

# NAVIGATING MENTAL WELL-BEING IN UNIVERSITY LIFE

*YOUR MIND MATTERS*



MENTAL HEALTH HANDBOOK FOR  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**BESTER BERNARD NYANG'WA**



NAVIGATING  
**MENTAL WELL-BEING**  
IN UNIVERSITY LIFE

**YOUR MIND MATTERS**

Mental Health  
Handbook  
For University Students

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# About the book

## **Mental Health Handbook for University Students**

This handbook is approved by the Ministry of Health, Malawi, and it serves as a practical and accessible guide for promoting positive mental health among university students. It equips students with current information on common mental health challenges within the university environment and provides practical advice for recognising mental health issues in both themselves and others. The guide outlines steps for seeking help and offers insights on how students can support their peers in seeking assistance. The book covers a variety of mental health problems and the underlying factors contributing to these problems including:

*Anxiety*

*Stress*

*Depression*

*Addiction*

*Sleep disorders*

*Academic pressure*

*Social challenges*

*Relationship problems*

*Financial stress*

*Transitioning to university life*

The handbook is an invaluable resource for university students. It includes essential information about mental disorders and the promotion of good mental health. It will prove indispensable not only for university students but also for those striving to promote university students' mental health.

Bester Nyang'wa is an early career researcher with a background in media and communications, with a keen interest in the area of health, social and behavioural change communication.

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## Foreword



An effective response to addressing mental health disorders among youth is essential for the future of the world because, according to the United Nations Population Fund, with 1.8 billion youth, “the largest generation of young people in human history is coming of age” (United Nations Population Fund 2014). Currently, we have the largest generation of 10- to 24-year-olds in human history and mental health disorders among youth lead to tremendous suffering (morbidity) and early death.

**I**t is now recognised that most mental disorders begin during youth (12–24 years of age), although they are often first detected later in life. These disorders will stay with them into adulthood. Poor mental health is strongly related to other health and development concerns in young people, notably lower educational achievements, substance misuse, and violence. Mental health issues are therefore increasingly recognised as a priority area among students. Without an early intervention to address these mental health challenges, the impact on society could be great.



One key known barrier is the early identification and prevention of youth mental health disorders

Despite these facts being known, very little is being done to counter this pending mental health crisis. The barriers to provision for

youth mental health disorders can be overcome. One key known barrier is the early identification and prevention of youth mental health disorders. These include low rates of help-seeking, the limited capacity of existing services to respond, and the fact that health systems are not suited to young people's needs. Researchers note that young people fear stigma and embarrassment, they have problems recognising symptoms (poor mental health literacy) and prefer self-reliance, and that these are the most important barriers to help-seeking. Some factors that help make youth seek assistance for mental disorders include positive past experiences (with health care service provision), social support, and encouragement from others.

With mental health receiving increasing attention amongst youth and young adults, this very timely handbook is a critical tool in the promotion of the mental well-being

of university students. Written in an engaging manner, Bester Nyang'wa has gone a long way to make mental health issues more accessible to the readers of this important handbook. It serves as a great starter kit written in simple language void of technical jargon. It addresses issues pertinent to any university student and nicely unpacks complex terms. The author offers some tips and techniques to address some of these challenges and is a good go-to start-up before seeking professional help should self-treatments prove ineffective. The book gives a list of contacts to enable one to find the required professional help in the Malawi context. Read it, practice what you read and keep it close by. It is a good basic introduction to the important field of mental health!

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## Preface

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Welcome to the “Mental Health for University Students Handbook,” a resource crafted to address the unique mental health challenges faced by university students. In these pages, we will explore vital topics and themes designed to support students in fostering their mental well-being. This handbook emerged from part of the findings of a study that I conducted on “Mental Health Awareness and Help-seeking Among University Students: A Case Study of Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences – MUBAS”. The inspiration was drawn from the wide-ranging literature reviewed, which revealed the prevalence of mental health issues among students, preceded by low help-seeking due to among other things; lack of awareness, stigma and. Self-reliance and embarrassment. Furthermore, I have personally witnessed the prevalence of mental health challenges among the youth. Fuelled by a commitment to provide actionable resources, this handbook is a response to the urgent need for comprehensive knowledge and support. Although designed specifically for university students, the insights and strategies of this handbook can benefit anyone navigating the complexities of mental health.

The handbook begins by emphasising the importance of mental health to the university experience. Subsequent chapters delve into defining mental health, dispelling misconceptions, and addressing stigmas. It examines factors influencing mental health, discusses common issues, and offers practical coping strategies. The inclusion of case studies and personal stories adds a human touch, reinforcing key points. To effectively utilise this handbook, I encourage readers to explore specific sections based on their needs (by referring to the table of contents). Readers will also find information about additional resources and support services, including helplines, and community resources. It is envisaged that this handbook will serve as a beacon of understanding and support, not only for university students but for anyone who comes across its pages.

This “Mental Health Handbook” is more than a guide; it’s a companion in your journey towards mental well-being. While this handbook aims to be

a comprehensive resource, it may not cover every aspect of mental health, and individual experiences may vary. Therefore, in addition to the guidance offered within these pages, I strongly advocate seeking professional help when faced with mental health challenges. Together, let's work towards a future where understanding, compassion, and proactive mental health care define our university communities.

## Acknowledgements



I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the individuals whose unwavering support has been instrumental in bringing this “Mental Health Handbook for University Students” to fruition. Associate Professor Nancy Chitera, the Vice Chancellor of the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences – MUBAS, and Dr. Gertrude Sitolo, the Director of student affairs at MUBAS, deserve special mention for their support. A profound thank you goes to Dr. Flemmings Ngwira, Head of the Language and Communication Department, whose guidance and insights have been invaluable throughout this journey. I am grateful to all lecturers and staff in the Department of Language and Communication for their support.

