

It's different kinds of difficult: student experiences of COVID and lockdown.

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IT'S DIFFERENT KINDS OF DIFFICULT: STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF COVID & LOCKDOWN



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Acknowledgements:

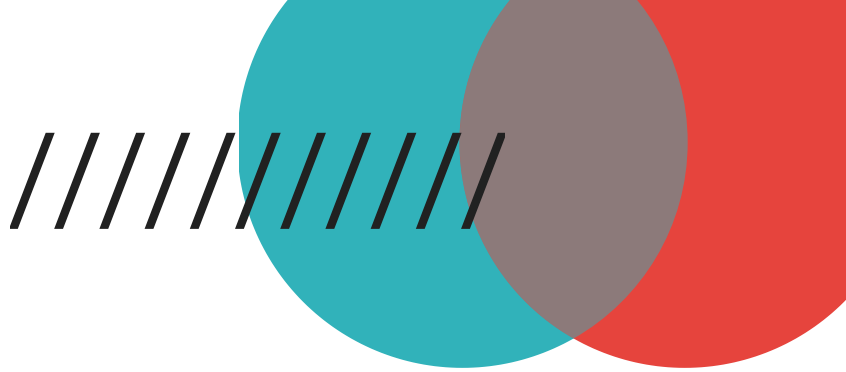
The research team would like to extend its thanks to Dave Black (Grampian Regional Equality Council), Filippo Antoniazzi and Ross Leven (RGU Student Life), and to all of the student participants who gave their time to share their experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020 when the first lockdown was announced, the university student experience has changed. Students have experienced isolation, boredom, financial hardship, mental health concerns, and have missed the in-person aspects of their education. Some students have felt moral judgements from others for their actions or perceived actions, and many have felt that young people have been demonised by the media.

Our research wanted to hear about student experiences during the pandemic and lockdown. We surveyed 124 students at Scottish universities, and held three focus groups to understand the key challenges faced and the strategies used to survive these past months.

We made the decision to feedback our findings both in a student-facing format and a report to be made available to Scottish universities to help institutions know what can be done to help students.

We hope that these documents give voice to the student experience and recognise the dedication of students over the past year. We recognise that while not all students have experienced lockdown the same, all experiences are valid.

In the remainder of this document, we will highlight the key challenges that you told us that you faced. We will provide quotes and explanations as well as helpful strategies that were suggested and, where relevant, further resources to consult. Universities will have different names for processes and different systems in place but we hope that these ideas will give you somewhere to start.



“BEING A STUDENT IS STRESSFUL IN ITSELF, BUT WHEN YOU’RE IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, IT’S MADE EVEN MORE COMPLICATED”



KEY CHALLENGES

The pandemic and lockdown have affected all of us differently. Some students in our study voiced that lockdown had allowed them time to focus solely on their studies and self-care, but the majority of students we heard from had found lockdown to be extremely challenging, frustrating and isolating.

In this toolkit, we highlight the five key challenges that you told us that you faced: mental health, financial and material support, study skills, community connections, and health and exercise. We illustrate each challenge using students' own words, followed by helpful strategies recommended by students and, where relevant, further resources to consult. While the toolkit is organised around these five areas, the research showed us that every student's experience was—and continues to be—different. As one student explained “it's different kinds of difficult” and we acknowledge that all experiences are valid. We encourage you to dip into different sections of the toolkit to navigate the challenges that you personally have experienced.

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- 01 MENTAL HEALTH**
 - 02 FINANCIAL & MATERIAL SUPPORT**
 - 03 STUDY SKILLS**
 - 04 SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**
 - 05 HEALTH & EXERCISE**



01. MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic and lockdown have presented serious mental health challenges to students. Some students described feelings of anxiety and depression as a result of isolation, boredom, and of work and study stress.

Students described the stress as overwhelming and some considered quitting their course of study.

One student described a negative cycle of thoughts and concerns stemming from study expectations without social interaction:

“Online learning is very hard and it requires a lot of motivation. Being stimulated by social interaction has been taken away from us and therefore the downtime that some of us just need us taken away. I feel that because I am always home, I always have to be looking at my computer completing some form of university work.”

“WE ARE TRYING OUR BEST, AND...IT CAN BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT ON MENTAL HEALTH TO GO MONTHS WITHOUT SOCIALISING NOT ONLY WITH YOUR PEERS, BUT YOUR FAMILY TOO.”

