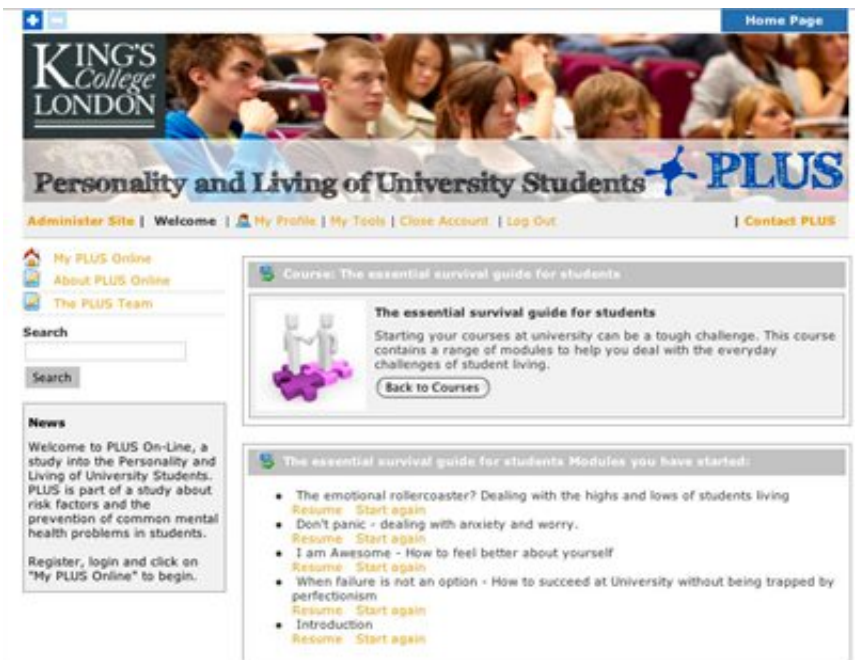


Online therapy could improve student mental health

April 30 2014, by Seil Collins



A screenshot of the online intervention. Credit: Dr Peter Musiat

(Medical Xpress)—A new approach to treating university students' mental health problems, using an online intervention, has been tested by researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London. The intervention reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improved self-esteem.

The transition from school to higher education involves many life-style

changes, and is associated with an increase in [mental health](#) problems which can be disruptive to [students'](#) education and emotional development. Approximately 1 in 5 undergraduate students suffer from symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders or substance misuse.

Online interventions provide a flexible and engaging platform for students, but many interventions on offer are not effective, target specific symptoms only or have not been designed specifically with students in mind.

Rather than targeting individual symptoms, researchers at King's developed an intervention designed to target underlying personality risk factors. The online resource 'PLUS' (Personality and Living of University Students) was described to students as an opportunity to 'learn more about their strengths and weaknesses', and 'how to deal with the challenges of university life'.

Step 7 of 8

When failure is not an option - How to succeed at University without being trapped by perfectionism

Let's come back to the example of our medical student Amy and see how she could apply the seven steps to challenge her extreme and unhelpful perfectionist behaviour:

Amy decides that her alternating between procrastinating and then overcompensating makes things worse for her as the exam approaches. Her anxiety and stress are getting stronger and stronger instead of going down.

She comes up with several alternative solutions and their pros and cons:

Solution	Pro	Con
I could stop exam preparations now	I don't have to manage all this work.	I will fail the exam and not be able to continue to study.
I could try to really impress my professors by not just working through the key text(s) for the exam, but by reading much more widely	If I could pull it off it would be brilliant and everyone would think I am the best.	I do not have the time to do this I need to prioritize key topics I also need some breaks
I could lock myself away in my room and study 18 hours a day for the last 2 weeks before my exam. This would mean drinking vast amounts of coffee to stay awake.	It sounds tempting, because it would mean I would only have to study really hard for 2 weeks.	This will be counterproductive. I won't be able to concentrate and won't be able to sleep because of the coffee.
I could join up with my fellow students and form a study group.	They would help me to structure the workload	I'd rather work alone because it means others don't distract me and I stay in control
I could make a study plan	This would give me structure. I know if I stick to the plan, I'm well prepared.	Might be hard to stick to this. I often make longer and longer lists and they just make me procrastinate.

Amy decides that although her natural instinct is to isolate herself and study alone to stay in control, joining up with a couple of friends who are good at preparing for exams and meeting with them regularly to assess her progress, discuss difficult topics and keep up morale would be the most realistic and helpful solution for her.

Example of one of the modules. Credit: Dr Peter Musiat

Students were assessed according to four [personality traits](#) known to be associated with increased risk of common [mental health disorders](#): Neuroticism, Concern over Mistakes, Doubts about Actions and Hopelessness. They were then grouped according to whether they were high or low risk and randomly allocated the online intervention (519 participants), or a control intervention (528). The online intervention was divided into modules with text-based cognitive-behaviour based exercises focusing on different traits.

Compared to controls, students who completed the online intervention had reduced [symptoms of depression](#) and anxiety, and improved self-esteem at 6 weeks and after 12 weeks follow up. The findings were published in *PLOS ONE*.

Dr Peter Musiat, from the Department of Psychological Medicine at the IoP at King's and lead author of the paper, says: "There is a need for improved mental health interventions targeted specifically at [university students](#), and online therapies are a good way to engage this group. Online interventions vary in their quality, so we were keen to develop an evidence-based intervention. This is a novel approach because we targeted personality risk factors rather than symptoms. The intervention is designed to help students recognise and reduce unhelpful behaviours and thoughts resulting from these personality traits."

The intervention was designed and delivered as part of the trial only and is not currently available online. The researchers are refining the software, and hope to run further trials to test its effectiveness.

More information: Musiat, P. et al. "Targeted prevention of common mental health disorders in university students: randomised controlled trial of a trans-diagnostic trait-focused web-based intervention"

published in *PLOS ONE*. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0093621](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0093621)

Provided by King's College London

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