

spun<sup>o</sup>ut

# SURVIVAL GUIDE to Life

spunout Survival Guide to Life

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# Introduction

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The spunout Survival Guide to Life aims to equip and empower you with important information about issues you experience every day. The book explores issues such as mental health, education, employment, sexual health, life online and much more. This guide is primarily designed to support you during the transition from school to college or work or independent life more generally, but lots of the information will be relevant to readers of any age.

Existing spunout readers have suggested all the topics which feature in the book; and a number of our readers were heavily involved in the whole publishing process from beginning to end. The book's chapters include signposts to services and useful resources for readers who may need further support or just want someone to talk to. We have also partnered with the Children's Rights Alliance to include information on the rights of people under the age of 18.

Throughout this guide we have worked to use inclusive language, so that all our readers can find advice that is relevant to you. Between the age of 16 and 21, we all go through lots of different changes and challenges, from: exams, leaving home, going to college, meeting people, forming relationships, and finding a job and a lot more besides.

Everyone's journey is different but the spunout Survival Guide to Life is here to hopefully make life that bit easier. We hope you'll find it a helpful resource, and we'd love to hear what you think about it.

*The spunout team*

hello@spunout.ie

# Foreword by Denise Harding

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Life can be a difficult journey to navigate at any stage but this is particularly true between the ages of 16-25.

With this age range, there will be certain expectations put upon you. You will start to make decisions that will bring change to your life, and while each individual's experience will be different, one thing we can all agree on is how it can be both an exciting and daunting time.

I first became aware of spunout in my early teens, and it's a website that would go on to provide me with information and support on the process of grief and youth mental health.



spunout has always served a positive purpose, and being a part of their youth advisory board, the Action Panel, in recent years has provided me with some fantastic opportunities and friends for life. I have loved being able to contribute to causes that are significant to young people living in Ireland, and I hope in some way my contribution has helped others, in the same way the content I came across helped me.

Now, the latest edition of 'The Survival Guide to Life' is here for you. In this book, you will find factual information on everything from relationships, education, to mental health, youth rights and so much more. This guide is here to let you know that as a young person, your concerns and questions are valid. Young adulthood can be tricky so hopefully you will find some of the answers to your questions through this edition, and always remember to reach out to a person you trust if you ever find things are becoming too difficult.

Denise

# Foreword by Mike Edgar

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Being a young person is not easy by any stretch. For me it's been a lot of changes in a very short amount of time. You go from being in school and being told that the Pythagoras Theorem will be the most important thing you'll ever learn to being thrown out in the wild and having little to no idea what you're doing. Looking back now, had I known what options I really had and had there not been such an intense pressure to go straight to a degree I wasn't sure on, I would've made very different choices. And that's just the tip of the iceberg for things I didn't even know that I didn't know.



I was lucky enough to be able to turn to friends and family, but even they don't know everything, so having spunout there as somewhere I can turn to and either find an article answering my questions or using the live chat to talk to somebody who can help has been a lifesaver for me. That's before we even get to all the opportunities and amazing experiences I've had as a volunteer with spunout.

At the end of the day, life is going to throw us challenges that we're not always prepared for and that's where this book comes in. The book covers everything from education and employment to sexuality and sexual health. The best part being that young people have been involved at every step of the way, contributing directly to the content, or proofreading the articles to make sure they make sense and are as helpful as possible. So, if you're sitting at home panicking about something, take a look here and hopefully it can point you in the right direction or just give you the solution you're looking for. If afterwards you're still looking for help, you can text the number 50808 to get free, anonymous support 24/7 from a trained volunteer.

Our problems are a lot more manageable when we know there's someone in our corner helping out, so don't be afraid to ask for help when it's needed. In the immortal words of High School Musical, we're all in this together.

Mike

# Living with COVID-19

Since publishing the last version of the Survival Guide for Life, many changes have taken place in our world. The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives in ways we could not have imagined. From our health, to education and how we work and socialise, the pandemic has reshaped life in Ireland, even after restrictions have been lifted.

For some of us, we may also have experienced loss due to the pandemic and may be trying to learn to live with grief after the death of a loved one. As we move forward, it is important to recognise how the events of the past three years continue to have an impact on us and to be kind to ourselves during times of transition and uncertainty.

By prioritising our health and well-being, we can embrace the changes that were beneficial to our lives while recognising the difficulties we still may face due to COVID-19.

## Getting vaccinated

Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself against COVID-19. Vaccines help to boost your immunity to the virus, which means they will teach your immune system how to protect you from the virus. This can help to prevent serious illness if you are infected with COVID-19. Getting vaccinated can also help to protect those around you by limiting the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 vaccine is available free of charge. There are also booster doses available to those who have received their first round of vaccinations. If you would like to book your first vaccine or a booster, please visit the HSE online portal at [vaccine.hse.ie](https://vaccine.hse.ie). There you will find all the information you need to get your COVID-19 vaccine.

## Does the COVID-19 vaccine cause any side effects?

Some people who receive the COVID-19 vaccine will experience mild side effects such as pain in the area that the vaccine was given, joint pain, sickness, fever, headaches and tiredness. These usually disappear after

a few days. If you do get side effects after your vaccine, you can report them to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Serious side effects like severe allergic reactions are extremely rare. Your vaccinator will be trained to treat any allergic reactions if they do occur. If you are concerned about any side effects after you get your vaccine, you can contact your GP for advice.

When you get vaccinated, you will be given a booklet with information on side effects of the vaccine you have received.

## **How to protect yourself from COVID-19**

Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself against COVID-19. In addition to this, there are also other things you can do to help protect yourself and those around you from the virus.

You can help stop the spread of COVID-19 by:

- Staying at home if you have any COVID-19 symptoms
- Wearing a face mask in enclosed spaces such as on public transport
- Washing your hands regularly and use hand sanitiser
- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- Disinfecting touched objects and surfaces
- Avoid touching your face

## **Living with grief after COVID-19**

You can experience grief after any significant loss in your life. Losing a loved one in particular is extremely difficult, and can bring up many emotions. Grief can affect people in different ways, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

It can take time to come to terms with the fact that a person is no longer with you. It's important to give yourself the space you need to experience these feelings and remember to reach out to friends and family for support. There are also bereavement services available for anyone struggling with the loss of a loved one or if you just want to talk to someone you don't know personally.

## Understanding the grieving process

You may have heard of the stages of grief that people can go through after the loss of a loved one. Previously, it was thought that people grieving went through these stages one after another, however now we know that everyone grieves in different ways and that you can switch back and forth between emotions or phases as you process your grief. It can be easy to create expectations that you should feel a certain way about your loss or after time has passed. What is important is not expecting to feel a certain way by a certain time, but instead prioritising self-compassion and allowing yourself to grieve at your own pace.

## Talk to someone

Grief is not something that you need to go through alone. Talking about how you're feeling is an important part of processing your emotions and coming to terms with loss. Talk to someone when you are ready about what you're going through, whether that's a friend or family member who knew them or someone who did not. If you do speak to someone who was close to them, bear in mind that they may be grieving too, and make sure they're ready to talk.

There are also a number of services available to support you and give you a space to talk about what you're going through. Going for bereavement counselling can be an option to find a way to cope with your grief. Many counselling services will offer bereavement support.

## Bereavement counselling and support in Ireland

There are a number of support services available to help you at this time and throughout your grief process.

- The Irish Hospice Foundation - [hospicefoundation.ie](http://hospicefoundation.ie)
- Rainbows Ireland for people under 18 - [rainbowsireland.ie](http://rainbowsireland.ie)
- Anam Cara for bereaved parents and siblings - [anamcara.ie](http://anamcara.ie)
- Barnardos Children's Bereavement Service for families & children/ young people under 18- [barnardos.ie/resources/bereavement](http://barnardos.ie/resources/bereavement)

# 50808

50808 is a free 24/7 anonymous text service, providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support during a mental health or personal challenge, and connecting people to resources that can help them into the future.

To talk to a trained volunteer now, free-text **SPUNOUT** to **50808** to begin.

If you are a customer of the 48 or An Post network or cannot get through using the '50808' short code please text HELLO to 0861800280 (standard message rates may apply). Some smaller networks do not support short codes like '50808'.

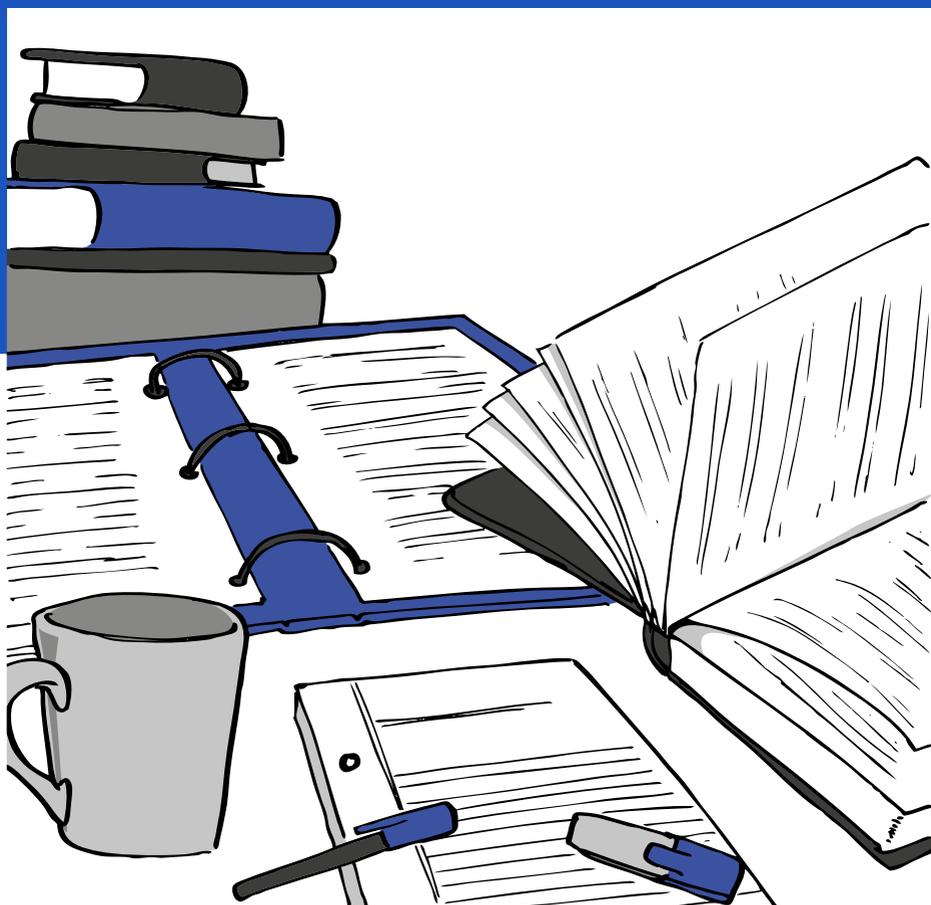


# Chapter 1

# Education

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Dealing with exam stress and deciding what's next for you after school. From courses, to college and student grants; this chapter has got you covered.



Being in school can be enjoyable but can also come with stresses such as homework and exams. Studying for exams may not be much fun, but it can be made a little easier with some thought and planning. With that in mind we've put together some tips that can help.

- **Make a study timetable** - Structure your study and give time to each subject. Even the ones you don't like.
- **Have a clutter free study environment** - Try to study at a desk and keep it free from clutter. Avoid studying on your bed or in other areas you rest and relax.
- **Easily distracted?** - Try downloading an app like selfcontrolapp.com on your internet browser that can block websites like Facebook or Twitter for a certain length of time.
- **Mix it up** - Use different study techniques, and be open to trying new things.
- **Use past exam papers** - Going over past exam papers will help you prepare for the exam and get a feel for what the paper will be like.
- **Plan ahead and start early** - Studying is like a marathon, you have to be in it for the long haul. Leaving everything until the last minute will have you feeling overwhelmed and unable to focus.
- **Reward yourself** - Studying can be tiresome. Treat yourself after a productive study session.
- **Get enough sleep** - Avoid staying up all night cramming before an exam. You'll need all your energy the next day and a lack of sleep will affect your concentration.
- **Talk to someone** - If you feel that your exam stress is overwhelming you, speak to a friend, teacher or lecturer. Don't keep how you are feeling to yourself.
- **Remember that it will all be worth it** - When your motivation has hit an all time low, visualise yourself picking up your exam results and doing well.



## Avoid exam stress

Worries about the future, panic, guilt about not studying more, despair at having messed up - we have all felt these ways from time to time. It doesn't help that during exam season everyone seems to talk about exams non-stop.

Exam stress can be overwhelming. If it all seems to be getting too much, there are plenty of things you can do to keep calm and get perspective.

- **Remember that some stress is normal**, but minimise stress by studying bit by bit all year, not just at exam time. Do weekly reviews of study and exam material.
- **Stress can prevent you from doing your best.** Learn some relaxation techniques, and practise them ahead of the exam, so that the techniques will come easy to you on the day.
- **The power of positive thinking.** Spend time with people who are positive and make you feel good. It's easier said than done, but try to avoid negative thoughts that will only bring you down.
- **Be active.** Spending all your time inside studying can negatively impact your mood and your performance. Go out and do something active. Going for a walk, run, or even some stretching can help.
- **Be realistic.** Take studying seriously and try to do your best, but avoid setting yourself rigid goals like "600 points or I'm not happy". If you

set the standards very high, you're putting yourself under massive pressure. Look at the results you need for what you want to do and aim for this.

- **Take breaks.** Apart from helping you to relax, it's also good for the brain. You might be surprised how good some fresh air or exercise can feel.
- **Eat well,** sleep well and skip using alcohol to relax, as it interferes with sleep and your mood.
- **Try to keep things in perspective.** Your exam results are not a measure of your value as a human being, nor do they measure intelligence or creativity.

You can find more information on looking after your mental health in Chapter 2.

## The night before the exam

- Check your timetable for the correct time and location of your exam.
- Set your alarm before going to bed. Plan how you will get to the exam venue, with plenty of time to get settled.
- After study, switch off your brain to sleep, do something to relax.
- If you have trouble sleeping try natural sleep aids like herbal teas or meditation.
- Get everything you need for your exam ready (stationery, calculator, etc.)

## The day of the exam

- Make sure you have worked out how you will approach the paper: how many questions do you need to answer? How long do you have for each question?
- Eat light balanced meals with slow energy release foods.
- Keep hydrated with water and avoid energy drinks.
- If you are worried about nerves or anxiety, address it before your exam – take a walk or take some time away from everyone before you go into the exam hall.

## During the exam

- Take a deep breath before opening your paper and use the first few minutes to read each question, marking the ones you will attempt.
- If you have questions or concerns about the paper, alert the examiner.
- Keep hydrated – that’s why you brought the water.
- Stick to your time allocation for each question.
- Don’t give up: if you are running into trouble and can’t focus, take a break or start another question.
- Allow time at the end of the exam to review your answers. Key ideas often come to mind when you go back to check your work.
- Avoid leaving the exam early. Make the most of the time you are given as it is relatively a short amount and show the examiner what you know.

## After the exam

- Make sure you have handed in everything you need to submit.
- Take a short study break; get some downtime before tackling the next exam.
- If you are feeling stressed or worried, talk to someone you trust.
- Avoid going over the exam in your head. Instead, it’s time to clear your mind and focus on the next exam.

## Exams are over. What next?

Finishing school is a good time to think about your future. In Leaving Cert year, it’s important to make a decision that’s right for you. You can consider whether you want to go to college, take some time out, get a job or do something totally different.

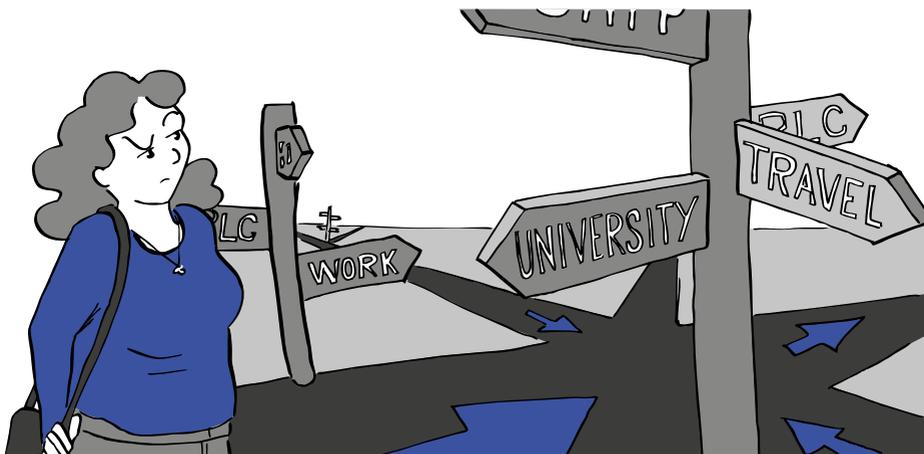
If you’re feeling a little confused about your options and don’t know what to do next, pay a visit to your local Youth Information Centre or ask your guidance counsellor for advice. It is okay if you don’t have an answer right away. To find your local Youth Information Centre visit [crosscareyouthinfo.ie/find-your-local-youth-information-centres/](http://crosscareyouthinfo.ie/find-your-local-youth-information-centres/)

It is also worth thinking about you: your interests, your passions, your skills, your talents and your needs in relation to preparing for a future career.

It is important to take into consideration your personal or family finances. If you would like to go to college away from home you will need to research the cost of student accommodation and living expenses and see if you can afford it. You should see whether you may be entitled to receive a student grant.

PLC (Post Leaving Cert) courses are a good choice for testing out a career you are interested in. PLC qualifications can also be used to help you get a place in university in Ireland and the UK.

If you don't feel ready for continuing your education just now, that's okay, you can always return later as a mature student.



## Tips on choosing the right path for you

It can be hard to know the career choice that's right for you. In reality most people don't know what they'd like to do when they're still in school, and end up trying different jobs before they find something that they enjoy. Many people will change career paths several times in their lives.

Sometimes it's easier to rule out what you don't want to do, than what you would like to do. Take every opportunity to try different jobs (work experience, volunteering or part-time work) and try to find a job that you feel passionate about instead of thinking of it as being just a way to keep money in your pocket.

## **Making the right career choices**

Don't let anyone try to tell you that you won't be able to do the job you're interested in, that you won't get the right exam results or that you aren't good enough. There are always options to get into the career you want — even if it might take a little longer than usual.

If you don't know what you'd like to work in then try to think of what your dream job would be, what you're good at in school, what you love doing and what job opportunities are available in the careers that interest you.

Think about whether you want to go to college or university, take a professional training course or go straight into work.

- Make use of school or university career guidance rooms and research the jobs you're interested in as much as possible. Also talk to the Career Guidance counsellor or teacher.
- If you've decided what job interests you then try to talk to someone who does that job, and ask them if you can do work experience with them.
- Go to the open days of colleges you're interested in attending to hear more details about course content and the college campus.

## **I think I want to go to college**

### **Deciding what to apply for**

Check out college websites to get an idea of what courses interest you. Make sure to check the basic entry requirements for the courses you're interested in, for example, many Irish colleges require that you have results in Maths, Irish and English, as well as the necessary points.

Most colleges/universities have open days, which give you an opportunity to visit the campus. There is usually a tour of the facilities and information about everything they have to offer. You could also consider applying to colleges outside of Ireland or the UK. Different colleges and countries will have different application processes so be sure to look up the relevant details online or talk with a guidance counselor.

## CAO and UCAS

In order to be accepted to most colleges and universities in Ireland and the UK, you need to fill in a CAO form (colleges and universities in Ireland) or a UCAS form (colleges and universities in the UK). Both CAO and UCAS let you apply for full-time courses including degrees, diplomas and certificates.

February 1st is the usual closing date for CAO applications but late applications are usually accepted up until May 1st. There is also a free change of mind option from the beginning of May to the beginning of July. Check the CAO website at [CAO.ie](http://CAO.ie) for the most up to date deadlines.

When filling in your CAO and UCAS applications make sure to put the course you really want to do as first choice, NOT what you think you'll have the results for. Give yourself plenty of time to fill them out, and avoid leaving it to the last minute to avoid any mistakes. Make sure the course codes are in the right place. Remember there is a 'change of mind' form that you can use if you decide you want to apply for different courses. Check out [CAO.ie](http://CAO.ie) and [UCAS.com](http://UCAS.com) for the forms and for more information on filling them out. Your local Youth Information Centre will be more than happy to help you with the application process.

## Access Programmes

The ACCESS route to college is an admissions scheme to help students who may not traditionally go on to third level education. This could be due to your socio-economic background, the history of education in your family, or because of a disability.

There are two schemes available for students through ACCESS, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE). It is possible to apply for both schemes if both are relevant to you.

## HEAR

To apply for HEAR, you must be a school leaver under the age of 23. You must also have completed the Leaving Cert (you can apply while in sixth year, at the same time as filling out the CAO), as you will be using your points to apply for courses.

There are a number of 'eligibility indicators' that a person can meet in order to be eligible for HEAR. You must meet the 'Low Income' indicator plus a combination of two other indicators. Find out more about these combinations of indicators on the HEAR website.

You can apply to go down the HEAR route by filling out your CAO form and indicating on the form that you would like to apply for the HEAR scheme. This form will be part of your CAO application. For more information visit [accesscollege.ie/hear](https://accesscollege.ie/hear)

## DARE

In order to be considered for DARE entry, you must have completed the Leaving Certificate (you can apply while in sixth year, at the same time as filling out the CAO), be aged under 23, and have a disability of some kind (physical or mental). You will need to provide evidence of your disability with your DARE application.

You can apply for DARE at the same time as you are applying for the CAO. Make sure you indicate on your application that you would like to be considered for DARE. When filling out the CAO, you will need to disclose your disability or learning difficulty and fill out a form called the Supplementary Information Form. You can find more information about the Supplementary Information Form on the DARE website.

To learn more about DARE visit [accesscollege.ie/dare](https://accesscollege.ie/dare)

## School isn't for me

If you are thinking of leaving school, it is a good idea to talk to a guidance counsellor, a family member or friend to make sure you are leaving for the right reasons. Make a plan so you are moving on to something productive and to where you want to be. It might be a good idea to think about where you see yourself in five years time – what will help you get there? What is the path for you?

A life of academia isn't for everyone but it's important to know that there are other options. If you're aged between 15 and 20 and have left school early, you can train with YouthReach. The training is full-time (you get an allowance) and covers work experience, skills and general education. PLC courses focus more on continuous assessment and practical work experience, while apprenticeships can be a good option for people who want to train on the job - learn more about apprenticeships in chapter 7. If you are thinking of joining the workforce straight away, check out our Employment chapter for more information on your work rights. Some people might like to work abroad. If this is you, visit our Independence chapter for more information on travel.

## PLC courses

PLC stands for Post Leaving Certificate course. PLCs are suitable for anyone that has left secondary school and wants to develop practical, technical or IT and digital skills. The courses tend to be targeted towards specific jobs, and can be useful if you are looking to start work in a specific field soon after you finish the Leaving Cert. The courses are usually full-time, and are for one to two years. Some PLC courses will qualify you to go on to further education at third level. If you have not done your Leaving Cert, but have relevant work experience, you may still be eligible for a PLC. Ask to meet with the course co-ordinator and then explain your circumstances.

### Why would I do a PLC course?

The skills that you learn on a PLC course are known as transferable skills. This means that the skills learned on any PLC course will be useful in any line of work. PLCs offer a chance to get work experience, and can help you secure a job that requires work experience.

### How to apply

You can find more information about PLC courses on [qualifax.ie](http://qualifax.ie) and [fetchcourses.ie](http://fetchcourses.ie). Apply directly to the school, college or adult education centre offering the course. You may be called for an interview to discuss the course and to find out more about it.



## Getting the course you want

*“I was so excited about starting college and was really surprised when I found it so overwhelming. It all seemed like a little too much. I stuck with it for a few weeks and soon realised that everyone was feeling the exact same way I was and just no one had the courage to admit it. We all just assumed that everyone else was on top of everything, and they had already made friends. Once I accepted that I wouldn’t be on top of everything all the time, and made the effort to talk to people first, I embarked on one of the best adventures of my life.” - Mairéad*

Getting an offer on a college course, Post Leaving Cert course, or apprenticeship is an amazing feeling. After all the stress and nerves, you’ve got a place and can start this next exciting new chapter of your life.

## Getting ready to go

Prepare everything as much as possible before you leave home. Make sure you have a plan for how you will manage money throughout the year, somewhere to live, and an idea of what you’re supposed to be doing in your chosen course. It is important to be aware that there is currently a housing shortage in Ireland and because of this, securing

a place to live may be difficult and expensive. For more information on finding student accommodation visit [spunout.ie/studentaccomodation](http://spunout.ie/studentaccomodation).

Once you have accepted a place in university or college, re-read all the information on accommodation, financial support and student services. If you are unsure of anything, visit the university or college website where you will find further information and contact details of the university support services.

If you know anyone else that's studying at the same place or is planning to go there, then pick their brains for useful information. Try to find out about the best accommodation and public transport options, or if you need a car.

## How do I apply for a student grant?

There are two types of grants: a student maintenance grant and a student fees grant. The opening date for student grant applications is usually in the first week of April the year that you are attending college. As there are so many applications to process, it's recommended that you apply as soon as possible after the opening date. Typically, your application should be in by the first week of July at the very latest. Be sure to look up the exact due dates for the year that you are applying for online at [SUSI.ie](http://SUSI.ie).

### Student maintenance grant

The undergraduate student grants are divided into maintenance grants and fee grants. The amount received depends on your means/parents' income.

You have to fill in a means test form to apply for a grant. This checks your income or the income of your parents in order to decide if you get a grant and if so, how much money you get. If you work (legally and paying tax) during the summer or while studying, this income will also be counted when you apply for a grant. You cannot get a maintenance grant if you are on a Back to Education Allowance or a VTOS allowance.

A maintenance grant is a contribution towards a student's living costs. Generally, if you qualify for a maintenance grant, you qualify for the fees grant.

## Qualifying for a student maintenance grant

To qualify for a maintenance grant you must:

- Be attending an approved course in an approved institution.
- Be applying for a full time course and are a resident of Ireland.
- Be attending an approved course in an approved institution.
- Meet certain criteria around nationality and immigration status.
- Have been living in Ireland, the EU, EEA, or Switzerland for the past three of five years to qualify for a maintenance grant.

You are not eligible for a grant if you already have a degree, are studying for a degree at the moment or have completed more than the first year of a degree.

## How to apply

- You can apply online at [SUSI.ie](https://www.susi.ie).
- You will need your PPS number and your CAO number to register.
- You will need the gross income of your earnings/your parents/cohabitants, etc., where applicable.
- A personalised list of supporting documentation will be requested by SUSI once you've applied. (Remember to apply in advance as some forms will take time to request and process, for example, your parents' P60s etc).

Bear in mind that there can be significant delays in processing maintenance grants. Therefore, you might have to budget carefully before your grant money comes in, as it could be well into the first semester before you receive any money. Even a full grant will not be enough to help you survive financially at college.

