A Step by Step Guide to Improving your Mental and Physical Health at University
Welcome

University is a time of personal growth, and being a student will bring a number of changes to your lifestyle – some will be exciting and interesting and others will be challenging and demanding. It is so important to look after yourself and to adopt good health and well-being habits to help your body and mind and deal with the challenges of student life.

You will be juggling academic pressures new environments, new relationships, part-time work, club and society activity, commuting and new living environments. You can be more effective and successful if you are studying and living from a place of calm and balance.

It is normal to have poorer mental well being at difficult times in your life or if you are feeling lonely, stressed or anxious. Your resilience will affect your capacity to stay focused and upbeat during these times. If these feelings are prolonged over a long period of time, they will negatively affect all other areas of your life. Our message to you is don’t suffer on your own reach out and talk to friend, the Students’ Union or Student Support & Development staff. There are many supports available to you in DCU that will help you get back on track! If you have good physical and mental wellbeing you will:

- Cope with stress better and be more resilient
- Feel more confident
- Feel more engaged with others
- Be more productive in your studies
- Enjoy life more
- Find greater meaning in your life direction

Sometimes we know what we should be doing for our wellbeing but it can be hard to get motivated and make sustainable changes. This booklet will provide you with wellbeing tips and planning tools so you can think about how you can apply the ideas to your own life. It is important to recognise that it is impossible to keep everything balanced all the time- there are times when we need to speed up or slow down, the important thing is to try to strive for some balance between work, rest and leisure, and to identify when you need to make changes. Make your wellbeing a priority!
When life is busy, you focus all your time and energy into a few areas and it is very easy to find yourself off balance. This can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress as you juggle commitments and feel that you are not giving enough attention to other areas of your life. At times like this it is useful to step back and take a ‘helicopter view’. The Wheel of Life is a great tool to help you assess areas of your life and to clearly see what is off balance.

**How to use the Wheel**

1. **Brainstorm Life Areas**
   Make a list of the 8 areas of your life that are important to you and put them on the wheel.

2. **Assess each area**
   Consider each section of the wheel, and on a scale of 0 (low) – to 10 (high), mark an ‘x’ at the place at the relevant point in the wheel.

3. **Join up the marks**
   Join up the marks on the wheel. Does your wheel look in balance?

4. **Think about your ideal level**
   Now it’s time to consider your ideal level in each area of your life. Remember some areas of the wheel will need more or less attention at certain times and you will also need to make choices at specific times to gain balance.

5. **Take action**
   You now have a visual representation of the priority areas of your life and also your ideal balance. You can clearly assess the gaps and look at the actions that you need to take. Remember that gaps can be two ways – those in which you are devoting too much or too little time and energy.

**Action Plan:**
6 Steps

1. Time Management
2. Exercise & Fitness
3. Nutrition
4. Relax & Unwind
5. Rest and Sleep
6. Study & Exams

Time Management

Do you have a ‘To-Do’ list as long as your arm? Are you stressed about what you have to do? Do you have conflicting priorities and have difficulty making decisions? If so, you need a new Time Management strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbalanced</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often missing deadlines and feeling stressed</td>
<td>Meeting deadlines and review quality of work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regularly working long hours</td>
<td>Achieving work/life balance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling pressured by lack of time or too many things to do</td>
<td>Lower stress and feeling more control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumping from crises to crises</td>
<td>Spending quality time on important tasks</td>
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</table>
By prioritising what is most important to you, time management allows you to spend quality time doing things that add value to your life.

Time management is about prioritising your daily/weekly activities and managing those activities throughout the day/week. The foundation of good time management starts with personal goal setting and being clear as to what you want to do. By prioritising what is most important to you, time management allows you to spend quality time doing important things that add value to your life.