I am indebted to Professor Chiwoza Bandawe for his enlightening contributions that have enriched the content of this handbook. His insights have played a significant role in shaping the depth and scope of the material. Special gratitude is extended to the Health Education Services of the Ministry of Health for the approval of this handbook, particularly to Dr. Michael Udedi, and Mr. Alvin Phiri for their review, and insightful contributions. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my mother, family, and my wife for their unyielding support, encouragement, and understanding. Their unwavering belief in my ideas and constant encouragement to soar high have been the driving force behind this project. To all the individuals, organisations, and stakeholders who have contributed, directly or indirectly, I extend my sincere thanks. This collaborative effort underscores the importance of addressing mental health for university students, and I am grateful for the collective support that has made this handbook possible.

**Bester Bernard Nyang'wa**

# I.

# INTRODUCTION



*Being selected for university is a significant milestone achievement.*

## **Importance of mental health to university students.**

So! First and foremost, I just want to say that your presence here at university means you made it among hundreds of thousands, and allow me to say this out loud: congratulations!!! Iweyo! ndi Dolo! Aise!!! (*You are a star*). Here at university, several things about your life matter a lot for you to succeed in your everyday life including academic endeavours. One of them is your mental health. Quiet a strange term? Don't worry about that. We are here to break this down together and we will surely do that shortly, but for now, let's dive a bit deeper into why mental health is such a big deal for you as a university student.

As a university student, you require good mental health if you are to achieve your goals, just like you require good physical health. Think of mental health as the compass guiding your journey through academic challenges, social

interactions, and personal growth. You can't go to class with malaria or a bad flu just like you can't go to class let alone concentrate on your studies with an unhealthy mind. Maintaining good mental health means you're equipped to tackle those tough assignments with clarity, navigate the maze of social dynamics, and nurture your well-being as you evolve during your university years. In essence, it's like having a reliable support system for this adventure called university life.

## **Statistics on mental health issues among students**

Young people's mental health is a major public health issue. Mental health problems among young people contribute to impaired physical and mental health extending into adulthood (Bor et al., 2014). Globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (WHO, 2021). Depression, anxiety, and behavioural issues are primary contributors to disorders and disability.

A systematic review of studies from Sub-Saharan African countries encompassing a total population of 97,616 adolescents found the following prevalence estimates; 40.8% for emotional and behavioural problems, 29.8% for anxiety disorders, 26.9% for depression, 21.5% for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and 20.8% for suicidal thoughts (Jörns-Presentati et al., 2021).

Suicide (which we shall discuss in detail later) stands as the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds globally (WHO, 2023), emphasising the critical need to address adolescent mental health early to prevent lasting impacts on both physical and mental well-being, and hindered opportunities for fulfilling adulthood.

In Malawi, prevalence rates of common mental disorders like depression and anxiety among youth range from 10 - 30% (Jumbe et al., 2023), with an existing treatment gap of around 90% in the population (Kim et al., 2014). These statistics, however, are in no way an indication that mental health problems cannot be overcome. Like any other ailment, mental disorders are preventable and treatable. If you have read up to this point, then you are halfway to becoming someone who can overcome mental challenges as well as help those in need. So, let's keep going!

## II.

# UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH



*A sound mind is crucial for navigating university life successfully*

### **Definition of mental health**

To adequately understand “mental health” let us first have a clear understanding of “health” in general. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or sickness. This is to say; being healthy is not just about not suffering from ailments such as malaria. It is possible for you not to be suffering from any physical disorders but still be unhealthy. How? This is where the aspect of “mental health” comes in. The adjective “mental” describes anything having to do with the mind, just as “physical” has to do with the body. While mental health encompasses aspects associated with the intellect, mind, and brain, it extends far beyond these dimensions. In addition to cognitive functions, mental health includes emotions, behaviours, and the choices individuals make. Moreover, there is a social component involving peer influence and societal acceptability, broadening the scope of

mental health beyond the confines of intellectual considerations. “Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the everyday stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (World Health Organisation [WHO] fact sheet, 2022). Mental health is a key part of our overall health and well-being. It’s the foundation that helps us make choices, build relationships, and shape the world around us, both individually and as a group. Think of it as a basic right for every person, and it is something everyone should have. Plus, it’s super important for personal growth, building communities, and making society better overall. Mental health is therefore more than the absence of mental disorders. Wait a minute! Did we discuss mental disorders? I don’t think we did. That’s nothing to worry about anyway. Think about a mental disorder as a sickness/disease to the mind/brain, as is malaria or diarrhoea to the body. The American Psychiatric Association – APA (2024) defines mental disorders as “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour (or a combination of these)”. Now let’s get back to why mental health is important to you as a student.

### Why mental health matters

Mental health problems can affect many areas of your life as a student, reducing the quality of your life (the overall well-being and satisfaction you experience across various aspects of your existence/being in this



*University students are susceptible to various mental health challenges.*



Mental health problems can also negatively impact your relationships with friends as well as family members.

world and being on campus), academic achievement, physical health, and satisfaction with the university experience. Mental health problems can also negatively impact your relationships with friends as well as family members. These issues can also have long-term consequences, affecting your future employment, earning potential, and overall health (Eisenberg et al., 2007).

While mental health is a concern for everyone, students occupy a particularly significant realm in this regard (Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020). Uplifting your mental well-being is paramount, as it directly correlates with your academic performance and the realisation of your full potential (Agnafors et al., 2020). Beyond academics, fostering positive mental health will equip you with the capacity to form meaningful relationships, make sound decisions, and collaborate effectively. These positive outcomes extend not only to you as a student but also resonate within your broader community e.g. family, neighbourhood and even here at university.