## Fee grant

There is also a grant available to cover your college fees. This is means tested, and follows a lot of the same conditions as the maintenance grant. If you qualify for a maintenance grant, you will also qualify for a fees grant.

The fees grants can cover: all or part of the student contribution, costs of essential field trips, and all or part of a student's tuition fees.

If you live in Ireland, but study in Northern Ireland or Britain, then you can apply for a grant at home.

## Avoid delays in getting your grant

- Make sure you fill in the grant application form correctly and without leaving empty spaces. If you have any questions, go to [SUSI.ie](https://www.susi.ie).
- Send in your grant application on time. Sending in a late application will cause delays. Apply for the grant when you're waiting for a CAO or UCAS offer.
- You are going to have to show documents about your parents' income, so leave plenty of time for getting these.

## Student Assistance Fund

The Student Assistance Fund can help students who are struggling to cover the costs of things that are required in order for them to be able to attend college, pay necessary daily, weekly or monthly expenses, or participate in their course.

This can include:

- Books and class materials.
- Rent, heating and lighting bills.
- Food.
- Medical expenses, i.e. doctor or dental visits.

In order to be eligible to apply for student assistance, you must be registered on a full-time undergraduate or postgraduate course of not less than one year's duration in a participating college, or on a part-time course leading to a higher education award at level 6-10.

For more information on the Student Assistance Fund visit the HEA website or speak to the student services at your college.

## Stuff to remember

- If your grant is delayed, you might be able to get a grant advance from your bank. This is an interest free loan for up to nine months, so long as you can prove that you'll eventually get a grant.
- The grant isn't usually paid on repeat years unless you can prove that illness caused you to repeat.
- The grant isn't enough money to live on. You're going to have to use savings from a summer job, a part-time job, support from family or bank loans to get through college.

Find more information on education and training at [spunout.ie/Education](https://spunout.ie/Education)

## Support Services

- Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) - Find out information on, and apply for student grants - [susi.ie](https://susi.ie)
- [Studentfinance.ie](https://studentfinance.ie) - This website has information on what you are financially entitled to as a student in Ireland.
- CAO - Apply for third level courses in Ireland on the CAO website - [cao.ie](https://cao.ie)
- UCAS - Find out about college application routes for studying in the UK - [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)
- USI is the national Students' Union of Ireland - [usi.ie](https://usi.ie)
- ISSU is the Irish Second Level Students Union - [issu.ie](https://issu.ie)
- Further Education & Training Course Hub - [fetchcourses.ie](https://fetchcourses.ie)

# Chapter Summary

- ✓ Choosing what you want to do after school can be confusing and overwhelming. But don't worry you will get there, even if it doesn't feel like it now.
- ✓ There are loads of options if you want to continue your education after school. You could attend a PLC course, do an apprenticeship, or go to college.
- ✓ If you wish to go to college you need to fill out a CAO form for colleges in Republic of Ireland or a UCAS form for universities in the UK. You could also consider applying to colleges in other countries.
- ✓ If you decide to stay in education you could be eligible to receive a student grant. The student grant is means tested on your parents' income. In order to check if you are eligible, visit [www.susi.ie](http://www.susi.ie)

## Chapter 2

# Mental Health

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Keeping your head healthy. Tips for looking after your mind, coping with anxiety and stress, depression, suicide, self-harm and knowing where to turn to for help.



# Mental Health

When we think of mental health we often think of illnesses like depression or schizophrenia. However, these are mental health problems, and often get confused with the term mental health. Mental health refers to the general state of your mind; so you can have positive mental health, negative mental health, or often somewhere in between, even if you are generally coping well. Having positive mental health refers to having an overall positive sense of emotional and mental wellbeing. Positive mental health is really about how we think and feel about ourselves, others, our life, and how we cope with life's challenges and everyday demands.

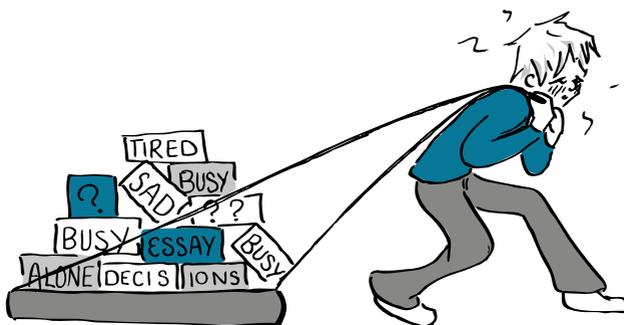
A major part of our mental health and wellbeing is being able to deal with challenges or disappointments in life. Some days we wake up and feel content with life. We feel confident and relaxed about ourselves and look forward to things we enjoy. Other days we might wake up feeling terrible, and find it difficult to even leave bed. Having both good days and bad days is perfectly normal. But it's how we deal with both the good and, especially, the bad times that can affect how we feel.

Just like our physical health, our mental health can become unwell too. One in four people will experience mental health difficulties at some stage in their life. Our mental health is so important and it is vital that we look after it, because when we don't, it can have drastic consequences. But don't worry, just like our physical health there are loads of things we can do to mind our mental health.

## Dealing with anxiety and stress

*"I sometimes get anxiety and always considered constant worrying and heart-racing to be normal. I spoke to some friends about my feelings after a while and I was totally wrong! Now, almost two years later, I realise that I have to talk about how I'm feeling. Bottling things up just adds to misery, and sometimes talking things out helps you realise things that you wouldn't otherwise." - Aine*

Often when we experience too much stress, our mental health can be badly affected. Managing stress is a big part of staying mentally well.



You can control some things that cause stress, but it's also important to remember that some low levels of stress are a natural part of life.

Stress can be healthy in small doses and is always going to be a part of your life. For instance, a job interview or a big match will all cause some natural stress. We've all been stressed by something in our lives. This is normal and stress can help us get motivated for dealing with problems and pressure. There's nothing like a bit of stress to help you finish that assignment that you've put off for weeks.

But when stress gets out of hand, it can become a problem. Most of us have been anxious, and experienced that feeling of butterflies in the stomach, of racing thoughts, not being able to concentrate, sweaty hands and of not being able to relax. It's normal to feel stressed and anxious sometimes, but it's not good for you to feel worried all the time or to feel that anxiety is taking over your life.

## I feel stressed

If you think you're suffering from too much stress or anxiety, you may be experiencing some of these symptoms:

- You might feel physically ill with headaches, indigestion, sweaty hands, dizziness and feeling faint.
- You might feel like smoking or drinking more, eating too much or not eating enough.
- You might also feel run down, tired, have problems concentrating or problems sleeping at night.
- You might feel worried all the time or feel cut off from reality.

## Three ways to manage your stress

Sit down and make a list of all the things that are bothering you. Divide them up into things you can do something about (like homework or assignments) and the things you can't control (like parents or friends fighting).

### 1. Things you can do something about

Decide which is the most important or urgent and tackle that first. Then move onto the others in turn. Remember, it's not the end of the world if you don't meet a deadline or get a bit behind in your 'to do' list.

### 2. Things you can't control

Remember no matter what the question or the problem, there's always someone that can help. Have a talk about it with someone you trust. Maybe they will be able to offer you advice or direct you to a support service. If they can't, at least you'll have got it off your chest.

### 3. Relaxation

Relaxation is important but can be extremely difficult when you're stressed, especially when you have a lot of thoughts racing around your mind. It's useful to learn a "relaxation response" to calm you down when you are stressed. Start by finding a quiet place where you can lie down. Focus on getting comfortable, slowing down your breathing, letting all your muscles relax, and thinking about being in a really calm place like lying on a beach in the sun with no worries, or taking a long soak in the bath.

This imaginary calm place is your mental refuge. Imagine lots of details - the sounds, the smells, the sensations, etc. Practice 'going there' in your mind for just a few seconds every day. It might be difficult at first but once you get the hang of it, it can really help.

# Feeling overwhelmed at making a decision?

One of the downsides of anxiety and stress is that it can often make you feel overwhelmed and leave you unsure of what to do. If you're feeling confused or overwhelmed about your life, check out our tips and see which work for you. There is a solution out there somewhere!

- **Hiding from a problem or ignoring it, simply doesn't work.** You will have to face the problem eventually, so putting off dealing with it will just make it worse in the long run. Instead, use this energy to get working on the problem.
- **Try to be as calm and relaxed as possible** when making your decision. It can be difficult to make a good decision if you are feeling overwhelmed. It's always okay to take a little time and not rush into a decision until you can think clearly.
- **Ask someone.** Reaching out is often the best way to work through a problem. Whether you talk to a friend or a family member, talking to others can give you a different perspective.
- **Try to break the problem down** into smaller pieces. You don't have to solve everything at once, take it bit by bit.
- **Check in with your gut instinct.** Relaxation techniques like meditation, a nice walk, or some soothing music may help you chill out and tune in with your inner wisdom.
- **Take a break.** Distract yourself with a walk, a movie or a visit to a friend.

## Building self-confidence

Self-confidence means feeling good about yourself, believing in your abilities and believing in your worth and value as a person. It doesn't mean boasting about how good you are at something. It's important that you believe in yourself rather than relying on impressing others.

People can struggle with self-confidence when they don't feel like they're good enough at something, when they focus on the negatives in their lives too much, if they're afraid to give their opinion or don't feel confident about how they look. Most people will deal with some of these

issues at some stage in their lives but it's important to remember that there are ways to improve your confidence.

## Try these confidence boosters:

- **Having confidence is about thinking positively.** You need to replace negative feelings about yourself with a positive belief in who you are and what you can do.
- **Think of at least one good thing about yourself** that other people like or that makes you feel good. It could be something like being trustworthy, having a good sense of humour or something you're good at in school or work.
- **Plan something positive every day**, something that you can look forward to and that gives you a sense of achievement. It could be going for a walk, doing art, cleaning your home, or helping another person.
- **Talk** - share your feelings with others. Try to talk things through with friends or family.
- **Counselling can help a lot** in improving confidence. It can help you to recognise your good qualities and it gives you an opportunity to talk about any problems you have.
- **Being critical of others (slagging them off or bitching) because you feel insecure about yourself won't help.** If you can be nice to other people, then it's more likely that people will think better of you and respect you more.
- **Remember, you have to WANT to improve your confidence.** Feeling better about you isn't going to happen overnight. Sometimes you won't even realise that your confidence is improving until you realise you're doing something that would have terrified you before!

# Body image

“I’m too short”, “I’m too skinny”, “I wish my legs were longer” - Do any of these sound familiar? Everyone has times that they wish that they could change the way they look.

Body image is how you feel about yourself when you look in the mirror or think about yourself in your mind. It also includes the way we think other people see us. People usually either have a positive body image, when they feel good about themselves, or a negative body image, when they feel less positive about the way they look or feel. Body image is closely linked to our self esteem and how we feel about ourselves.

Our body image can be affected by our constantly seeing unrealistic images on social media, in magazines, on TV and advertising. Companies make billions of euro each year by making us feel insecure about our bodies and how we look. It’s their job to make us feel insecure, otherwise they’d be out of a job. So try and remember this the next time you see the latest fad diet or beauty cream advertised on Instagram.

However, this can be easier said than done, and many people have a poor body image or low self esteem. This might cause you to worry about how you look or what size or shape you are, but we all come in different shapes and sizes and even models and actors are so heavily airbrushed that they can’t ever look like they do online or on TV.

If you are worried about your body image and feel like it’s really getting you down, it’s important to talk to a friend, family member, or someone you trust. You can also check out [Bodywhys.ie](http://Bodywhys.ie) for more information about maintaining a healthy body image.

## What is body positivity?

Body positivity is a movement encouraging people to accept that bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and that everyone should feel valued and accepted regardless of their size. Body positivity is also about recognising that a person’s size is not an indicator of their health, and it is wrong to make assumptions about someone’s lifestyle based on their body or weight.

It is about having a positive body image, but it is also about accepting other people and fighting discrimination based on the way someone looks.

## Tips for achieving a healthy body image:

- **Try not to worry about what others think.** This can stop you from feeling confident and happy with yourself and your body.
- **Try aiming for a healthy body** rather than a slimmer figure.
- **Try not to compare yourself to others.**
- **Remember that all bodies are naturally different** sizes and shapes.
- **Focus on what you do like about your body** and remind yourself of two or three positive things each day.
- **Eating well and regular exercise**, without guilt or obsession, will help you feel good about yourself.
- **Avoid diets or products that promise quick weight loss**, as they don't work in the long-term and are bad for your health.

## Understanding and recognising eating disorders

Our relationship with food is pretty important: we need it to survive and thrive on a daily basis. Any changes in our eating habits can have a pretty big impact on our lives and that's why eating disorders are something we should be aware of.

An eating disorder is a health condition that causes a serious and potentially life-threatening change in your normal eating habits. What many people may not realise is that eating disorders aren't necessarily about food - they're often a sign of underlying worries and emotional stress.

Three common eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia and Binge Eating Disorder.

Anyone can be affected by eating disorders, and they can battle with an eating disorder at any stage in their lives. There's no single reason for eating disorders. They usually develop over time in reaction to a range

of factors such as life changes, bullying, teasing about your body, loss, stress or depression. Eating disorders can also be linked with difficult experiences from the past that have not been resolved.

Here are some questions to ask yourself about some of your habits. If you find yourself demonstrating even one of these signs, you could have an eating disorder:

- **Do you feel guilty or ashamed about eating?** Are you frightened of putting on weight or do you check your weight all the time?
- **Do you worry all the time** about your weight or body shape or about what you're eating?
- **Do you exercise all the time** to work off what you eat?
- **Do you think about food all the time?**
- **Are you very critical of yourself?** Do you think that you could do things better such as losing more weight or exercising more?
- **Do you eat when you feel depressed** or down about yourself?

Always remember that people can and do recover from eating disorders. There is help out there. If you have an eating disorder or think you may be developing a problem, you can speak to your GP about getting help. You can also contact Bodywhys for more information and support at [Bodywhys.ie](http://Bodywhys.ie)

## What is exercise addiction?

Exercise addiction means that you are exercising too much, too intensely or for too long. You may find that the need to exercise is taking control of your life or you make yourself exercise even if you're injured or sick. Exercise should be fun, not a routine that you are unable to break out of.

You could be over-exercising in this way with the goal of keeping your weight, muscles or body shape under control. Exercise addiction can be linked to anorexia. Too much exercise can also cause injuries such as stress fractures, damage to bones or joints, torn muscles, ligaments and tendons. Your immune system can also be affected, meaning that it's easier for you to get sick.

## How do I know if I'm addicted to exercising?

You might feel like you have to exercise and that you can't miss out on your exercise routine.

- Maybe you exercise even when you're injured, sick or very tired.
- You might feel guilty, depressed or anxious when you're not able to exercise.
- You might become isolated or withdrawn from friends or family.
- You might worry that your work, study or social life gets in the way of exercise.
- Maybe friends or family are worried that you exercise too much.

If you're worried that your exercise routine is unhealthy, then talk to a doctor or qualified trainer about planning a safe and healthy exercise routine for you. You can also contact Bodywhys by calling 1890 200 444.

## Looking after your mental health

### I'm sad all the time, could I be depressed?

Most people will go through a difficult time at some stage, but there's loads of things that you can do to cope and help manage hard times. However, there is a difference between feeling down and having depression. We all have those days where we feel like we can't cope, but it is when these days become more regular and negatively impact on your life that you may be experiencing depression.

Depression is a serious medical condition that affects your behaviour, your thinking, your emotions and physical health over time. While feeling down only lasts for a short while, depression lasts much longer. Depression is different for everyone, but many people report feeling an emptiness or an overwhelming sadness that just won't go away. You might feel like avoiding social situations such as meeting up with friends, and want to spend a lot of time in your room away from other people.

There are a lot of signs of depression and some of those include:

- **Feeling sad or down** a lot of the time, even when there's no reason.
- **A lack of feeling or emotion.** You don't feel anything and have lost the ability to feel happy.
- **Feeling exhausted** and lacking energy all the time.
- **The things that used to give you enjoyment** or make you happy leave you feeling numb or uninterested.
- **Withdrawal** from friends and family.
- **Lack of concentration.**
- **Putting on or losing** a lot of weight.
- **Disturbed sleep patterns.** You might not be able to fall asleep or you can't get up in the morning.

There are a lot of different causes of depression, including things like stress from being bullied, exams, working too hard at school or college, or a stressful family life. Some people use alcohol or drugs as a way to cope with depression, but this will only make a low mood much worse.

Whatever the reason for depression, remember that it's never your fault. Depression is a common health problem the same as high blood pressure, diabetes or a heart condition, and just like these, it can be managed. If you think you might have depression, the first thing to do is talk to someone. Ignoring how you feel or hoping it goes away on its own won't help. It can help to learn more about how you're feeling.

Go onto [spunout.ie/MentalHealth](https://spunout.ie/MentalHealth) to read more about anxiety and depression.

If you're feeling depressed, there are different types of treatment available. However you will need to talk to a doctor to find out what treatment is best for you. Depression is also one of the main reasons that many people visit their GP, so don't be afraid to ask them for support.



## Ten tips for looking after your mental health

1. **Eat well** - Looking after your physical health also benefits your mental health. What you put into your body has a huge impact on your mood and how you feel. Eating a lot of sugary or processed foods can make you tired or anxious. Eating nutrient dense foods such as fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and healthy fats and proteins, like fish, will have a positive influence on your mood and energy. Always start the day off with breakfast, avoid skipping meals, and drink loads of water.
2. **Get enough sleep** - Sleep is so important and not getting enough of it can negatively affect your mood, your decision making skills, and concentration levels at school or at work. When you feel anxious or down, your sleep is often the first thing that is affected. To ensure a good night's sleep, try to do something calming before bed like having a hot bath or listening to relaxing music. Avoid looking at your phone or another screen right before bed as well.
3. **Limit your intake of caffeine, alcohol and other drugs** - Caffeine is a stimulant which might make you feel more alert in the short term but can increase anxiety if you drink too much of it. Many people use

alcohol as a way to relax when they are stressed, but it can make your mood much worse as it is a depressant. Taking drugs such as cannabis can also increase your risk of experiencing a mental illness. (You can read more about the effect of alcohol and drugs on the body in chapter 4.)

4. **Exercise regularly** - Exercise is a great way of boosting your mood even if it feels like the last thing you want to do. Exercise allows your body the chance to release some of the anxiety and stress that has built up, and releases endorphins in the brain which makes you feel good. Exercise doesn't have to mean joining a fancy gym, instead try building simple body movement into your day. Go for a walk or try some simple stretches. You'll be surprised how good you feel afterwards.
5. **Spend time with people who make you feel good** - This can be friends or family, whoever you feel comfortable and confident around, and who love you for being you.
6. **Laugh a little each day** - There's nothing like having a good laugh to make you feel better. Get together with friends and watch your favourite film, or spend time on YouTube looking at silly videos.
7. **Listen to music** - Music has a magical way of being able to change our mood. Stick to upbeat music that makes you feel good, and stay away from that sad song that always makes you cry.
8. **Talk to someone** - This can be anyone; friends, family, a sports coach, youth worker, teacher, health professional. Anybody! It might sound corny but it's really true when they say that a problem shared is a problem halved. Talking to someone about the things that are worrying you can really help you offload any stress or anxiety you might have.
9. **Remember that it's okay to have a good cry** - Crying is often seen as something negative, but science tells us it's actually a good thing. When we cry our body releases some of the chemicals which build up in our body when we're stressed, making us feel better.
10. **Relax! Take a break** - Feeling stressed or anxious about something? Take a break and give yourself a chance to relax. Play your favourite video game, go for a walk, catch up with friends, read a book. Whatever it is, take a break from what you're doing and try something different for a while.

# How do I even talk about my mental health?

*“I always thought that people who went to counselling had to have really big problems so I felt a little silly making the appointment. I soon realised that you don’t have to know what the problem is or how to solve it nor does it have to be something life changing. All I had to do is admit that there was something wrong. We soon got to the bottom of it, and within no time I had a better understanding of why I was feeling the way I was. I was delighted I went, and it gave me the confidence to go in the future if I needed to. I also realised that talking to someone can often prevent a small problem from becoming a big one too, and that’s just as important.” - Éadaoin*

There has been stigma attached to talking about mental health, but this is slowly changing and people are realising that it’s ok to talk about your feelings, and what’s going on in your head. Experiencing mental health difficulties is different for everyone, and there’s no magic cure. But one thing the experts do all agree on is that talking about it helps.

If you are going through a tough time, you may be hoping that you snap out of it or that it’s just a phase you’re going through.

First of all, talking about what’s going on for you is really a good way of helping you work through your emotions. You don’t have to try to manage everything by yourself; there are people willing to help you get through any situation, no matter how big or how small it may be.

If you’re used to bottling up your feelings and dealing with things yourself, then talking about stuff to someone else may feel a little strange.

Although everyone agrees that talking about your mental health is good, no one seems to acknowledge how tough it can be to know what to say. With this in mind, we’ve put together some tips to help you along.

*“The counsellor explained that there are countless men my age who are going through the same thing, but that nobody talks about it. Knowing that I wasn’t alone and that I wasn’t the first to go through this did give me hope. It now seems ridiculous that I thought nobody else felt like I did, but I had never heard any of my friends describe feeling how I had felt. Depression was something for artists and musicians and people being interviewed on The Late Late Show; it was for “other” people, not me. But it was me, I have depression too.”*  
- Shane

## Asking for help

### Step one: Talk to someone

Talking about your mental health is important but that doesn’t mean you have to shout your deepest thoughts from the rooftops to just anyone.

Deciding who to talk to is the first step. You’ll know who you will feel most comfortable speaking to. If you don’t have anyone close you can talk to like a family member or friend, have a think about who you could go to. Is there a teacher at school, a youth worker, or a sports coach that you would feel comfortable talking to? Would you feel more comfortable speaking to a health professional like your college counsellor or GP first? Or someone who doesn’t know you, like at a support service?

Find a time and place where you know that you won’t be interrupted and can take your time to explain how you have been feeling.

If you are nervous about getting tongue tied or forgetting something, write down a few points on a piece of paper to keep you right.

You may not feel able to put together the exact words on how you feel. Instead explain the emotions you’ve been feeling. There’s no right or wrong answer, just be honest. If you’ve been feeling angry, sad or frustrated - say exactly that.



Be aware that the person might not know that much about mental health so it might help to go onto [spunout.ie](http://spunout.ie) and print off some of the mental health factsheets for them to read so they can understand a little more.

Actually saying what's wrong and sharing it with someone else can put a whole new perspective on things. The person you talk to might also suggest options that you had not thought of before.

If you don't receive the reaction you were hoping for try not to get upset. It might take a while for them to understand fully what you are saying, so give them some time. They might have a lot of questions, and you can try to answer these yourself or direct them towards a resource online where they can learn more about what you're going through.

If you work up the courage to talk to someone and they are unable to help or don't help you, then try again and keep trying until you get the support you deserve. It might help to talk to a support organisation like Samaritans who also have phone, text and email support (see the support services at the end of this chapter for their phone number).

## **Step two: Talk to your GP**

The next step is to make an appointment to visit your GP. It might feel awkward talking about your mental health if you're not used to talking about it. Your GP is used to people coming to them with all sorts of issues and will have met with someone with a similar problem a million times before.

Ask a friend or family member to go with you if that would make it easier. It can help to write down what you want to share with the GP ahead of time and bring the list with you. Remember to ask any questions that you may have and ask your doctor to explain anything you might not understand.

Your GP may refer you onto other services for further support, or ask you to come back and see them again. For anyone over 18 with a medical card there is now a free counselling service which your GP can refer you to.

If you cannot afford to access your GP, check out some of the free or low cost support organisations around the country that can help. Your local youth drop-in centre may have more information about what is available or you can check out spunout's database of support organisations at [spunout.ie/Help](https://spunout.ie/Help)

## **Step three: Talk to your family, if you have not already done so**

You may not feel like telling your family about how you've been feeling, but having them there to support you can really help. You might be afraid to tell them what you've been going through because you think they won't understand, but this isn't always the case.

It might help to have someone with you for support when you talk to them, and to print them off some information about mental health to help them understand. Check out [spunout.ie/MentalHealth](https://spunout.ie/MentalHealth) for more information.

If your family aren't a safe space for you to talk, there are always people who care and who are there to listen to you, whether that's a friend, teacher, or youth worker.

## **How do I help a friend going through a tough time?**

When a friend or family member is experiencing a mental health difficulty it can be hard to know what to do. They may not be acting like themselves and might try to push you away. Despite your best attempts, they may not be ready to open up about what's going on for them, so it's important to be patient and sympathetic.

Talk to someone you trust (family member, school counsellor, doctor or support organisation) and share any worries or feelings with them. Remember that no matter what the question or the problem, there is always someone that can help.

## There are a few things you can do to help

- **Encourage your friend to seek help**, if they have not already done so, by going to their GP or by talking to a teacher or someone they trust. If they are already seeing someone, encourage them to keep appointments and be there for them if they want to talk. It might help if you go to their first appointment with them, as waiting rooms can be lonely places.
- If your friend is unwilling to seek help, and you are worried they might be in danger of hurting themselves, it is important that you let them know that you will have to speak to someone who can help. This may be difficult and your friend may be upset with you at first, but ultimately your friend's health and safety is more important.
- **Be open to different forms of communication**. It may be tough for your friend to express themselves face to face, so being open to instant messages, texts or DMs helps to keep the lines of communication open and your support solid.
- **Remind them that everyone goes through tough times and that it's not a sign of weakness or any sort of personal flaw**. Avoid criticising or complaining that your friend is lazy or isn't making an effort. Telling them to 'snap out of it' or 'pull themselves together' isn't helpful. Something like depression is NOT treated by pulling yourself together, getting on with it or ignoring the problem. You wouldn't tell someone with cancer to 'snap out of it', and depression is no different.
- **Remind your friend that you are there for them no matter what**. Try to avoid giving them too much advice, and instead listen to what they have to say in a non-judgemental way. If they are drinking a lot of alcohol or taking drugs, try to encourage them to stop as this will only exaggerate their moods and make them feel worse, turning bad moods into something much darker.
- **Your friend is still the same person**, and hanging out together and doing the things you've always done will help them realise that you still are there for them no matter what they're going through.
- **Look after yourself**. It's important that in trying to support your friend that you don't forget about looking after yourself. If you feel you are getting stressed or anxious it's important that you too have someone you can talk things over with.

## Being a good listener

Sometimes, all your friend might need is for you to listen to them. These tips from the Samaritans can help you be a good listener for your friend.

