

Surviving Thriving at NSCAD with

a mental illness

A Student-Created
Comprehensive Guide

NSCAD
UNIVERSITY

Sandy Escobar

Surviving Thriving at NSCAD With a Mental Illness:
A Student-Created Comprehensive Guide

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In brief...

Hello, fellow students!

This is a guide to using the resources at NSCAD, Dalhousie university and the surrounding Halifax area to best manage your mental illness, support your overall mental health, or find help if you find yourself feeling mentally unwell and have to figure out what to do about it. I am a fourth year NSCAD student who has done fairly well academically and socially at the same time as having a mental illness. You can, too!

You are not alone!

It is estimated that one in five Canadians will have a mental illness at some point in their lives, and that it affects 10-20% of youth. There are a bunch of us at NSCAD that have had or have a mental illness. Even though a lot of people prefer to go incognito about such things, due to ridiculous stigma. Please, know that whatever you have or are going through, you are not the only one.

Know your rights!

If you have a mental illness that is ongoing and causes you difficulty with the traditional way curriculum is taught or evaluated, you are entitled to accommodations to bridge that gap. As well, if you find yourself going through an episode where you are too mentally ill to complete an assignment, you have the same rights to make up for missed work as if you have a physical illness.

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»I respect your decision. I hope you will keep these options in mind. My door is always open.«

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A MENTAL ILLNESS, ANYWAY?

(Obviously if you have a diagnosis you can just skip this section)

Having a mental illness usually means having a more limited ability to function because of moods and perceptions. If you find yourself majorly struggling to do your schoolwork or go to classes because of erratic moods, substance abuse, worrying, or being unable to focus on anything, it may be a good idea to get yourself checked out, or at least visit the resident NSCAD psychology expert, Bernadette Kehoe in the student services office.

Here are some common mental illnesses that affect university students:

Depression

Signs, including appetite or weight changes, no energy, nothing is interesting to you anymore, loss of interest, negative attitude, feelings of helplessness, difficulty concentrating, way too much or way too little sleep, feelings of hurting yourself or suicide – most of these every day for at least two weeks.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Excessive anxiety more days than not for at least six months, resulting in at least half of these: feeling restless or on edge, feeling easily tired, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, trouble sleeping.

Bipolar Disorder

The symptoms of depression plus manic episodes, which usually involve: inflated self esteem, being super talkative, racing thoughts, not needing much sleep, becoming more distractible, doing many fun things to the point that they may be self destructive, more goal oriented activity for at least one week.

If you get a diagnosis, keep in mind that this does not define you; you are a person first. Having a mental illness can be difficult, but it doesn't mean you won't get better and go on to have an awesome life.

If you don't feel like getting a diagnosis, or are not mentally ill but still are struggling, getting supports for your mental health and wellness are still useful (see later in this guide). University can be a stressful experience, and most students have found themselves overwhelmed at some point.

GENERAL ADVICE FOR NURTURING MENTAL HEALTH AT SCHOOL

Keep perspective – if you have a bad day, don't beat yourself up over it.

Work with the highs and the lows – try to get ahead when you are feeling more in your productive zone so that you will have room if a low hits later on.

Take care of your overall emotional and physical health - make time for exercise, sleep, time with friends, healthy eating, and leisure time. If you tell yourself you will do nothing but work with no breaks for extended periods of time, you are more likely to get overwhelmed and anxious/depressed.

Recognize warning signs (when you are feeling especially unable to focus/depressed/overwhelmed) so you can take care of things before they become critical.

If you are prone to stress, reduce your sugar and caffeine intake.

Join local organizations and find support networks

Find peers you can talk to about what's bothering you. If you are part of a studio class, or know people in studio classes, mid evenings the day before class are usually when people vent and commiserate with each other. Also allotting fifteen minutes before and after class to connect with classmates can be a great way to meet people.

SELF-STIGMA ADVICE

Guilt over Asking for Help

Our society tends to value this notion of each person as an independent actor. If you think about it, though, everyone (neurotypical or not) needs some sort of support or assistance. The social model of disability describes impairment as the medical condition one may have and disability as the disabling effects of society. Our society tends to look down on the notion of help, especially when it's seen as catering to someone's impairment, but help is something that we all need. We live in a world where every person requires assistance from another person to fill basic human needs, and asking for help because of impairment should not be seen as different from this.