## **Mental health disorder and mental health illness**

Frequently, we use the terms mental illness and mental disorder interchangeably to mean a mental condition that we have been/someone has been diagnosed/found with. However, these terms carry distinct meanings.

### **Mental disorder**

When defining a mental disorder, the United States National Institutes of Health (NIH) describes it as “a disturbance of normal functioning of the mind or body,” with causes ranging from genetic factors and disease to trauma. While the term “disorder” encompasses conditions affecting both the body and mind, it has become somewhat outdated. In the past, experts were unaware that mental disorders could impact the brain rather than solely the mind (National Institutes of Health, 2022).

The term in more common use today is mental illness, as it more accurately reflects that psychiatric conditions can affect more than just the “mind.” Additionally, “disorder” holds a negative connotation, while “illness” encourages people to envision someone grappling with a medical condition which can be prevented, managed or treated.

## Mental illness

As per the United States’ Centre for Disease Control – CDC (2023), mental illness pertains to conditions that affect a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, or behaviour. In contrast to the term “mental disorder,” this phrase incorporates language implying that mental health conditions extend beyond just the mind. Examples of mental illnesses encompass depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and more (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention - CDC, 2023). Although many doctors use the terms mental disorder and mental illness interchangeably, mental illness is the accurate term to depict psychiatric conditions.

### Common misconceptions and stigmas

I am sure you have come across a lot of information about mental health and disorders, and chances are, you might have some beliefs implanted into your thoughts. But here’s the thing: most, of what you’ve heard is either partially true or completely false.



*Misconceptions fuel stigma*

Now, let’s expose some myths, clarify misconceptions, and shed light on the aspects of mental health that are often misunderstood, with a focus on addressing the most common misconceptions.

## **Misconception # 1: Mental health issues cannot affect me.**

Firstly, let's agree on something we all share: nobody wants to be sick. This is the same with mental health. Most people never imagine themselves struggling with it. A widespread misconception revolves around the idea that mental disorders selectively affect certain demographics, be it individuals of a specific age group, social class, gender, or any other defining characteristic. However, just like any other disorders such as malaria, diabetes, typhoid etc., mental disorders do not discriminate; they can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, geography, income, social status, race, ethnicity, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, background or other aspects of cultural identity (American Psychiatric Association, 2024).

## **Misconception/Myth # 2: Mental health issues are a result of personal weakness.**

Just like physical ailments such as cough, flu, malaria etc., mental health conditions have nothing to do with being lazy or weak. Many factors contribute to mental health conditions, including:

- Biological factors, such as genes, physical disorders, injury, or brain chemistry
- Life experiences, such as trauma or a history of abuse
- Family history of mental health conditions

## **Misconception/Myth # 3: Mental disorders are untreatable.**

Studies show that people with mental health conditions get better and many are on a path to recovery (United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2023). Recovery refers to the process in which people can live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. There are more treatments, services, and community support systems and they work. With the right kind of help, treated appropriately and early, most people recover fully and have no further episodes of illness. For others, mental illness may recur throughout their lives and require ongoing treatment. This is the same as many physical illnesses, such as diabetes and

heart disease. Like these other long-term health conditions, mental illness can be managed so that individuals live life to the fullest.

**Misconception/Myth # 4: People with a mental illness are violent/dangerous.**

This incorrect belief forms the basis for some of the most harmful stereotypes about individuals with mental illness. Those facing mental health challenges are seldom a threat, even those with severe conditions that might lead to unusual behaviour; the likelihood of them being dangerous is exceptionally low. The majority of individuals with mental health conditions are no more prone to violence than the general population.

Only 3%–5% of violent acts can be linked to individuals dealing with a severe mental illness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2023). Interestingly, those with significant mental health challenges are more than ten times more likely to become victims of violent crimes compared to the overall population. It is quite probable that you know someone with a mental health condition without even realising it, as many individuals facing such challenges actively contribute as productive members of our communities.

**Misconception/Myth # 5: Mental Illness is caused by witchcraft.**

Mental illness is not caused by bewitchment. Mental health conditions have complex origins, often involving a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors (National Institute of Mental Health – NIMH (2022)). Attributing mental illness solely to bewitchment perpetuates stigma and hinders individuals from seeking appropriate and evidence-based mental health care.

**Misconception/Myth # 6: A person with a mental illness can help themselves out of it.**

Since mental illness is not caused by personal weakness, it is unlikely or more difficult to be ‘cured’ by personal strength. Being strong on your own doesn’t fix it (SA Health, 2024). It is the same as expecting someone to cure themselves of Malaria simply because they are strong. You need more than just strength. Getting better usually means getting help from professionals,

talking to someone, and at times using medicine. Asking for help doesn't mean you're weak; it means you're doing what it takes to feel better.

### **Misconception/Myth # 7: There's nothing you can do for a person with mental illness.**

If someone shows signs (which we will expose later) of mental illness, have an open and honest discussion with him or her about your concerns. You may not be able to force someone to get professional care, but you can offer encouragement and support (Health Direct, 2024). The support of friends and loved ones plays a crucial role in one's mental health journey.

### **The spectrum of mental health (From well-being to mental disorders)**

Think of mental health as a spectrum, similar to how we see physical health. On one end, you have the feeling of being ok, like when you're full of energy, happy, and able to handle everyday challenges. That's like being in great physical shape and without any illness (minor or major), where you feel strong and ready for anything. In the middle of the mental health spectrum, you might have days when you're okay but not at your best. It's like when you have a minor flu or a little headache. You can still do your usual stuff like take a bath on your own, make yourself breakfast, go to class, wash clothes etc., but you're not 100% alright.