- **Ask open questions.** Instead of asking questions which only require a yes or no answer, try and ask open questions. These are the How?, What?, Where?, Who?, and Why? questions. For example instead of saying ‘has this been going on a long time?’ ask ‘how long has this been going on?’
- **Give words of encouragement.** Remember to give words of encouragement to the person as they tell their story.
- **Summarising.** This helps to show the person that you’ve been listening and that you’ve understood what has been said. Summarise what they’ve said and say it back to them. A summary helps to show the individual that you have listened and understood their circumstances and their feelings.
- **Reflecting.** If someone says, ‘So it’s been really difficult recently,’ you can keep the conversation going simply by repeating a word they used in their sentence, such as ‘difficult’. Repeating back a word or phrase encourages the individual to carry on and expand.
- **Clarifying.** We all tend to gloss over important or difficult things without thinking. If this happens saying something as simple as ‘tell me more about that’ can not only clarify the point for you, but for them as well. Sometimes someone may gloss over an important point. By exploring these areas further you can help them clarify these points for themselves.
- **Reacting.** You don’t have to be completely neutral. If whoever you’re talking to has been having a dreadful time, some empathy and understanding is vital. Simply acknowledging this is important. It’s okay to say something like, ‘you’ve had an awful time.’ You need to show that you have understood the situation by reacting to it – ‘That sounds like it is very difficult.’

# Self-harm

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone deliberately hurts, cuts or injures themselves. For some people, self-harm is a way of coping with difficult or overwhelming feelings.

## Why people self-harm

Many people self-harm as a coping mechanism to deal with intense or difficult emotions. You might not know why you or someone else self-harms but that's ok. You can work with a mental health professional like a counsellor who can help you figure that out.

## Some of the reasons people give for self-harming

- **To relieve tension and anger.** It might also be a way to let out feelings and to deal with sadness, stress, self-hatred or depression. Many people self-harm as a coping mechanism to deal with intense and difficult emotions. These feelings are often pushed down and eventually are expressed through causing physical pain.
- **To cope with physical pain** rather than emotional pain.
- **To relieve anxiety and tension** and to help calm them down when they are distressed.
- **Not being able to express your feelings** by crying, or as a way of communicating distress to yourself or others when you don't have the right words.
- **Self-harm may help you deal** with past trauma, such as sexual assault, rape or abuse. You may feel happy with your current life now, but feel the need to self-harm when you think about past traumas.
- **To deal with anger.** Some people are very uncomfortable expressing anger outwardly. So they turn this anger on themselves and self-harm instead.
- **Hating yourself** and hurting your body in punishment.

## Getting help for self-harm

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide or self-harm, you should immediately contact your local doctor or go to the A&E department of the nearest hospital. You can google the location of your nearest hospital or look at the HSE website.

If you self-harm it's very important that you seek help and support. It might seem that nobody understands what you're going through or that you are alone, but remember there IS help available. You can also attend a service like Pieta House that provides free support to anyone who self-harms or is suicidal. They have centres all around the country and work specifically with people who self-harm so they will completely understand whatever you tell them.



## Suicide

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide or self-harm, you should immediately contact your local doctor or go to the A&E department of the nearest hospital.

### I feel suicidal

If you are feeling suicidal then it's important that you talk to someone about how you are feeling immediately. Telling someone might be scary, and you might be afraid of their reaction, but it means that you won't have to deal with things on your own any more. Your family and friends would want to know how you are feeling, just as you would if any of them were in distress.

If the person you tell doesn't understand then it's important to speak to someone else.

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide or self-harm, you should immediately contact your local doctor or go to the A&E department of the nearest hospital. The doctors and hospitals in your area can be found with a Google search or on the HSE website at [hse.ie/eng/services/maps](https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/maps)

## Feeling overwhelmed and want to talk to someone?

- Get anonymous support 24/7 with our text message support service
- Connect with a trained volunteer who will listen to you, and help you to move forward feeling better
- Free-text **SPUNOUT** to **50808** to begin
- Find out more about our text message support service

*If you are a customer of the 48 or An Post network or cannot get through using the '50808' short code please text HELLO to 0861800280 (standard message rates may apply). Some smaller networks do not support short codes like '50808'.*

## Creating a safety plan for when suicidal

A safety plan is a plan for someone to use if they are feeling suicidal to remind themselves of their reasons to live, remain safe and to help them cope when they feel like their safety is at risk. It is often a tool used in support services.

A person will fill out their personal safety plan when they are in a less risky headspace, answering questions around topics such as family and friends that can support them, how to make a safe space if they are feeling suicidal and ways they can help themselves if they are having suicidal thoughts. If you create a safety plan it is a good idea to then go through it with a GP or mental health professional who can ensure it is the best plan of action for you.

## Seven steps of a safety plan

- **Step 1: Warning signs** - Your first step in creating your safety plan is to write down a list of your warning signs. Your warning signs are signals to yourself that you are potentially heading towards a low place.
- **Step 2: Reasons to live** - Step two is writing down a paragraph that focuses on some of your reasons to live. When you are feeling suicidal it is easy to lose sight of all the possible wonderful things in your life that make you happy and the people around you that love you.

- **Step 3: Making my space safe** - If you are feeling suicidal, it is important to get yourself to a safe space where you do not have access to things that could use to harm yourself. For step three, write a list of places you need to avoid or things you need to remove yourself from in order to keep you safe when feeling suicidal.
- **Step 4: Things I can do by myself** - Create a list of things that you can do that will help distract yourself from suicidal thoughts. This list can be made up of anything you enjoy, that can keep you safe and are beneficial to your mental health.
- **Step 5: People and places that I can connect with** - If you are feeling suicidal, being around other people can be a great support and help improve how you are feeling. Make a list of people you like spending time with that you can contact if you are feeling low.
- **Step 6: People who you can call for help** - Create a list of people you know you will be able to call for support if you are feeling suicidal. Include their name and their contact details. You should feel you could contact the people on this list at any time and they would be able to come and support you.
- **Step 7: Professional supports** - Remember that professional support is always available to you if you are feeling suicidal. If you have a counsellor or health care professional that you see regularly, add their contact details to your list. If you think you need emergency support do not hesitate in contacting 999 or 112 and calling an ambulance to where you are.

## Helping someone at risk of suicide or self-harm

It can be scary to hear that someone you know is thinking of suicide, and your first reaction may be shock and confusion as to why they feel that way. There's no simple reason as to why someone might feel suicidal, and it's important that you remain as calm as possible and avoid judgement as this may make the person more anxious and less likely to confide in you.

## Be open and listen if a friend or family member wants to talk about their feelings or problems

Try to really listen and not judge. They are likely to be in deep distress and already feel a sense of failure. Try to avoid saying or doing anything that might make this feeling worse. Keep reminding the person that there is help for them and that you will be there to support them through it.

It is important that you encourage them to get help immediately and that you also talk to someone who can help.

## Stay with your friend

Make sure they are not left alone. If necessary, call 999 and wait for help to arrive. Let your friend know that you will stay with them until help arrives or offer to go with them when they seek help.

## Never keep a suicide plan a secret

Even if your friend has asked you not to tell anyone, it is important that you talk to a professional so that your friend can get the support that is needed.

## Feeling overwhelmed and want to talk to someone?

- Get anonymous support 24/7 with our text message support service
- Connect with a trained volunteer who will listen to you, and help you to move forward feeling better
- Free-text **SPUNOUT** to **50808** to begin
- Find out more about our text message support service

*If you are a customer of the 48 or An Post network or cannot get through using the '50808' short code please text HELLO to 0861800280 (standard message rates may apply). Some smaller networks do not support short codes like '50808'.*

## How do I know if someone else is feeling suicidal?

If someone is feeling suicidal, they might show some of the following signs:

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Depression or very low mood
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Extreme sadness, hopelessness or irritability
- Changes in appetite; changes in sleep patterns; loss of energy
- Negative comments about self
- Feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and worthlessness
- Thinking constantly about suicide
- Sudden change from distress to saying they are 'at peace' or 'okay' (this may indicate that they have decided to take their life)
- Talking about going away or saying goodbye
- Threatening suicide
- Talking or writing about suicide
- Putting personal affairs in order
- Giving away the things they own

Find more information on mental health at [spunout.ie/MentalHealth](https://spunout.ie/MentalHealth)

# Support Services

- Pieta House provide a free, therapeutic approach to people who are in suicidal distress and those who engage in self-harm - [pieta.ie](http://pieta.ie)
- Samaritans provide a listening support service for people who need to talk. Call **116 123** or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- Childline provide support services for young people through online chat, via text and over the phone. Their service is free and confidential - [childline.ie](http://childline.ie) - **1800 666 666** - Text "Talk" to **50101**
- Jigsaw is a network of projects across Ireland, working with communities to better support young people's mental health and well being - [jigsaw.ie](http://jigsaw.ie)
- Aware provide face-to-face, phone and online support for people who are experiencing depression, as well as friends and families who are concerned for a loved one - [aware.ie](http://aware.ie)
- MyMind provides accessible counselling and psychotherapy services online or face-to-face for fees on a sliding scale - [mymind.org](http://mymind.org) - **0818 500 800**
- Turn2Me provides free online counselling to residents of Ireland over 18. - [turn2me.org](http://turn2me.org)
- Bodywhys are a support organisation for people with eating disorders with both online and offline support groups around the country - [bodywhys.ie](http://bodywhys.ie) - Helpline: **01 210 7906** or email [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie) for support.

# Chapter Summary

- ✓ Mental health is a way to describe the state of your mind, feelings and emotions. It includes how we feel about ourselves, how we feel about others, and how we are able to meet the demands of life.
- ✓ If you are feeling suicidal then it's important that you talk to someone about how you are feeling immediately. Telling someone might be scary, and you might be afraid of their reaction, but it means that you won't have to deal with things on your own any more. Contact your GP or go to your local A&E. Remember everyone goes through tough times, and asking for help is not a sign of weakness or a personal flaw. It's a sign of strength.

## Chapter 3

# Bullying and online safety

Different types of bullying, dealing with bullies and helping a friend who is being bullied. How to handle peer pressure, being assertive and rebuilding your confidence and protecting yourself online.



# Bullying

Bullying can happen to anyone, and anywhere. It can happen in school, college, work, online and even at home. Bullying can have a devastating effect on a person's mental health and self-esteem, and can make life miserable for the person who is being bullied. There are several different ways someone can be bullied, from emotional abuse, to online bullying, to more obvious physical bullying. There are lots of things you can do if you're being bullied, and you certainly don't have to deal with it alone. This chapter will outline tips on how to deal with bullies, the effects of bullying, and what to do if you see someone you know being bullied. Being connected to the internet 24/7 means that avoiding bullying and trolls online is harder to do, but it's not impossible. You will find more information on staying safe online in this chapter.

Bullying is defined as unwanted negative behaviour, such as verbal, psychological or physical abuse conducted by an individual or group against another person (or a number of people) and which is repeated over time.

## Types of bullying

- **Physical bullying** involves harmful actions against another person's body such as hitting, punching or kicking. It might also involve interfering with another person's property, and includes stealing or damaging things.
- **Verbal bullying** is talking to a person or about a person in a way that is hurtful to them, like teasing, name-calling, spreading rumours or whispering.
- **Non-verbal bullying** refers to any behaviour that upsets, excludes or embarrasses another person, for example: leaving someone out of a game or activity on purpose, making rude gestures at someone, or writing hate notes about a person that will be upsetting to them.
- **Emotional bullying** refers to any bullying behavior that manipulates, torments, and generally plays with the emotions of others.
- **Cyberbullying** usually involves unwanted messages, images, audio or video sent online to threaten, abuse or harm someone.



It's estimated that around three in ten young people experience bullying at some stage. Bullying can affect your ability to enjoy life and can damage your self-confidence. Remember, being bullied is nothing to do with you, how you look, or how you feel. It is always about the bully.

## How to stop bullying

If you or someone you know is getting bullied:

- **Make sure to talk to a friend** or someone you trust about what's happening, and don't try to deal with the bullying alone. You will feel more confident dealing with things if you have good support around you.
- **Never respond to a bully.** If you feel like saying something, write it down and get it out of your system, but don't send it to the bully. It's best not to engage as most of the time the bully is looking for a reaction from you to make themselves feel better.
- **It can be very difficult** for anyone who is being bullied to talk about it, but talking to a parent, a teacher, a youth/sports group leader or someone in a position of authority who can help is very important. If you find it too difficult or you're too frightened, ask a friend to support you and to be with you when you talk about the bullying. If you don't get the help you need the first time you ask, go to a different person until you find someone who can help you.
- **What the bully is saying about you simply isn't true.** They are just trying to hurt you, but your friends and family know that what they're saying isn't true, and hopefully you do too.
- **If the bullying is affecting you** physically or mentally, go to see your

doctor. It can be good to talk to someone who isn't an immediate friend or family member.

- **Try not to get worked up** in front of the person who is bullying you - they may become bored if they don't get a reaction from you and stop.
- **Keep a record** of every bullying episode that happens: note the time, place, what happened and if anyone else was a witness. This will help you explain clearly what's been happening. If the bullying is happening on a computer, phone or tablet, take screenshots and save messages.

## **I've seen someone being bullied, what can I do?**

It can be difficult to approach a bully about their behaviour because of the fear that you might become their next target. But standing by and watching bullying take place is not the solution either. The more people who stand up to bullying, the less likely it is to keep happening. You can also approach the person getting bullied and let them know that you saw the bullying and suggest that you go with them to talk to someone who can stop it. If they don't want to report it to someone themselves, you should report the incident to an appropriate person yourself. You should let them know that you don't think it's acceptable and offer your support. You can also use the report function on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter etc., if you see bullying online.

*"If you are being bullied, there is ALWAYS someone out there who wants to listen and to lend a helping hand. Your problems do matter. Your feelings do matter. If you talk to a friend and they don't care, then they're not a friend. If you don't have friends, talk to a teacher or any adult. Write a note and pass it through the staff room door in school when no one is looking. Let someone know even if you don't identify yourself. Someone will help" - Jamal*

## **I think my friend is being bullied**

If you think your friend or someone you know is being bullied, talk to them about it. Avoid questioning them too intently or asking them anything that might make them feel that they have done something wrong. Bring up the subject indirectly, giving them the option to talk

about it or not. When they start to talk, listen carefully to what they have to say. If you are very concerned for their wellbeing, you should talk to a trusted teacher or family member who can do something more about it.

## **Signs that a friend or family member is being bullied**

- A change in behaviour such as suffering a lack of concentration and/or becoming withdrawn, excessively clingy, depressed, fearful, or emotionally up and down.
- Appearing to have no close friends, not being part of groups, not discussing good things that are happening in their lives.
- Happy at the weekend but not during the week.
- A drop in performance in school or at work.
- Physical signs like stomach aches, headaches, sleep difficulties.
- Making negative remarks about themselves, including phrases such as “Nobody else thinks I’m any good”.
- Having unexplained cuts and bruises.

## **Why do bullies bully?**

Reasons for bullying vary from person to person. In general, a bully wants to feel they have power over others, and use that power to make others feel worse. A bully might want to feel powerful because inside they feel powerless or are struggling. A bully might use bullying as a way to be accepted by others and to distract from their own insecurities and problems. They might have been bullied themselves and mimic that behaviour, taking their own hurt out on others. Some bullies pick on people’s differences to feel powerful, better than others, or have a sense of control. But none of this is an excuse for treating people badly.

Remember: you shouldn’t have to put up with bullying. Talk to someone about what’s happening. They want to help. See the end of this chapter for services that can help you.



## Being bullied online

The Internet is full of information, ways to connect and communicate with friends, music, videos and so much more. You can open up to people online in a way you might not feel comfortable to in real life. Hiding your identity can be a good way to protect yourself online but the opposite can be said when it comes to cyberbullying. A lot of people

who remain anonymous online think they can hide behind this and say whatever they want to people on social media, even language that is hurtful and abusive. These people, often known as ‘trolls’ are best blocked, reported and generally not interacted with.

## Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying involves unwanted messages, images, audio or video sent by electronic means to threaten, abuse or harm someone. It’s like physical or verbal bullying, but uses technology instead. Examples of cyberbullying can include:

- Abusive messages or slagging on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.
- Offensive comments on videos or posts.
- Spreading rumours online or through messaging.
- Hacking into your online accounts.
- Posting or tagging people in offensive images or posting photoshopped images of other people.
- Sharing of information or content online without your consent.

## How do I avoid it?

- Never give out your passwords - always keep your passwords to yourself and make a habit of logging out of your email or social networks when you're finished. Passwords should be made up of mixed characters, not pet names or dates of birth.
- You should also have a different password for each account or service.
- Restrict your privacy settings on Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.
- Learn how to block and report other profiles on all your social media accounts.
- Pick your friends carefully and remember whatever you post online can be seen by everyone who's got access to your page. When it comes to Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram, only accept friend requests from people with whom you're comfortable sharing information with and whom you know in real life.
- Ask yourself whether or not what you say online would be acceptable in a face-to-face discussion and avoid saying hurtful things to other users.
- If you're angry or upset, wait to send that message. Often things are said carelessly in the heat of the moment. It's best to wait until you've calmed down and had time to think. Once you've sent it, you can't take it back.

*"You can't stop people being cruel or isolating others. However, you can change how others are affected by it. If you're being bullied, try to change how you receive negative comments. It's not easy. It is not a reflection on you. Try to recognise all your good features, your talents, your strengths. Don't let someone else have control over your self-esteem or how you see yourself. Try to be a participant in life: get involved, work with others and build relationships with peers. Confidence is not an easy thing to build, but you can fake it 'till you make it." - Amy*

# How to deal with being bullied online

It's not a good idea to reply to a bully, as much as you might want to; it will only make the problem worse. The bully's objective is to make you worried and upset. Letting them know they have been successful will only encourage them to continue. If you're worried or concerned about a piece of content that has been uploaded that you are in, contact the provider where the image or video has been uploaded (e.g. Instagram, Twitter) and ask for it to be removed, and talk to a trusted adult or friend. It's a good idea to save the evidence and take a screenshot as proof.

Go offline, log out or switch off your phone, and talk to family or do something you enjoy. You can temporarily disable most social media accounts - this might be a good way of taking a break from the stress of dealing with things. Talk to a trusted adult such as a close relative, a family friend, a teacher, health professional or a youth worker or contact a free confidential support service (see end of chapter). Make sure you know how to block and report users on all types of websites and profiles that you have online.

In serious or persistent cases, report the bullying to Gardaí yourself or through your parents.

*“Bullies see themselves as strong as and better than others, but in fact that is not true. Often people bully for many reasons such as a way of coping with something going on in their life, but that is no excuse. The people who come through all of the bullying are the strong ones; they go through the pain and come out the other end. That is what it means to be strong” - Siobhan*

## Digital Citizenship

The internet and technology are a part of all of our lives, and it's important we take our digital presence seriously. Being a good digital citizen means practicing safe, responsible, and legal use of technology. Good digital citizens understand the rights and responsibilities that come with being online and use technology in a positive way.

## Being responsible online

- **Think before you share.** Passwords are private and not to be shared with others, even a best friend.
- **Respect other people's privacy.** Ask your friend if it's ok to upload those photos they're in before tagging them – it's the right thing to do.
- **Report online offenders.** Have you seen something that is abusive or bullying online? Instead of just ignoring it, report the content to the website or tell a parent/teacher about it.
- **Hate speech is one the leading dangers online.** Reporting abusive language online is as quick and painless as clicking the 'Report' button.
- **Give credit where it's due.** It's so easy to share online, but be sure to credit the people who've created what you're sharing. Someone put a lot of effort into that joke or meme, don't try to pass it off as your own.
- **We should never insult people online.** A good rule of thumb is to not say anything online that you wouldn't say to someone's face.

## Staying safe online

The internet makes our lives so much easier. But with all of the opportunities it provides, there are also some risks to be aware of.

- **Set up secure passwords** for your different online accounts and change these passwords regularly. Find out how secure your passwords are at [spunout.ie/OnlineSafety](https://spunout.ie/OnlineSafety).
- **Be sensible** about who you are friends with online. If you don't know someone, don't accept their friend requests. Always tell a family member or friend if you plan to meet an online friend in real life.
- **Avoid** giving out personal information online. Keep things like your surname, date of birth, address and phone number private.
- **Check your privacy settings** on all your online profiles to make sure you're not sharing photos or other content publicly.
- **Be sure to check your location settings** and location tagging. You

might be giving away your location to thousands of people on social media without knowing.

- Try to only use a **nickname/alias** or first name when chatting in forums or gaming online.
- Use a **junk email address** for random sign ups and avoid giving out your primary email address too often. You can end up with lots of junk mail or people harassing you.
- If you're **uploading images**, make sure you're not giving away personal details in them like a car registration or street sign in the background.
- For more information on being responsible online, visit: [spunout.ie/OnlineSafety](http://spunout.ie/OnlineSafety)

## The legal age of social media

For most services, such as google, there is no law on what age you can access them. If a social media platform uses your personal data you have to be 16 years old to sign up without your parent or guardian's consent. By social media platforms, we mean apps like Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok.

For more information on your rights under 18 visit [childrensrights.ie](http://childrensrights.ie).

## Behaviours to avoid online

### Unprovoked sexting

Never send someone a sexual message or photo (also known as a 'sext') if you don't know that they would be comfortable with receiving it.

Remember, if you are under the age of 18, it is illegal to:

- Send sexual messages or media (photos or videos)
- Send them to someone who is also under 18
- Be in possession of sexual messages or media from someone who is under the age of 18

If you send unwanted sexts, this is a form of sexual harassment. Like any other sexual act, sexting and sending nudes must be consensual, meaning that everyone involved agrees to it. Other behaviours to avoid include:

- Posting negative comments or messages
- Constantly messaging someone who isn't replying
- Talking part in illegal activities such as buying or selling drugs and scamming people
- Creating fake profiles and pretending to be someone else

Go to [spunout.ie/OnlineSafety](https://spunout.ie/OnlineSafety) to learn more about behaviours to avoid online.

## Image-based sexual abuse and the law

Since 9 February 2021, new laws apply to the sharing of “intimate images” without the consent of the person in the images. If a person records, distributes or publishes intimate images of someone without their permission, they have broken the law.

Intimate images include any photo or video of:

- Someone's genitals, breasts, bum or anal region
- The underwear covering these parts of the body
- A naked person
- A person engaged in any form of sexual activity

Depending on a person's intent when sharing the images, they can face a maximum prison sentence of up to 7 years.

If someone is under 18 and a nude or sexual image or video of them is circulated, this is child pornography. Anyone who has distributed this will be liable to be prosecuted as a distributor of child pornography.

If someone has shared naked photos of you, it is important to report it to the Gardaí. You can also report it at [hotline.ie](https://hotline.ie).

## How to react to racism online

Racism is when someone discriminates against or speaks abusively towards people of colour, Travellers or Roma. People often experience racism in their daily lives, and unfortunately, racism also exists online as well.

If you come across racism, it's important to speak out against it and report it. Ignoring it won't make it go away, and it can send the message that racism is accepted in our society, which it should never be.

Ways to deal with racism online:

- Report it on the platform, such as Snapchat or Twitter
- Save screenshots of the racism as proof
- If you feel it is necessary, report it to the Gardai
- Report it to iReport, a confidential reporting system from the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR)
- Reach out to the person who was targeted online and let them know that you are there for them and disagree with what has happened

## What to do if you experience racism online

If you have experienced racism online, it's important to remember that you are not alone. Support is available to you if you would like to reach out. If they are available to you, reach out to someone you trust, like a family member, teacher, youth worker or friend. If you would like to, you can share how you're feeling with them and ask for their support during this time.

If you can, talk to other people who also have experience with racist incidents and who will be able to relate to what you are going through. There's nothing worse than when you're having a hard time but it feels like no one around you understands.

# Reach out to victim support organisations

If you are experiencing racism, there are a number of organisations you can reach out to support via their websites.

- INAR - [inar.ie](http://inar.ie)
- The Immigrant Council of Ireland - [immigrantcouncil.ie](http://immigrantcouncil.ie)
- Irish Refugee Council - [irishrefugeecouncil.ie](http://irishrefugeecouncil.ie)
- NASC, Migrant and Refugee Rights- [nascireland.org](http://nascireland.org)
- Doras Luimni - [doras.org](http://doras.org)
- Migrants Rights Centre Ireland - [mrci.ie](http://mrci.ie)
- A local Traveller organisation such as Pavee Point, Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), Exchange House, Involve Youth Service, or TVG Cork

## Online Gambling

Online gambling is gambling done through websites, apps and games on your computer or phone that require you to spend money. Some people may see online gambling as less serious than gambling in the bookies, but it is just as easy to become addicted to gambling online. In fact, there can be even greater risks linked to online gambling, including:

- Easy access to online betting which is always available 24/7.
- Many websites give you a number of free bets to get you started. To keep you playing they will also offer more bets to ensure you stay online as long as possible.
- It is very easy for betting companies to track your betting habits and therefore target you specifically making it harder to stop betting.

## Signs that you may be addicted to gambling include:

- Trouble controlling your gambling or difficulty taking time off from it.
- Trying to hide your gambling, how much money you spend, or the sites you visit.

- Becoming annoyed if you can't access a computer or phone to gamble.
- Lying about the amount of time you spend gambling or the money you spend.
- Neglecting relationships or responsibilities.
- Losing interest in socialising.
- Spending a lot of time online or on your phone on gambling apps and websites.
- Thinking a lot about gambling – when and how you will do it, as well as thinking about cutting back.

Gambling can be difficult to give up and you may have to try a few different things but recovery is possible. You can call Problem Gambling Ireland for information and support on **089 241 5401**.

## Using the internet for activism

The internet is often used by activists as a space for informing people about their cause and organising events and demonstrations. There are lots of different ways of engaging with activism online. You can inform yourself on different issues, find groups to join, organise, and plan actions.

**Find ways to engage:** You can use the internet to search for different groups working on the issues you are interested in and learn the best ways you can engage with them, both in person and online.

**Start your own group:** If you can't find a group that focuses on the issues you care about, you can start your own. Put out a call on social media for people who share your passion for the issue.

**Running a campaign:** The best way to get your message out there is to run some sort of campaign. This can be done both online and offline, and the internet offers lots of options. Think about the story you want to tell and the best way to tell it - this could be through blogs, images, videos, or podcasts.

**Take action offline:** While the internet is a great place to research and

organise, the most effective activism is the kind that happens in real life. Use the internet to organise the events that will help your cause in real life; such as protests and community meetings.

**Look after yourself:** Remember to look after yourself and take the time to step back every now and then, because activism can be overwhelming. If it all feels too much remember that by making your voices heard by the people in power, you can bring about change.

## Dealing with peer pressure

Peer pressure is a type of pressure or influence pushed on a person by a group of their friends, other students or just people their own age. It can mean someone forcing or manipulating you into doing something you don't want to. But it's also the pressure you can feel to be like everyone else, or push down the parts of yourself that make you unique. Peer pressure can also be focused on trying to get you to change your opinions and what you believe in, as well as how you act. Like bullying, peer pressure can affect your confidence and self-esteem. Check out these tips that can help.

