional fear of failing, feeling you make the wrong decisions about important issues in your life, or distancing yourself from everything you have always wanted to be, etc

Therefore, if the causes are identified in time, if the person understands and accepts them, if they get the resources and help they need, and if they are willing to change, it is very likely that symptoms will decrease and disappear in a reasonable period of time.

You must remember that depression is NOT the result of laziness, weakness, or personal failure.

### **What can I do?**

First of all, don't be alarmed. Try to identify what is affecting you (e.g. the relationship with your family or partner, financial problems, etc.), and how it may affect other areas of your life (for example, problems with your parents or flatmates can lead you to avoid spending time at home, or not leave your room, and this may influence your academic performance, the relationship with your friends, etc.).

Sometimes, talking about your problems with the people involved can offer you solutions before you reach a higher level of stress. You can also try to:

- *Change your normal routine*, taking a break to indulge in a favourite activity or something new (even if you don't feel like it).
- *Take some exercise*, as this eases tension and improves sleep.
- *Focus on the here and now*, try to achieve small goals, and don't hope to resolve everything in one go.
- *Avoid making long-term commitments*, or making decisions or changes that make you feel trapped or limited; it is better to postpone them until you feel well enough face them.
- *Avoid stressful situations that increase your tension*, and are avoidable (e.g. meeting people who make you feel nervous, taking food you don't tolerate well, etc.).
- *Fall back on your family and friends*, since talking to them can help you understand what's going on, downplay its importance, and give you a different point of view, etc.

If these feelings of depression persist or get worse, it would be best to get some professional advice. Many students face bouts of depression but with help, willpower, and clear thinking you can begin to look forward to the future again.







## SLEEP PROBLEMS

Sleep problems are those difficulties that can arise when trying to get to sleep or trying to sleep through the night. They can affect your sleep in terms of quantity, quality, and/or routine. The persistence of any of these difficulties may have negative consequences for your physical health, as well as your psychological wellbeing and, therefore, can affect the way you adjust to academic life. Around one in three university students has sleep-related problems at some time or other.

### Some symptoms

- Having trouble getting to sleep.
- Waking up several times during the night.
- Waking up and not being able to fall asleep again.
- Being unable to sleep restfully and waking up tired.
- Persistent feeling of fatigue during the day.
- Health problems (e.g. heart or pulmonary problems, headaches, dental infections, peptic ulcer, rheumatic diseases, hyperthyroidism, arterial hypertension, renal failure, polyuria or constantly needing to use the toilet, asthma, gastroesophageal reflux, fever,

coughing, etc.).

- Increased use/abuse of sleeping pills.
- Problems paying attention and concentrating that affect academic performance (i.e. loss of study habits, lack of attendance, low marks, problems with handing in tasks on time, etc.).
- Apathy, confusion, irritability, bad mood, lack of energy, etc.
- Deterioration of interpersonal relationships.

### **Why do sleep problems arise?**

Generally, sleep problems arise as a consequence of the interaction of a series of factors, over a period of time. The most noteworthy of these factors are: environmental (i.e. noise, extreme temperatures, closed spaces, inappropriate bed or room, or using them badly, exposure to bright light, timetable changes both in work and travel routines, etc.); use/abuse of substances (i.e. amphetamines and derived substances, some antidepressant drugs, corticosteroids, coffee, tea, certain refreshments, fatty and spicy food, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, recreational drugs, etc.); and mood (i.e. distress, sadness, nervousness, stress, anxiety, euphoria, etc.) produced by circumstances such as sitting exams, emotional loss, shift work, relocation, or health, occupational, and relationship problems, for instance.

Other possible factors are: the presence of some disorders and pathologies; excess physical or intellectual stimulation before going to bed; and disturbed sleep patterns (such as going to bed late and waking up late, sleeping too much during the day, sleeping a lot some days and then very little other days, etc.).

### **Some strategies for developing appropriate sleep habits**

1. *Follow a regular sleep routine.* This means going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. In this way, you give your body a good rest. If you feel like sleeping a little bit more on weekends, you can, but do not spend most of the morning or the day

sleeping. Bear in mind that if you want to regulate your sleep pattern, you should focus on getting up at the same time each day, not on going to bed at a certain time. Your sleep routine will regulate itself according to when you wake up.

2. *Create bedtime rituals.* Establish a set routine before going to bed to help you prepare for sleep – for example, putting on your pyjamas, brushing your teeth, closing the bedroom door, turning the light off, and adopting your favourite position for sleeping. Whatever your routine consists of, the key is to always follow it in the exact same sequence, and to do so every night.
3. *Moderate your physiological needs before going to bed.* It is best not to go to bed hungry, thirsty, or feeling you need to urinate, etc., since these can affect your sleep. Avoid heavy or spicy food for dinner, and try to restrict liquids just before going to bed. This will prevent you from waking up during the night to go to the toilet.
4. *Avoid taking certain substances during the day, especially before going to bed,* such as stimulants (e.g. coffee, tea, nicotine, or any other stimulant of the central nervous system), cannabis or alcohol (at the beginning they have sedative effects, making you feel sleepy, but later on they may interrupt your rest).
5. *Set up an appropriate environment that will encourage you to sleep.* It is best to: keep your room at a pleasant temperature, with no annoying noises or strong lights; choose a suitable bed (with a firm but comfortable mattress); use comfortable bedclothes (neither too light nor too heavy); and ensure your pillow is comfortable in terms of size, firmness, and flexibility.
6. *Do not use your bed for waking-time activities.* In particular, at bedtime it is important to avoid reading, studying, watching television, talking on the phone, eating, planning the following day's activities, or arguing with your partner. The only exception to this rule is having sex.
7. *Carry out activities that make it easier to sleep, such as:*