To begin managing your time, you first need an idea on how you use your time at the moment. The Well Cast Day Planner is a great tool to do this! Paying attention to how you manage your time will help you manage it more effectively. Poor time management leads to stress and feelings of loss of control and lower productivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Well Cast Day Planner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Record your time</td>
<td>7:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write down everything</td>
<td>8:00</td>
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<td>that you do</td>
<td>9:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Analyse it</td>
<td>10:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pick out your five</td>
<td>11:00</td>
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<td>biggest time wasters</td>
<td>12:00</td>
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<td>of the day</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Change</td>
<td>2:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Come up with a way</td>
<td>3:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>to get the time back</td>
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<tr>
<td>by prioritising and</td>
<td>5:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>decluttering.</td>
<td>6:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schedule time for</td>
<td>7:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>blocks of activities</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Record your time
2. Analyse it
3. Change
Time management is a combination of finding time to do things and using that time well. When you use time effectively, it frees you up to do more of what you want.

Quick tips for good time management

- Use a diary or a task list to plan ahead and log commitments. This saves time in the long run, gives you an idea of what’s ahead and minimises nasty surprises.
- Set realistic time-frames for activities and use a timer such as the Pomodoro technique [http://pomodorotechnique.com/](http://pomodorotechnique.com/).
- Reduce distractions when studying e.g. phone/Internet/social media.
- Leave blank space in your schedule - things often take longer than we think.
- If you’re prone to procrastination, do a ‘self-check’ - ask yourself “What am I doing?” and “Why am I doing this?”, and if needs be, redirect yourself to the task at hand.
- Write a short ‘hit list’ – what you must get done, to help keep you focused.
- Try to ‘work smart, not long’. This involves tight prioritisation - allowing yourself a certain amount of time per task - and trying not to get caught up in less productive activities.
- Take breaks - Our brains get bored, tired, and lose focus if we function non-stop without a break. We need rest to be able to do good work, and regular breaks help you gain perspective on what you’re doing.

Planning
Exercise and Fitness

Being active and getting involved in physical activity is not only good for your body but it is good for your mind!

Physical activity releases endorphins or ‘feel good hormones’ in your brain that reduce feelings of pain, relieve stress, increasing self-confidence, positive mood and promoting better sleep. Being active does not have to mean joining the gym or running a 10K – it can simply be about moving more throughout the day. Here are a few tips to get moving to improve your mood and health:

- Take the stairs
- Park your car or bike furthest away from your destination
- Get off the bus or train a stop earlier and walk
- Speed up your housework
- Take regular breaks from study and get up and walk
- Put a pedometer app on your phone and aim for 10,000 steps a day
- Sit on a stability ball to strengthen your core muscles

Join a DCU Sports Club
This is a fun way to meet new people, learn new skills and to fit in exercise too. Check out www.dcu.ie/sportsdevelopment for more information. Joining fee is only €4!

Get on your bike!
Rediscover the truly invigorating and liberating experience of riding a bike and boost your health in the process. Cycling is one of the easiest ways of fitting exercise into your day. It will also save you money! Cycle to university, work or around the city with the Dublin Bikes scheme www.dublinbikes.ie

Go for a Walk with Friends
Stay fit and catch up with friends at the same time. Instead of going to the restaurant at lunchtime, enjoy a walk in Albert College Park with friends (located opposite the Hub and Sports Centre entrance). DCU has recently launched a Sli na Slainte which is perfect for chatting with friends and keeping fit. Just walking at a decent pace for half an hour, five days a week will do wonders for your health and fitness. To keep track of your walking, use a pedometer. 10,000 steps can burn up to 400 calories.

Start Running with C25K
Start running with the Couch to 5K, a free running plan developed to help absolute beginners get into running. The plan involves three runs a week, with a day of rest in between each, with a different plan for each of the nine weeks. There are also free C25K podcasts to help you to achieve your running goal. Visit www.c25k.com/

Home Workout
Devise a mini-circuit in your own home by using steps or stairs for step-ups, do tricep dips on the sofa and use the hallway or garden for shuttle runs. You can work every muscle group and really whittle away your waistline without leaving the house. Check out YouTube for video clips on getting fit at home or borrow fitness DVD’s from the library.