“MENTAL HEALTH IS AT AN ALL TIME LOW, LACK OF MOTIVATION AND NO MORE SOCIAL INTERACTION.”

“EVERYTHING JUST FEELS OVERWHELMING SO ON YOUR OWN WITHOUT THE DAILY CONTACT TO FELLOW STUDENTS WITH WHOM YOU CAN SHARE ALL THIS”





Crucially, we saw that not every student experienced mental health challenges in the same way. As one student explained, there are many unseen concerns happening 'behind the scenes' that can add to negative mental health outcomes.

"Mental health has suffered. That's a pandemic that has already been going on. Also, so many young people are dealing with stuff that you can't see on the surface (eg grief, money troubles) and people just assume because you're a student your life is partying and easy."

This quote shows the frustration many students experienced because of misconceptions about them and their lifestyle without consideration of the nuances of their situation.

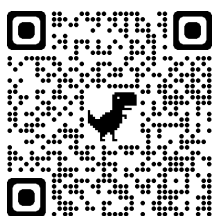
WHAT CAN HELP

But, many students were proactive and developed coping strategies. Students turned to **meditation** (through apps like Headspace, Calm and Balance or through free online videos), **yoga**, **listening to music**, and going for **a daily walk** or engaging in some **light exercise** to boost their mental health.

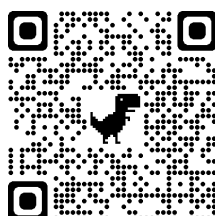
Many students formed **WhatsApp or Zoom groups** with friends and family near and far. When things got tough, **turning to personal tutors for advice** or to **university counselling services** was also helpful. Even **saying 'hello'** to a passer-by when on a physically-distanced walk or the Res Life Team can help.

Your university may have resources available ranging from individual counselling to online services like SilverCloud or Big White Wall, and Nightline.

IF YOU ARE FEELING ANXIOUS, DEPRESSED, OVERWHELMED OR JUST NEED A CHAT, YOU CAN REACH OUT TO YOUR UNIVERSITY WELLBEING SERVICES. THERE ARE ALSO OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE THROUGH YOUR GP OR NHS 24. YOU CAN ALSO CONTACT SAMARITANS OR BREATHING SPACE



Breathing Space



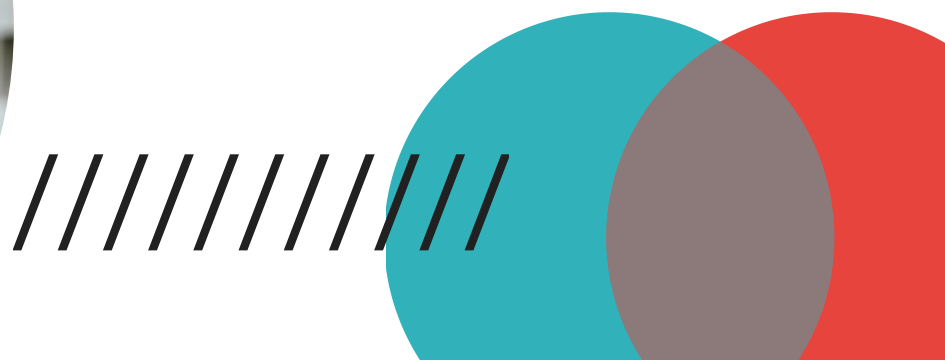
Samaritans





“I THINK I HAD UNDERESTIMATED JUST HOW IMPORTANT PHYSICAL HUMAN INTERACTION WAS, AND THE FIRST LOCKDOWN PARTICULARLY SHOWED ME THAT. SO, I MEDITATE A LOT MORE NOW, STARTED DOING YOGA, TAKING A LOT MORE WALKS, TRYING TO STAY ON TOP OF MY MENTAL HEALTH. I’D SAY LAST YEAR MY MENTAL HEALTH DID TAKE A HUGE HIT, BUT AGAIN I THINK WE’VE SORT OF LEARNED TO FIND COPING MECHANISMS AROUND IT”