- Taking regular exercise.* Exercise stimulates sleep, it makes you fall asleep more quickly, and it contributes to a more reparative sleep. However, exercise just before going to bed will make falling asleep more difficult.
  - Follow a balanced diet.*
  - Do relaxing things before going to bed* (e.g. have a bath or a glass of hot milk, practice a relaxation technique, etc.).
8. *Do not medicate yourself. If, after following these guidelines for some weeks, the problems persist, consult a specialist.*

### **Other useful tips**

- If you don't feel sleepy, don't force yourself to sleep! Nor should you stay awake in bed for more than half an hour. In these situations, it is better to get up, do some kind of activity, and go back to bed again when you do feel sleepy.
- Don't take 'forty winks'. Avoid taking a nap during the day, unless it's about 8 hours since you got up. If you must nap, ensure that it does not last more than 20 minutes.
- While you're in bed, try not to look at the clock, because if you think of the time you have until you have to get up, or how long you have been lying awake, it will make you more nervous.
- As soon as you get into bed, turn the light off to make it easier to get to sleep.
- If you can't stop thinking about something, do not try to change the thought for a different one or not think at all, since that usually has the opposite effect. You will end up thinking even more about what you don't want to think about. Just 'thank' your mind for that idea and let it 'move on to the next one'.

## **Useful resources**

**Unidad de Sueño del Hospital “Virgen de las Nieves”.**  
**Dpto. de Neurofisiología Clínica**  
Tel: 958 021 659

**Tarragona Sleep Centre**  
<http://www.centredeson.com/esp/index.html>

**Chile Sleep Intitute**  
<http://www.institutodelsueno.cl/higiene.html>





## RELATIONSHIPS WITH FLATMATES

Sharing a flat with others is a rewarding experience for many university students. Nevertheless, sometimes it is a source of conflict, the most common causes being the domestic chores (i.e. cleaning, cooking, shopping, paying bills, etc.), use of the bathroom or the TV remote control, noise, visits, guests, study habits, sharing belongings, financial issues, ways of communication, values, and, in general, lifestyle issues.

### **What are the possible consequences?**

Problems with flatmates not only affect those living under the same roof – they can also influence other aspects of daily life. Amongst the most frequent problems, we find issues involving friends in common, a fall-off in study habits, and emotional problems such as increased stress or moodiness.

### **Why do these problems arise?**

As in all personal relationships, the relationships you establish with your flatmates require time, energy, and commitment to make things work. Every flatmate enters the house with a different perspective and a set of 'rules' and norms they have learned over the years.

If any of your flatmates do not share these rules, problems can easily arise in your daily life.



Moreover, sharing accommodation means spending a lot of time together and can sometimes lead to stress, disagreements or day-to-day problems that can get blown up into full-scale rows. When this happens, just getting on well with your flatmate won't in itself make it easy for you to understand each other. To achieve this you need specific conflict management skills.

### **What can I do?**

If you want to establish some mutually-agreed house-rules with a view to avoiding and/or resolving conflict with your flatmates, bear in mind the following recommendations:

- *Anticipate problems* and discuss the house-rules in detail. If possible, when you're first getting to know each other, even before you decide to move in, talk to the others about your habits, your likes and dislikes (e.g. whether or not you smoke, if you're an early-riser or like to go to bed late, whether you like to study on your own or prefer to have company, and so on). This conversation should clarify issues related to living together that might later prove a source of conflict. Getting these issues clear from the start will help you avoid subsequent misunderstandings and possible arguments.
- *Plan strategies to overcome possible differences* so that everyone wins. Flatmates can influence each other to a great extent, and everyone can benefit from this. For instance, if you find your flatmate studying when you get home, you will probably follow suit instead of doing something else that you might have done if they hadn't been studying. Similarly, if you and your flatmates have different needs, together you can plan things so as not to bother each other.
- *Tell your flatmates about things you find annoying as soon as possible.* Don't burden yourself with resentment that may later make you overreact when faced with silly irritations. Furthermore, before complaining to others about problems at home, try to talk directly to your flatmates, as this will help to avoid tension building up between you.

- *Choose the right moment to discuss your problems.* It's a bad idea to start discussing a problem when one of the people involved is busy or wants to do something else. If necessary, you should all agree to meet together. This commits everyone to taking the problem seriously and trying to find a solution between you.
- *Try to be clear and specific in your demands.* Beforehand, take time to think carefully about whatever it is that's upset you and try to think in terms of specific actions, feelings and attitudes.
- *Discuss your problems one at a time.* It is best if you think beforehand about which issue is the most problematic so you can talk about things one at a time. Stick to the subject during the conversation. Try to avoid mixing problems or issues that are not strictly related because this will only add confusion instead of helping to solve the main problem.
- *Listen to your flatmates and show respect for their views.* Remember: there are two sides to every story. Try to see things from their point of view instead of jumping to conclusions. In doing so, you will be showing respect for their opinions. Similarly, insist they listen to you and show respect for your views. You will only reach a consensus solution if you know both sides of the story.
- *Attack the issue and not the person.* People normally tend to say things like "you annoy me", which directly associates the problem with the person. Instead, try saying things like "those dirty plates annoy me, can you please do the washing up?" This way you avoid personal attacks that only lead to defensive responses.
- *Ask for realistic changes and try to reach agreement by consensus.* Regardless of how serious you may find the problem, you cannot hope to reach an unrealistic solution that satisfies your demands only. If you want to find a lasting solution, you must reach a consensus and try, somehow, to satisfy everyone's demands.
- *Be aware that you may have to accept a solution that only partly resolves the issue.* Sometimes it is impossible to resolve an issue

completely. If that's the case, you may have to consider stopping living together in order to avoid further damage to your relationship.