On the other end of the mental health spectrum, there might be times when things feel tough. It's like when you're physically unwell, perhaps with a more serious illness such as malaria. You might need some extra support to get back to feeling better (e.g. visit the clinic and get some medication). So, mental health is like physical health, it can vary for everyone, and where you are on the spectrum can change. The goal is to move towards feeling good and, if needed, get the right support, just like you would for your physical health.

### III.

## FACTORS AFFECTING MENTAL HEALTH IN UNIVERSITY



*Academic pressure: A leading source of stress for students*

### **Academic pressure**

Academic pressure is a significant factor that can negatively impact your mental health (Stear, et al., 2023). The pressure to perform well academically can be overwhelming, especially if you are pursuing a demanding field. This pressure can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression, which can affect your ability to focus, learn and pass examinations.

### **Social challenges**

Social challenges are another factor that can affect your mental health. You may experience difficulty making friends, feeling isolated, or dealing with

conflicts with roommates or peers. Social media can also contribute to social challenges, as you may feel pressure to present a perfect image online, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

### **Relationship problems**

Relationships within the university setup can significantly impact your mental well-being (Ritter et al., 2023). Breakups, in particular, are potent stressors that often cast a shadow on academic and personal spheres. The emotional turbulence of a breakup can trigger feelings of loneliness, sadness, and even a sense of identity loss. Coping with the aftermath may pose challenges as you struggle with reshaping your daily life, redefining plans, and rebuilding self-esteem.

### **Financial stress**

Financial stress is another common factor that can impact your mental health (Guan et al., 2022). You may struggle to pay for tuition, living expenses, and other costs associated with attending university, leading to feelings of financial burden and stress. This stress can be worsened by the high levels of debt that you may accumulate to finance your education.

### **Transitioning to university life**

Transitioning to university life can also be a significant challenge for students, particularly for those who are the first in their family to attend university or who are from diverse backgrounds (Cheng et al., 2023). Students may experience cultural shock (such as language barriers, social norms, and educational system differences when adjusting to a new environment), homesickness, and feelings of disorientation as they adjust to a new and unfamiliar environment.

## IV. COMMON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES



*Some common mental health disorders faced by university students*

As alluded to earlier, mental health issues are common and can affect anyone regardless of their background, age, or gender. These issues can range from mild to severe and can have a significant impact on an individual’s daily life, relationships, and overall well-being. To better understand common mental health disorders, we will be using some hypothetical examples/vignettes throughout our conversation. These examples are fictional and do not reflect any real individuals or situations. They are used solely to help illustrate the symptoms and experiences of different mental health conditions. Let’s get going.

### **Anxiety**

**Definition:** “Anxiety is a persistent state of excessive worry, fear, or unease, often related to future uncertainties”. Anxiety is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences at some point in their lives. However, when anxiety becomes excessive, persistent, and interferes with daily functioning, it can be a sign of an anxiety disorder (American Psychological Association [APA], 2019). Anxiety can manifest in a variety of ways, such as excessive

and persistent worry about everyday things, such as assignments, exams, finances, or relationships.

**Common symptoms:** Restlessness, increased heart rate, racing thoughts, irritability, muscle tension, and difficulty concentrating.

**Example:** Emily, a second-year student, often wrestles with anxiety. As exams draw near, her mind becomes a battlefield of uncertainties such as “What if I fail?”, “What if the questions are too difficult?”, and “What if I can’t recall the answers?” Consequently, sleep escapes her, replaced by nights filled with restlessness and racing thoughts about the upcoming exams.

## Stress

**Definition:** Stress is a natural response to challenging situations, but chronic stress can have adverse effects on mental health. It arises when the demands placed on an individual exceed their coping abilities. According to the WHO (2023), everyone experiences stress to some degree, but the way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall well-being.

**Types of stress:** There are different types of stress, including acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress. Acute stress is the most common form of stress and is often short-term. It arises from the demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Episodic acute stress occurs when a person frequently experiences acute stress, leading to a pattern of worry and anxiety. Chronic stress, on the other hand, is long-term and can result from situations such as poverty, dysfunctional families (families with emotional/physical abuse, conflicts, lack of respect and love etc.), or being trapped in an unhappy marriage or job.

**Common symptoms:** Fatigue or tiredness, irritability or feeling restless, headaches, muscle tension, and changes in sleep patterns.

**Example:** Mark, an ambitious student and a captain of the university football team, faces mounting stress as deadlines loom. Juggling assignments and social commitments leaves him feeling perpetually on edge. The weight of expectations, both self-imposed and external, manifests physically, impacting Mark’s ability to find joy in his academic pursuits.

## Depression

**Definition:** Depression is a mood disorder characterised by persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, and a general sense of hopelessness (National Institute of Mental Health – NIMH, 2021).

**Common symptoms:** Persistent sadness, fatigue/ tiredness, changes in appetite or weight, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulty concentrating.

**Example:** Sarah, who was once full of life, now battles a constant darkness. The joy she found in hanging out and learning has faded. Everyday tasks feel like big hurdles, and depression keeps her away from friends and studies, leaving her feeling empty. For instance, she used to love socialising, but now even the idea of gatherings makes her uneasy, adding to her sense of loneliness.

## Addiction

**Definition:** Addiction involves the compulsive use of substances (experiencing an uncontrollable urge to consume alcohol, smoke cigarettes/ chamba, use drugs, or do certain actions to satisfy yourself) or engaging in behaviours despite harmful consequences. It often serves as a coping mechanism for underlying issues.

**Common Symptoms:** Loss of control over use, continued use despite negative consequences, preoccupation with substances or behaviour, and withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal symptoms happens when, for example, you decide to stop consuming alcohol but your body responds negatively and you feel sick because your body is used to receiving alcohol. Symptoms may include shaking and feeling like vomiting.