“I LOVE WALKING, WE JUST LIVE CLOSE TO THE BEACH, GOING OUT WITH THE DOG, GOING FOR LONG WALKS. AND JUST BEING ON THE PHONE, FAMILY, FRIENDS, CHATTING AWAY. PUTTING YOUR MUSIC ON, DOING A BIT OF CLEANING. ANYTHING THAT’S GOING TO MAKE YOU FEEL A BIT GOOD. OR READ, BECAUSE YOU DON’T HAVE TIME TO READ FOR LEISURE, EVERYTHING YOU’RE READING IS ALL FOR UNI, SO WHEN YOU DO GET A SPARE MINUTE OR GET A BIT OF A BREAK, BECAUSE I THINK WE ONLY HAD THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY THIS YEAR, THERE WASN’T ANY SPRING BREAK OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. I THINK JUST HAVING TIME FOR YOURSELF IS A BIG THING, BECAUSE YOU JUST GET BURNT OUT OTHERWISE. ”





**“I’M DEEPLY REGRETFUL I DIDN’T DISCOVER MEDITATION
EARLIER IN THE PANDEMIC”**





02. FINANCIAL & MATERIAL SUPPORT

The financial impact of COVID and lockdown has been acutely felt by the students who shared their experiences with us. Our student participants were keen to stress that their financial and material experience had been truly challenging.

“We have it as bad as everyone else but what’s worse is we’re paying money for our education so it’s not like we’re earning out of it.”

Some students found that despite the hardship caused by lost jobs and increased spending on resources, they overall spent less each day.

“I found myself not spending as much (3.90 per ticket per day 5 days a week, 2 per coffee per day, 3 per meal per day”

Ultimately, though, many of our participants felt angry that they have struggled to pay for university accommodation while often dealing with the effects of job loss.

“I am angry because it’s not our fault that we were told to come back to our university flats. We have had to pay money for rent that was not necessary for our courses and largely not able to get any compensation for that or loss of jobs.”

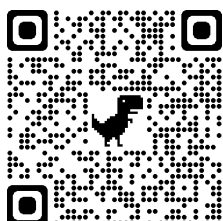
**“STUDENTS/YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE
LOST JOBS, LOVED ONES, MONEY
ETC THE SAME WAY ANYONE
ELSE HAS.”**





CITIZENS ADVICE SCOTLAND HAS A PAGE OF GUIDANCE WITH SUGGESTIONS AROUND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS AND MANY STUDENT UNIONS WILL HAVE DETAILS ABOUT ANY DISCRETIONARY FUNDS OR LOANS THAT ARE AVAILABLE.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/debt-and-money/financial-support-for-students-s/>

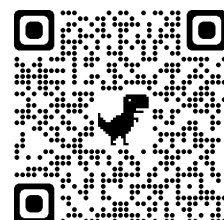


STUDENT INFORMATION SCOTLAND HAS INFORMATION AVAILABLE ABOUT HARDSHIP FUNDS AND OTHER FUNDS THAT ARE AVAILABLE:

<https://www.saas.gov.uk/>

UCAS ALSO OFFERS A STUDENT BUDGET CALCULATOR TO HELP FACTOR IN AND PLAN FOR COMMON UNIVERSITY-RELATED EXPENSES:

<https://www.ucas.com/finance/managing-money/budget-calculator>



“THE PHRASE ‘IT’S BEEN HARD FOR EVERYONE’ DOES NOT ADEQUATELY TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN OF BEING CONFINED TO A SINGLE ROOM FOR THE BETTER PART OF A YEAR IS ENORMOUS WHEN COMPARED WITH HAVING A FAMILY HOME OR A BEDROOM AND ANOTHER PRIVATE SPACE OR AN APPROPRIATE (SEPARATE) WORKSPACE.”





03. STUDY SKILLS

Maintaining good study habits at any time can be difficult but with the changes brought about by lockdown, there have been additional challenges to consider.

There were some students who took part in our research who found that lockdown meant that they were able to study more effectively, saying that “I have been less distracted studying at home due to having no one around.” Many students appreciated the recorded lectures provided and found the ability to revisit content to be helpful.