Relaxation Exercises
Why not try Yoga, Pilates, Meditation or Mindfulness techniques. They are a great way to exercise your mind and body and have the added benefits of helping you reconnect with yourself, promoting relaxation and alleviating stress.

DCU is expanding!
We now have three campuses.
Why not visit the St Patrick’s, All Hallows or Glasnevin Campus by bike or by foot.

For more travel information - go to http://www.dcu.ie/info/get_to.shtml
Our diet, more than any other factor, has the biggest influence on our health. When you come to university it may be the first time you have lived away from home and had to fend for yourself. To have enough energy to study and enjoy student life to the full you need to eat regularly and healthily! Here are some top tips that will help you to learn easy ways to make nutritious choices…

**Top Tips**

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<tr>
<th>Get organised</th>
<th>Make a shopping list before you go to the supermarket and plan your meals – not only will you save money, but you will be more prepared to cook healthy choices! Take turns cooking with your house mates.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Watch your waste</td>
<td>When you buy foods that go off quickly, plan your meals carefully so it gets eaten or frozen straight away.</td>
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**Eat a balanced diet**

Eat regularly and include a wide variety of foods that include fruit, vegetables and fish. Cut down on saturated fats, sugars and salt. Drink plenty of water and don’t skip breakfast! Check out the simple food swaps below that can make a big difference.

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<td>Fried foods</td>
<td>Grilled or baked foods</td>
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<td>Refined grains (white bread/rice)</td>
<td>Whole grains (brown bread/rice)</td>
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<tr>
<td>French fries</td>
<td>Baked potato or sweet potato</td>
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<td>Sweetened drinks</td>
<td>Water</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desserts such as cookies, cake, ice cream</td>
<td>Fresh Fruit, popcorn, frozen yoghurt</td>
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**No time to cook or can’t cook?**

Search the web for easy recipes and cooking tips. Cook extra so you can use the leftovers for a quick meal the following day, or cool the remaining portions and freeze. Cook more one pot dishes like risotto and stews where you throw everything in together, you will save energy, time and washing up!

**Make your takeaway a healthy one**

You don’t have to give up takeaways completely, as long as you make the right menu choices and don’t have them often.

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<th>Swap</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chipper: Thin chips and battered fish</td>
<td>Chunky chips and plain fish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pizza: Deep pan stuffed crust</td>
<td>Thin base, vegetable, lean meat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian: Creamy Curries eg. masala &amp; pilau rice</td>
<td>Tandoori or Madras, boiled rice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese: Deep fried dishes</td>
<td>Stir fries and boiled rice</td>
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**Smart Snacking!**

Beat those hunger pangs with smart snacks! It’s too easy to reach for the quick fixes when studying and juggling a busy lifestyle. Keep a stock of healthy snacks you can grab when you’re hungry, such as crackers, energy bars, fresh fruit, granola bars, high fibre cereal, nuts, popcorn, carrot/cucumber/celery and Hummus!
Food and Your Mood

Your mood and how you feel can be affected by the food that you eat and the subsequent amount of sugar in your blood. When you eat a high carbohydrate meal it is broken down into glucose and your blood sugars rise quickly making you feel mentally good (sugar hit!).

Your body quickly responds by producing insulin and taking the glucose out of the blood to the liver and muscles for energy and storage. This sugar high is subsequently followed by a dip in blood sugar making you feel tired, foggy headed and irritable and craving more sugary carbohydrates and quick fixes! Your adrenal glands also secrete fight or flight hormones that lead to faster breathing, heart rate and anxiety. This rollercoaster of high and low blood sugar can play havoc with your mood, eating habits and health.