**Example:** James, under the strain of academic pressure, turns to beer-drinking and smoking marijuana for relief. What started as an occasional escape transforms into a concerning pattern. He can't control how he drinks or smokes weed, despite causing problems, like missing classes and having conflicts with friends. Skipping a drink or a joint (cannabis) makes him feel uneasy or sick.

## Sleep disorder

**Definition:** Sleep disorders interfere with the regular sleep pattern, leading to difficulties falling or staying asleep (Holder & Narula, 2022). They can result from various factors, including stress.

**Common Symptoms:** Insomnia (sleeplessness), difficulty staying asleep, excessive daytime sleepiness, and fatigue/ tiredness.

**Example:** Olivia can't sleep well at night, and it's making her tired all the time. Because she's so tired, studying is hard. This makes her feel stressed, and it's not good for her mental health or doing well in her studies.

# V.

## RECOGNISING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Recognising signs and symptoms is crucial in identifying various conditions or issues that you or someone around you (a friend/classmate/roommate etc.) may be experiencing. By being aware of these signs and symptoms, it becomes possible to seek help or provide appropriate support and intervention. Here are some categories of signs and symptoms that can be recognised:



*Social withdrawal can be an early indicator of mental health challenges*

### Behavioural changes

Behavioural changes refer to alterations in an individual's actions, reactions, or patterns of behaviour. These changes can manifest in various ways, such as:

- ***Social withdrawal:*** The person may start isolating themselves from social interactions or avoiding friends.
- ***Aggression or irritability:*** They may display increased anger, frustration, or hostility towards others.
- ***Changes in sleep patterns:*** Insomnia or excessive sleeping can indicate underlying issues.
- ***Substance abuse:*** The person may start using drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism.

- **Risky behaviours:** Engaging in dangerous activities (extreme sports like excessive weight lifting, reckless activities such as driving or riding bicycles and motorcycles, binge drinking, risky sexual behaviour, and walking alone at night without concern are examples of such behaviours) without considering the consequences.

## Emotional changes

Emotional changes involve shifts in an individual's emotional state or well-being. These changes can include:

- **Mood swings:** Frequent and extreme fluctuations in mood, such as going from happy to sad or angry within a short period.
- **Persistent sadness or hopelessness:** Feeling down for an extended period without any apparent reason.
- **Anxiety or excessive worry:** Constantly feeling anxious, restless, or experiencing panic attacks.
- **Loss of interest:** Losing interest in previously enjoyable activities.
- **Increased sensitivity:** Becoming more sensitive to criticism or rejection.



*Fatigue may signify a burdened mind*

## Physical symptoms

Physical symptoms refer to bodily changes that can indicate an underlying issue. Some common physical symptoms include:

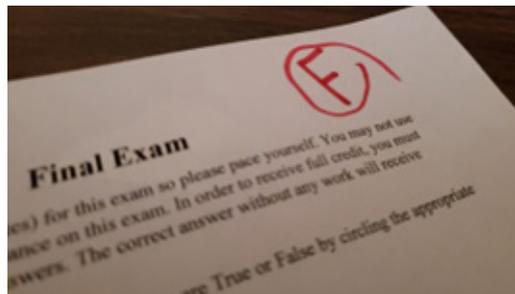
- **Fatigue or low energy levels:** Feeling tired and lacking motivation to engage in daily activities.

- **Changes in appetite or weight:** Significant weight loss or gain, as well as alterations in eating habits.
- **Headaches or migraines:** Frequent headaches that may interfere with daily functioning.
- **Digestive problems:** Experiencing stomach aches, nausea, vomiting, or changes in bowel movements.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Insomnia, nightmares, or excessive sleepiness during the day.

## Academic performance indicators

Academic performance indicators are signs that can be observed in a person's educational achievements. These indicators can include:

- **Decline in grades:** A sudden drop in academic performance or consistently poor grades.
- **Lack of concentration:** Difficulty focusing on tasks or becoming easily distracted.
- **Decreased participation:** Avoiding participation in class discussions or group activities.
- **Increased absenteeism:** Frequent absences from school or skipping classes.



*A drop in academic grades may indicate a mental disorder*

- **Lack of motivation:** Showing disinterest in learning, completing assignments, or studying.

## Suicide warning Signs

Suicide is the act of intentionally causing one's death, and it is a major health problem. Suicide doesn't have a singular cause; it typically arises when various stressors and health issues intersect, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Most suicides are related to psychiatric disease (Brådvik, 2018). Depression, frequently undiagnosed

or untreated, is the primary condition linked to suicide. Untreated conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance-related issues heighten the risk of suicide.

Before we go any further, I just want you know that choosing suicide is never a viable solution or option; there are always people willing to listen and support you through difficult times. It's crucial to be watchful for changes in behaviour or the emergence of entirely new behaviours when suspecting someone might be suicidal. The highest level of concern arises when the altered or new behaviour is connected to a distressing event, loss, or change.

Individuals contemplating suicide typically display one or more warning signs, expressed through their words or actions. Recognizing the warning signs of suicide is crucial for early intervention, be it seeking-help (like talking to someone), or offering help to a colleague/friend. These signs include:

## Talk

If a person talks about:

- **Killing themselves** – Note that individuals may not necessarily say “I am going to kill myself” although at time they may, but you have to be on the lookout for statements such as: “I just don’t see a way out of this” or “Sometimes, I think it would be easier if I weren’t here anymore.”
- **Feeling hopeless** – Someone who is hopeless, will utter statements such as “I’ve tried everything, and nothing seems to get better. I can’t see any hope for the future.”
- **Having no reason to live** – Similar to someone who is hopeless, people who feel they have no reason to live will often express that they see no point in living anymore. E.g. “Every day feels like a struggle, and I can’t find a reason to keep going. What’s the point?”
- **Being a burden to others** – Watch out for statements/ feelings such as “I feel like everyone would be better off without me. I’m just a burden to everyone around me.”
- **Feeling trapped** – If you feel or hear someone say “I feel stuck in this situation, and I don’t see a way out. It’s like there’s no escape”, this is another warning sign.