- *Ask a neutral third party to help if you can't agree on a solution.* This can be a good strategy if there is no other way of reaching an agreement. Sometimes a third point of view can smooth out the problem and facilitate reconciliation.



## FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

When starting at university, your days will be filled with all kinds of obligations that will take up the time you would normally spend with your parents, guardians or carers (summarized for simplicity as ‘parents’ in this section). Moreover, if you have left home to move to another city to study, your parents’ feeling that they are ‘losing’ their child will intensify. It can be difficult to make them understand that you can take care of yourself now and live independently, but here are some tips that may help you ease the process:

- *Try to understand your parents’ feelings.* It doesn’t matter whether or not you are the first to move away from home to study, you will still leave a space that your family will find hard to fill. Acknowledge the fact that they may be frightened or anxious when faced with these changes both in their lives and in yours.
- Parents don’t ‘magically’ learn how to interact with their ‘grown-up children’. Interacting, effective communication and even arguing, may help ease this process. *Talk directly and openly with your parents about everything you have learned, and let them continue to help by drawing on their experience.*
- *Demonstrate to your parents that you are handling the changes in your life in a responsible manner.* Some parent-child relationships include an element of dependence. This is normal if your parents

have always offered to help you whenever you needed it. Some children feel this dependence has a negative influence on them when they're trying to become independent, but parents can find it difficult to accept their child's growing autonomy. Be patient. Talk to your parents and explain what you are doing and why you are doing it. Tell them about your successes and failures too.

## Dealing with your parents' divorce

Families are constantly changing. Going to school, starting at university, getting married, having children and growing up are normal events that inevitably change the relationship between parents and children. If parents separate or get divorced, this can profoundly affect the relationships between all family members. It can draw you closer to one parent or the other, or push you away from both of them, leaving feelings of guilt or responsibility for everything that is happening. It may even influence the relationship you have with your own partner. So it's vital to take the following recommendations into account when dealing with such events:

- *Don't let yourself become isolated during the separation process.* The support and acceptance of others are very important.
- *Take into account the fact that your feelings may be constantly changing.* You may sometimes have difficulty concentrating. You may feel sad, angry, or distressed. These reactions are quite normal and it takes time to move on.
- *Try to communicate freely with your parents.* Let them know what you need them to tell you, without having to go into very private issues that they may find too difficult.
- *Avoid taking sides.* As best you can, try to be objective and understanding with both of your parents.
- *Learn to find support and rely on people from outside your family.*

## Going home to your family during the holidays

When a child lives away from home for most of the year, their parents really look forward to having them home again during the holidays. For students, this involves taking a break from classes, enjoying home cooking again, and so on. But it can also be the source of a lot of stress.

In fact, this is usually the time when students have the chance to see how much their parents consider them to be adults and leave them to their own devices. Make no mistake, coming home in the holidays can mean going back to following one set of rules when you have got used to living with another.

In order to avoid these possible conflicts, here's a range of strategies that may be helpful:

- *Let your family know about your plans for the holidays before arriving home.* This way, your parents will get an idea of what it is that you would like to do, so they are less likely to make plans for you.
- *Try to involve your family in your plans.* This will help make them feel that you are part of their lives and will avoid their planning 'extra activities' just to see you.
- *Discuss your different views and expectations about house-rules with your family.* Try to negotiate rules based on respect and, therefore, both on your parents' authority and on your own recent independence (e.g., at what time to come home at night).
- *Be honest and take responsibility for your academic performance.* Tell your parents in advance if you've had bad results. It makes no sense to avoid telling them about your results. Choosing the right moment to talk about results can help ensure that this issue does not overshadow everything else and prevent you from discussing other more pleasant aspects of your stay.
- *If you just don't feel right about the idea of having to spend the entire holiday with your family, look for an alternative.* Visit that friend

you haven't seen for ages, get a job, or go to a summer school so you can broaden your experience and knowledge, etc.



## YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PARTNER

A good relationship with your partner can be a never-ending source of comfort for both of you. But on the path to creating a successful relationship you may encounter obstacles. For instance, when it comes to talking to each other, you may well begin to think your partner speaks a different language or simply doesn't listen to you. This can be magnified when it comes to discussing issues related to sex. Each one brings their own view of life to the relationship because, after all, each of you has been educated differently and has their own life story.

Conflicts may arise when you disagree about how you see things, your wants, ideas or values. Usually, these situations create a bad atmosphere within the relationship. They unleash intense feelings that may even seem disproportionate in relation to whatever caused them. Whatever the cause may be, if conflicts are managed well, they can strengthen a relationship and improve your mutual understanding.