Here are some top tips to minimise the blood sugar rollercoaster and to calm your mood:

1. Eat Complex carbohydrates
   A diet rich in high fibre complex carbohydrates such as wholegrains, brown rice, pasta, sweet potatoes etc. will minimise blood sugar imbalances as they are metabolised slowly by the body. They are rich in B vitamins which convert food into fuel and will keep you feeling energised throughout the day.

2. Add Probiotics
   Your gut is considered your second brain as the digestive system is the second largest part of our neurological system. Looking after your gut health will help improve your mood. Add probiotics or ‘good bacteria’ such as apple cider vinegar, live yoghurt, sauerkraut and miso to optimise gut health.

3. Omega 3 fats
   60% of the brain is made up of fats so omega 3 fats from oily fish, nuts and seeds help keep your brain healthy, enable the brains messaging signals to work and boost serotonin levels that calms, relaxes and regulates mood.

4. Add sources of tryptophan
   This can be found in turkey, milk oats, eggs, fish, dairy, poultry bananas etc. Your brain needs the amino acid tryptophan in order to make serotonin, the neurotransmitter that has a happy-making and calming effect. It also helps to make the hormone melatonin, which regulates sleep.

5. Add green leafy vegetables
   These are rich in magnesium and B Vitamins. Magnesium is a calming mineral and a co-factor in over 300 enzyme reactions in the body and plays a role in energy production in our cells. While Vitamin B1 aids blood sugar balance, B3 plays a role in serotonin synthesis and B5 is important for adrenal function which controls stress.

6. Avoid sugar and caffeine
   Turning to sugary treats and caffeine when you are stressed and in a bad mood will further exasperate these feelings. Once the ‘sugar/caffeine’ high is gone you are left feeling irritable, anxious and craving more sugar.
Rest & Sleep

A lot of the time when we think of having work/life balance, we do not consider the quality of our rest and sleep to be a part of that balance.

Sleep is often the first area to be affected if we are stressed, busy or anxious. Sleep is essential for the body’s natural repair systems and it can help you stay alert and make decisions. Lack of sleep can have negative effects on both your body and mind. It can alter the body’s metabolism, affect brain and memory, alter appetite, resilience and the stress response. Sleep deficiency can also alter decision making, increase mood swings, lower motivation and increase feelings of sadness and depression. It is good to be aware of your sleep patterns and to make sure that you have adequate rest and sleep especially coming up to and during exams. Here are some good tips to get the balance right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbalanced</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leave the TV on while going asleep</td>
<td>Have 8 hours a night sleep (min)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drink caffeine products 3 hours before bed time</td>
<td>Wake before the alarm clock goes off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work on the laptop/smart phone while in bed before sleeping</td>
<td>Wake feeling refreshed after a nights sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wake up in the morning still tired</td>
<td>Find it easy to fall asleep</td>
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</table>

How to get ZZZ Balance

Avoid anything that will stimulate your brain 3 hours before going to bed. Stimulant foods include coffee, tea, red bull, sugar drinks and large meals. Stimulant activities include working on any electronic device, which is everything from a smart phone to playing video games. Alcohol is also a reason for lack of sleep. Apart from the obvious like long nights out partying, alcohol can hinder the quality of sleep especially if taken on a daily basis.

Set up a routine for bed-time
If you go to sleep at 11pm, then start to get ready for bed at 10pm. The routine can include, getting lunches ready for following day, washing and brushing teeth, tidying away clothes in bedroom and reading in bed. Even though watching TV for long periods of time is a stimulant, watching TV for a few minutes while you settle down is okay.

If you find it hard to wind down, a change in the body temperature can make you sleepy. In winter, have a hot shower or bath. As your body cools down after the hot shower, your body will wind down and you will feel sleepy. Alternatively in summer when it can be hot and humid, you can have a cool shower and have bedroom windows open to cool the body down and help with sleep.

Do you have an app for that?