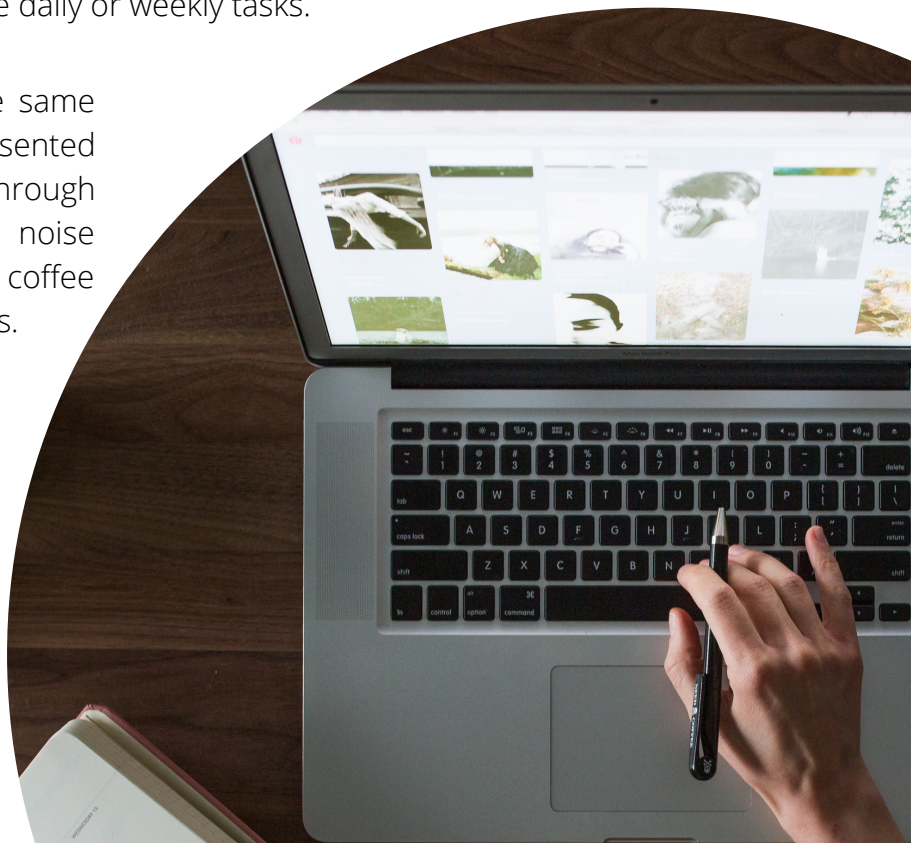
However, most participants told us that the transition to online learning had presented more negatives than positives.

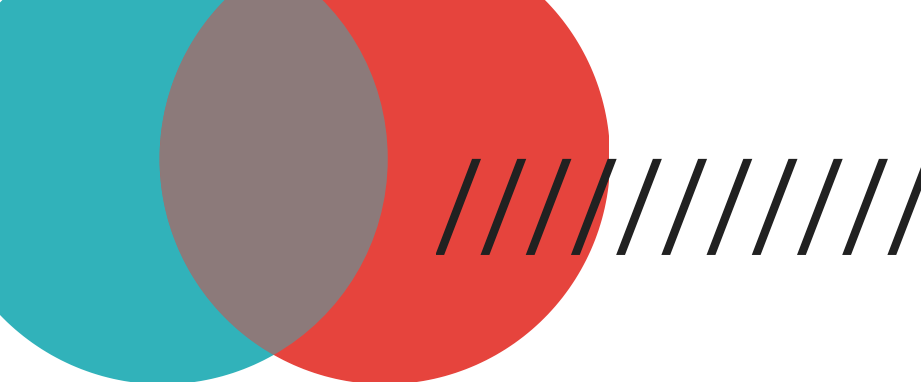
WHAT CAN HELP

Students suggested several ways through which they maintained focus as their studies moved online. Many used to-do lists, paper planners, and task managers. Some students used the Pomodoro technique of 25 minutes working with no distractions followed by a short five minute break and then repeat the cycle. This gave students structure and a way of focusing on tasks in manageable chunks. Others used 'reward systems' to help motivate them to complete daily or weekly tasks.

Some students found that working in the same place in their accommodation presented challenges that could be mitigated through creative solutions like using background noise soundscapes that could ‘take them’ to coffee shops, woodlands, libraries, and classrooms.

Working at different locations made a difference, too. This could mean sitting at the other side of the kitchen table for a period of time, working outside, working on the floor, or at the desk for short periods to give a change of scene.





One student described having a friend or sibling on a Zoom call as they both worked. This emulated a classroom environment as it was possible to chat for a few minutes and then work **“just knowing that it felt like there was someone beside me”**.

Above all, one student explains “first of all **I began to forgive myself** for a lot of things, in terms of learning from home and the situation...you want your work to be perfect but when you’re in the same place for so long, you’re like ‘maybe I’m not as perfect as I thought and I should actually just try my best.’”