### Be assertive

Dealing with bullies can be extremely intimidating. But as we've mentioned before, they tend to quit bullying if they're not getting a reaction anymore. That's where assertiveness comes in. This basically means standing up for yourself, but also expressing how you feel, here are some pointers:

- First of all, start small and learn how to say "no" to things. It might be your friend trying to get you to go out some night when it's the last thing you want to do, or you putting your foot down about what film to go see. However small it is, it'll be a good start to get you on the path to asserting yourself.
- When you're trying to stand your ground, keep eye contact with the person you are talking to.
- Try to keep a calm tone to your voice when talking, this will be easier if you know what you want to say in advance.
- Keep in mind that assertiveness doesn't mean aggressiveness. Being loud and shouting will probably just make you seem hostile or

erratic rather than calm and collected.

## Build your confidence

If you've been the target or victim of bullying, it can really ruin your confidence and self-esteem, but it's important not to let all the negativity being thrown your way get to you. Here are some tips for improving your confidence:

- Having confidence is about thinking positively. It's important to be realistic, but it's also important to encourage yourself positively. Replace negative feelings about yourself with a positive belief about who you are and what you can do.
- Have a rant every now and then — this could be to a good friend or even a counsellor. They can help you to recognise your good qualities, and it gives you an opportunity to talk about any problems you have. Speak to your GP about counselling options that are available to you. You can also check out [spunout.ie/Help](https://spunout.ie/Help) to find support services.
- Think of at least one good thing about yourself that other people like or that makes you feel good.
- Do something that makes you feel good every day. It could be something that you can look forward to and that gives you a sense of achievement, for example, going for a walk, listening to music, or meeting up with friends.
- Fake it 'til you make it. Projecting confidence even when you don't feel it can help change the way people react to you and over time you will naturally develop confidence.

# Support Services

- If you are having a tough time and want to tell someone, you can text anonymously to talk it out with a trained volunteer. Text **SPUNOUT** to **50808** to get started.
- Childline provide support services for young people through online chat, via text and over the phone. Their service is free and confidential - [childline.ie](https://www.childline.ie) - 1800 666 666 - Text “Talk” to 50101
- Samaritans provide a listening support service for people who need to talk. 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- Webwise provide a lot of information and resources for staying safe online - [webwise.ie](https://www.webwise.ie)
- [iReport.ie](https://www.ireport.ie) is a safe online space to report racism and racist incidents that happen online or offline.
- [Hotline.ie](https://www.hotline.ie) is a website to confidentially report suspicious content online that you think might be illegal.

## Chapter Summary

- ✓ Talk to someone if you're being bullied, don't go it alone.
- ✓ Learn how to block and report on social media — don't engage with the trolls.
- ✓ Don't share personal information or details about yourself on your profiles or with strangers online.
- ✓ If you know someone who is being bullied, talk to them and encourage them to report the bullying. Don't be a bystander!
- ✓ If you experience racism online you do not have to accept it. Reach out to those close to you for support and report the person on the platform.
- ✓ Online Gambling is highly addictive and can slowly become a problem over time. Support is available if you are concerned about your gambling.

## Chapter 4

# Drugs & Alcohol

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The mental, physical and legal impact of drugs and alcohol. Helping drunk or high friends, helping yourself with your own alcohol or drug use and socialising without alcohol or drugs; this chapter has got it all.



# Alcohol and Drugs

When it comes to drugs (including alcohol), it's important to be informed with the facts in order to make the decisions that are right for you. Knowing the risks and effects of different drugs is the first step. Because every person will respond differently, there is no way to know for sure how someone will react to a drug. Some people may feel more relaxed or have more energy, while others will have a completely negative experience. Different drugs have different effects, and people who take them will have individual reactions.

It can often be a friend who will offer you drugs rather than a stranger, and that can make it really hard to say no. But you are your own person, and you should never feel pressured into taking something just because your friends are, or because you think that it's expected of you. It's your body and no one else can make a decision about what you take. It's really good to read up as much as you can before you are in a situation where someone is offering you drugs, then you will have a better chance of making the right decision for you.

## Alcohol and other types of drugs

- **Depressants or downers** - Drugs like alcohol, heroin, and solvents slow down the body and nervous system making you feel more relaxed and less self-conscious. They can be very dangerous, especially mixed with other substances.
- **Stimulants or uppers** - These are drugs like speed, ecstasy and cocaine, which speed up and heighten reactions to your surroundings. They can be particularly dangerous if you have heart or blood pressure problems.
- **Hallucinogens** - Acid and magic mushrooms are hallucinogenic drugs, which alter the way you see, hear and feel things.

A lot of things influence the way drugs make you feel, especially what's actually in the drug, how much of it you take, your mood before you take it, if you've taken any other drug and your surroundings at the time. Drugs affect people in different ways and because most drugs are illegal there's no way to control what goes into them, so what you think you're getting, and what you're actually getting can be very different.

# Alcohol

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Ireland and although it is a legal drug, it doesn't mean that it is less powerful than other drugs.

## What are the effects of alcohol?

When you drink, alcohol passes into your bloodstream and travels around your body. At first you probably feel more relaxed and sociable. As you drink more, you might start to talk louder, slur your words, stumble, and the more you drink the worse the effects get (passing out and vomiting among them). This is all thanks to the alcohol slowing down your body's and brain's reactions.

The intensity of the effects of alcohol depends on the strength of the alcoholic drink, and how much and how quickly you drink. Other factors that influence the effects of alcohol include the weight of the drinker, their mood, and when they last ate.

- Alcohol is also a depressant drug and can exaggerate what mood you are in when you start drinking. So, if you are in a sad or depressed mood when you start drinking, this will be made worse.
- The short term effects of alcohol can last up to a few days, and usually result in a hangover, which can leave you with a pounding headache and a sick stomach, as well as mental health effects such as low mood and anxiety.
- Long-term heavy drinking (see the section below to find out more about how much is too much alcohol) may cause serious damage to internal organs, including your heart, stomach and liver. Heavy drinking can also cause cancer, skin problems, trembling (the shakes), brain damage, mood swings and personality changes.
- Some people find that drinking alcohol can affect them in ways that they don't like. They may become aggressive, angry or really loud and disruptive. Other people find that drinking alcohol can make them feel really down or depressed.
- Alcohol can also lower your inhibitions meaning that you might do things when you are drunk that you would never dream about doing sober, such as having unprotected sex or getting into fights.

- Mixing alcohol with other drugs is incredibly dangerous. This is because alcohol serves to slow down the nervous system (controlling heart and breathing rate), and if this is combined with drugs that do the same thing, your body could shut down completely.
- A regular, long term drinking habit can lead to physical as well as psychological dependency.
- Tolerance can develop, which means you need more to get the same effect.
- Getting very drunk can lead to loss of consciousness, alcohol poisoning, and death, particularly among those who are not used to drinking.



## Hangovers

Hangovers are the worst. No matter how amazing the night before was, a hangover has the power to suck the joy right out of it, leaving you with a pounding headache, a mouth like sandpaper, a churning stomach and the desire to never drink again. This is your body's way of trying to get rid of the toxins you drank the night before.

### What happens in your body during a hangover?

1. **Hormonal havoc** - Alcohol affects neurotransmitters in the brain, such as serotonin and dopamine. It even affects histamine, a chemical which the body releases whenever you come into

contact with a substance you are allergic to. This disruption in neurotransmitters can negatively affect your mood and cause you to feel 'down' after a heavy drinking session.

2. **Sleep disruption** - Alcohol interferes with sleep quality, in particular REM sleep. REM sleep is the period of sleep where you dream and it is also supposed to be one of the most important stages to restore the brain. So you're likely to feel exhausted the day after, even if you've slept for 12 hours straight.
3. **Stomach irritation** - Alcohol can irritate the lining of your stomach and increase stomach acid. This is what causes that horrible feeling of nausea, stomach pain, and even vomiting.
4. **Dehydration** - Alcohol is a diuretic, which means it increases urine output making you pee more. If you pee more, your body will simply increase your thirst to try and replace the lost fluid. Dehydration can further lead to electrolyte imbalances, causing your body to get low on important substances such as sodium and potassium. This is part of the reason you may crave crisps or salty foods like bacon the morning after.
5. **Widening of blood vessels in the head** - Just as painful as it sounds, but this widening certainly contributes to the morning after headaches. It also seems to contribute to light sensitivity.
6. **Low blood sugar** - Some people are more sensitive to this effect than others. Basically, alcohol generally lowers glucose levels in the blood and can also deplete the stored sugar in the liver. Some people's bodies just make more sugar to compensate, but not everyone can, and so you may find yourself dealing with low blood sugar symptoms like intense hunger, cravings, shakiness, weakness and headaches.
7. **Toxic by-products** - As alcohol is metabolised, it breaks down into various by-products. Some people can clear these by-products quickly, while others cannot, leading to toxins left over in the body.

# How much is too much?

Experts recommend that young people under 18 avoid alcohol completely as it can interfere with brain development in teenagers. However, some young people will start drinking alcohol under the age of 18.

It is recommended that an adult should have no more than 100 grams of alcohol per week, that's 7 standard drinks or less. Examples of one standard drink are a half pint of beer, one small glass of wine, or a pub measure of spirits (35.5ml).

It's recommended that no more than two or three standard drinks should be had on any one occasion, and it is best to spread the amount you drink out over the week, and not all in one night. Your body size will affect things, so if you're small then alcohol is going to affect you more. If you're drinking in rounds with someone who's bigger than you, don't try to drink the same amount.

While it might not seem so, plenty of people drink very little or no alcohol at all. If you do drink alcohol, you are probably now mentally calculating how much alcohol you consume on an average night out. If you drink more than five standard drinks on a night out, this is considered binge drinking and is bad for your health.

## Minimise the damage that alcohol does to your body

Even though there are many dangers of drinking, many still choose to drink alcohol, and drink far too much of it. It's easy to say "never again" when you've got the hangover from hell, but much more difficult the following weekend when it's time to go out again. If you do choose to drink then learn how to minimize the damage you do to your mind and body.

- **Eat before you start drinking.** This slows down the rate that alcohol is absorbed into your body. Avoid drinking on an empty stomach.
- **Drink slowly.** Be aware not just of how much you drink, but how fast you are drinking. If you feel yourself getting drunk then slow down or stop until you sober up again.

- **Keep track of how many drinks you've had.** It's best to stop drinking before or after you've had five standard servings of alcohol on any one occasion. Try slowing down and pausing between sips and your next round.
- **Drink lots of water or a soft drink between alcoholic drinks.** Before you go to bed, drink as much water as you can. It will stop you getting too dehydrated and prevent that thudding headache the next morning.

## My friend's drunk, how can I help?

If your friend is very drunk, they're not going to be thinking straight. Sometimes, they might be in an unsafe situation or be difficult to deal with. Here are some tips on looking after them:

- In a serious case of drunkenness, a person might pass out. If this happens, put them in the recovery position (lying on their side), check that they're breathing and that nothing is blocking their mouth, such as vomit, and call for help. Don't leave the unconscious person alone, and call an ambulance if you can't wake them up.
- If your friend isn't breathing they need immediate help. Get someone to call an ambulance and shout for help from anyone who has first aid training.
- If your friend is vomiting or choking when they vomit then stay with them and get someone to call an ambulance.
- Try not to let drunk friends leave on their own or with a stranger. Insist on staying with them until you're sure they get home safely. Do not leave your friend alone when they are drunk.
- If you're worried about a friend drinking too much, avoid lecturing them, especially when they are drunk. Talk to them about cutting back on alcohol when they are sober and not hungover.
- If they can, get them to drink some water to start getting the alcohol out of their system.
- For sobering up, there is no substitute for time. It takes as many hours as the number of drinks taken and can take 24 hours or more for the after-effects of alcohol to fully wear off.
- Stop a friend or someone who has been drinking from driving home. Hide the car keys if you need to.

*“It’s never easy to look after someone who’s hammered. I’ve found the best things to do are usually the most practical – get your friend some water, sit them down and keep talking to them. If you feel that they’re beyond your control, don’t feel bad about getting help from other friends or security in the pub or club. Get them into a taxi and home, you can only do so much for someone who’s drunk. Finally, don’t criticise too much the next morning: chances are they’re feeling pretty terrible already!”- Aine*

## Alcohol and the law

It is against the law for anyone under 18 to buy alcohol in a pub, off-licence or shop. It is also illegal for a person to buy alcohol for someone who is under 18. It is illegal at any age to drive while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

The Gardaí can randomly breathalyse any driver stopped at an alcohol checkpoint at any time. If they test your urine or blood and find traces of drugs you can be arrested for drug driving. The Gardaí can take alcohol off under 18s who are drinking in a public place. They can also contact their parents or guardians.

## Penalties for breaking the law

The Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 says that in Ireland you:

- Cannot be drunk in a public place. There’s a maximum fine of €127 if you’re caught.
- Cannot take part in offensive conduct between 12am and 7am. The maximum fine rises to €635.
- Cannot use threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour in public. Not only will there be a maximum fine of €635, you could also face up to 3 months in jail.

## Drugs and the law

The Gardaí can legally search you or a vehicle without a warrant if they suspect you might have illegal drugs in your possession or have drug involvement. They can also arrest you if they’ve reasonable grounds to suspect you of a crime under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

## What happens if I get caught by the Gardaí with drugs?

If you're arrested for possession of drugs, the seriousness of the offence is decided by whether you only had enough for personal use or you had enough to supply or sell to others. Personal use is less serious and is all about the quantity of the drug. If the court decides the drug amount you have is more than for personal use, you'll be charged with possession for supply. This means you're being charged with having enough illegal drugs to sell or give to others. It doesn't matter if you've actually sold the drug or not.

With possession of other illegal drugs for your own use, you can be fined and/or jailed for a maximum of up to seven years. With possession of illegal drugs for supply (or dealing) you can be fined and/or jailed for a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

## Alcohol/drugs and your mental health

Many people take drugs for the effect it has on their mood. However, it's important to look at any long term effects before you make a short term decision.

Drugs such as alcohol or cannabis interfere with the chemicals in your brain and can affect the messages those chemicals are trying to send. If you are thinking about using drugs, or are already using drugs, you should consider the effects that drugs can have on your mental health.

Psychoactive drugs such as heroin, cannabis, alcohol and ecstasy affect your mood. This can create positive feelings in one person and negative feelings in another. It can also create positive feelings in the short term, but bad ones in the long term. The short-term effects may well be something you enjoy, but you may also have side effects that make you feel strange. For most people these are short-term and will pass as the drug leaves your system, but for others the unwanted side-effects will last much longer.

One of the reasons people use alcohol and drugs is to escape difficult emotions. Difficult emotions like sadness or frustration can feel overwhelming and we may not know what to do, and so turn to alcohol

or drugs to cope. The harsh reality is alcohol and drugs make mental health problems worse and it's possible to become dependent on them. Developing an unhealthy relationship to alcohol or drug use can put serious strain on your health, relationships, and commitments.

## **Short-term effects of drugs**

All drugs may cause mental health problems and can cause anxiety, mood swings, depression, sleep problems and psychosis. You may also have panic attacks – periods of very severe anxiety when your heart rate increases, with trembling, sweats, shortness of breath, and a fear of losing control. Some drugs can cause delusions or psychosis, causing you to believe things that aren't true, or have hallucinations and see or hear things that are not there.

## **Long-term effects of drugs**

Using drugs may cause you ongoing mental health problems. It is not yet understood why this happens to some people and not others. It may be that using a drug has triggered a mental illness you didn't know you had, or the drug has changed the way the chemicals work in your brain.

## **Alcohol and antidepressants**

Generally speaking, drinking alcohol while taking antidepressants is not advised for a number of reasons. One of the reasons why it's best to avoid alcohol while taking antidepressants is that alcohol is known to actually make depression worse, even though it might seem to improve your mood in the short-term by making you feel more confident.

Although some people think alcohol will help them when they are feeling depressed, alcohol is a depressant. Alcohol messes with your brain's own level of happiness chemicals, like dopamine and serotonin. When the levels of these chemicals go down, it can have a negative effect on your mood and mental health. Alcohol also slows down how your brain functions.

Drinking can cancel out the benefits of your antidepressant. It can make your symptoms worse and more difficult to treat. No matter what

antidepressant you take, it's important to speak to your doctor before drinking alcohol because every person is different. They will be able to advise you on what to do, and can answer any questions in person that you might have.

## Alcohol and antibiotics

People often assume that when they are on antibiotics that they can't drink alcohol. Some antibiotics are dangerous when mixed with alcohol, while some have less severe side effects. If you are put on antibiotics speak to your doctor about the side-effects and whether or not you are allowed to drink alcohol while taking them. They will know what is best for you to do.

Mixing alcohol and antibiotics can potentially have a variety of side effects. Some antibiotics can have dangerous side effects such as rapid heart rate, increased blood pressure and liver damage. Other side effects include a red and hot face and neck or flushing, excessive sweating, dizziness, headache, nausea and stomach issues. Similarly common side effects of alcohol such as stomach problems, tiredness or headaches may be made worse by taking antibiotics at the same time.

Mixing some kinds of antibiotics with alcohol can be very dangerous, others aren't affected by alcohol at all. It is important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about it and to find out if it is possible to drink alcohol on the antibiotics that you are on.

*"I know that using drugs really affects how I feel about myself – having tried smoking once or twice, I've discovered it makes me nervous and anxious. Any underlying mental health conditions can be really affected by drink and drugs. Even without those, when you're hungover on a Saturday morning it can feel there's nothing worse in the world. My friend once described drinking as "stealing happiness from the next day" and it's the truest thing – if you're drinking, you can be prepared to feel fairly dodgy the following morning!"-  
Anon*

# Cannabis

Cannabis (Aka: Hash, marijuana, dope, weed, grass, pot, puff, ganja)

Cannabis is a plant that is used as a drug. It can be smoked (in a pipe, bong or rolled in a joint, sometimes with tobacco) or eaten. There is a myth that because cannabis is a natural plant that it is harmless. This is false — there are side effects of cannabis that you should be aware of.

## Is it illegal?

In Ireland, cannabis is a class B drug which means it is against the law to possess it, use it, sell it or traffic it. Possession of the drug carries a prison sentence of up to 5 years and dealing up to 14 years.

## What happens when you take cannabis?

- When stoned you can feel relaxed and talkative. Colours may look brighter and sounds may seem louder.
- You can get cravings for food, this is known as “the munchies.”
- Side effects include panic, anxiety, paranoid reactions and hallucinations.
- Cannabis has the potential to interfere with short-term memory, and affect your performance at school, college or work.

## The impact of cannabis on your mental health

- Cannabis users can experience temporary psychological distress such as anxiety, panic attacks or paranoia.
- Using cannabis has been linked to more severe psychological distress such as psychosis and the onset of schizophrenia. Heavy use amongst those with a mental illness or with a family history of mental illness may make this condition worse.
- Cannabis may also interfere with short-term memory and learning ability, and has been linked to a lack of motivation, which can affect your performance at school/college or work.
- Cannabis use that is daily or frequent, or that starts from a young age under 18, can increase the risk of more serious side effects.

## The impact of cannabis on your physical health

- Cannabis can alter your senses.
- Your hand-eye-coordination and reaction time can be affected.
- Like cigarettes, smoking cannabis can damage your lungs and throat, and can cause chronic bronchitis, coughing, hoarseness.
- Smoking cannabis can lead to cancer.
- Cannabis use can also affect fertility in both men and women.

## Party Drugs

‘Party drugs’ are drugs taken on a night out. While the name sounds leisurely, they can be quite dangerous and can be addictive. Several different types of drugs might be referred to as a party drug.

Some drugs referred to as ‘party drugs’ include:

- **MDMA (ecstasy, E, X, pills)** - MDMA is a synthetic drug chemically similar to stimulants and hallucinogens. It can be taken in pill form or snorted as a white powder.
- **Ketamine hydrochloride (K, ket, special K, vitamin K)** - Ketamine is a strong tranquilliser and anaesthetic. It comes in white powder, tablet, or liquid form.
- **Cocaine (coke)** - Cocaine is a white, odorless powder. It is a stimulant that is usually sniffed up the nose.

All of these drugs are different and have various safety concerns. All of them are dangerous and can potentially cause addiction, health problems, or death. They are all dangerous to mix with other drugs, including alcohol.

Be careful if someone gives you a pill to take at a party. Often pills that claim to be MDMA are mixed with other drugs or harmful chemicals. You can never be sure what’s in a drug or where it’s coming from. Be sure to read more about the effects of party drugs at [spunout.ie/Drugs](https://spunout.ie/Drugs).



## Where can I get support?

If you think you have a problem with drug use, consider speaking to someone you trust, your GP, parent, teacher, an older sibling or friend. You can find a confidential service in your area by logging onto [Drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie)

## I'm worried about my drug/alcohol use

The most obvious sign that you or someone you know have an unhealthy relationship to something is the feeling that you NEED to have it or do it. If you are worried about yourself or someone you know who has been taking drugs, remember that there is always help and support out there. You may feel that now is the time to get help for your drug use. There are many treatment options available to you when you decide that you are ready to get help for drug use.

Not all types of treatment are the same and it's important that you talk to your GP or the support services to find out which treatment is best for you. Never be afraid to ask for help or support. There are services available specifically to help you cope with substance use problems.

## Psychological signs

- Using drugs to forget your problems.
- Withdrawing from your family and friends or keeping your drug use a secret.

- Your drug use is affecting relationships — with family, friends or partners.
- Losing interest in activities that you used to enjoy.
- Having problems at work, school or college because of your drug use.
- Spending all your time with people who use drugs.
- Spending a lot of time planning how to get drugs.
- Spending a lot of your money on drugs.
- Owing money because of your drug use.
- Your health and important areas of your life are suffering due to drug use.
- Wanting to change your drug habits, but not feeling you are able to.
- Not being able to stop taking drugs, even though you have tried.

## Physical signs

- Changes in sleeping patterns — finding it very difficult to get to sleep or sleeping at unusual hours.
- Feeling shaky, with flu-like symptoms or feeling sick when you try to stop taking the addictive substance.
- Needing to take larger amounts of the substance to get the same effects.
- Losing a lot of weight or putting on a lot of weight.

If you think you have a problem with drugs or alcohol, consider speaking to someone you trust, your GP, a teacher, a family member, or a friend. You can find a confidential service in your area by going to [Drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie).

If some of the below statements apply to you, chances are you need support for your substance use:

- You try to stop drinking/taking drugs for a day or a week, but end up taking them anyway.
- You wish people would mind their own business about your drinking/drug use.

- You have had a drink or drugs to get going in the morning.
- You envy people who can drink/take drugs without getting into trouble.
- Your substance use is causing trouble at home.
- You tell yourself you can stop anytime you want to, but you keep getting drunk/high when you don't mean to.
- You have missed days of school/work because of substance use.
- You have 'blackouts' or don't remember chunks of time due to substance use.
- You sometimes feel your life would be better if you didn't drink/do drugs.



## A sober night out

For anyone who wants to have a night out with a clear head, it can sometimes be difficult to enjoy a social life that doesn't focus solely on alcohol or drugs.

If you're going on a night out where alcohol is on offer and you're trying not to drink, try just sticking to soft drinks or a non-alcoholic drink instead of alcoholic ones. No one has to know the difference. Let your friends know that you don't want to drink alcohol. Ask them not to buy you alcoholic drinks and not to try to pressure you into drinking or taking drugs. This can be difficult, and definitely easier said than done. But

if you stand strong and don't let the pressure get to you, they should respect your choice.

Plan alternative nights out with friends that don't involve going to the pub, a nightclub or anywhere else that you're surrounded by drink. Instead, you could go out for something to eat, organise a film night at home or do something different that you wouldn't normally do.

*“It is really difficult to just say ‘no’ that you will not drink or you will not get drunk but I have found that by doing this and continuing to do this you learn a lot about yourself and your friends in the process. A great challenge in life is learning to have fun and be ok with yourself without needing a drink to do so.” - Cian*

## Smoking

Nearly 6,000 people die in Ireland each year from the effects of smoking, and many more are affected by it. Cigarettes and tobacco contain harmful chemicals like nicotine, tar, and carbon monoxide which are highly addictive and poisonous to the body. Being around second hand smoke is also dangerous, especially for children.

Smoking causes long-term effects to your health such as breathing problems, throat cancer, lung cancer, mouth cancer, stomach ulcers and more. Half of all smokers in Ireland will die from a tobacco related disease.

In the short term, smoking affects your skin, teeth, breath, and gives an odour to your clothes and hair. Nicotine affects the brain and has negative effects on your mood, sleep quality, and mental health. Buying cigarettes or tobacco is also expensive and can be a drain on you financially.

Some young people smoke 'roll up' cigarettes or 'rollies' because it is cheaper than buying standard cigarettes. Some people believe that this is also a healthier alternative, when in reality they are often much worse for you. E-cigarettes and 'vaping' have also been marketed as a 'healthier' alternative to smoking cigarettes. The truth is, that from a health perspective, any amount of nicotine or tobacco in your system is too much.

The best thing to do is to never start smoking. But if you do smoke, here are some of the benefits of quitting:

- Within 20 minutes your circulation will improve.
- Within eight hours the carbon monoxide level in your blood will drop and the oxygen level will go up.
- Within a few days your sense of smell and taste will start to improve.
- Within one year the chances of having a heart attack drops by half and within two years the risk drops to almost the same as a non-smoker.
- Within five years the risk of smoking related cancers will be greatly reduced.

## Social smoking

Someone who thinks of themselves as a social smoker is someone who usually only smokes in social situations such as in pubs, nightclubs, parties and music events. Many social smokers do not smoke every day and may only smoke on a night out or with friends. Many people who smoke socially do not see themselves as smokers, or as having an addiction to nicotine. But any amount of smoking is dangerous, and many people who start as social smokers usually become regular smokers due to its addictiveness.

Sadly, because of the disease causing properties of tobacco and the addictive nature of nicotine there is no safe limit for cigarette smoking or vaping. The social smoker is vulnerable to the same harmful health effects as regular smokers. No matter what the frequency, smoking still exposes you to thousands of harmful chemicals. So there is no safe lower limit of intake.

## Vaping

Vaping is an electronic version of smoking cigarettes, where vapour instead of smoke is inhaled from an e-cigarette. E-cigarettes do not contain tobacco or carbon monoxide, however they do contain nicotine and other chemicals which can be harmful and addictive.

Some people are choosing to vape instead of smoke, viewing it as a healthier option. However, until long term research has been carried out, we will not know the true health effects of vaping. If a young person chooses to smoke tobacco or vape, they are still inhaling nicotine which is highly addictive. The younger a person tries nicotine the greater the negative effects can be.

As a young person the brain is more vulnerable to the effects of addictive substances. Nicotine can disrupt brain development, interfere with long-term cognitive functioning, and increase the risk of various mental and physical health problems later in life. The safest option is to avoid smoking or vaping completely.

## Smoking and mental health

When you smoke a cigarette, nicotine activates the pleasure centres of your brain and produces dopamine, a chemical that makes you feel good. But while it might give you a temporary boost, in the long run, smoking can harm your mental health.

Nicotine creates an immediate sense of relaxation because of the initial chemical reaction. As a result, some people smoke believing that it will reduce anxiety and stress. But smoking causes your body to release the stress hormone cortisol. High levels of cortisol can leave you feeling stressed in the long run. It can also cause your anxiety to worsen.