Sleep Meter – Stop wondering how well you are sleeping and start knowing! This application tracks your sleep habits and presents statistical and graphical analysis.
Android – FREE

Sleep On It – Sleep tracker and alarm app. Get the alarm that does it all! Set your alarm and with one tap you can record how much sleep, then add info about sleep quality, your mood, meds and more to see what affects your sleep and how much you really need to feel rested and energized.
Apple – FREE
You can be more effective and successful if you are studying from a place of calm and balance.
The words ‘stress’ and ‘relaxation’ get used a lot in articles about studying, exams or work/life balance, but what do they mean? How do we know which ‘state’ we are in? What effects do they have on the body?

### Stress

In physiology, **stress is anything that causes the body to respond by releasing stress hormones.** This results in the 'fight or flight' syndrome. Symptoms include faster heart rate, increased blood flow to the muscles instead of the major organs, faster breathing, increase in blood sugars and increase in ability of blood to clot. This is all good if we find ourselves in a situation where we need to react to an emergency situation, however over a prolonged period of time, these stress responses can interfere with how the body is supposed to work.

**Chronic conditions** include:
- Back/neck pain
- Headaches
- Digestive problems
- Inability to sleep
- Feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, anger, irritability and of being overwhelmed

The “relaxation response” is the opposite of the “stress response.” The **relaxation response** causes the exact opposite physical symptoms in the body. Regular use of relaxation techniques can counteract any symptoms of stress that the body may have. In the run up to exams, stress levels will be higher than normal and if you remain in this state for 4-8 weeks, you will more than likely have experienced some of the above symptoms. If however, you have used some chosen relaxation techniques throughout this stressful time you’ll have enabled the physical and emotional body to remain balanced.

### Results of relaxation techniques include:
- Regular heart beat
- Slow and deep breathing resulting in more oxygen available in the body
- Improved concentration
- Increased mental clarity
- Increased productivity during the day
- Organ function, such as digestion, occurs normally
- Memory improves

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbalanced</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spend hours playing video games or surfing the internet</td>
<td>Take part in extra-curricular activity at least twice a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not exercise</td>
<td>Exercise for 20 mins. at least three times per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have hobbies or take part in extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>Consciously aware of stress points in the body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find it difficult to sleep at night</td>
<td>Meditate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have heart palpitations/shallow breath and feel panicky on a daily basis</td>
<td>Read instead of watching TV</td>
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</table>
Relaxation

Doesn’t this sound like a healthier place to be when preparing for exams or assignments? Absolutely! You can be more effective and successful if you are studying from a place of calm and balance. The following techniques can be used to help with relaxation and can be used at any time:

Physical Techniques
Yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi and Stretching. This will release tension and stress in the muscles, spine and neck areas.

Breathing Techniques
Breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth three times. Breathing should be deep and full. This will slow the heart rate down.

Meditation
YouTube have many 10 minute meditations to help you relax. Find one that suits you. DCU offers ‘mindfulness’, so watch out for the next scheduled event on the SS&D event pages!

Relaxing Music
If classical music is not your thing, there are many chill out tunes available online on iTunes or YouTube to help you relax when not studying.

Other methods
Exercise, massage, walking or taking part in any hobbies.

Do you have an app for that?
Sleep Meter – The vast majority of people have not had any relaxation training and therefore finds it difficult to switch off and be still.
Android – FREE

Relax HD Lite – Effective and rapid stress relief in 5 minutes. Used to manage anxiety and return balance, this app is an essential tool for modern life.
Apple – FREE

Relax Lite:Stress Relief – For insomniacs and busy folks, this app provides relaxation therapy that really works.
Android – FREE

Do you leave all your studying to the week before the exams? Do you feel guilty when out socialising, feeling you should be home studying? Do you feel frustrated that you cannot get a grasp of your studying?

