University life can be very challenging and demanding. Besides adjustment difficulties during the first year of school, students often experience emotional disturbances associated with academic studies, personal relationships, identity development etc.

Dealing with these emotional changes can be confusing. It can be scary to speak up or hard to figure out what to do. Whatever you’re dealing with, acknowledging there’s an issue and taking action is the first step to improvement.

Let’s learn the facts about common emotional health issues now and seek ways to take control and feel better!
Kate was a first year non-local student. She came all the way from her home to study in Hong Kong. She had always prided herself in being the best at everything: in high school, the first university student in the family... However, after spending a month here, it appeared to Kate that everyone else just seemed so much brighter: that they spoke better English; they all had great interpersonal skills or were simply talented in something that she didn't know. She started to feel much under stress and doubted if she was capable enough to handle her university life.

When her hall mates invited her to social gatherings, Kate couldn’t get herself to take any interest. Instead, she spent hours alone in her room staring into the air, often thinking about her gloomy future and feeling really down and hopeless. This situation persisted throughout the semester. Lately she found herself getting tired all day and sleeping so excessively that she even began to skip classes – something she’d never done in the past. She tried hard to pick up some textbooks to study, but her concentration couldn’t last 10 minutes. Once again she was convinced that she was nothing but a loser...
Depression

Many of us have felt sad or alone at some point. When sadness becomes too much to handle, or lingers for a long time, it may be a sign of depression. Depression can affect one’s ability to work, study, interact with people or take care of themselves. It can be caused by imbalances in brain chemistry. But it can also be triggered by stress, poor nutrition, physical illness, personal loss, and school or relationship difficulties.

Signs and Symptoms

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that the person once enjoyed
- Insomnia, early morning awakening or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being slowed down
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Inconsistent class attendance
- Decline in personal hygiene
Depression

Depression is highly treatable. Do seek help through our student counseling service.

Points to note:

• It is common for people who are depressed to think about suicide. Seek help immediately if you or a fellow student is having these thoughts.

• Don’t assume that the problem will go away on its own.

• Not to push oneself to “fix the problem” or “pick oneself up”. Depressed individuals can feel very helpless about their condition and such advice can drive them to further despair.
A story of anxiety

Alex is a senior biology student. He had been feeling some changes in his temper since the beginning of his final year.

He was easily irritated especially while he’s working if his roommate made any noises, such as talking to someone on the phone, tapping the desk, or leaving the room and letting the door slam. He would be distracted by the tiniest movements/sounds and unable to concentrate on his assignments.

One day when the results of mid-term were released, Alex received a low grade. In frustration and high stress, he spent hours freaking out over not doing well, failing his parents and being unable to graduate. These intense worries bothered him so much that he started to sweat heavily and developed a bad headache. When his roommate asked if he was alright, Alex got mad and yelled at him for not minding his own business...
Anxiety

We’ve all experienced anxiety in one way or another. For example, some students are anxious at presentations, and some feel nervous talking to others. In other words, anxiety can be a normal response to stress. However, it becomes a disorder when it’s out of proportion to what’s going on or is impossible to control. It can negatively affect a person’s daily functions.

Anxiety disorders can appear in different forms, such as generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social-anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder etc.

Different people experience anxiety differently. Some people express their anxiety emotionally, while others show signs of physical distress. The common factor, however, is a sense of overwhelming, irrational fear.
• Physical symptoms include rapid heartbeat, chest pain or discomfort, dizziness, sweating, trembling or shaking, stomach pain and muscle tension
• Excessive worries
• Feeling agitated or irritated
• Poor concentration
• Difficulty making decisions
• Difficulty sleeping, or restlessness
• Being too fearful to take action
• Avoidance of social situations

Anxiety can be alleviated with the right help, such as counseling, relaxation techniques and meditation.

If you are supporting a friend experiencing anxiety, remember to refrain from judgments even if you find their anxiety or obsessions completely irrational.
Sarah was a straight A student. She was a very determined girl with high self-discipline. She worked very hard and did well in her exams and was rewarded a 3.8 GPA. However, she felt a strong need to achieve perfection. So in order to boost her performance in the semester to come, she decided to engage in a demanding exercising routine for relaxation and energizing purpose.

During the course, Sarah was getting more and more concerned with the way she looked. She found herself ugly, fat and unattractive. So starting semester 2, she spent 3 hours on the track mill every day. She also suddenly declared a vegetarian, ate tiny portions during lunch and skipped dinner. Within a month, she appeared really skinny and looked pale. Despite her friends’ advice to stop the extreme diet, she felt good about herself and being in control...
Eating Disorders are compulsions to eat or avoid eating that are harmful to one’s physical and psychological health. They are unhealthy coping mechanisms that can arise to handle stress and anxieties.

People with eating disorders often have low self-esteem. Because eating disorders are compulsive behaviors, it’s difficult for them to stop even when they want to. College girls are especially vulnerable to eating disorder.

The most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating. Severe eating disorder can be fatal.

**Anorexia**

- Significant weight loss (more than 10% body weight; sometimes by means of self-induced vomiting, abuse of laxatives or enemas, or excessive exercise)
- Intense fear of losing control over weight
- Perceiving oneself as overweight despite evidence of underweight
- Anxious or ritualistic behavior at mealtimes (e.g. counting calories obsessively)
- Menstrual changes or the absence of menstruation in women (severe warning sign)
Bulimia:

- Bingeing (repeatedly eating large quantities of food in a short period of time and feeling unable to control this behavior)
- Purging (elimination of the food through artificial means such as forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives, periods of fasting, or excessive exercise)
- Discolored teeth and gums
- Constipation

To help someone with an eating disorder, both the emotional and physical symptoms should be addressed. Treatment deals with any medical or nutritional problems, as well as promoting a healthy relationship with food and teaching more positive ways to cope.
Emotional health is vital to academic success and personal growth. Remember, you and your friend are not alone. Help is always available. Make an appointment with our counselors.

To read more about other psychological issues and concerns, please visit [http://www.polyu.edu.hk/stars/counselling/](http://www.polyu.edu.hk/stars/counselling/)