Self-Stigma

It's easy to think thoughts like "Because I am like this I have failed". Some mental illness is caused by thinking in negative thought loops, some caused by trauma, some caused by irregular brain chemistry – no one is really sure. But regardless of how much is biology or willpower, behavioral, cognitive, or chemical, you feeling mentally paralyzed is still one hundred percent real and legitimate, as legitimate as a physical illness that is seen as much more worthy of accommodation. And although you may hold the keys to your own recovery, it is not your "fault" that you are "sick."

DISABILITY SERVICES AT NSCAD

Location

The student services office in the Duke block (Room D-200)

People to Know

Bill Travis

Disability Resource Facilitator

902 494 8313

btravis@nscad.ca

Bill Travis can help you with getting academic accommodations, advice over disability related concerns, and extra support you might need – like helping you break down tasks and time management.

Bernadette Kehoe

Director of Financial Aid and Student Counseling

902 494 8130

bkehoe@nscad.ca

Bernadette Kehoe has a background in counseling, and is a good person to talk to about mental health referrals, mental health events and activism, as well as financial advice (i.e. scholarships and bursaries).

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Types/Reasons

- Ongoing Academic Accommodations – for when you have an ongoing mental illness that routinely interferes with your functioning.
- Temporary Academic Accommodations – for when you are not diagnosed yet or find yourself in a sudden crisis.
- Accommodations not through disability services – this is not recommended, but if you feel that you cannot disclose a mental illness to anyone for various reasons, here is how to get academic exemptions.

How to Get Ongoing Academic Accommodations

You will need to provide a written document of your mental illness to Bill Travis in the student services office. This is a detailed letter that can be provided by a psychologist, psychiatrist, family doctor, or social worker. It includes:

- Related medical history.
- How your mental illness affects academics.
- Relevant medication and how this may affect performance.
- Required accommodations. You are entitled to accommodations specified here in this letter. Remember when you are discussing this with your doctor or therapist that you can always choose less accommodations if you find yourself not needing them, but it might be more difficult to get more that are not written in your letter.

This document is treated as confidential medical information, and Bill Travis can only see this documentation without your permission.

List of Ongoing Accommodations Offered

Classroom

- Note taking – if you struggle with attendance, this is a good option to make up for missed lecture based classes, also may help if you have trouble with concentration.
- Taping the lecture helps if you have trouble concentrating and organizing thoughts, or trouble writing.
- Preferential seating to reduce audio and visual distractions.

- Note taking technology, including laptops, personal digital assistants, or word processing keyboards can be provided (ask Bill Travis about note taking technology).
- More frequent breaks, the ability to step out of class when feeling overwhelmed or stressed.
- Excused absences – this will allow you to get around the attendance policy for studio classes without it affecting your grade, and can be useful if your mental illness stops you from attending classes on certain days.

Assignment

- Extensions on assignment deadlines – this can help relieve anxiety if several assignments are due at once, or can help if you have a series of mental health days and have not been able to keep up with course work that week.
- Extensions can often be provided after the term ends and before marks need to be handed in to the school, (a week or two later) depending on the professor.

Exam

- Having more time to write exams and writing them in a quiet room – this can help if you have exam anxiety.
- Preferential seating, or sitting in a separate, quiet room. For all exams at NSCAD, Bill Travis can book separate rooms for students with disabilities, and this can help if you have difficulty with concentration or social situations.
- Supervised breaks during an exam to relieve anxiety.
- Changes to scheduled exam dates – if you have several exams on similar dates, you can arrange to move them to reduce anxiety. You can also change the time of the exam to when you work best; for example, for later in the day, if you struggle with fatigue and concentration.
- Extended exam times – this can help you finish exams if you struggle with fatigue or concentration.
- Exam broken into sections with rest breaks – this can reduce the effects of fatigue.

Government Grant Accommodations

If you have documentation with the government showing that you have a permanent disability, you can receive funding for additional accommodations if you require them. These are:

- Tutoring – you can apply to have a certain amount of tutoring hours covered by the government, which would help if your mental illness affects your concentration.
- Assistive technology, such as smart keyboards or laptops to help write in class, which may also help with concentration-related mental illnesses.

Temporary Accommodations

If you find yourself suddenly encumbered with a mental illness or learning disability and are receiving treatment for it, it is possible to get accommodations without yet having an official diagnosis for one semester at NSCAD. Also, it is possible to appeal failed classes from appearing on your academic record if they were due to a mental illness. If this is the case, speak to Bernadette Kehoe in the student office within 30 days of receiving the grade.