However, like everything else in life, relationships can also end. Breaking up with a partner is always a frustrating, discouraging experience. Common reactions include denial, rage, self-blame and/or confusion. But remember that breaking up is just another part of personal growth. All in all, these are experiences that help you reflect on the strengths of the relationship and mistakes that may have been made, which can only help improve your future relationships.



Here is a series of strategies you may find helpful when dealing with some of the problems mentioned above.

### **Recommendations when solving issues within a relationship**

- *Choose the right time to talk about your problem.* If necessary, specifically agree to meet with your partner. Avoid times when one of you is tired, busy, or has something else to do.
- *Try to be clear and specific in your demands.* Beforehand, take your time and think about whatever it is you don't like. Try to think of in terms of specific actions, feelings or attitudes.
- *Talk openly about your needs with your partner.* Don't wait for them to ask you. It's pure fantasy to think that if they really love you, they'll know what you need: most people are not 'telepathic'.
- *Sometimes not talking to others about problems or misunderstandings can hamper the relationship.* Deal with these possible problems openly. Silence, or just letting things go, will only make things worse.
- *Talk about problems one at a time.* It is best if, first of all, you both agree on which problem worries you most and discuss that without mixing it up with other issues.
- *Criticise the behaviour, not the person.* For instance, instead of saying "You're unbearable", say "I can't stand it when you arrange to meet your friends without letting me know". This will avoid your partner getting defensive.
- *Introduce your criticism with a positive comment.* This may help make the other person more receptive to your demands. For instance, "I like the fact that you are sincere, but sometimes you are too abrupt".
- *Listen carefully and respectfully to your partner.* Give them all the time they need to express their point of view without interrupting. Accept their feelings without prejudice.

- Similarly, *make your partner respect and listen to you.*
- *Demand realistic changes from your partner.* For this to happen, ask yourself what you really want from your partner and think about whether your demands are realistic from their point of view.
- *Try to find a solution that suits both of you.* Avoid having winners and losers.
- *Remember that you may well have to accept an imperfect solution to your problem.* Sometimes, it's just not possible to fully resolve an issue.
- After you've talked things over, *tell your partner you're grateful to them for listening to you and having the discussion.*

### **How to talk about issues involving sex**

- *Acknowledge your own desires:* what you feel for your partner, how much sexual contact you want, and so on.
- *Tell your partner what you really want in your sex life.* One good strategy is to say what you enjoy most and what you don't feel comfortable with.
- In the same vein, *show interest in your partner's desires and sexual preferences.*
- *Be clear about the limits you put on your sexual relations.* You may have to defend them. Don't feel shy, you are talking about your feelings and your body and you have the right to be respected. If you want to say "no", just say "no", and thus avoid giving mixed messages.

### **How to confront a break-up**

- *After a break-up, let any feelings of sadness, rage, fear or pain come to the surface.* If you deny these feelings or keep them to yourself, you will just prolong or even magnify them.

- *Realise that some break-ups are inevitable.* You have no control over the other person. Hoping for reconciliation, blaming yourself and negotiating with the other person may just be barriers you bring up against the feeling of losing control and the impossibility of holding onto your partner.
- *After a break-up, give yourself time but don't cut yourself off from others.* Take care of yourself, ask for help and let yourself enjoy new experiences and new friendships.
- *Talk about things with someone.* Often, this can give you another perspective on the situation. If you feel trapped in your feelings and can't see how to change the situation, talk with an expert. They can help you with finding other alternatives.



## UNWANTED PREGNANCY

An unwanted pregnancy is one that occurs at an inappropriate or unexpected time. It can lead to your giving up studying, getting into a serious relationship too early, your family getting bigger without you wanting it to, or you may even decide on an abortion. All of these scenarios can be difficult to manage and assimilate. The three causes of unwanted pregnancy are not using contraceptives, using them incorrectly, or using faulty contraceptives.

Some 70% of young people between 15 and 24 years who have sexual relations that include penetration report that they do take precautions (normally by using a condom). However, 30% admit that this is not always the case. The reasons they give for not doing so are the excitement of the moment and the fact that the relationship developed unexpectedly. This means that a high percentage of young people expose themselves both to the risk of an unwanted pregnancy and to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) such as HIV (AIDS) or syphilis.

Other factors that increase the chances of taking risks are a lack of information, a lack of awareness, urban myths, or a partner's insistence on not using contraceptive methods. The latter is more common than you might think: stubbornly-held opinions about how condoms reduce your sensitivity or 'cramp your style' can lead to couples not using them. Oral contraceptives are often not even considered as an option because of their side-effects.

## Old wives' tales

Some of the most common ones are:

- *"It's impossible to get pregnant the first time you have sex"*. FALSE. The chances of getting pregnant are just the same as on any other occasion.
- *"If the man withdraws just before ejaculating, there is no way of getting pregnant (also known as coitus interruptus)"*. FALSE. Even prior to ejaculation, seminal fluid contains sperm that can lead to pregnancy, so you must put on a condom before penetration. As they say, "it drizzles before it rains".
- *"You can't get pregnant during menstruation"*. FALSE. You can also get pregnant during ovulation. Some situations (e.g. stress, nervousness, worry, fatigue, amongst others) can induce ovulation during menstruation.
- *"If the woman washes herself, stands up or urinates immediately after having sex, she won't get pregnant"*. FALSE. Within seconds of ejaculation, there are already sperm in the neck of the uterus.
- *"Using two condoms makes having sex twice as safe"*. FALSE. Friction between the condoms may tear them.