Smoking encourages the brain to stop making its own dopamine. The amount of dopamine in your brain then decreases over time. This will happen even though you might continue to smoke more to feel good again.

Quitting smoking is one of the best decisions you can make for your physical and mental health. When you stop smoking, your quality of life and mood can drastically improve. Research even shows that giving up smoking can be as effective as antidepressants. If you are on any anti-psychotic medicine or antidepressants, let your GP or psychiatrist know before you quit. They might need to change the amount of medication you are on.

## How do I quit?

There is no quick fix to stopping smoking, it takes a lot of determination and willpower and you may need support from friends and family. It might take a few tries, but stick with it and you will be able to quit.

- **Plan ahead** - If you are thinking about stopping smoking choose a day to quit beforehand.
- **Take one day at a time** - It may be a cliché but it really is true, take one day at a time and if you do slip up by having a cigarette, don't worry. Simply start over the next day.
- **Reward yourself** - Save the money you would have spent on smoking and spend it on something nice for yourself.
- **Don't give up** - It takes most smokers several attempts to quit smoking, so don't beat yourself up if you don't manage it straight away. The most important thing is to keep trying.

Talk to your GP or pharmacist for help and advice about the best way to quit smoking. For more help to quit smoking visit [QUIT.ie](https://quit.ie) and sign up for an online quit plan. Visit [spunout.ie/Quit](https://spunout.ie/Quit) for more information on your quit journey and tips on how to stay smoke free.

## Support Services

- Alcohol and drugs helpline - [1800 459459](tel:1800459459)
- Drugs.ie provide information and support on alcohol and drugs - [drugs.ie](https://drugs.ie)
- Narcotics Anonymous is an association who support people who are recovering from drug addiction - [na-ireland.org](https://na-ireland.org)
- Alcoholics Anonymous is a support group for people recovering from alcoholism - [alcoholicsanonymous.ie](https://alcoholicsanonymous.ie)
- Al Anon is a support group for families and friends of problem drinkers - [al-anon-ireland.org](https://al-anon-ireland.org)
- National Smokers' Quitline - [1850 201203](tel:1850201203)
- [Quit.ie](https://quit.ie) provides information and support to quit smoking

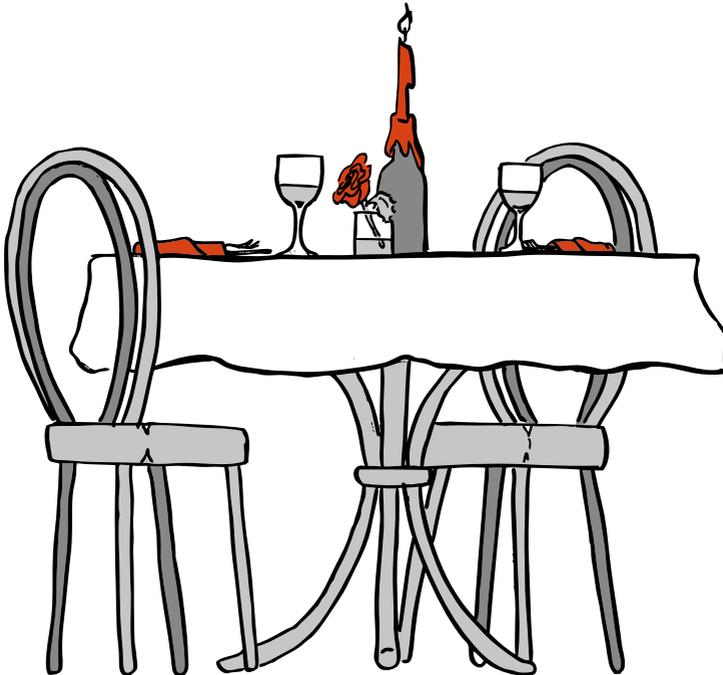
# Chapter Summary

- ✓ Be sure to do your research on drugs and their effects before you make a decision about what is healthy for you.
- ✓ Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Ireland, and although it is a legal drug for those over 18, it is still dangerous, addictive, and can cause serious damage to your physical and mental health.
- ✓ It is against the law for anyone under 18 to buy alcohol in a pub, off-licence or shop. It is also illegal for a person to buy alcohol for someone who is under 18.
- ✓ If you are arrested and found with drugs in your possession you could face up to seven years in prison, and longer if the judge feels that you were going to supply the drugs to other people.
- ✓ If you are worried about yourself or someone you know who is drinking or taking drugs, remember that there is always help and support out there.
- ✓ There is no healthy amount of smoking or vaping. Seek support to stay smoke free or to quit.

## Chapter 5

# Sexuality & Relationships

Coming out, going out and dealing with the good, the bad and the toxic. Looking at sexual orientation, identity, relationships, and supporting LGBTI+ friends and family.



# Sexuality & Relationships

There are many different types of relationships. We have sexual and romantic relationships, as well as relationships with our family, friends, partners, coworkers, and acquaintances. Having positive relationships is good for your mental health. A relationship usually develops when you have a connection with another person. The best relationships are obviously healthy but others can be less healthy and even toxic.

## Healthy sexuality

Many people in the world experience sexual desire. This means we find other people attractive and think about them in a sexual way. Some people want to have sex with other people, whereas others are happy to just think about it privately. And some people experience sexual desire rarely, or not at all. Sexuality is about how you think and feel about sex. Healthy sexuality is about having a confident, comfortable and communicative attitude towards your sexual desires, whether you want to have sex or not.

Sex can be a healthy and positive part of life, but it's important to only have sex when you want to with consenting partners. A big part of this is knowing how to clearly say no, and to be able to recognise when someone else is saying no. Having a healthy sexuality is just as much about being able to say that you don't want to have sex, as being able to say that you do.

If you decide to have sex, it's important to make sure that you're always comfortable and happy with it. You should always feel safe and respected, and that you, in turn, are making your partner feel safe and respected. If you do not enjoy your sex life, it's important to be able to confidently express this, and likewise, it's important to be able to listen to your partner's concerns about sex too.

## What is my sexual orientation?

Your sexual orientation, refers to what kinds of people you find attractive or like. You might feel unsure about your sexual orientation and who you find attractive might change at different stages of your life, but this is completely normal. There is no rush to understand your sexual

orientation. Some people have a very clear idea from a young age and some people feel differently about it throughout their lives. It's okay to take your time to experiment and think about what you like. You don't have to tell others anything about your sexuality or who you like, unless you want to, but remember it can help to talk. The most important thing is to feel comfortable and proud of who you are, no matter what way you identify or express yourself.

Your sexual orientation is different to your gender identity. Your gender identity is about who you are, and your sexual orientation is about who you like.

## Being LGBTI+

### Am I LGBTI+?

There are many ways to label or express your sexual orientation. Some common words are lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, queer, gay, straight, or asexual. We might also hear the terms homosexual and heterosexual. There are as many unique sexualities as there are people in the world. SpunOut.ie has a glossary of terms ('A-Z of sexual orientation') to help you understand some of the words people use to describe their experiences and ways of being in the world. No matter how you experience your sexual attraction to others, it is all normal and okay, and you deserve to feel safe and supported in your sexual orientation.

If you feel attraction to people who have the same gender as you, you might be gay, lesbian or queer. If you feel attraction to people of multiple genders or regardless of gender you might be bisexual or pansexual. If you don't identify with the gender you were assigned at birth, you might be transgender. The I in LGBTI+ stands for intersex. Someone who is intersex was born with a body with a variation of the sex characteristics for a 'female' or 'male' body. The + in LGBTI+ is to include all of the other identities and people that the acronym does not show.

Some people know their sexual orientation from a young age, but others take more time or are not sure until they get older. Being attracted to someone who is the same gender as you is completely normal and there's nothing wrong with exploring those feelings and having

relationships to help you decide. It's important to respect the people you get into relationships with when you're figuring things out. It is very common to have crushes on lots of different types of people as you grow up. There is no rush to label your sexuality, now or ever. Do what feels authentic and comfortable for you.

## **Stereotypes**

There are lots of stereotypes about being LGBTI+ but that doesn't mean they are true. Being LGBTI+ is about who you're emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to, not about how you look or dress. You cannot tell someone's sexual orientation or gender identity from looking at them. You don't have to change who you are or how you look because of your identity. No matter your sexual orientation or gender identity, don't feel you have to change to meet people's expectations - you're great the way you are.

## **Meeting other people**

When you are coming to terms with your sexual orientation and sexuality, sometimes it can be helpful to talk things over with someone who has gone through it before. Also getting support from your peers going through the same thing can be useful, so it might be a good idea to check out some of the support services at the end of this chapter.

## **Bisexuality**

Bisexuality or pansexuality is when people feel attracted to more than one gender. The strength of your feelings towards different genders might change over time. You can be bisexual and not act on those feelings. Or you might have relationships with people of various gender identities during your life. It is totally normal to be bisexual or pansexual. There are some scientists (such as the late Alfred Kinsey) who think that every human is bisexual to some degree; it just may or may not be expressed.

## **The 'T' in LGBTI+**

Transgender is an umbrella term for those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the gender they were given at birth. Most babies when they are born are labelled 'female' or 'male' due to certain

physical characteristics. These babies are then raised in the world as girls and boys, and later live as women and men. But this pattern does not suit every person. And many people feel the label or gender category they were given at birth is not correct. People who are cisgender do identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

It's important if you are friends with or know a trans person to address them with the correct name, pronouns, and gendered language that they refer to themselves as and are comfortable with. This is a necessary part of respect for all people, transgender or cisgender. Transgender people include people who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-nonconforming people. Binary means something that is composed of only two things, such as 'man and woman' or 'girl and boy.' Many people will experience their gender outside of the gender binary. Meaning they are not strictly a 'man' or a 'woman'.

Some trans people have known they are trans from a very young age, while others realise much later. Everyone experiences their gender in different and personal ways. So what is true for one person, may not be true for another. When it comes to people's gender, it is helpful to hold off on judgements or generalisations.

## Being Asexual

Being asexual means you experience little to no sexual attraction or desire. Being asexual does not mean something is 'wrong' with you or that your sexual desire is 'broken' and needs to be 'fixed'. People of all ages, backgrounds, or sexual orientations can be asexual.

Asexual people who experience different types of romantic or sensual attraction. Asexual people who experience different types of romantic, aesthetic, or sensual attraction might have these attractions for men, women, nonbinary people, or people of any gender.

Just as with a sexual person, asexual people experience a range of emotional needs. Like sexual people some asexual people will want to have romantic relationships where others will be happier with friendships or choosing to be on their own. Regardless of whether a relationship is sexual or non-sexual, they are often built on the grounds of closeness, shared interests, fun, trust and care for one another.

Although asexual people experience little to no sexual attraction or desire, they might still choose to have sex. The reason an asexual person may have sex can vary, just as that with a sexual person, but can include wanting to pleasure themselves or their partners, or if they want to become pregnant. Other asexual people may choose not to engage in sexual activity.

## Talk to someone

If your sexual orientation or gender identity is causing you stress, it can be helpful to talk to someone. It is especially important to open up to someone if you are being bullied or experiencing discrimination due to your sexual orientation or gender identity. A professional counsellor or therapist who is informed on LGBTI+ issues and has worked with other LGBTI+ people may be able to support you and give you a space to speak openly. Be sure to check out some of the services listed at the end of this chapter if you need support.

## Coming out

‘Coming out’ is a phrase used to describe when a person decides to tell someone about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Most people are assumed to be straight and cisgender, until someone ‘comes out’ and says otherwise. But we know this isn’t true and is actually a kind of discrimination. If you decide to ‘come out’, you could consider telling someone that you trust and who supports you.

Deciding to tell someone that you’re LGBTI+ is a very personal decision. You only need to tell someone when you’re ready and if you want to. Coming out as LGBTI+ can be a hugely positive experience; a liberating time when you embrace your identity. But sometimes it can be a stressful or difficult thing to do as well. Whether you decide to come out or not, there is no need to feel any guilt about it. You are who you are - and you shouldn’t feel you have to hide.

*“If you are LGBTI+ or if you’re questioning your sexuality, the burden on your mind is enormous. It’s often said a problem shared is a problem halved, so telling someone can often lift a weight off your shoulders. However, who/if/when you tell is up to you.” - Stephen*

## Deciding when to come out

Being LGBTI+ in Ireland, especially in smaller towns, can be tough. How you handle it is up to you, and some people decide to be more open than others about their sexuality. Everyone is different and it's important to respect other people's decisions and choices. Just because you might be out doesn't mean everyone else is ready to be out at the same time, people deal with things at different paces. Being LGBTI+ is normal, and you deserve to be your true self. Hiding your sexual orientation or pretending to be straight can place a huge stress on you mentally and emotionally.

You might choose to tell friends but not your parents, or to tell everyone you know. If you tell some people and not others, remember that secrets have a habit of escaping. When you're ready to come out, start by telling someone you trust and that you think will be supportive. This will give you confidence to tell other people. Maybe you have imagined what people will say, and chances are it will be quite different. Being LGBTI+ doesn't mean you're a different person, and people shouldn't treat you any differently. If when you come out you are met with stupid questions, ignorance, nasty comments or abuse, this is not your fault. Some people react badly to something they don't understand — but this is no excuse. Keep the people who understand and are supportive close. And remember, it is okay to take some space away from the people who don't accept you for you.

## Supporting LGBTI+ friends and family

Coming out isn't always easy. If a family member or friend comes out to you or you find out that they are LGBTI+, you may feel unsure about what to do. You may not need to do anything — but it can be helpful to think of some ways to be supportive.

Make sure they know that you love and accept them no matter what. Many LGBTI+ people worry that they will no longer be accepted if they come out so it's important that you reassure them that their sexual orientation or gender identity has not changed how you feel about them. Let your friend or family member know that you are there if they ever want to talk and offload. If they have just come out they might have to deal with other people's prejudices. If they have asked you to keep it to yourself, assure them that you will. Just because they are

comfortable and confident enough to come out to you, doesn't mean they are ready to come out to their parents or to the rest of the world. Don't pressure them to tell other people if they have chosen to keep things private for now. They will tell others when they are ready - the last thing they need is more stress and pressure.

Check in with how your friend or family member is feeling, as some LGBTI+ people can feel depressed and isolated, especially if they have not come out to anyone else but you. Let them know that they are not alone and that there is support out there (see the end of this chapter for helpful services). If you are really worried about a friend or family member being depressed or suicidal, it's important to encourage them to seek professional help.

Remember that your friend or family member hasn't changed; they are still the same person. If they have a partner, welcome them and be warm and friendly. It can be intimidating for someone who is LGBTI+ to bring their partner to meet family or friends, so let them know that you support them.



## Relationships: the good and the bad

Your sexuality is just one part of the picture. Soon you might start having relationships and dealing with your romantic feelings towards other people. This can be scary at times, but when a relationship is good it can be a lot of fun.

## Being in a relationship

At some stage in your life you may choose to be in a relationship. When a relationship is going well it can be the best feeling in the world. When it's not going so good there can be feelings of hurt, sadness, anger, rejection and isolation. Your confidence is low and it can be hard to think clearly. It can be hard to know the signs of a healthy relationship, but try to trust your gut. If your partner puts you down or says things that make you feel bad about yourself, the relationship is probably not worth your time. If you are feeling pressured to do something you don't want to do or don't feel comfortable with: say no. Respect your own choices. Make sure to respect your partner and that they respect you. If you are getting involved sexually then it makes sense to know about the risks and plan ahead to avoid them. Remember the age of sexual consent is 17 (find out more in our chapter on sexual health).

## Being single

Not everyone has to be part of a couple or in a relationship. There are a lot of pros to being single, like having more time to focus on yourself, your interests, and your friends. Having friends who you enjoy spending time with and who support you is a really important part of life, whether you're single or dating. It might bother you if it seems like all your friends are coupling up, but everyone's relationship journey is different and we all go at our own pace.

## Do I want to be in a relationship?

All relationships are unique and move forward at their own time and pace. Sometimes though, one partner wants to move faster than the other. While you may be happy and content with where you are, your partner might want more commitment from you or vice versa. Commitment can mean different things to different people; it can be going from a casual couple to an exclusive relationship, seeing more of each other, or bringing up the boyfriend/girlfriend conversation. If you are a person who likes your alone time, the thought of a big commitment to another person may freak you out.

## How to handle it

- **Talk it out with your partner and listen to each other.** Oftentimes, a quiet but public place is the best area to chat about things. You could go for a long walk or sit in a quiet cafe and hash it all out.
- **Think of a compromise** such as instead of seeing each other every day you see each other three times a week or find something that works for both of you.
- **Respect each other's views** on the situation but be aware that you might be at different places in your lives and the timing for this relationship might not be right.

## Dealing with changing relationships

As you get older, your relationships with classmates, friends, family and partners can change. You can experience good and bad relationships. It's important to be aware of how you feel within these relationships as they can affect your mental health.

In good relationships, you can feel positive, loved, confident, wanted and comfortable. Having a happy positive relationship is good for your mental health. This goes for all types of relationships. Being in a good relationship doesn't mean you won't still feel down sometimes. Remember that no one should be expected to feel happy and positive all the time.

In a bad relationship you could be left feeling confused. You could love and hate the person at the same time, feel trapped, depressed or worthless. These kinds of feelings can bring you down and affect your mental health, that's why it's so important to choose the people in your life wisely. There's no point staying in a relationship just for the sake of it. Communicate how you really feel, and if your needs aren't being met it could be time to move on. If you are in a relationship that is abusive, be that emotionally, physically or sexually, it's important you remember that no one deserves that kind of treatment, and there is support out there for you. See the end of the chapter for more information on support services.

*“It is rare that someone ends a relationship just one day out of the blue. There are usually warning signs such as arguments or a lack of interest on one party’s behalf. Perhaps we should heed these and either try to resolve the issues that exist in our relationship, or face the fact that things just aren’t working and take the high road..” - Kristine*

## Tips for better communication

- Try to listen to the other person’s point of view even if you don’t agree.
- Be respectful (even if the other person is not). Don’t resort to cursing, shouting or put-downs.
- Try to let the other person finish before you have your say.
- Make your point as clearly as you can.
- Choose a good time to discuss touchy subjects.
- Be as open and honest as you can; sharing the good and the bad is part of a healthy relationship.
- Leave room for compromise and be reasonable. Ask for what you want but accept that sometimes it is not possible or practical.

## I feel like I’m in a toxic relationship

A toxic relationship is one that is bad for you. Instead of bringing security, contentment and joy to your life, a toxic relationship brings you more sadness than happiness. A toxic relationship is also usually full of ups and downs — you may feel ecstatic and extremely happy one day and utterly devastated the next. In the long term, toxic relationships can be bad for your mental and physical health. Signs of a toxic relationship:

- You get pulled in and doted on one day, and pushed away and ignored the next.
- You feel emotionally unstable, lose confidence and have lower self-esteem than you used to.
- You feel that you bear all the responsibility for making the relationship work.
- Your partner puts you down, and your gut instincts don’t let you fully trust them.

- Your partner gets jealous of the time you spend with others and might text/phone obsessively.
- Your partner may tell you that they love you but their actions might speak differently. They might “use” love as a way to keep you in a relationship.
- You change yourself to please your partner more. This can mean anything from becoming quieter if they don’t like your loud side, to losing or gaining weight and to dropping your hobbies if they are not into them.
- You lose yourself completely and feel like you could not survive without your partner.

## Abusive relationships

Abuse can happen in different close relationships, such as friends, family, coworkers, or partners, but can also happen with people you don’t know. No matter the situation, abuse is never acceptable.

If you are in an abusive relationship or live with domestic violence, help is out there for you. This can be easier said than done as you might still care for or love the abuser, and you may be frightened of more abuse if you leave.

Abuse can include neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, threats, manipulation and being made to feel unsafe. People of any age or gender can experience abuse. Nobody has the right to hurt you in any way, even if they’re in a position of authority or they say that they love you. Abuse is wrong even if you think it’s your fault or that the abuser didn’t mean to hurt you. Remember, there is help out there and you deserve better.

## Finding help for abuse

- Tell someone you trust about the abuse and ask them to support you or go with you to tell someone who can help.
- If you can’t tell anyone that you know, you can speak confidentially with Samaritans or another support service.
- Sometimes an abuser will threaten to harm you or someone you love if you tell anyone what’s happening. These threats are a way

of keeping you silent. You could consider telling the Gardaí, as they might be able to help keep you and your family safe.

- If the abuser is living in your home then you might need a temporary place to live for safety. There are refuges for those who are leaving abuse and the Gardaí can help you. If you're under 18 you can get help from social services.
- Telling someone you're being abused doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be taken away from your family. Social services will try to work out a situation that means you are in the safest environment for you; this could be with or away from your family.
- Even after the abuse has stopped you might have emotional or self-confidence problems. It may be a good idea to visit a counsellor to help cope with feelings in the aftermath of abuse.
- Remember that abuse is never your fault, victims of abuse are never to blame for what happens to them.

## How to seek out a healthy relationship

- Set boundaries with various people in your life. You may find it easier to stand up to your partner if you have had practice standing up to others in your life. Start small and try to increase your confidence bit by bit.
- Respect yourself. Choose interactions and activities that make you feel uplifted and positive about yourself and your abilities.
- Work on your own life — make time for your interests and hobbies, work hard at school/college or your job, spend time with friends and generally have a relationship with yourself first.
- Surround yourself with friends who get you, and respect you. It will help you remember how you like to be treated and lessen your threshold for toxic behaviour.
- Wait to have sex until you and your partner are both ready. Spend your time with people who respect your boundaries and don't try to pressure you into anything.
- Try to get to know someone well before you enter into a more serious relationship with them. This can help you build up trust and communication with someone, and also gives you time to get to know how they treat people in their life.

- Look into therapy or counselling of some kind. Therapy is a great way to work through your past unhealthy experiences, and can help you have healthier ones in the future.

Find more information by visiting [spunout.ie/Relationships](https://spunout.ie/Relationships)

## Support Services

- BeLonGTo is the national organisation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) young people, aged between 14 and 23 - [belongto.org](https://belongto.org) - 01 670 6223
- Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) seek to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families - [teni.ie](https://teni.ie) - [info@teni.ie](mailto:info@teni.ie) - 01 873 3575
- National LGBT helpline - 1890 929539 - [lgbt.ie](https://lgbt.ie)
- Gay Switchboard Ireland is an LGBTI+ support service - 01 8721055 - [theswitchboard.ie](https://theswitchboard.ie)
- Safe Ireland provide contact information for domestic violence services across Ireland - [safeireland.ie](https://safeireland.ie)
- Mens Aid provide a confidential helpline, information, and support service for male victims of domestic abuse - [mensaid.ie](https://mensaid.ie)
- You can contact Samaritans on 116 123 or Childline on 1800 66 66 66.
- You can call Women's Aid 24hr for support from domestic abuse on 1800 341 900.

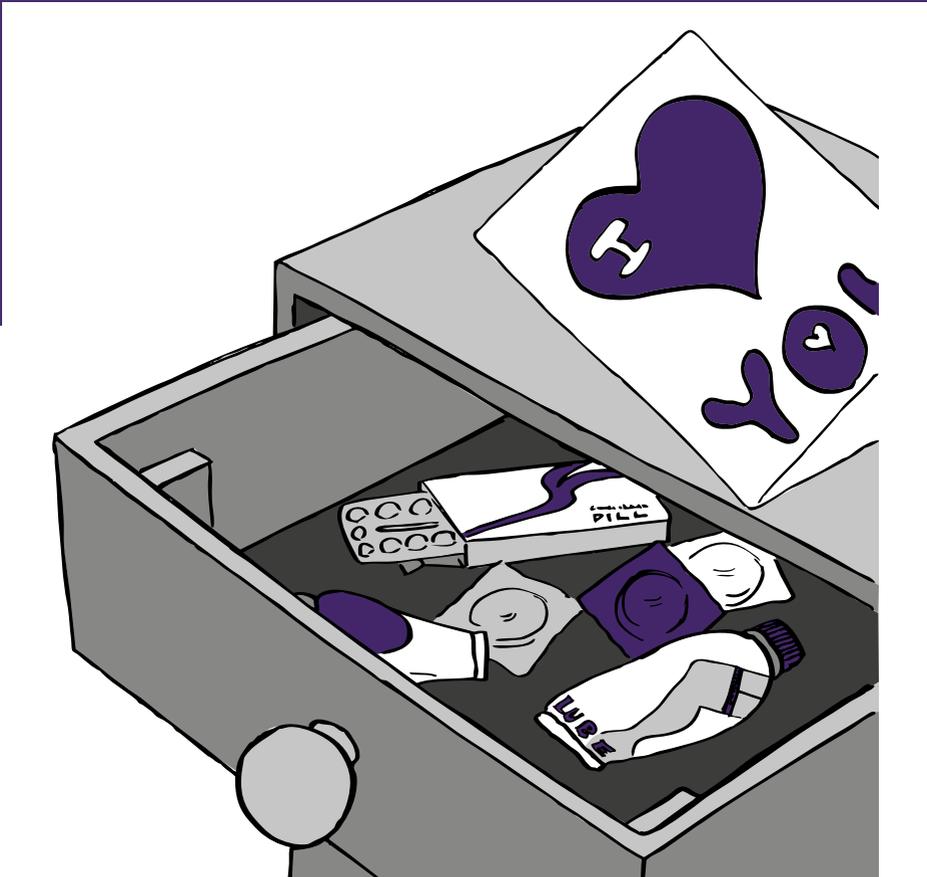
## Chapter Summary

- ✓ There are many ways to describe your sexual orientation. Any way you experience sexual attraction is perfectly normal.
- ✓ If you feel attraction to people who have the same gender as you or to multiple genders, you might identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or something else. If you only experience attraction to people with a different gender to you, you might be straight.
- ✓ Someone who is transgender is someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the gender they were assigned at birth.
- ✓ Coming out as LGBTI+ can be a very positive experience but it's important to come out if you want to, when you are ready, and to someone you trust.
- ✓ Relationships can be good for your mental health as well as bad and it's important to be aware and foster positive relationships in your life.

## Chapter 6

# Sexual Health

All you need to know about sex, consent and knowing when you're ready. We look at consent, safer sex, porn, sexting, STIs and getting tested.



# Sexual Health

People have sex for lots of different reasons. For fun, for sexual pleasure, to feel close to someone and be intimate, or sometimes to get pregnant.

Sometimes it might feel like everyone is having sex but you. But the reality is that everyone's sex life is different, and as for people your age, they're almost never having as much sex as they say they're having.

No matter what your friends are doing, you should only have sex when you are ready, and you should never feel pressured into doing something that you don't feel comfortable with.

No one deserves judgment for their consensual sexual choices. We all express our sexuality in different ways. What's right for one person may not be right for you and that is okay. We can all support each other on our journeys of sexual wellbeing and encourage each other to be safe and respectful of others.