- **Unbearable pain** – People who have gone through a lot feel like “The pain inside is just too much. It’s overwhelming, and I don’t know how much longer I can endure it.”

## Behaviour

Behaviours that may signal suicidal risk, especially if related to a painful event, loss or change:

- Increased use of alcohol (beer, spirits etc.) or drugs (narcotics such as chamba)
- Looking for a way to end their lives, such as searching online for methods
- Withdrawing from activities
- Isolating from family and friends
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
- Aggression

## Mood

People who are considering suicide often display one or more of the following moods:

- Depression (persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of interest or pleasure in daily activities).
- Anxiety (a state of uneasiness, fear, or worry often accompanied by physical symptoms like increased heart rate, muscle tension, and restlessness).



*Watch out for signs of short of temper*

- Loss of interest (the diminished ability to find pleasure or interest in activities that were once enjoyable).
- Irritability (easily becoming annoyed or agitated. It may manifest as impatience, frustration, or a short temper in response to stimuli that wouldn't typically provoke such reactions)
- Humiliation and shame (feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or disgrace due to perceived failures or judgments from oneself or others).



*Seek counselling services and encourage others to do the same.*

***Note: Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts and contemplation about ending one's own life.***

Mental health coping strategies are essential for managing and improving mental well-being. These strategies can help individuals deal with stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. It's important to note that coping strategies can vary from person to person, and what works for one individual may not work for another. Now let us look at some effective mental health coping strategies:

### **Seeking counselling services**

MUBAS offers counselling services to students. This can be through the University Chaplain, Director of Students Affairs and the MUBAS Clinic. You need to take advantage of these services. The above-mentioned are trained to provide support and guidance for a variety of mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, depression, and more (while respecting your privacy). They can offer coping strategies tailored to your individual needs and help you navigate your academic and personal challenges.

***Example:** If you are feeling overwhelmed with academic pressure, scheduling a session with the University Chaplain, Dean of Students, or your lecturer can provide a safe space to discuss your concerns and explore coping strategies.*

### **Build a support system/invest in your human relationships**

Strive to build a strong support system within the university community, as this can be beneficial for your mental well-being. This can include forming study groups (group discussions/ma disi), joining clubs or organisations on campus, or simply connecting with peers who share similar interests. Having a support system can provide a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

***Example:** Joining a study group for a challenging course can create a supportive environment where you can share knowledge, discuss difficulties, and foster a sense of camaraderie.*

## Time management and prioritisation

I am sure you have learnt/you will be learning English for Academic Purposes – EAP in year one. University life can be overwhelming, and poor time management can contribute to increased stress and anxiety. Create a realistic schedule to balance academic and personal activities. Identify the most important tasks that need attention. Avoid procrastination (the act of delaying tasks). An example is when you wait until the night before an exam to start studying. Procrastination, or delaying tasks until the last minute, can significantly contribute to heightened stress levels. Prioritising involves not just recognising deadlines but also evaluating the importance and impact of each task. By identifying the most crucial assignments, exams, or personal commitments, you will be able to allocate your time and energy more efficiently. This approach ensures that urgent and high-priority tasks are addressed promptly, reducing the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed. Prioritise assignments, exams, or personal commitments based on deadlines and importance.



*Support systems are crucial for maintaining a healthy mind*

**Example:** *If you have multiple assignments due in a week, creating a detailed schedule that allocates specific time slots for each task ensures you tackle high-priority items first, reducing last-minute stress.*



*Exercise is powerful tool for nurturing mental well-being*

## **Regular exercise and physical activity**

It is important to look after your health, diet as well as exercising. Engaging in regular physical activity has been shown to have numerous mental health benefits, including reducing stress and anxiety. MUBAS has fitness centres, sports teams (netball, football, volleyball etc.), and recreational activities that you can participate in.

***Example:** You don't have to be a professional or participate at a competitive level. Partaking in MUBAS sports teams, like the volleyball, football, basketball, athletics or netball teams, not only promotes physical health but also offers a social aspect, creating a positive and holistic impact on your mental well-being.*

## **Healthy sleep habits**

Adequate sleep is crucial for mental well-being. Prioritising good sleep such as maintaining a consistent sleep schedule and creating a restful sleep environment, can significantly impact your mental health.

***Example:** Establishing a routine of going to bed (e.g. 8 p.m.) and waking up at consistent times (e.g. 6 a.m.) daily, coupled with creating a relaxing*

*bedtime ritual (such as winding down by switching off your phone and listening to soft music etc.), can improve your sleep quality and overall mental resilience.*

### **Setting realistic expectations**

Many students face mental health challenges due to unrealistic academic or personal expectations. Setting achievable goals and being kind to yourself when facing setbacks is essential for maintaining good mental health.

**Example:** *It's okay to learn from mistakes and failures. Remember, not everyone is "a distinction" student, and there's no need to compete with anyone. Instead, compete with yourself, aiming to improve every time and achieve a good enough grade without the pressure of being number one.*

### **Engage in creative outlets**

Engage in creative activities such as art, music, or writing. This can serve as a form of self-expression and stress relief.

**Example:** *There are several music clubs and choirs on campus which you can join and showcase your skills and talent.*

### **Online resources**

Explore apps or websites offering stress management tools. Online therapy platforms can also provide support.

**Example:** *Utilise platforms like Better Help to engage in virtual therapy sessions, allowing you to explore coping strategies, gain insights into stress triggers, and receive professional support from the comfort of your environment.*

In summary, using coping strategies, building resilience, and seeking support can help you navigate life's challenges. By incorporating these tools into your daily life, you can boost your mental well-being and face whatever comes your way.