## What to do if you think you are pregnant

If you have had sex without taking any precautions there is an emergency contraceptive known as the 'morning-after' or post-coital pill which can prevent a high percentage of pregnancies if taken within 72 hours after having sex. You can't use it as a matter of routine because it's not 100% effective and it alters your menstrual cycle when used repeatedly. If, however, more than 72 hours have passed, pay attention to your menstrual cycle, and if you think you are late, use a pregnancy test to confirm whether or not you are pregnant. Remember that at your health centre you will find healthcare specialists who can help you.

## What to do if you are pregnant

Deciding to have an abortion or to continue with the pregnancy are difficult decisions that cannot be taken lightly. You must think about them carefully and get as much information as possible about the different options.

It is best to seek help from someone reliable (if not your partner, then a relative, friend or specialist, for instance) who can advise you and offer their support and companionship during the process. Healthcare and Family Planning Centres can give you advice about whether or not to abort, how to arrange an abortion through the Spanish health service, and where to go. They also offer information about how a pregnancy progresses, monitoring the pregnancy, and so on. The decision to have a baby needs to be made within an appropriate social, economic, family and emotional environment that will favour the baby's optimal development and that of its parents.

## What can you do to avoid an unwanted pregnancy?

You simply have to use contraception. By doing so you will have healthy sexual relations – without any surprises. You will cut the chances of getting pregnant by 99% – or if you are a man, you will avoid getting a woman pregnant – at a time in your life when having a child is not one of your priorities. Now, we will go over the most common contraceptive methods to help you decide which one would suit you best:

A. *Barrier methods*: these are the only means of avoiding both pregnancy and also infection from STDs. Examples:

- *Male and female condoms*. These are the most highly recommended means of having safe sex. They are available from any chemist's without a prescription. Female condoms are rather more expensive and more difficult to put in place but you do not have to remove a female condom immediately after intercourse.

B. *Female hormonal methods*: these are only available on prescription from your doctor and do have contraindications. Remember

that they are not compatible with smoking as they increase the risk of severe cardiovascular side-effects. Examples:

- *The contraceptive pill.* This is an oral contraceptive that contains female hormones (oestrogen and progestin) which prevent ovulation and pregnancy when taken regularly.
- *Vaginal ring* This is a flexible ring that, when inserted into the vagina, releases small doses of hormones that prevent ovulation. It is very easy to use and the woman can insert and withdraw it herself.

C. *Surgical methods:* these block your capacity to reproduce. They are reversible in 80% of cases. Examples:

- *For women:* sterilization by tubal ligation. The fallopian tubes are cut or sealed, which prevents the egg that leaves the ovary from coming into contact with sperm.
- *For men:* sterilization by vasectomy. This involves cutting the seminal conduits and preventing sperm from reaching the penis.

D. *Other methods:*

- *Intra-Uterine Device (IUD).* This is a small device with a copper filament which is inserted into the uterus to prevent sperm from reaching the fallopian tubes so that fertilization cannot take place. It has to be inserted and removed by a specialist. It is an effective contraceptive for 3 to 5 years but you should have yearly check-ups. The IUD is recommended for women who already have children.

There are other 'methods' but these are unsafe. Even if only used occasionally, they do not prevent you from getting pregnant and, of course, they expose you to the risk of contracting STDs. These include spermicides, the rhythm method, and controlling baseline temperature, amongst others.

When choosing the contraceptive method that suits you best, do not hesitate to seek information at a Family Planning Centre and/or visit your nearest Youth Health Guidance Centre.

### **Useful resources**

#### **Federación de Planificación Familiar de España (Granada)**

<http://www.fpfe.org/guiasexjoven/DatosCentroCompleto.asp>

#### **Instituto Andaluz de la Juventud (Andalusian Institute for Young Adults)**

<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodelajuventud/informacionsexual/>

#### **Gabinete de Orientación para la Salud (C.J.O.S.) (C.J.O.S.) (Health Guidance Unit)**

C/ Hornillo de Cartuja nº 6, 1º A (Granada)

<http://ve.ugr.es/pages/cjos/index>

#### **Sex Information for Young Adults in Andalusia**

Tel: 901 406 969

#### **Servicio Andaluz de Salud. (Andalusian Health Service)**

#### **Centro de Enfermedades de Transmisión (Centre for Sexually Transmitted Diseases)**

<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/servicioandaluzdesalud/centros/Detalle.asp>

#### **Sociedad Española de Contracepción (Spanish Society for Contraception)**

<http://www.sec.es/>

#### **To obtain the 'Morning-After Pill'**

[http://www.sec.es/informacion/general/recursos\\_asistenciales/hospitales/provincias/p\\_granada.php](http://www.sec.es/informacion/general/recursos_asistenciales/hospitales/provincias/p_granada.php)







## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), sexual orientation is a continuous emotional, romantic, sexual and affective attraction towards people of the same sex (homosexuality), the opposite sex (heterosexuality) or both sexes (bisexuality). It is clearly different from other aspects of sexuality such as biological sexuality (male or female genitals), sexual identity (feeling psychologically, socially and culturally like a woman or a man) and the social role of gender (behaving as a man or a woman to meet cultural standards and expectations). Sexual orientation ranges from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality and encompasses different forms of bisexuality. Furthermore, an individual's sexual orientation can change over time.