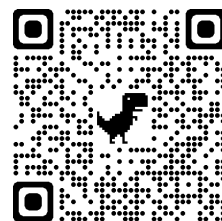

There are free Pomodoro timers online (like pomofocus.io/) and you can even use a stopwatch to time yourself. Websites like myNoise.net and YouTube have soundscapes and ambient noise available free without a subscription.

Websites like GetRevising.co.uk allow users to create a free timetable to structure the study week and assign downtime and time away from the screen.

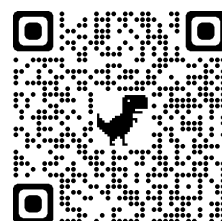
UCAS also has a useful guide on tips and tricks to consider:
<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/distance-learning/tips-study-online-or-remotely>

You can also check to see if your university has a 'study skills' or writing centre for more assistance.

“I KNOW THAT I PUT MYSELF UNDER A LOT OF PRESSURE TO DO WELL...BUT I THINK JUST ALWAYS REMEMBERING TO TAKE THAT TIME OUT, NOT LEAVING THINGS TO THE LAST MINUTE, BEING WELL ORGANISED, HAVING A PLAN. SO, WHAT YOU NEEDED TO DO, LOOKING AT YOUR DEADLINES, THINKING OF YOUR DEADLINES AS THAT’S THE FINAL DAY KIND OF THING AND NOT JUST AIMING FOR THOSE DEADLINES, BECAUSE I USED TO TRY AND GET THINGS A BIT EARLIER BECAUSE THEN IF YOU WAIT TILL THE DEADLINE THEN YOU’RE RUSHING AT THE LAST MINUTE”



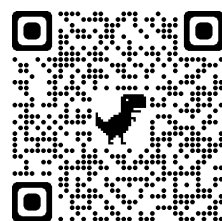
POMOFOCUS.IO TIMER



MYNOISE SOUNDSCAPES



UCAS TIPS FOR ONLINE STUDY



GETREVISING TIMETABLE MAKER



04. SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Lockdown has presented many challenges to maintaining social contact and community connections. Our ways of communicating have changed and as one student described “it has been a challenging and even lonely time; some of my friendships have been broken”.

Social life has been affected in several ways. Normal day-to-day campus interactions have changed as classes moved online, meaning that, as one student explained “it’s harder to socialise with people”. With daily conversations between classes not possible, students used breakout rooms during classes to gain social contact and chat with peers.

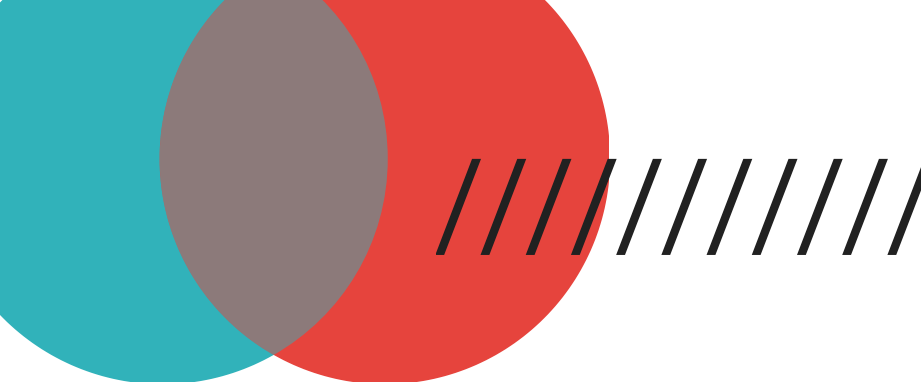
Outwith their studies, some students found that there was comfort and company to be found in university clubs and societies. Many students had regular Zoom or other video-based catch-ups and games nights with friends and family.

Some students found it difficult to see under-12s still meeting and having “that social interaction” and they described the way in which they felt that university students and their needs had been forgotten.

Several participants described losing contact with friends and friendships not withstanding the stresses of lockdown and remote interactions.

“WE WERE DOING THE ZOOM QUIZZES ON A SATURDAY NIGHT, ZOOM CALLS WITH FAMILY, SETTING UP GROUP CHATS AND STUFF”



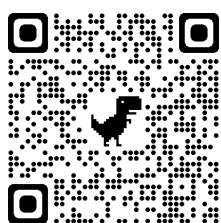


Other students found that while the ways of maintaining contact changed, their family and friends—regardless of their location—were their ticket to some sense of normality. But others noted that this was not possible for everyone and some students may be truly isolated and not have anyone to talk to. Randomly-generated buddy systems worked well, though, for some students, ensuring that there was always someone there to listen and to suggest where to turn for help or advice.