## Relaxation techniques

Try this relaxation technique, known as Box breathing or Square breathing, to alleviate stress anytime. It involves the following steps:

1. Sit down if possible, and close your eyes. Alternatively, focus on your breathing.
2. Inhale deeply through your nose, counting to 4 seconds.
3. Hold your breath for another 4 seconds, allowing the air to fill your lungs.
4. Exhale slowly through your mouth over 4 seconds.
5. Maintain a 4-second pause (without speaking) before starting the cycle again.
6. Repeat these steps as needed. Just 30 seconds of deep breathing can bring about a sense of relaxation and control.



*Try relaxation techniques for a healthy mind!*

## VII.

# UNIVERSITY RESOURCES AND SUPPORT SERVICES



## STUDENT COUNSELING SERVICES

*Counselling services are available on campus*

### Counselling services

At MUBAS, we understand the diverse challenges that you may face as a student, and we are committed to providing comprehensive counselling services through the Directorate of Student Affairs and the MUBAS Clinic. The Directorate of Student Affairs, comprising the Director of Student Affairs - DOSA, Chaplain, Wardens, and Student Affairs Officer, offers a safe space for students to discuss various concerns, including academic, personal, and emotional issues. Additionally, the MUBAS Clinic is staffed with trained psychosocial nurses dedicated to supporting students in their mental health journey.

### Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of our counselling services at MUBAS. When you seek support from the Directorate of Student Affairs, Chaplain or the MUBAS Clinic, your privacy is our priority. Conversations with our counsellors, chaplain, or psychosocial nurses are held in strict confidence, ensuring that



*Confidentiality is guaranteed*

your personal information remains private. Your well-being is of utmost importance to us, and we are here to provide support with the utmost respect for your privacy.

## Mental health awareness programs



*A past mental health awareness initiative*

MUBAS hosts a dedicated “Mental Health Awareness Week” every semester. Throughout the week, we invite esteemed psychosocial experts to share insights through engaging talks, providing valuable knowledge and strategies to navigate the complexities of mental health. One notable feature is the establishment of a helpline, offering a confidential space for students to seek immediate support and guidance. You are encouraged to take part in the diverse array of activities organized during this week. From thought-provoking talks to creative expressions like poems, drama, and music, each component is meticulously designed to foster a holistic understanding of mental health. Participation in these activities will enrich your understanding of mental health. We urge you to stay alert and open to the teachings and new knowledge presented during this week, as it contributes to a healthier and more supportive university community. Your well-being matters, and together, we can create a campus environment that champions mental health awareness and resilience.

## VIII.

# CASE STUDIES AND PERSONAL STORIES



What if I fail? and What if the questions are too difficult?

### Overcoming anxiety

Meet Emily, a 20-year-old young lady studying Business Communication. As exams approached, Emily found herself grappling with persistent anxiety. The looming uncertainties of “What if I fail?” and “What if the questions are too difficult?” turned her nights restless, robbing her of precious sleep. Determined to reclaim control, Emily sought support from the university’s counselling services. Through therapy sessions and mindfulness techniques, she learned to manage her worries and face exams with a calmer mind. Emily, who once grappled with persistent anxiety, managed to overcome her fears and graduated with a degree in communication. Today, she works as a mental health advocate, sharing her journey and empowering others to navigate their mental health challenges.

### Managing stress

Mphatso is an ambitious student and captain of the university football team. Juggling assignments and football responsibilities left him on edge, feeling

perpetually stressed. Realising the need for balance, Mark began prioritising tasks, integrating relaxation techniques, and learning to say no when necessary. By adopting a structured approach to his schedule, Mark not only reduced stress but also found joy in both his academic pursuits and football responsibilities. Mark successfully found balance in his life, graduating with a degree in Civil Engineering. He now works as an engineer, utilizing his skills to contribute meaningfully to various projects while also promoting workplace well-being.

### **Navigating depression**

Say hello to Mariah, who once was a joyful young lady but found herself battling constant darkness. Feelings of emptiness and isolation overwhelmed her. Sarah courageously reached out to friends and a trusted lecturer,



attending counselling sessions with the University Chaplain to explore her emotions. Reintegrating into activities she once enjoyed, Mariah built a support network and embraced therapy, overcoming the grip of depression to rediscover a sense of purpose. Sarah, who bravely tackled depression, emerged stronger and more resilient. She graduated with honours in architecture and currently works as an architect, bringing creativity and passion to her projects.

### **Breaking free from addiction**

Meet Mikhe, a student under the strain of academic pressure turning to substances for relief. Beer drinking and smoking marijuana became a concerning pattern affecting his academics and relationships. Acknowledging the need for help, Mikhe joined a support





group and underwent therapy to address underlying stressors. Through counselling, support networks, and lifestyle changes, Mikhe broke free from the cycle of substance dependence. Mikhe, who conquered substance dependence, pursued a degree in accounting. He now works in the financial sector, helping individuals manage their finances and serving as a beacon of hope for those on a journey to recovery.

## Improving sleep patterns



Olivia could not sleep well at night, impacting her studies and overall well-being. Recognising the need for change, Olivia implemented a consistent sleep routine, practiced relaxation techniques, and optimised her sleep environment. By prioritising quality sleep, Olivia not only improved her ability to concentrate on her studies but also experienced a positive shift in her overall mental health. Olivia, who prioritised sleep and enhanced her overall well-being, graduated with a degree in mining. She now works in the mining industry, applying her expertise and advocating for mental health awareness in the workplace.