## Getting your period

Most people with a uterus (or womb) will experience menstruation during their life as part of their monthly cycle. Your cycle begins on the first day of your period and ends on the first day of your next period, when a new cycle begins. Your menstrual cycle is the process where your body prepares your uterus for a pregnancy. It includes ovulation, which is when a microscopic egg flows down from the ovary into the fallopian tube where it waits to be fertilised.

If the egg is fertilised - that is, you have sex and sperm meets your egg - it will travel down from the fallopian tube and into the womb and attach itself to the now thickened womb lining. Once attached, the fertilised egg sends its own hormone signals (in the form of estrogen and progesterone) out to keep the womb lining thick and to turn off the ovulation process until that pregnancy is finished.

If your egg does not get fertilised, the hormones that support the thickened womb lining (mainly progesterone) start to drop and the womb lining begins to come away from the wall of the womb. The tissue, blood and tiny egg flow out of the opening of the womb and through your vagina as the menstrual period.

The average menstrual cycle lasts around 28 days, but this can be different for everyone. It could vary from 21 days to 40 days. If you're concerned about your cycle, speak to your doctor.

## Having sex and the risk of pregnancy during your period

Although the idea of having sex on your period is not for everyone, if both you and your partner are comfortable with it then there's nothing wrong with that. Some people find that having sex or masturbating while on their period can help to lift their mood and ease cramps.

If there is a possibility of pregnancy, make sure to use protection by wearing a condom, because you can still become pregnant even if you are on your period. Period blood can carry HIV and STIs, so condoms and dental dams are always a good idea to prevent the spread of STIs.

## Dealing with pain during your period

Period pain is common, but it's not the same for everyone. Some people experience little to no pain, while others can find period cramps so painful that it's difficult for them to do anything in the first few days of their period.

Most period pain can be treated with over the counter painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen. If you have asthma or stomach problems, avoid ibuprofen and choose paracetamol instead. If you experience severe pain, you may want to speak to your doctor. Sometimes pain can be caused by an underlying medical condition, and your doctor can help you find ways to manage this.

Your GP might be able to prescribe you something stronger if neither of these work. They might also consider putting you on a form of hormonal contraception such as the pill, because this can sometimes help to reduce period pain, or stop the period altogether.

## Period products

There are a variety of period products such as pads, tampons, menstrual cups and period pants. Usually, a person will try a variety of products to find the one that works best for them. Visit [spunout.ie/Period](https://spunout.ie/Period) to learn more about the product that might suit you best.



## Consent and being ready for sex

### What does the law say about sex?

The term 'sexual age of consent' means the age that someone is legally allowed to have sex. The age of sexual consent is 17 in the Republic of Ireland and 16 in Northern Ireland.

This means that if you are under the age of 17, you are not legally allowed to have sex. It means that someone who has sex under the age of 17 or with someone else under the age of 17, may be prosecuted by the Gardaí.

However, just because the age of legal sexual consent is 17, this does not mean that by age 17 everyone is emotionally ready to have sex. The word consent means to agree to something. No matter what your age, sex must always be consensual. When it comes to sex, people must clearly say 'yes' that they consent to what happens between them.

*"Respect is number one. But what does respect mean? To me, it's the three Cs: consent, communication and comfort. No matter what the situation, this "Big Three" should always be present." - Aine*

## Deciding to have sex

Deciding to have sex can be tricky, no matter how old you are or if you've had sex before.

Sex can be a healthy and positive part of life, but it's important to only have sex if you want to. A big part of this is feeling comfortable to say no, and to be able to recognise when someone else is saying no. Having a healthy sexuality is just as much about being able to say that you don't want to have sex, as being able to say that you do.

If you decide to have sex, it's important to make sure that you're always comfortable and happy with it. You should always feel safe and respected, and that you, in turn, are making your partner feel safe and respected.

When it comes to making tough decisions, trust your instincts and gut feeling (which is usually right) and if you aren't sure what to do, talk to a friend or someone you trust. No one should ever be pressured or bullied into sex, or be made to feel you are letting someone down if you don't engage sexually in some way.

If your partner tries to pressure you into doing something that you are not ready for then you might want to think about whether they are the right person to have in your life. You deserve people who like you for you, and respect your boundaries.

Along the same lines, what your friends are doing shouldn't affect your personal decisions. Although it may appear from TV or people's exaggerations that everyone is having sex, this is far from the reality of everyday life. Everyone is different, has different desires, and moves at a different pace. What feels right for you is right, and everyone should respect this.

Here are some things to consider:

- Do we both want to have sex?
- Do we respect each other and feel comfortable?
- Have we talked about STI testing?
- Have we talked about how we will protect against STIs or an unplanned pregnancy?



## Using protection

Even in the heat of the moment, it's important to always remember to use protection. Using protection every time you have sex is the only way to protect you and your partner from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or an unwanted pregnancy.

Depending on the type of sex you are having (oral sex, vaginal penetration, anal penetration etc.) there are different precautions to take.

Always carry a barrier method of protection, such as a condom or dental dam. Carrying a condom doesn't mean that you expect sex, it just means that you're being smart and prepared.

Even if you are using another type of contraception, such as the pill or the coil, you still need to use condoms and dental dams to protect against STIs.

Learn about the different types of protection and contraception at [spunout.ie/Contraception](https://spunout.ie/Contraception)

## What contraception is free in Ireland?

The HSE has launched a new service to provide free prescription and emergency contraception for 17 to 25-year-olds. The free contraception service will cover the full cost of prescription contraception, including the cost of:

- GP or doctor’s appointments – to talk about contraception options and for repeat prescriptions when needed
- Any prescriptions given by your doctor – these will be given free of charge at participating pharmacies
- Your choice of contraception – from a wide range of short-term and long-term contraceptives such as the patch, pill, ring, implant, injection and IUDs
- Fittings and removals of implants and IUDs or IUSs (coils)
- Any check-ups or other follow-up care needed, relating to your implant or coil
- Emergency contraception (morning after pill).

Full details, including how to access free contraception, and information about contraception choices are available on [sexualwellbeing.ie](https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).

## What is consent?

Consent is an agreement between partners that they definitely want to have sex, or do any sexual act. Both partners need to fully, clearly, and freely agree to it, and it must be continuous for the duration of sex. Meaning you have the right to change your mind at any time.

Consent is needed for vaginal, anal or oral sex, mutual masturbation, sexual touching, or kissing. Consent can be expressed both verbally and physically - so it can be with words, as well as actions and body language. It must be enthusiastic, conscious and freely given. This means consent must be given without pressure, threat or manipulation. If consent is not expressed freely, this is not sex - it is assault.

Consent can be expressed in a variety of ways, and a lack of consent can be expressed in just as many ways. Someone may not say the word “no” with their voice but they may say it with their bodies or tone of voice. Furthermore, consent is not the absence of a ‘no’, it is the presence of a clear, enthusiastic and ongoing ‘yes’. Consent is about communicating to make sure partners are on the same page.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when it comes to understanding consent and body language:

- Is your partner not responding to your touch?
- Are they pushing you away?
- Are they holding their arms tightly around their body?
- Are they turning away from you or hiding their face?
- Are their muscles stiffening?
- Do they seem upset?
- Are they remaining silent?
- Do they seem un-enthusiastic and not into it?
- Have they said that they're feeling too tired or sick?
- Are they changing the subject away from sex, or trying to concentrate on other activities?

If the answer to any of the above is yes, then you should stop immediately, and talk about it. If you're not sure and you're getting mixed signals, just ask your partner if they want to proceed, and how far they want to go.

We have a responsibility to look after each other, and make sure our partners are comfortable, safe, and fully consenting. It's really important that everyone can identify when a partner is providing consent, and when they are not. Respecting those wishes is very important.

## **What's your comfort zone?**

If you don't feel ready or don't want to have sex with someone, then it's important to know your comfort zone, and how to communicate it.

You may want to kiss or touch with clothes on, but not want to touch under clothes. Or maybe you would like to have oral sex, but do not want to have penetrative sex. Whatever your comfort zone, it is important that you don't feel pressured into doing anything you don't want to do.

Sometimes it can help to have a plan of what you would and would not like to do before you go on a date or spend time with someone.

Then you might feel less stressed about having to figure out what you are comfortable with in the heat of the moment. Consider how you will communicate your boundaries and how you will listen to your partner's boundaries as well. Regardless of if you make a plan or not, when it comes to sex, your boundaries must always be respected in the moment.

## **How to say no to sex if you don't want to**

Sex can be a very vulnerable experience for some, and communication is key. You and your sexual partner/s should communicate what your boundaries are and what you are and are not comfortable with.

You can say no or stop at any point even if you've already started to have sex. You can always change your mind and the other person must respect this. Just because you have slept with someone before or because you are dating or in a relationship, does not mean you owe them sex at any point.

If you have decided that you don't want to have sex, be clear and direct with your partner. Simply say 'I don't want to do that' or 'I'm not comfortable with that'. If they continue to pressure you, say 'no' again in a firm voice, and remind them they are making you uncomfortable. If need be, get up and put space between you and the other person or leave. They may try to make you feel guilty by saying, 'if you really liked me you would...' or 'you're such a tease'. Ignore whatever line they give you. There is no pressure on you to do anything that you don't want to, and they should respect that.

## **Masturbation**

No matter your sexual experience, it can sometimes be difficult to know what you like or want sexually. Masturbation is one way to get to know your body and find out what you do or don't like. Masturbation is the touching of the genitals (penis, testicles, vagina, clitoris, anus) for pleasure.

People often masturbate in order to have a sexual release known as an orgasm, but this is not necessarily the case for everyone. Only masturbate if you want to and feel comfortable, and be sure you are in a private place.

## Sex toys

There are many different ways of masturbating. Some people masturbate with sex toys. Sex toys are objects or devices that are designed to give people sexual pleasure or to enhance sex with partners. There are some safety concerns with sex toys, so be sure to only use a toy that is meant for sexual pleasure. Using household objects is dangerous. Only insert toys in the vagina or anus with a flared base so that they do not get caught in your body. And remember, if you share a toy with someone, STIs can be passed through sex toys if they are not cleaned properly.

## Oral sex

Oral sex is a type of sex that involves using your mouth, lips or tongue to stimulate another person's genitals or anus. Oral sex is very intimate, so it's important that you feel ready. No one should pressure or bully you into having oral sex before you are ready or before you feel safe and comfortable with that person.

Although you cannot get pregnant from oral sex, sexually transmitted infections can be passed on to both partners through oral sex. Use protection like a condom on a penis or a dental dam on a vagina or anus.

A mouth barrier or 'dental dam' is a thin piece of rubber that can be placed over the vagina or anus during oral sex to protect both partners against sexually transmitted infections. A condom can also be cut vertically and used as a dental dam.

Avoid having oral sex if you have a cut in your mouth, bleeding gums, mouth ulcers, lip sores or broken skin as it is possible for infection to enter your body.

## Alcohol, drugs, and consent

Alcohol and drugs can affect your ability to make decisions, compared to if you were sober. This includes the decision to partake in sex or sexual activity. Using condoms or other types of protection can be more difficult when you're under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which

means you are more at risk of catching an STI or having an unplanned pregnancy. If you do have sex when under the influence, without protection — make sure to get tested for an STI, and, if needed, get emergency contraception.

Be aware of drinking alcohol or taking drugs on a date or with a partner, as this puts strain on communication. You want to be sure that you and your partner are comfortable with everything that transpires, and when alcohol or drugs are in the mix, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to navigate consent.

If you were pressured into sex when you were drinking or taking drugs (or at any time), this is NOT your fault. Talk to someone you trust, and let them know what's happened.

## **Sexual violence**

Sexual violence can take many different forms. It can be any sexual action or behaviour done without consent, through force or violence, or where the person is under pressure or being coerced or manipulated. There is a spectrum of harmful sexual behaviour ranging from catcalls and sexual harassment in public, a social setting, or online, to sexual assault and rape. But none of this behaviour is acceptable.

Sexual violence can happen within a relationship or by someone you love or care about, family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. A person of any gender or sexual orientation can be sexually assaulted and, likewise, a person of any gender or sexual orientation can commit a sexual assault. What links all types of sexual violence is the lack of consent in the interaction. It is never okay to be sexually spoken to, touched, harassed, be exposed to sexual content, or have sexual experiences that you have not consented to. These are crimes. Beyond the criminal context, these experiences are often harmful and traumatic for those who have experienced them.

## **Supporting someone who has experienced sexual violence**

It is important to support and believe people who speak out about sexual violence they have experienced. It can be difficult to speak

out about these experiences, because there can be fear of not being supported or believed. Statistically, virtually no one lies about experiencing sexual violence, harassment or abuse. So if someone speaks up about what they have been through, listen to them, be empathetic, support them, and believe them.

If you see someone or know of someone who is experiencing sexual harassment or abuse, offer them your support. This can take the form of reporting hate speech online, messaging someone to offer support, referring them to a service, or calling the Gardaí if you see someone in danger. If you see someone trying to take advantage of someone who is drunk or on drugs, help them to get out of the unsafe situation, or tell someone else who can help.

## Getting help for sexual violence

If you've experienced any form of sexual assault or abuse, there is help for you. While it is up to you to decide if you want to share what you have been through, it can help to talk. Tell someone you trust, even if you were assaulted or abused in the past but never spoke about it. Counselling can also be helpful.

A good place to start is contacting the National 24 Hour Helpline at **1800 77 8888**. This is available to anyone who has experienced rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment or childhood sexual abuse. They can talk to you about next steps, or simply just listen. You can also call if you are a concerned friend or family member.

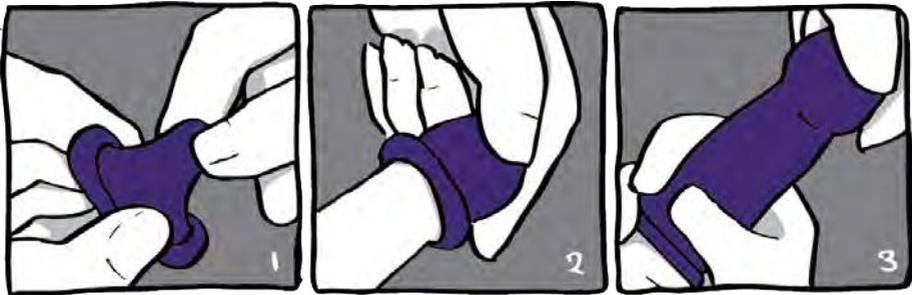
## Protection

When having sex it is important to think about what kind of protection you are going to use. No matter what kind of sex you are having, you need to protect yourself and your partner from STIs. If you are sexually active you should discuss the best method of protection for you with your GP. Condoms are the most regularly used form of protection, and when used correctly, they are one of the only methods which protect against both pregnancy and STIs.

It is important to remember, that like all contraceptives, condoms are not 100% effective. If there's a chance you could become pregnant,

you should use condoms with another form of contraception to protect against pregnancy and STIs. Some other forms of contraception are the contraceptive pill, the vaginal ring, IUS/IUD or coil, contraceptive injections, or a diaphragm. Talk to your doctor to find out about the contraceptive that will work best for you.

The only way to become pregnant through sex is if sperm enters the vagina, usually through vaginal penetration by a penis. Remember, the penis can release sperm, not just during ejaculation, but before it. If you are having oral, anal, or other types of sex that do not have the risk of pregnancy, it is still very important to use condoms and dental dams to prevent the risk of HIV and other sexual infections. A condom is easy to use – once you get the hang of it. Practice makes perfect, so learn how to use one before you need one for real.



## How to use a condom

- Check the use by date. Condoms cannot be used if they have expired.
- Always put a condom on well before you start to have sex or touch your partner's genitals. The penis releases fluid that can contain sperm before and throughout sex, not just during ejaculation.
- Don't let anything sharp (fingernails, jewellery, scissors) damage the condom when you open the package.
- Squeeze out any air in the tip of the condom before putting it on as an air bubble can cause it to tear during sex.
- Unroll the condom down the length of the hard penis. Leave a little space at the tip for semen.

- Check that the condom is on the right way. Do this by checking which way it rolls. If you have problems rolling it on, it is probably because it is on inside out, so you will have to start over with a new condom, as the other one will now have semen on it.
- Pull out immediately after sex. Hold the base of the condom and be careful when removing the condom that you don't spill any semen.
- Keep the penis away from your partner after removing the condom as it will still be covered with semen.
- Wrap the condom and dispose of it safely and hygienically (not down the toilet).
- Remember condoms can only be used once.

## **I've had unprotected sex, what do I do?**

If you have had unprotected sex, it's a good idea for both you and your partner to get checked for a sexually transmitted infection. You can get checked for free at STI clinics across the country. For a list of free STI clinics in Ireland, visit [spunout.ie/GetChecked](https://spunout.ie/GetChecked)

If there is a risk of pregnancy, emergency contraception can prevent pregnancy when you've forgotten to use protection, or if something goes wrong with your protection, like your condom splitting. Depending on the type of emergency contraception available, it must be taken within 72 hours (3 days) or 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex, so it's important to get it as soon as possible.

However, emergency contraception does NOT protect against STIs, and its effectiveness really does depend on how soon after the unprotected sex it is taken.

You can get emergency contraception over the counter in pharmacies around the country. In order to get it at the pharmacy, you must be at least 16, and will need to have a private consultation with the pharmacist. It is free of charge with a medical card. Otherwise, the price will vary amongst pharmacies between 20-70 euro. If you are under 16, you can be prescribed the morning after pill by visiting your doctor or a health clinic. Remember that emergency contraception should not be used as an alternative to regular contraception.

# I think I might be pregnant

Pregnancy results from sperm entering the vaginal canal and fertilizing an egg. The best way to avoid pregnancy is to use contraception, but if you have had sex without using protection, or if your contraception fails, then you could become pregnant.



The first sign that you might be pregnant is having missed a period. If you have missed a period and think you might be pregnant the only way to know for sure is to take a pregnancy test. You can go to your GP, or buy a pregnancy test at your local pharmacy. However, missing your period does not always mean that you're pregnant.

Other signs that you might be pregnant include: feeling sick, also known as morning sickness — although it's called morning sickness you can feel sick at any time of the day. Also change in your breasts — you may notice that your breasts become bigger, tender and sore.

## Taking a pregnancy test

Taking a pregnancy test is extremely nerve wracking and it can really help to have a friend with you for some support. If the test comes back positive, it's important to not feel alone. Confide in someone you trust as soon as possible, especially someone who can help you look into your options, like a trusted family member, teacher, GP, a pregnancy counsellor, or a support organisation. spunout has more information online about options if you find yourself pregnant, whether that be information on parenting or on terminations and your rights. See the 'Services and Supports' section at the end of this chapter for a list of pregnancy services.

Try to reach out to someone for support as soon as you can. Although it might feel like it, it is not the end of the world, and you will get through this.

## **Know Your Rights: What supports are there for pregnant young people in Ireland?**

If you think you might be pregnant or know you are pregnant and would like advice you can visit your GP (family doctor) or local health centre for advice and support. There are free, non-judgemental crisis pregnancy counselling services all around Ireland. For a list of these, visit the [MyOptions.ie](http://MyOptions.ie) website or text the word 'LIST' for free to 50444. For more information on your rights under the age of 18 visit [ChildrensRights.ie](http://ChildrensRights.ie)

## **Can I go for counselling for a crisis pregnancy without my parent or guardian knowing?**

If you ring a counselling service, you can ask over the phone about their policy on seeing someone under 18 without the consent of a parent or guardian. Some services will talk to you about how to tell your parent or guardian, and they will support you in doing that.

Other services will only see you if your parent or guardian comes with you.

## **Can I get free medical care while pregnant?**

You are entitled to free pregnancy care under the Maternity and Infant Care Scheme until your baby is six weeks old. This covers:

- Doctor visits
- Antenatal clinics
- The maternity hospital when your baby is born
- Two check-ups after the birth.

Contact your GP (doctor) or your local health centre for more information. You can also get more information on the scheme on the [MyChild.ie](http://MyChild.ie) website.

## Can I still go to school if I am pregnant?

Yes, you are entitled to continue your education if you are pregnant. You may be entitled to financial assistance for schooling at home under the Home Tuition Grant Scheme. This scheme pays for nine hours of schooling a week for 10 weeks. It is usually given to students who need to be absent from school in the later stages of pregnancy or immediately following the birth of the baby. To access this scheme, go to the Special Needs and Tuition Grants section of the Department of Education and Skills website.

## Can I get an abortion?

An unplanned pregnancy may leave you feeling worried and confused. Deciding whether or not to continue with a pregnancy is a personal decision. You should not feel forced by anyone to have an abortion.

You can have an abortion if you are no more than 12 weeks pregnant which means it has been 84 days since the first day of your last period. After 12 weeks, you can only have an abortion in certain circumstances. You can visit your GP or local health centre for advice and support. You can also contact My Options which is a HSE Freephone line that provides free and confidential information and counselling to people experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. You can contact them from 9am to 9pm on Monday to Friday and 10am to 2pm on Saturdays at [1800 828 010](tel:1800828010) or see their website [MyOptions.ie](http://MyOptions.ie).

## Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Most Sexually Transmitted Infections are infections that pass from person to person through sexual activity without using protection such as condoms or dental dams. You can get an STI from coming into contact with someone's bodily fluids like vaginal secretion, blood, or semen. You can also get some STIs like genital herpes and genital warts through just skin-to-skin contact, so if you see visible sores or warts on yourself or a person you are having sex with, hold off having sex until you get treatment.

Any sex between any gender of person can pass on an STI. Having unprotected sex even once can put you at risk of getting an STI. There are at least 25 different types of STIs. All of them are serious but most

are completely treatable. They can however cause long-term problems if they aren't diagnosed and treated properly. If you are having sex you should have regular check-ups for STIs. The most common STIs in Ireland are chlamydia and genital warts, but there has been a rise in gonorrhoea in recent years.

You can't tell by looking at someone if they have an STI. Even if you are in a committed relationship for a long time, one of you can still have an STI and pass it on. This is because STIs can live in your body for a long time before symptoms appear.

## Get checked if you've had unprotected sex

If you've had sex, it is important to get tested for an STI. It's possible to get an STI from vaginal, anal and oral sex or from coming into contact with each other's genitals. Most STIs have no symptoms and some can be passed even when using condoms. This is why it's very important to get tested regularly if you are sexually active, even if you do not see any signs of being infected.

While most STIs will have no symptoms, the following are the most common STI symptoms. If you have any of the following, visit your GP immediately:

- An unusual discharge/liquid or smell from your vagina, penis or anus.
- Blisters, boils, lumps, swelling or itching in or around your vagina, penis or anus.
- Burning or painful feeling when you pee.
- Pain during sex.

Most STIs are treatable with antibiotics but they have to be caught early to prevent long lasting health problems. If you think there's a chance you have an STI, it's important you get tested and abstain from sex in the meantime.

There are a number of free STI clinics around the country. Find a free clinic near you at [sh24.ie](http://sh24.ie). If you want to get tested somewhere other than a free clinic, it can be expensive. If you are worried about cost, always ask beforehand when you make an appointment. There are also

home STI testing kits, which you can order online.

## What happens at an STI clinic?

You are normally asked to register at reception when you arrive and fill out your information so they can contact you about your results. When your name is called the sexual health nurse or doctor will ask you a series of questions to identify what type of tests you will need.

The doctor will ask questions like have you had unprotected sex, what type of sex it was (oral, anal, etc) how many partners you have had, and if you have had sex with men or women.

You might be a little embarrassed answering questions about your sex life, but it's important that you answer them as honestly as you can, so the doctor can decide on what tests you might need. The staff at the clinic are professionals and are trained to be completely non-judgemental. The types of tests that you have depend on your sexual history and the answers you have given to the doctor. You may be referred to a sexual health adviser or counsellor to discuss your test results further.

## Does it hurt?

STI tests do not hurt. Usually they will take a urine sample, a blood test, or a swab. Your results may take a couple of days or weeks to come back, and this is normal.

In the meantime it is important that you don't have sex with anyone until you know your results, as you could infect someone else. If you find out you have an STI, tell anyone you've come into sexual contact with so they can get treated as well and not pass it on to other people or back to you. You can talk over any concerns you may have with the doctor/clinic, and don't be afraid to ask questions. To find a free STI clinic near you, visit [sh24.ie](http://sh24.ie)

## Sexting

'Sexting' is the combination of the words sex and texting. Sexting is the sending of sexual messages, images or videos by phone or online. Sexting can be with a partner, a friend or a stranger such as on a dating app.

For some people, sending or receiving sexts can be a turn-on, a way to feel intimate with another person, or a way for people to be sexual with one another when they aren't nearby. It can also be a sexual release between acquaintances or strangers. However, you shouldn't sext someone just because you think it will make them like you more, or do something you aren't really comfortable with.



Remember, if you are under the age of 18, it is illegal to:

- Send sexual messages or media (photos or videos)
- Send them to someone who is also under 18
- Be in possession of sexual messages or media from someone who is under the age of 18

If you send unwanted sexts, this is a form of sexual harassment. Like any other sexual act, sexting and sending nudes must be consensual, meaning that everyone involved agrees to it.

For some people, sexting can be relatively innocent and your messages will only be seen by the person you initially planned would see them. But there are also cases where an image or message which you share and intend to be private is then shown to or shared with other people.

There is only so much you can do to protect yourself from a naked picture or video of you getting into the wrong hands. Other than not sending one at all, there is no guarantee you can prevent it from being shared with a wider audience than you initially intended. Ultimately, sexting is a risk informed by trust.

Remember that pressuring someone into sexting or sharing images/video of themselves is never okay. Always ask someone first before you send a sext or sexual image/video of yourself. If someone is asking you for sexual content and is insistent or does not take your 'No' seriously, this might be a red flag that they are not a safe person to engage with.

When using dating or hookup apps, be aware of not giving out too much personal information such as your location or last name. If you are going to meet someone in person, meet up in a public place first and tell a friend so that they know to check in on you later.

Some things to consider:

- **Sexting will always involve some level of risk**, and you have to use your judgement to figure out how risky the situation might be, and what level of risk you are comfortable taking on.
- **Sexting requires trust**: try to think about how much you trust the person you are sexting with to keep things private or between the two of you. If you don't know someone well or at all it can be difficult to trust what they might do with personal content or who they might share it with.
- **Screenshots**: even if you send images or text through time-restricted apps like Snapchat, someone can always screenshot what you've sent them. There are apps that will gather screen grabs and also programs that record video from video calls or other webcam footage.
- **Try to play out the worst case scenario**: it can be helpful to think through the worst thing that can happen and if you are comfortable with that. Consider what someone might do on their worst day or after a fight or breakup. If you don't trust the person, it can be best to follow your gut.

## **I got naked, and now it's online. What do I do?**

Sometimes sexts or naked photos or video are leaked, either on purpose to hurt or embarrass someone, or by accident. Revenge porn is when someone shares a sexual image or video of someone without their consent. It is also known as non-consensual pornography or 'sextortion.' It might be done by a partner or ex-partner, acquaintance, or hacker.

More often than not, this distribution happens online, but it doesn't necessarily have to. Sextortion refers to a form of blackmail in which sexual information, images, or video are used to extort money, behavior, or other sexual actions.