### **What determines sexual orientation?**

Several theories exist (endocrinological, neuroanatomical, and genetic theories, amongst others.), although currently, research suggests that sexual orientation is the product of the complex interaction of biological, cognitive and social factors.

### **Is sexual orientation a choice?**

NO. Human beings do not choose to be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. People can become aware of their particular sexual orientation at different stages of their lives but most realise it during pre-

adolescence or adolescence – before ever having had a sexual encounter. Experts consider that sexual orientation is not a conscious choice and that it cannot be changed at will.

### **Is it possible to change your sexual orientation through psychological therapy?**

NO. Such treatments are potentially dangerous to your mental health as they can provoke strong feelings of guilt and anxiety as well as reinforcing self-denial. Homosexuality is not an illness or a psychological abnormality and it does not, therefore, require any kind of treatment. In fact, when homosexuals or bisexuals seek psychological help from professionals, they do so for the same reasons that heterosexuals do. The only additional issue is the need to learn how to combat their own and other people's prejudices.

### **Can homosexuals and bisexuals be good parents?**

YES. Research comparing children raised by heterosexual and homosexual parents shows there are no differences in the four critical areas: intelligence, psychological adaptation, social adaptation and popularity amongst friends. Moreover, the parents' sexual orientation does not condition that of their children.

### **Myths about homosexuality**

- *"Certain gestures or mannerisms denote a person's sexual orientation"*. FALSE. Gestures or movements aren't unequivocal signs of sexual orientation and can lead to misleading interpretations based on prejudice.
- *"Homosexuality is a mental illness"*. FALSE. According to the American Psychological Association (APA): "Homosexuality does not, in itself, imply a lower level of discernment, stability, confidence or general social or vocational capabilities". It is as healthy as heterosexuality.
- *"Gays want to be women and lesbians want to be men"*. FALSE. Most gays and lesbians are satisfied with their male or female

identity and have no intention or desire to change sex. Gays and lesbians develop gender identities consistent with their biological sex.

- *"Normally, in gay and lesbian relationships, one plays the male role and the other plays the female role"*. FALSE. This pattern of behaviour is based on the traditional heterosexual model that was adopted by some homosexual couples in the past. Today, most couples – whether homosexual or heterosexual – have developed other models of relationship mostly based on values such as equality and reciprocity.
  
- *"If a gay or a lesbian met the right person or had an amazing experience with someone of the opposite sex, they would fall in love and could be cured"*. FALSE. Many gays and lesbians have had partners of the opposite sex but consider it much more satisfying to have same-sex partners. Homosexuals who try to change their sexual orientation usually do so under pressure or as a reaction to negative social attitudes regarding their homosexuality. Gays and lesbians who try to have heterosexual relationships in order to 'cure themselves' can cause great suffering not only to themselves but also to their partners.

### **'Coming out'**

This refers to the process by which a homosexual lets their sexual orientation be known.

Usually, as soon as someone realises that their sexual orientation doesn't meet the expectations of their immediate environment, they feel isolated and try to deny, hide or reject their preferences for members of the same sex. However, this feeling will gradually disappear and they will start to acknowledge their orientation. During this process it can be helpful to spend time with other gays and lesbians who can help them to accept their sexuality and, thus, themselves. It is this self-acceptance that will enable them to 'come out of the closet' and open up to those closest to them.

There are lots of reasons why being open about your sexuality is

a good idea. Not only can it help you to strengthen links with friends and family, it also means you won't have to keep on being worried about trying to meet others' expectations and you will be able to focus on just being yourself.

### **Some advice on telling others**

- *Take your time.* Don't rush it. It's better to consider the pros and cons of making one decision or another.
- *Choose the right moment,* when the other person is not busy or in a hurry.
- *When talking about your homosexuality, be positive.* Remember, it's just as healthy as heterosexuality and others should see it like that too.
- *Sometimes you will need to tell someone who is not particularly understanding.* If that is the case, remember that other people may also need time to get used to it, just as you did.
- *If you have any doubts or need help,* any Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues will have professionals who can guide you.
- *Try to meet people who are in the same situation.* They will bring you relief and understanding, and can give you much-needed support.
- *Remember that if others don't accept your homosexuality, that's not your fault.* In the end, they're the ones who may have to change their point of view.

### **Advice for anyone who is being given this news**

- *Listen carefully to the person who is opening up to you.* Don't interrupt or judge them, and avoid stereotyping about lesbians, gays, transsexuals or bisexuals. It takes a lot of courage to tell somebody something like this.

- *Thank them for trusting you* enough to tell you something so personal. Congratulate them for being honest with you.
- *Let them know your feelings towards them* are the same as before and that nothing will change.
- *Ask them questions and show them your interest* in learning about their feelings and experiences. Be considerate and don't enter into more intimate questions unless you are sure it is appropriate.
- *Be honest if you don't feel comfortable*. Tell them if you need more time to digest their news – it's something you will have to think over, but that's not their responsibility.
- *Ask what you can do to support them* and whether they need anything from you right now.
- *Remember*, you can't – indeed, shouldn't – try to change them.
- *Keep an eye on them and continue to ask them* about it; you may both need to talk about it again.
- *Be willing to socialise* with their new friends.
- *Try to fight against any kind of homophobia* you may encounter. Give them your support.