Unbalanced
Leaving all studying to last minute before exams
Not doing any extra research in the run up to exams
Spending all spare hours socialising and in extra-curricular activities
Having notes and written work in different places and are easily lost
Not having a quiet place to study with no distractions

Balanced
Studying on a weekly basis throughout the semester
Having a study plan for the semester and for the exams
Having a balance between course work and social life
Having notes and written work in one folder
Having a quiet environment to study
At university, studying is left up to you and after years of structure in school, it can be hard to motivate yourself to keep going. The key objective is to break down the tasks ahead of you into small manageable tasks. This will reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of work you have to do. Also, it will allow you to keep on top of your work and studying for the exams will be less stressful. We have listed below the key areas that can help you be a success at exams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Skills Workshop</th>
<th>Register for an Exam Revision Strategies Workshop. <a href="http://www.dcu.ie/studentlearning">www.dcu.ie/studentlearning</a></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past Papers</td>
<td>For best exam preparation, see what questions came up last year. You can search for your past papers for all modules online at <a href="http://www.dcu.ie/internal/examinations/papers.php3">www.dcu.ie/internal/examinations/papers.php3</a></td>
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<td>Academic Support</td>
<td>Speak to lecturers in good time if you have any outstanding questions regarding the exams.</td>
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<td>Study Plan</td>
<td>Prepare a Study Plan. You can download this Exam Preparation Booklet, which will help you, at: <a href="http://www.dcu.ie/advice/student-guides.shtml">www.dcu.ie/advice/student-guides.shtml</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Thoughts</td>
<td>If you are having negative thoughts, e.g. “I am going to fail”, “I can’t do this”, write them down on a piece of paper, read them and then throw it in the bin. Next, take a new piece of paper, write down 10 positives sentences, e.g. “I am a success”, “I’ll pass my exams”, “and I enjoy learning”. You may not believe the sentences but it’s important to write them to cancel out each negative thought you have.</td>
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<td>Ask for Help</td>
<td>Talk to friends, family, lecturers or student support staff if you still feeling overwhelmed. It is normal to feel anxious when preparing coursework or studying for exams. Visit the Student Advice Centre or the Students’ Union on either campuses, if you are unsure who to speak to or need some study tips. Email: <a href="mailto:student.support@dcu.ie">student.support@dcu.ie</a></td>
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Do you have an app for that?

- **Studying and Exam Tips** – Studying and Exam Tips is an application that is designed to help you improve your skills at studying and for improving your grades. Android – **FREE**
- **StudyBlue app** – StudyBlue allows you to create and customise your own flashcards, which you can then use in a variety of different modes in order to help you study the material on them. 101 **FREE**
### My Well-Being & Resilience Plan

#### Things that have a positive effect on my well-being

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#### Things that have a negative effect on my wellbeing

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#### What changes will I make after reading this booklet to improve my wellbeing?

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#### Who/What can help me to achieve these changes?

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### Tips to help you achieve your goals:

- Notes/reminders on your phone
- Make commitments (e.g. sign up for a 6 week class and pay upfront)
- Trying not to break the chain e.g. commit to exercising every day, even if it is not possible to do the same level of exercise each day.
- Choose suitable rewards.
- Make a commitment to yourself “Every weekend/Sunday/Tuesday, I......”
Join a DCU Sports Club
This is a fun way to meet new people, learn new skills and to fit in exercise too.

Useful Contacts

The contact details below may be useful:

DCU Student Advice Centre
Glasnevin Campus
T 01 700 7165
St Patrick’s Campus
T 01 884 2004
dcu.ie/students/advice

Sports Development Service
dcu.ie/sportsdevelopment
T 01 700 6041

Health Care
Glasnevin Campus
T 01 700 5143
St Patrick’s Campus
T 01 884 2239
dcu.ie/students/health

Counselling & Personal Development
Glasnevin Campus
T 01 700 5165
St Patrick’s Campus
T 01 884 2239
dcu.ie/students/counselling

Produced By
Student Support & Development
Dublin City University
T 01 700 7165
E student.support@dcu.ie

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Careers
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Log on  www.dcu.ie/students
Write   student.support@dcu.ie
Call    (01) 700 7165
Drop in  Student Advice Centre