Many of our participants commented on the joy of receiving post—even a letter or a postcard from a friend let them know that someone had been thinking of them, and suggested that sending and receiving post was a simple way to maintain connections.



IDEAS TO HELP



ZOOM GAME IDEAS

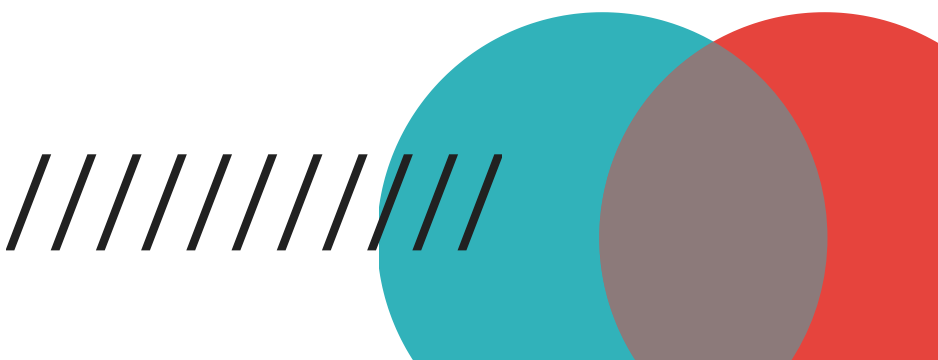
Regular catch-ups or games nights on Zoom or equivalent with family or friends. Get creative with the help of websites such as www.teambuilding.com/blog/zoom-games


Try using Zoom or equivalent for companionship, not only conversation.

Agree to send letters, mementos, postcards or small parcels to a friend or family member.

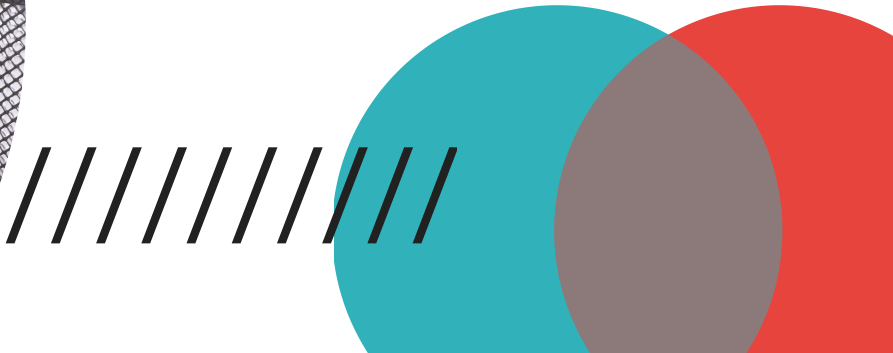

Get involved in online university life: check out what societies are doing virtually.

“I THINK IT WAS LEANING VERY MUCH INTO MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY, AND JUST KNOWING THAT YOU WEREN’T ALONE IN WHAT YOU WERE FEELING”





“BUT ONE THING THAT I REALISED WAS THAT BECAUSE I WAS HOME ALL THE TIME AND BECAUSE I LIVE ALONE, I WAS IN A WAY STARVED OF HUMAN INTERACTION, I WAS GOING ONLINE TOO MUCH. SO, WHAT I DID WAS, BECAUSE I USE AN IPHONE, I WENT TO THE SCREEN RESTRICTION SETTINGS, AND I BASICALLY CREATED A DIGITAL BEDTIME, SO BY 9:30, BECAUSE I USUALLY SLEEP AT 11:00, BY 9:30 THE MAJORITY OF MY APPS SHUT DOWN. I CAN ACCESS THEM, BUT ONCE THE THING GOES, IT’S LIKE SCREEN TIME FOR THE DAY, AND IT DOESN’T START UNTIL 8:30 EVERY MORNING. SO, I BECAME TOO RELIANT ON DIGITAL INTERACTION, SO I HAD TO PUT THAT IN PLACE.”





05. HEALTH & EXERCISE

Some students worried about the effects of COVID and lockdown on their health. Some talked about their concerns regarding the close living conditions in student accommodation and the way that COVID could spread, but our participants spent more time talking about concerns around the impact of lockdown on their health.