## **Useful resources**

### **Spanish gay and lesbian associations and organisations**

[http://www.gaispositius.org/GL\\_ESPc.html](http://www.gaispositius.org/GL_ESPc.html)

### **The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association**

<http://www.ilga.org/index.asp?LanguageID=2>

### **The Spanish state Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Federation**

<http://www.felgt.org/>

### **Instituto de Sexología (Institute of Sexology)**

<http://www.institutodesexologia.org>



## SEXUAL ABUSE AND ASSAULT

Sexual abuse and assault are defined as any type of sexual contact that threatens an individual's sexual freedom, or that is made when they are physically unconscious and not wholly responsible for their actions, or when they are under 13 years of age. A wide variety of actions are covered by the terms 'sexual abuse' or 'sexual' assault, ranging from molestation to penetration. The difference lies in the lack of violence or intimidation in acts of abuse.

Sexual abuse and assault can be perpetrated by anyone, regardless of their gender. However, the typical profile is of a male who is known to the victim. In fact, in the university context, sexual abuse and assault are most often committed by a friend, colleague or partner (35% to 70% of cases).

### How does it affect daily life?

Sexual abuse and assault are difficult experiences and, consequently, people react in many different ways. Although every individual and every situation is unique, the following are some of the most frequent reactions to abuse and/or assault:

- Emotional shock*: "I am so depressed, why am I so calm? Why can't I cry?"



- *Disbelief*: "Did it really happened? Why me?"
- *Shame*: "What will people think? I can't tell my family or friends".
- *Disgust*: "I feel dirty, like there is something inside me that shouldn't be there. I need to wash my hands and shower over and over again".
- *Depression*: "I feel helpless. Maybe I'd be better off dead".
- *Uselessness*: "Will I ever regain control of my life?"
- *Disorientation*: "I don't really know what day it is or what class I should be going to. I can't remember what I'm supposed to be doing".
- *Re-living the experience*. "I keep thinking about what happened. I still remember it. I see their face all the time".
- *Denial*: "That wasn't really rape".
- *Fear*: "I feel afraid all the time. What if I'm pregnant? What if I've caught something? I can't get to asleep, I have nightmares. I am afraid of going out or being alone."
- *Anxiety*: "I have panic attacks. I can't breathe! I can't stop moving about. I can't stay still in lectures".
- *Hatred*: "I wish whoever attacked me were dead!"
- *Tension or physical discomfort*: "I frequently have a headache/stomach-ache/back-ache. I'm nervous and I have lost my appetite".
- *Guilt*: "I feel like it was my fault. Perhaps I did something to bring this on myself".

## What can you do after being sexually abused or assaulted?

If you've just been a victim of sexual abuse or assault:

- Take shelter* in a safe place.
- Contact someone who can help you:* a relative, friend, or the emergency services. In Spain, dial 112 for Emergency Services or 016, the special call-line for victims of domestic violence.
- Don't take a shower, change your clothes, eat or drink.* You might destroy essential physical evidence necessary if you decide to press charges against your aggressor.
- Ask for medical attention.* You may have some hidden injuries. Moreover, doctors can help you avoid a possible pregnancy or infection.
- Write down everything you remember, including as many details as possible.* This can help you not only in the process of recovery, but also if you decide to take legal action.

## Strategies for getting on with your life after sexual abuse or assault

- Seek support amongst your friends and family.* Try to identify who you can trust in order to share your feelings and reaffirm your progress while recovering.
- Talk about the assault and share your feelings.* Choose the right moment, place and company when talking about what happened.
- Use relaxation techniques:* yoga, hot baths, exercise, and so on.
- Eat a balanced diet and stick to your bedtime routine* as best you can. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine, or tranquilisers.
- Discover your creativity.* Play and creativity are important as a means of moving on from the bad times.

- *Take little breaks* to reflect and relax, especially if you feel stressed or insecure.
- *Try reading.* Reading can relax you.
- *Consider keeping a diary* as a way of expressing your thoughts and feelings.
- *Relieve your pain and any feelings of hatred through healthy activities.* Write a letter to your attacker telling them how you feel about what happened. You can always choose whether to send it or not.
- *Hug those you love.* Hugging releases natural pain-killers.
- *Remember – you are safe,* even if that's not how you feel. The abuse or assault is over. You may think that you will feel bad forever, but with time you will feel better.

## Useful resources

### **Violencia de género**

#### **Domestic violence**

Tel: 016

### **Servicio de Atención a la Víctima de Andalucía (SAVA) (SAVA) [Andalusian Service for Victims]**

Tel: 958 028 759 / 958 028 760

### **24 hour Call-line for women**

Tel: 900 200 999

### **Police headquarters. Dedicated women's service**

Tel: 958 808 069

### **Instituto Andaluz de la Mujer (Andalusian Institute for Women)**

<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodelamujer>

Tel: 958 025 800

### **Centro Municipal de Atención a la Mujer (Granada) (City of Granada Women's Care Centre)**

Tel: 958 248 116

### **Fundación Mujeres (Women's Foundation)**

<http://www.fundacionmujeres.es>

### **Asociación de Mujeres contra los Malos Tratos (Association of Women Against Abuse and Assault)**

Tel: 647 526 633

<http://www.contramalostratos.org>





## EATING DISORDERS

In modern societies, many people tend to think that it is important to be thin at all costs, and even that it is synonymous with success. For people with eating disorders, weight and diet can determine their self-esteem. Eating disorders include a wide range of serious alterations in eating behaviour, feelings, and attitudes towards food. The most common eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia. They are both characterized by changes in physical appearance and weight.