Getting Accommodations without a Diagnosis or Seeing the Disability Service

For various reasons (the stigma, a sudden mental illness out of the blue), it can sometimes be difficult to get accommodations through this official route.

- Perhaps you find yourself suddenly feeling very mentally ill and it has caused you to miss several classes and or assignment deadlines, but you do not have any documentation. In this case, keep in mind that a mental illness is a medical illness as well as a psychological one. It is possible to get a doctor's note excusing work or class time missed from a walk in clinic, a doctor's office, or the Saint Mary's Nurse. These notes will not specify what you were sick with, as your medical history is confidential.
- Another option, if this is happening, is to talk to your professors. Many are quite sympathetic to being overwhelmed and struggling with assignments, and when possible would like to help rather than fail you.

DISCLOSURE AND TALKING TO PROFESSORS

Disclosing a mental illness can be a tricky and ultimately personal decision. There is a lot of stigma associated with mental illnesses, as I'm sure you know, but there are also benefits to being more open.

Disclosing a Mental Illness to Professors

Being specific about why you are struggling is something that you may or may not want to do depending on the professor. Telling a prof that you are anxious, for example, sometimes leads to them breaking down assignments for you and giving tips on how not to worry. Many prof's also have had mental illnesses of their own, or have had other students come forward with similar conditions. These profs are super sweet, accommodating, and helpful when you open up about specifics. Disclosing, however, does run the risk that prof's will see you in a negative light and not take accommodations seriously. Some prof's, unfortunately, might see you as a less serious student, or see the accommodations as not necessary. Use your judgment on whether to disclose, and remember: If your prof's act in ways that are insensitive or stigmatizing, talk to Bill Travis in the student services office – he has your back.

Connecting with Professors

Since art grading can be so subjective and many classes have a heavy participation grade, a lot of a marks can come from how much you look like you are learning and exploring in class. A lot of the time profs might look at poor attendance, spacing out in class, or not handing in assignments on time as a sign of laziness and lack of commitment, even when that is totally not what's going on (yay, stigma!). Because of this, it can be helpful to keep a continuous line of communication with your profs so that they know you are engaging with the subject matter. Letting the prof know that you are attempting to do the work even as you may be struggling with it, or that you are excited about the coursework even if you struggle with attendance can make a huge difference in how the prof sees your participation, and how supportive they end up being. A lot of profs also appreciate this communication because they like to feel like they are involved, engaged with, and helpful to their students (at least, the good profs).

ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Learning Skills Workshops at Dalhousie

Such as Surviving the Term (managing school and stress), Time Management, Avoiding Procrastination, and Making the Most Out of Readings can help with those skills that really affect school performance but that most schools assume you magically know already. It's a good idea to schedule some of these at the beginning of the term, when you have time to attend them.

Learning Coaches at Dalhousie

The people that offer the skills workshop are also academic coaches at Dal. As a NSCAD student, you can book an appointment with them to help you with time management or studying strategies one on one.

The Writing Centre at NSCAD

This centre is available for students of all writing levels. You can bring essays, rough drafts, ideas, and graded work to the tutors to provide suggestions. To book an appointment, contact Ken Rice on the 3rd floor of the Duke campus or at 902 494 8187.

Tutors for Students with Disabilities

Tutoring for students with disabilities is arranged through Bill Travis. If you have documentation with the Canadian government for having a permanent disability, you can get grants to cover this financially.

A Note on Learning Disabilities and Neurological Disabilities

Trying to study, learn, or work like the norm when that doesn't work for you can be frustrating and affect mental health. If you find it hard to focus on work, are having trouble absorbing material in class, or have extra troubles in reading and writing, it might be worth finding out if you have an undiagnosed learning disability. This doesn't mean that you are less intelligent; it often means that the way you work and learn is different from the one narrow way society sometimes expects us to. Learning that you have a learning disability can help you make positive changes to your study and work schedule so that it optimizes your unique learning style. You may also qualify for additional accommodations. Diagnosis involves a similar process as getting a mental illness diagnosis. See Bill Travis for details (Contact him at btravis@nscad.ca or Call 902 494 8313).

FINANCIAL AID

Emergency Funds

Both the SUNSCAD office and the student services office have emergency funds for students. If you find yourself in a tight spot financially you can borrow this money to stay afloat.