If someone has posted nonconsensual, sexual images/video of you online:

- Remember it is not your fault.
- Untag yourself if tagged.
- Contact the person who has posted it and request they take it down.
- Report it to the website in question and request they remove it.
- Talk to a family member straight away and get them to help you; it may be embarrassing at first, but it's better they're aware and able to help you.
- You may want to deactivate your social media accounts to take a break for a while.
- Contact a legal professional for their assistance in removing it and demanding the person who shared it to delete all copies. Under Data Protection and copyright law, you have the legal right to have these images taken off the internet.
- Know that things will get better, and this will pass. Make sure to speak to someone you trust and get support. It's important to have someone who can help you through a challenging time - so make sure you don't try to deal with it alone.

If you are sent sexual content of someone that you believe is being sent around as revenge porn, viral shaming, or has been leaked, it is very important that you do not send it to anyone else and report it immediately. Sharing a sexual image or video of somebody without their consent is illegal and it is never okay. It is very important that if you are sent an image like this, do not pass it on to anyone else.

Report the content if it has been shared on a social media, and tell the person who sent it to you to stop. If the sexual image or video circulated is of someone under 18, this is child pornography, and it's illegal. See [spunout.ie/RevengePorn](https://spunout.ie/RevengePorn) for more information on what to do in a case of revenge porn.

# Pornography

If you've seen sex depicted on tv or online, you might be in for a surprise. Sex in real life is very different to how it might look in films, shows, or in pornography online.

Most pornography, or 'porn' for short, is viewed on online. While porn isn't necessarily bad, it can give people an unrealistic view of what sex is and how relationships work in the real world.

While some people can separate fantasy from reality, there is the chance that due to watching porn or films many people have unrealistic, or harmful, expectations of sex. It's impossible to live up to an ideal that doesn't even exist.

Remember, porn isn't real, and people in porn are acting. What looks great on screen may not work as well in real life. There are huge differences between real life sex and porn.

## Consent

Consent is often completely absent from porn. Porn rarely involves conversation about what the actors are or are not open to sexually, and rarely is someone asked for verbal consent. In real life, consent must always be present.

## Gender and sexuality in porn

While all genders watch porn, most porn is made for men and by men, which has impacted the way a lot of porn is made. Women are often cast in a submissive role, or are disrespected, objectified, or are treated roughly or abusively. Other times the porn will only focus on the man's pleasure. In real life, sex should be pleasurable and comfortable for all involved.

A lot of porn makes it seem like only straight and cisgendered couples with very stereotypical gender expressions are having sex. In real life, people with all sorts of gender expressions and sexual orientations have sex. And if you are straight and cisgender, do not feel pressured to have

sex like those people do in porn. There's more than one way to be a man or to be a woman, and everyone has a different type of sex life.

## **Body types**

In real life people come in all shapes and sizes, but porn stars often have very particular body types - so try not to compare yourself or your partner to those you see in porn. As well as this, porn stars are often wearing makeup and filmed with certain lighting and angles.

## **Body hair**

People in porn are often shaved or waxed and appear nearly hairless. But people in real life have body hair and pubic hair, and this is normal. Because of porn women might feel pressure to be completely hair free. But it is up to each individual person and their preferences to decide if they want to remove their body hair or not.

## **Erections**

In porn, the men that are cast often have larger than average penises and it seems like they're able to get and keep an erection for hours. In real life, penis size varies and erections tend not to last as long. If you are having problems having an erection, it is nothing to be embarrassed about. If it continues to be a problem, it may be worth visiting your doctor.

## **Anal sex**

In real life not everyone is having anal sex, or even having sex in different positions. It's great to be adventurous but it's important to only do what you and your partner are comfortable with.

## **Foreplay**

Foreplay can often be missing from porn, but it can be a very important element to sex for many people. Many people don't feel ready for sex without first engaging in foreplay. Be sure to talk openly with your partner about each others' sexual needs.

## Noise

A lot of the noise you hear in porn is acting, and not everyone will be as loud when they're having sex, even if they are enjoying it. If your partner is not making as much noise as you would find in porn, this doesn't necessarily mean they're not enjoying themselves.

'Dirty talk' is often present in porn as well. In real life, some people like talking during sex, some don't. It comes down to personal preference. If you want to try dirty talk, make sure to check that your partner is comfortable first.

## Using protection

Often porn stars have sex without using protection like a condom or a dental dam. This does not mean that it is safe to have sex without protection. You should never be pressured into having sex without protection.

## Support Services

- Sexualwellbeing.ie has a lot of information about sexual health, contraception, STIs, pregnancy and more - [sexualwellbeing.ie](https://sexualwellbeing.ie)
- Rape Crisis Help provide information on rape and sexual violence. They provide support and counselling through Rape Crisis Centres nationwide. You can contact the 24-hour helpline on 1800 77 88 88 - [rapecrisishelp.ie](https://rapecrisishelp.ie)
- HIV Ireland offers a number of services to people living with HIV, their families and caregivers - [hivireland.ie](https://hivireland.ie) - 01 8733799
- Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) provide crisis pregnancy medical services and counselling - [ifpa.ie](https://ifpa.ie)
- You can call the My Options helpline on 1800 828 010
- If you're in college, check out your Students' Union for more information on where you to get free condoms and get tested.
- For more information on where to find an STI clinic near you, visit [sh24.ie](https://sh24.ie)

# Chapter Summary

- ✓ No one should ever pressure someone into having sex or doing something they aren't comfortable with.
- ✓ Always use a condom or dental dam during any sex to avoid an STI.
- ✓ If you are concerned about getting pregnant, talk to your doctor about being prescribed contraception in addition to using condoms.
- ✓ If you are having sex, be sure to get regular STI tests. If you have had unprotected sex, remember that most STIs won't have any symptoms.
- ✓ The age of sexual consent is 17 in the Republic of Ireland and 16 in Northern Ireland.

## Chapter 7

# Employment

Looking for a job, how to improve your chances of finding employment and dealing with Jobseeker's payments. Breaking down the opportunities out there, from apprenticeships, internships, and work rights.



# I need a job

Looking for a new job can take time and a lot of work, but it can also be extremely rewarding when you find a job that suits you. If it is your first time applying for work you may not be sure where to start, but that is why we are here to help. In this chapter we cover everything from CVs and cover letters to interviews and internships. Although you may not find the perfect job for you straight away, with time and experience you will be able to find work that is right for you.

Before you start looking for jobs, it's important to have a really good and up-to-date CV. It's the first thing most employers look for, and even if they don't have any jobs available, they might ask to have a copy of your CV for their files.

## Successful CV writing

Your CV and cover letter are usually the first impression that an employer gets of you. A CV gives basic information about you, your education, work experience, skills and achievements. It should highlight all of your strong points as a potential employee. A cover letter will complement your CV and explain why you want the job and what makes you the right person for it.

- Start with a template, you can find some good ones with a quick Google search or ask your school or college career teacher for help.
- Keep it simple. Print the CV in black ink on white A4 sized paper.
- Use a clear, easy to read letter font like Arial or Times New Roman.
- Don't try to put everything about yourself into the CV. Stick to one full page of the most relevant and important information.
- Start with your name and contact details at the top so that they're easy to see.
- Make sure to include your education, qualifications, relevant jobs and work experience, achievements and interests that help prove you've got the right skills for the job.
- Leave out (unless you're asked) gender, a photo, if you're married or not, state of health, date of birth, nationality or reasons why you left other jobs.

- Tailor your CV for each job you apply for. Look carefully at the job description and emphasise the skills or experience mentioned.
- If you're asked for a reference, include a past employer, teacher or sports coach. Make sure to ask that person if they will give you a good reference first before you list them. If you're not asked, write 'References available on request' at the end of your CV.
- Read over the finished CV a few times, and make sure there are no spelling mistakes. Also get someone else to proofread it. This is extremely important, as many employers will simply throw away your CV if they notice any errors.

The language and layout of a CV can be as important as the actual content so remember to keep sentences short, sharp and positive. It can be good to use bullet points to list your duties, skills and achievements, as they're easy to read. Another important thing to keep in mind is not to lie on your CV.

## Emphasise your skills

When applying for a job straight out of school or college, your CV might look a little bare. With this in mind, it can be hard to identify what exactly your skills are or how you show them in a CV. But everyone has skills and attributes to highlight to potential employers, even if you don't see them as skills yet. Things that employers like in a potential job applicant can include a positive attitude, good communication, time management skills, problem solving, responsibility and organisation, teamwork, adaptability and being able to work under pressure.

Everyone will have some of these skills, whether from school exams and presentations, babysitting, your hobbies, or playing with your local sports team. These types of skills are often referred to as 'soft skills' and are just as important to include on your CV as your second language or exam results. It's important to try to phrase your qualities and interests in an interesting and persuasive way, as most job openings will get hundreds of CVs.

Here are some things to double check before sending off your CV:

- Have you included a current phone number and an email address that you check regularly?
- Is your CV relevant to the job you are applying to?

- If you're emailing your CV, make sure to save the document with your name in the title. If it's just 'CV.doc' it will get lost in a pile.
- Have you got everything laid out with proper headings, bullet points and consistent dates? (Start with the most recent info and work backwards)
- Have you included a cover letter?
- Have printed out your CV and asked someone to read over it and your cover letter to check for spelling mistakes?

## Cover letters: first impressions

A cover letter is an important part of a job application as a good cover letter can convince an employer to interview you. It is essentially your first introduction to a potential employer, so it needs attention.

A cover letter should tell an employer why you are the best person for the job and make them want to read your CV and bring you in to interview. Again, spelling and grammar are really important, so check and re-check your cover letter before you send it off. Spell check doesn't pick up everything, so don't count on it to re-read for you.

- Keep your language clear and concise.
- Your cover letter should be no longer than a page.
- Tailor each cover letter for each job.
- Don't use the same cover letter for an IT job as your friend did for their teaching job; both jobs require completely different skills.
- Use words and phrases that were listed in the job advertisement.
- If the job is asking for someone with experience of Microsoft Powerpoint or Wordpress, make sure your cover letter references these skills specifically.

If there is something specific about the business or organisation you are applying to that particularly appeals to you, outline this reason in your cover letter, as your enthusiasm will stand out to a potential employer. Try to address cover letters to the actual hiring manager rather than, "To whom it concerns". This will demonstrate that you have done your

research. You'd also be surprised at how many people don't read job descriptions as well as they should. Outline the reasons why you meet all the job specifications listed in the advertisement, and be as specific as possible. Don't worry, most candidates won't fit all requirements, just some of them. So emphasise what you do have to offer and how keen you are on that company. Keep the cover letter brief and to the point. Depending on the role, you can take a more creative approach to a cover letter, such as making a video cover letter. This is definitely a unique and attention grabbing approach.

If you are emailing the cover letter (and this goes for CVs too), try to send it as a PDF rather than as a Word document. This is because Word files sometimes can't be opened if the company does not have a compatible version of Word.

Finally, when you are happy with your cover letter print it out and ask someone to read over it for you. It is easier for a person to spot mistakes when they are reading a hard copy.

## Where do I start looking for jobs?

If you are unsure of where to begin your job hunt or what next step is right for you, visit [spunout.ie/Compass](http://spunout.ie/Compass) to get some more information about what options are out there.

It's also a good idea to call into your local Intreo office; these offices are run by the Department of Social Protection and their function is to provide information and advice to jobseekers. They also have lists of job vacancies, plus, they run job clubs that provide training and support to jobseekers.

- Keep an eye on job vacancies online using websites like [Indeed.ie](http://Indeed.ie) and [Publicjobs.ie](http://Publicjobs.ie).
- Tell everyone you know that you're looking for work; they might just have a useful contact that will get you started.
- Call into organisations that you're interested in working for. Ask for an appointment with the recruitment manager, bring your CV and tell them that you're looking for employment.

- If you are over 18 and long-term unemployed (unemployed for a year or more), then you may be eligible for a variety of back-to-work schemes that allow you to work or to gain work experience while still getting your social welfare payment. Learn about some of the schemes at [spunout.ie/WorkSchemes](https://spunout.ie/WorkSchemes) or visit your local Intreo office.
- Consider cold calling or going around to companies with your CV in hand. It is quite a bold move and does require confidence, but some employers do seem to respond to it.
- Check out the job fairy hashtag on twitter: #jobfairy
- There are many different job sites that are tailored to specific career paths, like creative jobs or jobs in the nonprofit sector, so do some online research and check out the ones that suit you.
- Do a web search every weekday for jobs. Search by both job title and area. So, instead of just “teacher jobs”, also type in “teacher jobs Cork”.
- Use LinkedIn: it’s basically a social networking site for professionals. You can update your profile, which is like an online CV. It also has a job search tool to look for jobs in your field. Some jobs nowadays are only advertised on LinkedIn.
- Keep an eye on company websites. Some companies only advertise jobs on their website and not on other websites or with agencies.
- Be careful with your online behaviour. Employers often search for candidates online, so make sure your profile or photos aren’t of anything you wouldn’t want a potential employer to see. It might be a good idea to make your social media accounts private and to check your photo tagging settings.

## I got called for an interview

Getting to the interview stage for a job you want is very exciting, but can also be nerve wracking. To make the interview process as smooth as possible, keep the next few tips in mind.

**Perhaps the most important thing to remember is to be early or on time.** First impressions are important and arriving late reflects badly on your time-keeping skills. Leave home early to be sure you get there on time. Plan for delays such as traffic, public transport running late, etc. If for some reason on the day you are running late it is important to



ring ahead and let the company know. If the interview is somewhere you haven't been before, it's a good idea to go there a day or two beforehand to ensure you know exactly where it is. You can also look the location up on Google Maps street view and virtually "walk" yourself to the door, so that you know exactly where it is.

**Be sure to dress appropriately.** For most jobs an interviewer won't care what brand of clothes you wear or how stylish you look. However, dressing well shows your potential employer that you are taking the interview seriously and have put time and effort into your preparation. Look into the dress code for the employer and if in doubt it's probably best to dress a bit smart.

**Always go into an interview prepared.** Chances are if you decide to come up with things to say on the spot, you might freeze up or get too nervous. Be sure to learn everything you can about the employer and your role ahead of time. Look the company up online so that you feel confident to talk about how you would fit in as part of their team. If they organise events or campaigns you should refer to specific ones during the interview to show your knowledge of the company and their work.

**Practice your responses to questions they might ask you ahead of time.** There's plenty of interview Q&As online. You can ask a friend to help you run through some out loud. You don't want to sound rehearsed, but you should feel comfortable and prepared to speak on various parts of your experience. You also want to have a couple questions ready to ask them at the end, this will show your interest in the role. Your questions will depend on the type of job you are interviewing for. If it is relevant,

pay particular attention to areas like, Corporate Social Responsibility, Diversity and Inclusion etc. These areas are also a great source for you to come up with one or two questions for the interview panel at the end of the interview.

**Another thing to keep in mind during interviews is to avoid saying anything negative about a person or company you worked for.** You will probably be asked about a time you were challenged or something didn't go your way, and it's important to have an example in mind and put a positive spin on it, rather than place the blame on someone else. Try your best to speak about both your good and bad qualities in a positive light. Past 'mistakes' can easily be rephrased into examples of lessons you learned and challenges you overcame.

**Try your best not to let your nerves get the better of you.** If you are asked a question you don't know the answer to or feel stumped during the middle of the interview try to stay calm. You won't be expected to know every single answer, so take a deep breath and try to lead the conversation to a relevant point you feel confident talking about.

**It's probably easier said than done, but be confident in job interviews.** If you weren't suitable for the job, you wouldn't have gotten to this stage. Remind yourself what a great job you'll do if you are hired. Then relax, tell them about your skills and just be yourself.

## On the day of the interview

You'll probably be nervous, so it's a good idea to have everything prepared well in advance.

- Check in advance to see if you have to bring anything with you. Also, ask about the structure of the interview.
- Make sure to have any necessary documents ready: application forms, spare copies of your CV, exam or achievement certificates, a work portfolio, reference letters, etc.
- Try on your interview outfit to make sure it fits and that there are no buttons missing or stains. Make sure your shoes are clean.
- Bring information about the interview with you: how to get there, contact phone numbers, who you are to ask for, etc. You don't want

to arrive at the company and realise that you've forgotten the contact person's name.

- Eat before the interview to keep your energy levels up.
- Give yourself loads of time to arrive at the interview — try to be there about ten minutes before it starts. This will give you a chance to calm your nerves, go to the toilet and check your appearance.
- If you are delayed for any reason, make sure you ring to explain.
- Make sure you turn off your phone before the interview starts.
- Take some deep breaths and make sure your hands aren't sweaty before going into the interview room.
- Body language is important so smile, make eye contact and shake hands when you meet the interviewer.
- Always thank the interviewer when you're leaving.

## Types of interviews

Job interviews don't follow rules — you may find yourself drinking coffee and having a casual chat or you could end up being interviewed by a large panel of executives. It's best to prepare for almost anything and be ready to give a great impression.

A panel might interview you, ranging from two up to four or five people. You might also have a number of interviews with different people. Remember, if you have a few different people interviewing you, they'll talk to each other afterwards so be consistent with the information you give them. The interviewer might take notes, but try not to let this put you off.



Some interview processes include tests before, during, or even after the interview. This could be anything from a personality test to language

or computer skills. Its purpose is to help the interviewer find out more about your skills and abilities. You might take part in group activities or role-play situations that could test your ability to work in a team or your sales or leadership skills. Remember to listen, to express your opinion and to motivate others without trying to take control.

Sometimes employers offer to show you around the company or to introduce you to other people working there. This is an ideal opportunity to ask lots of questions about working there and about the job you are applying for.

*“Keep applying. After a hundred applications and several interviews, it is very easy to just give up or even go on a pause. You shouldn’t. Always keep at it. The perfect job (or at least one that pays) could come (and go), on any given day. You don’t have to be hunched over job sites constantly, but definitely try and aim to send in one application a day. Remember that applying for a job involves skill, and that the more you do it, the better you get at it.” – John*

## What other work is out there?

Not everyone will want to apply for a job straight after school or college, or maybe the type of work you want to do means taking a different route or gaining more experience. Whatever path you choose, there are plenty of options. In the next section, find out more about apprenticeships, internships and boosting your CV with things like experience and volunteering.

### Apprenticeships

An apprentice is a person who is studying a particular craft from someone who has been working in the field for a while and is sanctioned as an official apprenticeship scheme trainer. The apprenticeship will involve both off-the-job training and on-the-job training at your employer’s workplace. An apprenticeship generally lasts for four years, during which time you will spend three different periods in off-the-job training, totaling 40 weeks in all.

Each apprenticeship programme is based on specific skills and standards of that particular field. In order to pass their apprenticeship, the

apprentice must meet these standards. Once an apprentice has passed through their apprenticeship, they may then be eligible for further study on a related degree provided by ITs around the country.

You must be at least 16 to become an apprentice, and have a minimum of five D grades in the Junior Cert. Some employers require more than this. If you can't meet these criteria, you can still become an apprentice if you:

- Complete an approved apprenticeship preparatory training course and assessment interview.
- Are over 18 and have worked for at least three years in a relevant industry and have completed a successful assessment interview.

The employer you do the apprenticeship with must be registered with SOLAS as an approved employer.

Your performance will be assessed throughout your apprenticeship. The assessments vary depending on the field you are in, but include written modular work and practical assessments. On successful completion of an apprenticeship, a QQI Advanced Certificate - Craft is awarded. This is recognised internationally as the requirement for craftsperson status. Participants of the majority of SOLAS training courses are eligible for different allowances. The main allowances are given for the course participants' training, travel, accommodation, meals, and childcare. If all this seems like something you'd be interested in, visit [apprenticeship.ie](http://apprenticeship.ie) to find out more.

## Internships

An internship is a temporary training position in a company or organisation. Internships are great ways to learn and gain experience. Many companies offer internships as a way to offer people experience they could not otherwise get. While it's great experience, you are not guaranteed a job at the end of an internship. Internship programmes are usually set up by companies on their own



so if there's an area you want to get more experience in, research organisations in that sector and see what they might have to offer.

## Pros of internships

- Internships offer experience, which looks good on your CV.
- Internships are a good way to check out if a certain career actually suits you and if you like it.
- Internships are a great way to network and make contacts.
- If you do well, you may be offered a paid position with the company.

## Cons of internships

- Internships are usually unpaid.
- You may find yourself on tea/coffee duty a lot and be given lots of the boring, but necessary tasks of the organisation.
- You may not get much real experience or variety and be stuck doing the same things over and over. A lot of your experience will depend on the individual company and your supervisor.
- Some organisations may take advantage of interns, replacing them every few months for free labour when instead they could create a full-time job for someone.

## How to get the most out of internships

- Be eager to take on new tasks, be enthusiastic, and work hard.
- Set some goals for yourself such as working in a certain area or talking to people from that area.
- Ask questions. Questions will help you to learn and show your interest in the work.
- Network. Even if you are stuck in a small department, you can still strike up conversations with staff from other areas.

## Intern exploitation

- Be sure to set boundaries. This could mean expressing your needs around the hours you work, the amount of support you need, and getting a fair stipend for your expenses.
- Discuss the purpose of the internship from the start. This way a small

and specific role doesn't morph into something massive.

- Have a chat with the employer about possible job opportunities after internships. Simply asking about how many interns go on to employment in the company or organisation may give you an idea about your own prospects.
- Remember that you always have the choice to end the internship. If you feel you're being taken advantage of, it's okay to walk away. Just be sure to do it as professionally as possible, be honest about why you're leaving, and thank them for their time.

## How to find internships in Ireland

Check out the careers office at your university or college, as most will carry details of available internships. You could draw up a list of companies where you'd like to get experience and enquire if they do internship programmes. Also keep an eye on websites such as [activelink.ie](http://activelink.ie) for internship opportunities with nonprofits and charities.

## Volunteering

Volunteering is a really good way to learn new skills, explore career options, or to give something back to the world around you. You might think: "Why bother?" or "What's in it for me?". Maybe you reckon there's nowhere in your area looking for volunteers. Think again! You might be on a course or in a job that you feel is not totally right for you. However, for financial or other reasons, you must stick with it. Volunteering can fill in the gap and allow you to do more of the things you love. Plus, it feels good to get involved in a worthy cause or issue that helps others.

- Volunteering can be a lot of fun and a great personal learning experience.
- You get work experience. Even if you want to work in a different sector entirely, it looks great on your CV as employers like to see volunteering work. It shows that more than money motivates you.
- You get to see if the career you are trying to get into actually suits you. You may think you would love working with small children, but after a few days you may decide otherwise — you won't know until you try it out.
- You get to make new friends. The people you meet when volunteering

will often be like-minded people, so are more likely to be the type of people you would want as friends.

- Volunteering can lead to paid employment. Many organisations have paid staff that started out as volunteers. You might not get paid work after you have been a volunteer for three months, but if you enjoy the volunteering and stick around, you never know where it might lead.
- It helps you to develop better social and interpersonal skills.
- Volunteering abroad allows you to learn about another culture (and possibly another language) or country by living there, instead of just getting the tourist's view.

## How do I start volunteering?

Choose something that you're passionate about. Ask yourself what issue or social problem motivates you. If you're interested in the type of work you're doing, it will be much more rewarding. Try to take part in a volunteering activity that matches your skills and experiences, or a new area you've been wanting to get into. There are lots of volunteering centres around the country.

## Volunteering tips

- Check how many hours of help you can offer per week or per month before you commit yourself. You don't want to end up overwhelmed and struggling to fit your volunteering into the rest of your life.
- Be polite and professional at all times. Volunteering may not be paid, but it is still a professional environment. Plus, you may want to use someone from your volunteering experience as a reference later on.
- Be reliable. Make sure you follow through on your commitments to the organisation and that you do whatever tasks you have committed to on time.
- Volunteering can help you to pick a career path. If you volunteer, you'll get a wide range of experiences and meet a lot of people. You'll also get to see what it's really like working in a certain field.
- Check out the European Voluntary Service. It's an initiative across European countries that allows 18-30 year olds to take up a voluntary position abroad.

All in all, volunteering offers you a very real way to find out if a given career is really right for you and gives you invaluable experience.

## **Know Your Rights: Work rights**

If you work part-time, have a summer job or are already in full-time employment, it's important that you know your rights when it comes to hours and pay. Speak out if you think you're not being treated properly. The Protection of Young Persons Act 1996 (ROI) is there to make sure that work carried out during school years doesn't put young people's education at risk. The Act generally applies to employees under 18. Employers should not employ young people under 16 in regular full-time jobs.

For more information about your rights under 18 visit [ChildrensRights.ie](http://ChildrensRights.ie)

### **Can I work if I'm over 16 years of age?**

16 and 17 year olds can work a maximum of 40 hours per week, with a maximum of eight hours a day. 16 and 17 year olds are entitled to a 30-minute break after working for four and a half hours. You should have two days off every seven days. These days off should be consecutive, which means they should be two days off in a row. You cannot be legally asked to work before 6am or after 10pm.

### **What about workers under 16 years old?**

- Workers under 16 cannot be asked to work more than 35 hours a week, aside from during work experience, where they may work up to 40 hours a week.
- You are entitled to a 30-minute break after four hours working.
- You cannot be asked to work before 8am or after 8pm.
- Workers under 16 should have two days off every seven days.

### **What are the rules if I have more than one part-time job?**

If you are under 18 and working for more than one employer, your combined daily or weekly hours worked should not exceed the maximum number of hours allowed.

## What about wages?

Since 1 January 2022, the national minimum wage for experienced adults is €10.50 per hour. A worker is considered experienced when they have worked for two years over the age of 18. An employee who is under 18 must be paid at least 70% of the national minimum wage, which is €7.35 per hour.

## Jobseeker's Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance

In Ireland, the unemployed are entitled to social assistance from the government. There are two main types of unemployment benefit: Jobseeker's Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance.

To get Jobseeker's Benefit you must have worked and paid PRSI contributions. PRSI is a form of tax you pay every month when you are working. If you have not paid enough PRSI, you will not be eligible for Jobseeker's Benefit and instead will have to apply for Jobseeker's Allowance. With Jobseeker's Allowance, you will be means tested to see what your income is. If it falls below a certain cut-off point you will be entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance.

You may be finding it hard to stay positive about finding a job while on social welfare, but you can use this time to improve your job prospects by making use of opportunities out there for further education and training. Talk to someone at your local Intreo office about education and training opportunities.

While Jobseeker's Allowance or Benefit can temporarily relieve some financial pressure, it's not really possible to survive on it long term, so keep on the job hunt.

## Who can get a Jobseeker's payment?

If you lose your job, cannot get a job, are made redundant or your working hours are reduced, you are entitled to social assistance. If you voluntarily leave a workplace, you are entitled to benefits but you have to wait nine weeks before applying for social welfare.

## How to apply

To apply for a Jobseeker's payment, you must go to your local Intreo office and submit some forms. Some offices require you to make an appointment, but most are usually walk in services where you take a ticket with a number on it and then go to the counter when your number is called. You then talk to an advisor who will tell you what you need to apply for and how to do it. You usually need to bring a passport or some form of ID along with your PPS number.