## IX. CONCLUSION

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### Recap of key points

In this exploration of mental health for university students, we've delved into the crucial role it plays in the well-being of individuals navigating the challenges of academic life. Understanding mental health is foundational, encompassing definitions, the significance it holds, and distinguishing between mental disorders and illnesses, while addressing common misconceptions and stigmas. We have identified various factors affecting mental health in the university setting, from the pressures of academics to social challenges, relationship complexities, financial stress, and the transformative phase of transitioning to university life.

Examining common mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, addiction, and sleeping disorders, we've highlighted the importance of recognising signs and symptoms. Behavioural, emotional, and physical changes, along with academic performance indicators, serve as crucial cues. The coping strategies section provides a comprehensive toolkit for students, from seeking counselling services, building a robust support system, and effective time management to incorporating regular exercise, maintaining healthy sleep habits, and engaging in creative outlets. Online resources are also highlighted for convenient accessibility.

University resources and support services, including counselling services and mental health awareness programs, play a pivotal role. We emphasised the importance of confidentiality in seeking assistance and participating in mental health awareness initiatives. The case studies and personal stories section illuminates the real-life experiences of individuals who triumphed over mental health challenges, offering inspiration and hope. These stories showcase the effectiveness of the coping strategies discussed earlier.

As we conclude, the significance of mental health in university settings cannot be overstated. Recognizing its impact, seeking help, and fostering a supportive environment are essential steps toward promoting the well-being of university students.

## **Encouragement to seek help**

The narratives underscore the vital importance of seeking help when facing mental health difficulties. Recognizing that reaching out is a testament to strength, not weakness, forms the cornerstone of the journey toward healing. Talking or opening up to someone doesn't mean you are weak. It is actually the opposite. It means you are strong and you have embarked on a journey to overcome your problem. Whether through university counselling services, support groups, or confiding in friends and family, the path to recovery begins with acknowledging the importance of support.

## **Future outlook for mental health in university settings**

Looking forward, the trajectory of mental health in university settings hinges on sustained efforts to foster understanding, destigmatise mental health challenges, and fortify support systems. Initiatives like mental health awareness weeks, counselling services, and community engagement lay the groundwork for a compassionate environment. Dispelling misconceptions, raising awareness, and strengthening support networks can transform universities into strongholds of holistic well-being, ensuring every student's journey is marked not only by academic achievement but also by profound personal growth.

## **List of mental health/psychosocial counsellors outside campus**

### **Toll Free/No Charges**

Chipatala Cha Pa Foni: 54747

Child Helpline: 116

Gender-Based Violence Helpline: 5600

### **Mzuzu Mental Health Services (Northern Region)**

St. John of God Hospital: (265) 1 311690 or (265) 1 311495

### **Lilongwe Mental Health Services (Central Region)**

St. John of God Hospital (Area 43, Off Ufulu Road, next to Emmanuel Teachers Training College): 0992 460 253 or 992 460 254

Aegis Room – Tamanda Msasata: 0999 419 898 or aegisroom.mht@gmail.com

Irene Hara, Chief Consultant Integrated Professional Counselling and Advisory Limited: 0992 598 595

Chilungamo M'manga (Psychologist): 0995 912 585

Elizabeth Nkhonjera: 0996 293 804

Guidance and Counselling Association of Malawi (GCAM): 0995 142 328 or 0888 448 108

Suicide Prevention Group Mponela: 0888 114 626 or 0999 299 770 or 0884 467 846

Likuni Hospital: 0996 383 202 or 0 992 556 138

Phunzi counselling (Area 18): 0999 365 871

Prime Health: 0995 482 905

Harm Reduction Awareness Counselling and Testing Services: 0999 317 529

Friends of Hope 0994 781 044

Youth wave: 0212 228 0498 or 0999 204 068

He Matters Foundation: 0997 071 657

Joseph Majid Lungu (Psychotherapist) Lighthouse KCH, Lilongwe: 0888 378 035

Moses Kachingwe: 0881 569 863 or 0997 542 704

Area 18 hACTS (Nunga Kamau) 0999 317 529. An addiction Specialist

### **Zomba Mental Health Services (Southern Region)**

Zomba Mental Hospital: 01 526 266

The Haven Counselling and Consultancy Centre – Julie Soko, Zomba: 0995 147 290

Tilinao Lamba (Counsellor) 0885795906

Prism Counselling & Consultancy Zomba: 0998 419 737

### **Blantyre Mental Health Services (Southern Region)**

Blantyre Counselling and Therapies Centre: 0996 299 888

Accord Cognitive Counselling Services (Behind ADRA in Blantyre): 0882 431 111

Vintage Health Wellness Centre (Namiwawa): 0995 260 153 or 0883 859 724

Kamuzu University of Health Sciences Private Clinic: 0888 002 284

Harmony Mental Wellness Solutions (Professor Chiwoza Bandawe) 0888 200 222

Dr. Precious Makiyi, Child & Adolescent Mental Professional: 0999 426 368

Prism Counselling & Consultancy: 0998 933 273

Mrs Mkolosia (Counsellor) 0993110993

Dr Alli Makalani: 0888 611 127

***NOTE: This list is not exhaustive and may contain contacts that are no longer functioning.***

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With mental health receiving increasing attention amongst youth and young adults, this very timely handbook is a critical tool in the promotion of the mental well-being of university students. Written in an engaging manner, Bester Nyang'wa has gone a long way to make mental health issues more accessible to the readers of this important handbook. It serves as a great starter kit written in simple language void of technical jargon. It addresses issues pertinent to any university student and nicely unpacks complex terms.

The author offers some tips and techniques to address some of these challenges and is a good go-to start-up before seeking professional help should self-treatments prove ineffective. The book gives a list of contacts to enable one to find the required professional help in the Malawi context. Read it, practice what you read and keep it close by. It is a good basic introduction to the important field of mental health!"

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