Scholarships, Bursaries and Loans

There are also numerous bursaries available for students with financial need and disabilities. You can find these in the student services office and they are usually due around the middle of each term.

Having a mental illness means that you can qualify for full time loans with a 40 percent course load, and for part time loans with a 20-39% full course load if you have documentation for having a permanent disability.

There are also non-NSCAD related scholarships relating to having a disability that you may qualify for if you have a documented mental illness:

<http://www.disabilityawards.ca>

This website contains a list of awards and scholarships for students with disabilities.

The Sarah Gaulin Memorial Scholarship

This is a \$1000 scholarship for students who are registered and returning to university full time in a Canadian college or university. You are eligible if you have an ongoing mental health condition for over two years, are committed to academics, and have potential to be an outstanding participant in the community. Visit the website at *<http://www.gaulinfoundation.ca>*

Food Banks

NSCAD has a food bank located at the beginning of the hallway that connects the lounge to the deck area in the Duke campus.

The Dalhousie women's centre also has a lot of tasty food open to all members – that is, Dalhousie students and anyone who pays a \$2 yearly fee.

CLUBS, ART COLLECTIVES AND OTHER SUPPORTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Finding a good support network of peers will help you feel more purpose, reduce stress, and help when you need someone to talk to. Plus usually they make life more fun. Below are a few clubs at NSCAD, and supportive organizations (some arts related) in the Halifax community.

- **At NSCAD University**

Mental Health Tea Hour

Biweekly confidential discussions about life and mental illness related topics while relaxing and drinking super sweet tea. Sawadee Tea shop, the first and third Mondays of every month at 12:00 p.m.

The Feminist Collective

This organization meets roughly once a week, has a Facebook page with updates on events and news, and plans a feminist gallery show every fall at the Anna Leonowens. Find the Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/194944297190640>

The Queer Collective

This is probably one of the larger and most social clubs at NSCAD. They have numerous social events and a Facebook page where people will post queer friendly news. Find the Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/inandoutatnscad> and the blog at <http://nscadqueercollective.wordpress.com>

Yoga

Weekly yoga, super-cheap at \$3 an evening, mats provided for you.

NSCAD Films

The film department at NSCAD is always looking for extras and volunteers to participate in fourth year film shoots.

- **In Halifax**

The Native Education Counseling Unit

Located in a bright yellow house on 6286 South Street, this program provides

educational and support services to all native postsecondary students In Halifax.

The Youth Project

Is a non-profit that supports youth 25 and under with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. They have support groups, referrals, counseling, workshops, social activities, and a food bank.

The Khyber Gallery & The Eyelevel Gallery

There are cool places, full of cutting edge and emerging artists. They have been known to exhibit NSCAD students and recent grads, and have a lot of events and volunteer opportunities for NSCAD students

VANS (Visual Arts Nova Scotia)

If you request to be on their mailing list, you will receive information on different arts events. They also have a program in which you could volunteer, bringing art to schools.

AFCOOP (Atlantic Film Cooperative)

This organization provides a network of workers in the independent film industry for students such as yourself. Volunteering with the organization can give you useful hands on experience and opportunities to meet people; also, volunteer hours can be exchanged for membership (10 hours), equipment rentals, and workshops. AFCOOP also has a mentorship program that you can sign up for each year in the fall between students and professional filmmakers.

Team Possibles

This is a community art organization of youth (16-24) with Down Syndrome and volunteers that meet each Saturday from 12:30-4:30 to create awesome, colourful, amazing art. To volunteer, contact Renee Forrestall at reneeForrestall@mac.com

Veith Street Gallery Studio Association

This is an educational organization based in North End Halifax that supports artists with disabilities and related challenges. The art works of members are exhibited in the Veith Street Gallery and the Pedway Gallery in Dartmouth. They also offer an artist in residency program.

<http://veithstreetgallery.org> for more information

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- **At NSCAD University**

Bernadette Kehoe

In charge of counseling in the student services office, she can refer you to different psychology resources in the area.

Mental Health Tea Hour

Biweekly confidential discussions about life and mental illness related topics while relaxing and drinking super sweet tea. Sawadee Tea shop, the first and third Mondays of every month at 12:00. Events are searchable on Facebook.