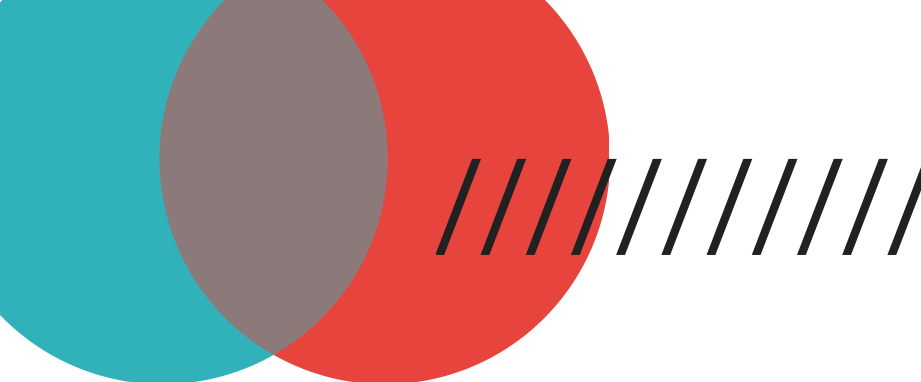
One student explained that:

"I had a lot of health things come up from not moving and not being outside and being freezing cold in my flat, and being confined to basically one room...it just started to feel like every day is blending into the next one."

Another student had questions around how to care for their eyes when they spent all day looking at a screen.

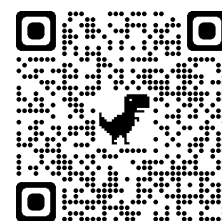
Some students turned to the same strategies they used to combat mental health challenges and relied on meditation, yoga, and exercise to remain active. One student relied on their university's free gym membership during the pandemic to stay fit.





Although any medical advice should come from a doctor or qualified medical professional, tips and hints for protecting your eyes when working can be found on the College of Optometrists website: <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/advice-on-lockdown-eye-care-to-mark-6-6.html>

They suggest that a good place to start is following the 20/20/20 rule. For every 20 minutes of screen time, look away for 20 seconds at something 20 feet away.



20/20/20 TIMER

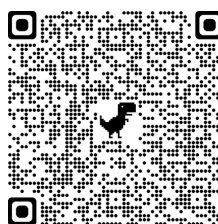
For ideas about how to stay fit while working at home, NHS Scotland provides suggestions: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/healthy-living/coronavirus-covid-19-physical-activity>

You can find other hints for other forms of exercise on the NHS website, too: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/10-minute-workouts/>

Remember to check any new fitness regime with a healthcare provider if you have concerns or queries.

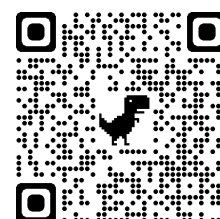


**ROYAL COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRISTS'
HOME-WORKING GUIDANCE**



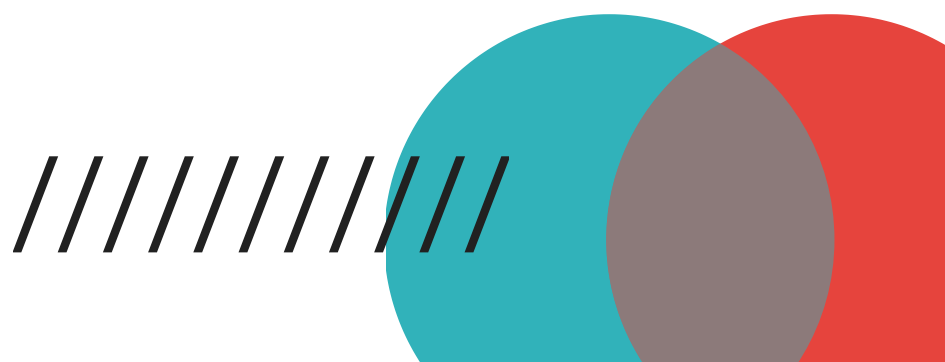
NHS SCOTLAND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

NHS 10-MINUTE WORKOUTS





**“WE HAVE NO MONEY, WE HAVE NO FAMILY, WE HAVE NO FRIENDS,
WE ARE IN A BOX WITH NOWHERE TO GO. BE PATIENT WITH US. WE
ARE NOT QUITE ADULTS AND WE ARE NOT QUITE CHILDREN. THERE IS A
SPACE IN BETWEEN WHERE WE ARE TREATED AS BOTH.”**





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