*Anorexia* is usually regarded as an individual's rejection of the normal minimum physical weight for their age and size. When a person suffers from anorexia, they develop an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming obese even though objectively they are extremely thin. As the individual keeps losing weight, other problems can appear such as dry skin and hair, cold feet, general weakness, digestive and intestinal disorders, insomnia, amenorrhea (the interruption of the menstrual cycle), and so on. Other more serious problems can appear too (e.g. greater susceptibility to infection, a nervous breakdown, metabolic changes, weakness of the heart muscles) and in extreme cases it can even lead to death.

*Bulimia*, on the other hand, is the compulsive ingestion of food followed by an inappropriate compensatory behaviour (e.g. provoking vomiting, using laxatives or diuretics, fasting, doing excessive physical exercise, and so on). It usually consists of alternating between compulsi-

ve eating (binge eating) and purging in secret, with rapid weight gains and losses. Cathartic methods and dietary habits like these usually cause medical problems such as dehydration, digestive and intestinal problems, serious dental problems, and muscular weakness. As the bulimia advances, ulcers and heart problems may appear, putting the person's life at risk.

### **Characteristics of eating disorders**

People with eating disorders invest a lot of time in thinking about food, weight and physical appearance. They may count and count again the number of calories in their meals, and may weigh themselves several times a day and set themselves very strict diets, even though they don't need to lose weight.

They frequently feel they are fat although their weight is normal or below average, or they feel uncomfortable after having a normal or even a light meal. In general, they classify different foods as either good or bad, and they judge themselves by what they've eaten. They are sure that people judge them on the control they exercise over food, so they usually get anxious if there are people around while they are eating.

### **What causes eating disorders?**

Eating disorders are said to be some of the most complex problems to understand in terms of what causes and prolongs them. In fact, there is no consensus as to the causes of eating disorders although clinical research points to certain factors that can predispose a person to such a disorder. These include: individual characteristics (e.g. dissatisfaction with body image); family problems (e.g. lack of communication); and social issues (e.g. role models). There are other factors thought to contribute to the onset of the disorder (e.g. starting a diet, changes in puberty, and so on); and to its continuation (e.g. a distorted perception of body appearance and weight, and so on).

How efficient any intervention may be depends on how early or late the problem is diagnosed and/or to what extent other aspects of behaviour and personal development have also been affected. Frequently, the eating disorder brings with it other behavioural problems linked to emotional avoidance.

Though men are increasingly susceptible to this problem, it is women who present the highest rates of incidence as, traditionally, their physical appearance has been unjustly overvalued. In our society there is a tendency to believe that unless you are as thin as a top model you can't consider yourself a valuable, desirable person. While there are now efforts to move away from this way of thinking, it is obvious that Western culture promotes patterns that condition self-esteem in relation to physical appearance and weight.

### **Assess the presence of possible signs**

Many people diet or eat too much from time to time. If you think your diet is out of your control, or that food is assuming too important a role in your life, answer the following questions in order to assess the presence of possible signs of an eating disorder:

1. I constantly think of food, weight, and my body size.
2. I get anxious before eating.
3. I panic if I think I'm overweight.
4. I don't know when I am physically hungry.
5. I usually eat compulsively (binge eating) and I can't stop until I feel very full.
6. I usually feel bloated and uncomfortable after meals.
7. I spend a lot of time fantasizing about food.
8. I weigh myself several times a day.
9. I do too much exercise or I am very strict about my exercise routine.
10. I think that being able to control my diet shows others I can control myself.
11. I have taken laxatives, diuretics, or other medicines in an attempt



to control my weight, or sometimes I have made myself sick.

12. I think food controls my life.
13. I feel very guilty after eating.
14. When I'm nervous or anxious, I feel alone or depressed.
15. I think my clothes don't suit me.
16. Due to my weight and appearance, I am more stressed than I'd like to be when I get close to people I consider sexually attractive.

Check your answers, and if you think that your dietary habits cause you discomfort and/or make you feel bad, it could be the right moment to talk to a specialist.

### **Some strategies to prevent eating disorders**

- Learn to eat in a healthy way.* Find out about the correct portion sizes from the different food groups that you need to be eating every day. The best way to do this is by asking a specialist and taking their advice.
- Plan your meals.* Eat at regular mealtimes and, preferably, in the company of others.
- Don't skip meals* as your body needs to eat regularly; and avoid snacking between mealtimes. It may help you to make sure there are no high-fat, high-calorie fast-foods to hand.
- Always eat from a plate, to ensure the correct portion size, eat slowly, chew your food carefully and put your knife and fork down between mouthfuls.*
- If you're not a good cook or you don't have enough time to prepare lunch, *the university refectories* are a good alternative

- If you are worried about yourself or about a friend, don't hesitate to take the initiative and *ask a specialist*.

### Useful resources

**Adaner Granada**  
**(Granada-based support organisation for anorexia and bulimia)**

Tel: 958 523 523  
<http://www.adaner.org>

**Hospital Clínico San Cecilio Granada**  
(Salud Mental) (Mental Health) Tel: 958 023 131

**Asociación Contra la Anorexia y la Bulimia**  
(Association Against Anorexia and Bulimia)

Tel: 902 186 986  
<http://www.acab.org>

**Centro A.B.B.**  
**(specialist treatment centre for eating disorders)**

<http://www.centroabb.com>