- **At Dalhousie University**

Dal Counseling

Dalhousie has up to 12 free therapy appointments per year with their counseling staff at the student union building (near Robie and University streets). To get an appointment, call at 9a.m. to register a same day half hour initial intake appointment. This is where they will assess your psychological history and pair you with a psychologist. Call *902 494 2081*.

Group Therapy

Dalhousie also has a variety of \$5 group therapy sessions, including an anxiety group, an eating disorders group, and dealing with loss support group, among others.

- **In Halifax**

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team

Intervention and short term crisis management for people experiencing mental health crises. Call 902 429 8167 or 1 800 429 8167.

Association of Psychologists Nova Scotia

Through an online directory, you can search for a psychologist best suited for you. You can select based on criteria such as areas of practice and expertise, as well as gender and location. Visit the website at <http://www.apns.ca/findapsych.html>

Capitol Health Addictions Program

Free, confidential support for people struggling with addictions and their family/friends. Services include counseling, recovery groups, community support, in-patient treatment (detox), methadone treatment, and recovery groups. Call 902 424 886 or visit the website at <http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/addictions-program>

Community Mental Health Services (Bayer's Road)

Free outpatient mental health services for people with depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders, bipolar illness and schizophrenia. They can help with diagnoses, medication, individual therapy, group therapy, and psychosocial rehabilitation, improving connections and participation in the community. Call 902 454-1400 or 902 454-1440.

COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH STUFF

There is a growing movement in the HRM for self-advocacy for people with mental illnesses. As a result there are several groups instigating peer to peer advice, support groups, and anti-stigma events.

Youth Against Stigma Coffee Houses

Once a month on Friday, about thirty young people show up at the Just Us! Café on Spring Garden Road for an open mike coffee house aimed at reducing the stigma around mental illnesses. Bill Travis played guitar in it. Therefore you should totally check it out.

Laing House

A peer support organization for youth ages 16-30 with psychosis, mood disorder and/or anxiety disorder. They have workshops, employment programs, healthy living programs, and community outreach. 1225 Barrington Street.

<http://www.lainghouse.org>

Mosaic for Mental Health

This is an art show and fund-raiser for the Halifax branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Artists with mental illnesses (potentially you?) exhibit 6" x 6" artworks on different mental health themes.

<http://mosaicformentalhealth.wordpress.com>.

Healthy Minds Cooperative

Peer support services for people with mental illnesses. They have one to one support, group sessions, workshops, and from recovery to discovery presentations Thursdays at the hub (1673 Barrington). Call 902 404 3504 or find more information at *<http://www.healthyminds.ca>*.

Schizophrenia Society of Nova Scotia

An organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for those with schizophrenia through education, support programs, public policy, and research. The HRM chapter has meetings the third Monday of every month. Call 902 465 2601 or find more information at *www.ssns.ca*.

Self Help Connection

A self-help resource centre for over 500 groups in Nova Scotia.

Call 902 466 2011 or 1 866 765 6639

or email at selfhelp@eastlink.ca

or visit their website at www.selfhelpconnection.ca.

MENTAL HEALTH AND DISABILITY ADVOCACY GROUPS

NEADS (The National Educational Association of Disabled Students)

A Canada wide organization encouraging the self-empowerment of students with disabilities.

YAC (Youth Advisory Council)

Youth Advisory Council is an anti stigma youth group. They review material created by teen mental health (a larger anti stigma and resource group for youth with mental illnesses) and make sure materials are youth friendly. They also hold events reducing stigma against mental illnesses in the HRM, such as the Youth Against Stigma coffee houses. You can join the youth advisory council by emailing Ardath, the coordinator, at ardath.whynacht@iwk.nshealth.ca

One in Five

A Halifax-based organization dedicated to promoting the awareness of mental illnesses.

ReachAbility

An organization about empowering individuals with disabilities and enriching communities. The founder, Tova Sherman, is a one-woman powerhouse of inclusion activism, running several related organizations and a TV show about disabilities, Inclusion Revolution. She is open to meeting with student disability groups for advice and support. Call 902 429 5878 or contact by emailing at info@reachability.org

Canadian Mental Health Association (Halifax Branch)

An agency with a wide range of services and supports for people with mental illnesses. Their Facebook page has a lot of interesting news updates. Call 902 455 5445 or visit the website at <http://haldart.cmha.ca>

Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia

This is a foundation that aims to raise money for support services, erase stigma, and raise awareness of mental illnesses. Find more information at www.cmha.ca