You should apply for your Jobseeker's payment as soon as you become unemployed. You will not be paid for the first 3 days of your claim, so it's important to apply on your first day of unemployment. To apply for both Jobseeker's Allowance or Benefit for the first time, you must fill out the UP 1 form online or at your local Intreo office. If it has been less than 2 years since you last claimed Jobseeker's Benefit, you must fill out form UP 6 instead.

The form should be brought to your local Intreo office. The staff will be able to help out with any questions or assistance you need.

## How is it paid?

You get paid weekly and usually the money is transferred directly into your bank account. You can also collect your money from your local Post Office. While receiving a Jobseeker's payment, you must go to your local Intreo office every month and sign on, confirming you are willing and able to work.

While you are waiting for your money to come through, you may qualify for a supplementary welfare allowance. A supplementary welfare allowance is basically an emergency payment you get if you cannot afford to wait until your dole money comes through. More form filling is required for this payment.

The Jobseeker's payment can change annually depending on the budget, which usually takes place every December. If you are working part-time, you can still get Jobseeker's payments. You must be unemployed for four out of seven consecutive days (including Sunday).

If you are receiving a Jobseeker's payment, you may be entitled to other benefits such as a medical card, mortgage interest payments, or rent relief. Enquire at your local citizens information branch or Intreo office for details on how to get these other payments. Find more information on finding employment visit [spunout.ie/Compass](https://spunout.ie/Compass)

## Support Services

- Citizens Information Bureau provides information about your rights and entitlements - [citizensinformation.ie](https://citizensinformation.ie)
- Find information for jobseekers at [welfare.ie](https://welfare.ie)
- SOLAS (previously known as FAS) is the government body in charge of further education and training in Ireland - [solas.ie](https://solas.ie)
- Migrant Rights Centre Ireland works to promote justice, empowerment and equality for migrants and their families - [mrci.ie](https://mrci.ie)
- Foróige is a national youth organisation to enable young people to develop themselves and their communities through projects, leadership, mentoring and more - [foroige.ie](https://foroige.ie) - 01 630 1560
- Youth Work Ireland have over 500 youth clubs nationwide where you can meet youth information officers to help with a range of information needs - [youthworkireland.ie](https://youthworkireland.ie)
- The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) represents and supports the interests of youth organisations and acts on issues that impact young people - [youth.ie](https://youth.ie)
- Find a volunteer role that suits you through Volunteer Ireland on [volunteer.ie](https://volunteer.ie)
- Visit [spunout.ie/Compass](https://spunout.ie/Compass) for more information on employment and training opportunities available for you.

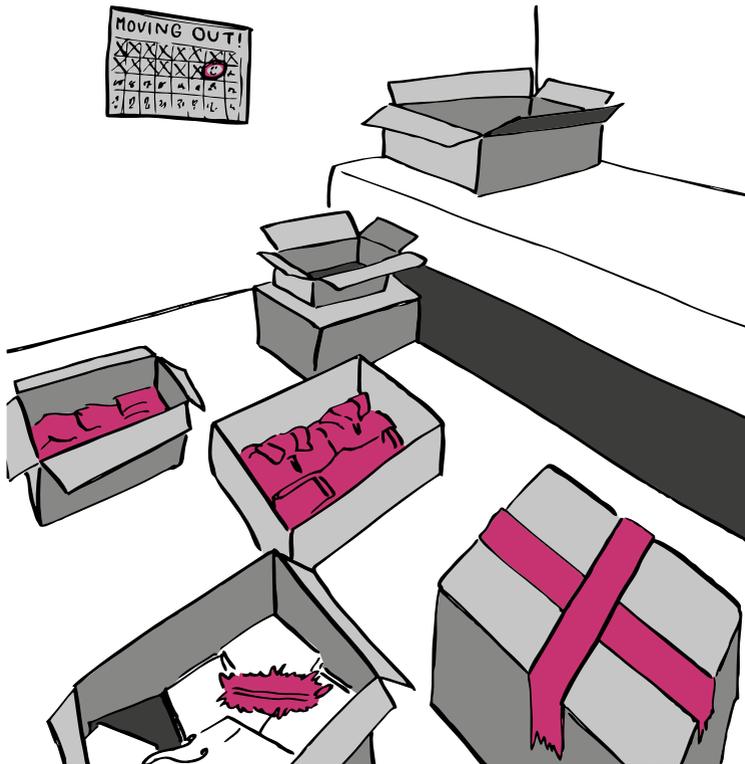
# Chapter Summary

- ✓ Finding a job can be challenging but you can help yourself by putting yourself in the best possible position for job hunting.
- ✓ Always have your CV up-to-date and only include the most relevant experience and skills for the job you apply for.
- ✓ Check and re-check your CV before sending it off. Spelling and grammar are important when it comes to making first impressions with a potential employer.
- ✓ Tailor your cover letter every time you apply for a job, as no two jobs will be the same.
- ✓ Remember you have skills and experience even if you don't recognise it so work on identifying them and your ability to sell them to interviewers.
- ✓ Never turn up late to a job interview, come prepared, and dress appropriately.
- ✓ Internships can be a useful way to test the waters with a career path and gain some experience.
- ✓ Apprenticeships can be a good route to a job, with a balance of both academic and hands-on work.
- ✓ Volunteering is another excellent way to gain some experience and new skills, so get involved in something you're passionate about.

## Chapter 8

# Independence

Moving out and moving on to deal with adult stuff, aka bills, accommodation, exercise and healthy eating. Looking at leaving home, going to college and emigration.



# Leaving home

For many young people in Ireland currently, moving out of their parent's home is not an option due to increasingly high rents and housing shortages. If you are thinking of moving out, or if staying at home is no longer an option for you then there are things you will need to think about, such as if you will be able to afford to pay rent and where you will be able to find accommodation.

If you are considering leaving home because of family problems or other worries, here are a few things to consider:

- Is leaving home your only option?
- Is there anywhere that you can get help to sort out the problems that are making you unhappy?
- Are there any other family members (older sibling, aunt, uncle or grandparent) that you could turn to for help?
- Have you thought through what you want for your long-term future?

You can leave home at 16 with your parents' consent or at 18 without their consent.

Leaving home is your choice, but make sure you've thought it out properly. If you've got a problem, talk it through with a support organisation. Most importantly, be sure you have somewhere safe you can stay. If you intend to move out, don't do it in a temper or without planning where you'll go and whom you'll live with.

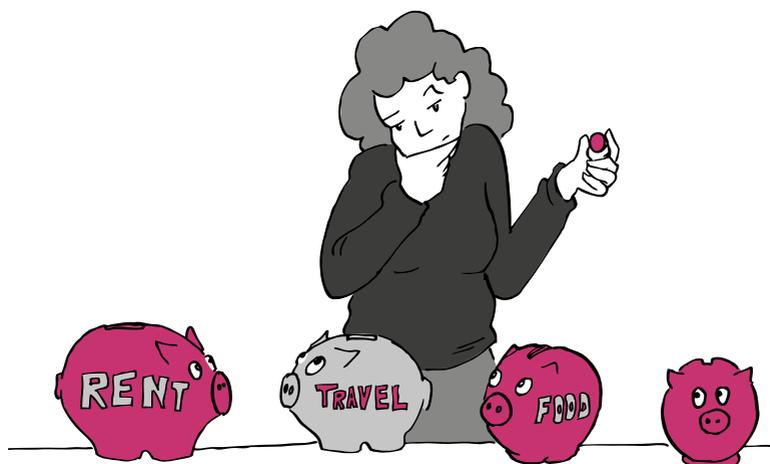
Part of this planning will involve budgeting for your income and spending each month and keeping track of all your bills.

If you are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless there is support and help available.

- Contact the Homeless Person's Unit Freephone number on **1800 724 724** for advice and information on emergency accommodation.
- You can also contact Focus Ireland's Advice and Information service on **01 671 2555**. They can help you find a bed for the night, help you

find food, help you with money and employment issues, and provide advice and support.

- Contact Threshold, the National Housing Charity, on their freephone helpline on **1800 454 454** for advice and information on your rights and entitlements when it comes to housing and accommodation.



## Bank accounts

Some of us have had bank accounts from a young age and don't really think of what our bank can offer us. When choosing a bank, think about where it is (so you can call in easily if you need assistance), what they offer (low interest rates or special student services) and how good their bank machine (ATM) service is. Make sure to check out credit union accounts as well as bank accounts. Don't choose a bank just because they're offering you a student card, phone, or any other free services. You're going to have to rely on that bank for a long time so be sure to do your research.

Decide if you want to open a savings account or current account. A current account allows you to receive payments such as your wages or social welfare and get cash from your bank or an ATM. A savings account will mean you should receive interest on money in the account. If you have savings or the opportunity to save you can always open a savings account as well as a current account so that your savings stay separate from your day-to-day spending. Always read the small print as you

might be offered a credit card with no interest in the first year, but there might be huge interest rates after that and very high penalty charges if you can't make payments.

*“Budgeting, as dull as it may sound, is a must-do. It takes a while to get used to living on a reduced income and not spending all your money on clothes, accessories and socialising, but it’s possible. Top tip? Do a weekly shop. You find yourself less likely to impulse buy at the college restaurant if you’ve food at home and you’ll eat healthier too if you have a well stocked press and not just pot noodle that you bagged for free during Fresher’s Week” - Sorcha*

## Budgeting tips

Everyone has to learn to budget within their limits. Here are some simple tips to manage your finances:

- **Create a weekly or monthly budget and stick to it.** Work out what your income is, what your basic bills are and see what you have left over. Once you get into the routine of budgeting, things like starting to save up some money will seem way more achievable.
- **Shopping lists, much like a budget, are necessary.** It can be useful to plan out what meals you want for the week ahead and work your shopping list around them so you don't end up overspending on foods you won't eat.
- **When spending your money, just think about whether you actually need something or just want it.** If it is just a want, wait on it until you can budget for it properly.
- **If you're in second or third level education, then get yourself a student travelcard.** Not only do you get cheaper fares on transport but lots of shops, restaurants and services give discounts too.
- **Shop around for phone plans and save money.** A bill phone may seem like good value for money but there's always that fear that you'll go over your minutes and limits so it might be best to stick with pay as you go so you can only spend the credit that you budget each month.
- **Download a finance/money manager app** to help you keep track of

what you're spending money on. You could also get a digital bank account such as Revolut that can help with tracking your spending.

- **Budget properly** and know how much you need each week, take out that much cash and avoid using your debit card.
- **Treat yourself every once in awhile.** Try budgeting once a month for eating out or a night at the cinema. It'll make financial planning easier if you have something to look forward to.



## Finding a place to live

Finding accommodation to rent in Ireland currently is difficult due to a housing shortage and increasingly high rents. If you are in a position to move out it's important to plan things in advance, like how much rent you can pay so that you don't end up looking at accommodation you can't afford. When deciding how much you can afford to pay, remember to add in the cost of heating, electricity, transport, food, wifi, phone bills and so on. It's important to stick to that amount so that you are not struggling financially for the entire year or more.

When you are looking at accommodation, there are some things you need to keep in mind. Here are questions to ask before you sign a lease. These things apply whether you're living abroad or looking for college accommodation:

- How much is the rent and does each person pay rent separately or as a household? Ask if you pay weekly or monthly, and on what date.

- How much is the deposit and do you need to pay rent in advance? (Get a receipt for any money paid at the start.)
- What are the conditions for getting your deposit back?
- What happens if one flatmate leaves? Who will be responsible for finding a new person?
- What extra bills are there? Are they paid by meter or bill? Whose name is on the bill?
- What sort of heating is there? How much does it cost to heat the house in winter?
- If you move in, take pictures of the room(s) and look for potential damage so you don't get charged for it when you leave.
- Make sure to get the landlord's contact information so that you can reach them with any problems.

Currently there is little enforcement of renting regulations in Ireland, and for this reason it can be difficult to find secure housing in which you can rely on your landlord to provide basic support. If you are experiencing issues with your rented accommodation or landlord there are supports that can help. Visit [RTB.ie](https://www.rtb.ie) (the Residential Tenancies Board) or [Threshold.ie](https://www.threshold.ie) for more information.

## Travelling

Travelling is a great way to learn about yourself and the world. If you are able to take some time to travel or to discover new interests — spending time abroad can be a wonderful opportunity for adventure, learning and life experience. It can enhance your CV or be a time for self discovery; you might decide to volunteer or learn a new language. It can be one of the most wonderful experiences of your life. Before you decide to travel, have a good think about what you want from the experience and how you will plan your time. And think about your reasons for wanting to travel.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries have introduced regulations or restrictions for entering the country. These restrictions can change depending on the situation with the virus at different points of the year. It is really important to find out the requirements for the country you are travelling to in advance, including whether or not you

need to get a pre-travel PCR/ antigen test and if you will be required to quarantine. Some countries now require all passengers to take a pre-travel COVID-19 test. You can find information on the travel restrictions for any country on the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Visit [dfa.ie/travel/travel-advice](https://dfa.ie/travel/travel-advice).

If you feel confident about your reasons to take time out, look into your options. Some people spend their their time volunteering, working, or in unpaid work experience, so that they can make a difference in the world or learn more about their career options. Other people go abroad to travel and see the world, sometimes taking on casual work to pay their way. And some people get better paying jobs such as au-pairing, camp counselling or agricultural work. Some use the time to study a language or get a TEFL (Teach English as a Foreign Language) qualification.

Be sure to research the living and travelling costs of the countries you plan to visit before you go. This way you will have an idea of how much you need to save. Above all else, enjoy yourself! A gap year can give you great experiences, great memories and maybe even a head start in your future career.

## Emigration

### Emigration check list

Emigration is common with young people in Ireland and if you choose to do it, it could open up the next exciting chapter in your life. If you have decided to take that step and move abroad, or even travel for an extended period of time, here are some tips to set yourself up before you leave.

- **Make sure you have your visa in order and any other documentation required before you go.** Some countries require proof of travel insurance, proof of funds, or other information that you could be asked for at the border.
- **Try to book your flight well in advance.** Setting your departure date will help you plan practicalities and give you mental and emotional time to prepare for the move.
- **Get your medication organised.** If you are on any regular medicines, get a three month supply to take with you. Your G.P. can write a



letter explaining what meds you are on, as some countries can be strict about importing medicines.

- **Make sure your passport is in date** and photocopy important documents such as passport, insurance, birth cert, work references and driving license.
- **Be informed.** Read about the places you are travelling to so you can make the most of the experience. Being aware of cultural sensitivities is important too.
- **Update your CV** to make it suitable for the job market/country you are going to, because CVs can look a little different everywhere.
- **Give advance notice to your employer.** If you are working let them know your travel plans and get your P45 before you leave. Check your contract of employment to see how much notice you have to give your work before you can finish.
- **Get credit references from your bank/credit union,** you may need them to set up an account in your new country.
- **Cancel any regular standing orders/payments** for rent, TV, gas, electricity, phone etc. and try and pay off any debts you have before you leave.

- **Get some currency for the country you are going to** and think about how you will transfer your money from your Irish account to your new one.
- **Mark the occasion in a meaningful way.** This is a big milestone, and even though there may be mixed feelings around emigration, acknowledging this big move can make it seem less daunting. Throw a goodbye party or make a point to individually say your goodbyes, whatever feels right to you.

## Feeling homesick

The first few months can be difficult after the initial excitement wears off. You may be feeling homesick or wondering if you've made a mistake. Keeping in touch with friends and family at home can help, but it's also important to get out there and do things in your new country. Try to get to know new people and remind yourself of why you moved there in the first place. It will get easier after a while.

## Thinking of going InterRailing?

An InterRail Pass is a type of train ticket that can be used to travel throughout Europe for relatively low cost. The InterRail Global Pass is valid in 30 countries and can be used to travel from country to country. You can get a Flexi pass which allows you to travel on a certain number of days or a continuous pass which allows you to travel on any day you choose. The InterRail One Country Pass can be used for travel within one country only.

## Where to go and what to know

- InterRail passes are valid in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.
- Although anyone can get one, InterRail Passes are more expensive for those over the age of 27.
- If you are 18 and an EU citizen, you can apply to win a free, 3 month InterRailing pass for the summer at [europa.eu](https://www.europa.eu)

- You must be resident in Europe to get an InterRail Pass. Most InterRail tickets are only valid on national railways and not on the train systems of private companies.
- You cannot use an InterRail Pass in the country you live in. This is to prevent commuters from using InterRail Passes to get to work, college or school.
- Global Passes vary in price depending on duration of your trip and how many days you travel, so make sure to plan ahead.



## Travelling reminders

Travelling can be a great experience; however you must also look out for yourself and your safety. Never agree to carry anything through customs for another person. Also, don't drive someone else's car across a border: in both cases you might be smuggling an illegal substance without realising it. It's always wise to be aware of local laws in the countries you visit, for example, in some countries, drinking alcohol is illegal. Also try to respect local customs with the way you dress.

If any of your stuff is stolen, report it immediately to the local police and get a statement about the loss. You'll need this to claim against your travel insurance. If credit cards are stolen, phone your bank and cancel them. If your tickets are stolen, talk to your airline agent about getting replacements. Contact home regularly to let your family know where you are, where you intend to visit next and if you make any changes to your plans.

## How to have fun and be safe travelling

Decide beforehand whether you are going to go for the traditional backpack or whether you are going to take a case on wheels. A backpack is convenient, but can be very heavy. A wheelee case is much lighter, but you will have to hoist it up and down stairs. If you decide to go with a backpack, make sure that it is a good quality one and that it has padded shoulder straps. Also, practice wearing it once it is packed to be sure it is not too heavy.

- Travel insurance may seem like a waste of money, but it is really worth buying, especially if something goes wrong like lost or stolen property, or illness.
- Apply for a European Health Card online so you are covered for health care within the EU.
- Bring comfortable clothes, shoes and rain gear. You could consider bringing a sleeping bag for hostels.
- Make a copy of your passport in case it gets stolen. Have relevant numbers to contact if this happens or your belongings get stolen.
- Always keep your valuables safe, or best of all leave them at home.

## Caring for your health

When you first move out of home or head off travelling, it's important to look after yourself and your health. Healthy eating simply means eating a variety of foods to make sure you get all the energy and nutrition you need. Remember to eat frequently, and several times a day, so you don't end up feeling overly hungry or tired at any point.

### Eating well:

- Eat foods that fill you with energy and make you feel good.
- Fruits and vegetables provide lots of energy and nutrients and will help you feel your best. Dark, leafy vegetables have tons of essential vitamins.
- Eat energy-providing carbohydrates like bread, oats, potatoes, rice and pasta. Choose wholemeal or wholegrain options whenever possible.
- Eat lean proteins. Legumes, like beans, chickpeas, and lentils, are a

great source of protein and fiber.

- Have some healthy fats like fish, eggs, avocado, and nuts.
- Use herbs and spices to brighten up your meals, for example: chilli, garlic, pepper, cumin, basil, coriander, etc.
- Be aware of how certain foods make you feel. Fried, packaged, or processed foods, sweets, and soft drinks can often make us feel down or tired.

## Stay hydrated

Be sure you are staying hydrated with plenty of water each day. We all need at least eight glasses (two litres) of fluids every day, and it's best that most of this is water.

Try to limit the amount of caffeine and processed sugar you are getting from coffee, tea, fizzy drinks, or even fruit juice, as these can be worse for our mood and energy levels. Stick to herbal teas and less processed juices or smoothies instead.

If you are very active or play sport, you'll need to drink even more than eight glasses of water during the day. It can be good to invest in a reusable bottle to carry around with you. Try to get one made from stainless steel or glass rather than plastic, both for your own health and the health of the environment.

## Diet culture

There are lots of fad diets out there, and messages that tell us thin bodies are the ideal. The truth is that hating our bodies and the damage that does to our self esteem can be worse for us than any 'junk' food. Having guilt, punishment, or obsession around our food choices is common, but ultimately not healthy for us physically or mentally. Try not to focus on rigid dieting, or whether a food is 'good' or 'bad.' Try instead to focus on health, not size, and feeling good in your body. Eat foods that make you feel positive and nourished.

If you think you might have an unhealthy relationship with food or dieting, please reach out for support from someone you trust or a service that can help like Bodywhys at [bodywhys.ie](https://www.bodywhys.ie) or 1890 200 444.

## Being active

Another way to look after your health and your body, is to be active. Being active looks different for everyone, but what's most important is you find a type of body movement that is fun and feels good for you. This could be going for walks or hikes, stretching or yoga, playing sport, dancing, swimming, playing with pets or siblings, or something more traditional like running or going to the gym. Whatever works for you, try to incorporate moving your body into your daily and weekly schedule. Exercise and body movement is known to improve your energy levels, your sleep and can reduce stress and anxiety. You'll be amazed how good you'll feel after.

## Staying motivated

It can be hard to get and stay motivated to be active, especially if it is something new for you. Try to fit simple exercise into your everyday life. If it's a strain on your schedule, you might not ever get around to it. If your chosen exercise is boring, it'll be hard to stick to, so pick something that's fun and that you look forward to. Ask a friend to exercise, go on a walk, or join a class with you. Being active can be a lot more fun, and easier to stick to, with company.

Being active can have really positive effects on our self esteem, mental health, and body image. If you find yourself obsessively exercising, or exercising as a way to punish your body rather than to reward it, talk to someone about how you are feeling. This might be a sign that your exercise habits have become unhealthy for you.

*“Involvement in sport or exercise can be a great way to make friends and meet new people. It can provide an escape from everyday life, but also help improve self-confidence and foster a sense of control, which can motivate you to achieve other goals. The benefits of exercise for both mental and physical health are practically inexhaustible. You don't have to be an athlete to achieve these, and if you keep active, for example by going for regular 20-minute jogs or strolls, you should notice an improvement in your sleeping and your concentration levels.” - Sarah*

## Tips to start moving

Even if you aren't used to exercise, there are still plenty of simple ways to get started with being active.

- Try to walk as much as possible. If walking isn't accessible for you due to injury or ability, try some stretches or seated exercises.
- When you start exercising, don't push yourself to exhaustion. The right amount of exercise should leave you breathless, but not shaking or gasping for air.
- Clean your house, you'll get plenty of exercise doing it.
- Some gardening or time being active outside is a great way to get fresh air and exercise.
- Check out fitness classes in your local community centre or gym; working out in a group setting can boost your morale.
- Check out YouTube for exercise videos and tips; you can find anything from weightlifting to yoga to salsa classes.

## Rights

Everyone has rights, including young people under the age of 18. Rights are basic freedoms and entitlements that everyone should have access to, regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, family or marital status, and whether or not they are a member of the Traveller community.

Your rights are laid out in a few different documents, including:

- The Constitution of Ireland
- The European Convention on Human Rights
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The state has a duty to make sure these rights are upheld. All government bodies and services, including the Gardaí, schools and health services are obliged to uphold your rights. Your parents or guardian are responsible for making sure your rights are respected on a day-to-day basis.

## What rights do I have?

Young people under 18 have most of the same rights as adults, except certain rights such as voting and drinking alcohol. As a young person, you also have some specific rights.

For example, all people under 18 are entitled to these rights and more under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- The right to have a say about things that affect you.
- The right to have ideas and say what you think.
- The right to practice your religion.
- The right to meet other young people.
- The right to get information you need.
- The right to special care, education and training if needed.
- The right to health care.
- The right to enough food and clean water.
- The right to free education.
- The right to play.
- The right to speak their own language.
- The right to learn about and enjoy your own culture.
- The right not to be used as a cheap worker.
- The right not to be hurt or neglected.
- The right to be protected from danger.
- The right to know about your rights and responsibilities.

For more information on your rights, visit [spunout.ie/Rights](https://spunout.ie/Rights)

## Know Your Rights

The Children's Rights Alliance has produced a guide on children's rights and entitlements in plain language. You can find the full guide on their website as well as Know Your Rights articles on spunout. The Children's Rights Alliance also has a helpline for children, young people and their families or people who are working with them to access legal

information. Their Helpline is open Monday 10am -2pm and Wednesday 2pm -7pm. You can call them on **01 902 0494** or if you prefer to email: [help@childrensrights.ie](mailto:help@childrensrights.ie).

## Voting

If you're over 18 and an Irish citizen, you are allowed to vote. You can vote for any person in any election as long as you live in Ireland. If you don't meet those criteria, things can be a bit more difficult, but in some cases you still might be eligible to vote.

The following people are eligible to vote in Ireland (as long as they are over 18):

- Irish citizens can vote in every election and referendum
- British citizens may vote at Dáil, European and local elections.
- Other EU citizens may vote at European and local elections.
- Non-EU citizens can vote at local elections only.

If you're a non-Irish citizen and want to vote in the elections here, you'll need to be an Irish resident since at least September of last year and, of course, be over 18.

## Registering to vote

In order to vote, you need to be on the Register of Electors. If you're unsure whether you're on the register or not, you can find out by logging into [CheckTheRegister.ie](http://CheckTheRegister.ie). If you're not on the register, you have the opportunity to register to vote each year by applying to the Draft Register of Electors.

The Draft Register of Electors is published on the 1st of November each year. This shows a list of the people included on the official Register of Electors on the 15th of February the following year.

To be included in the Draft Register, you must send in your application form before November 25th.

- To be included in the Draft Register, download and fill out the RFA form which you can find on [CheckTheRegister.ie](http://CheckTheRegister.ie). You can also get this form at your post office, public library, or local authority.

- Post it or bring it to your local authority, county council, or city council - find the address of your local authority at [gov.ie](http://gov.ie)

If an election or referendum has been called and you are not on the register, you will need to apply for the Supplementary Register. Your application must be received 15 days before polling day, not including Sundays, public holidays and Good Friday.

- To be included in the Supplementary Register, you need to fill out the RFA2 form which you can find on [CheckTheRegister.ie](http://CheckTheRegister.ie). You can also get this form at your post office, public library, or local authority.
- Get it signed by a member of the Gardai (Bring ID).
- Post it or bring it to your local authority, county council, or city council before the deadline which is 15 days before polling day. Find the address of your local authority at [gov.ie](http://gov.ie)

Learn more about registering to vote at [spunout.ie/Register](http://spunout.ie/Register)

## Support Services

- Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) provides information on budgeting and dealing with your finances - [mabs.ie](http://mabs.ie) - 0818 07 2000
- National Consumer Agency have useful information and tools on personal finance and consumer rights - [consumerhelp.ie](http://consumerhelp.ie) - 01 402 5555
- Citizens Information provides information on public services and entitlements in Ireland - [citizensinformation.ie](http://citizensinformation.ie) - 0818 074000
- If you are having problems while renting, you can go to Threshold for advice - [threshold.ie](http://threshold.ie) - 1800 454 454
- The Ombudsman for Children's Office promotes the rights and welfare of young people under 18 years of age living in Ireland. You can make a complaint to the ombudsman if you feel an organisation's actions have negatively affected a young person under 18 - [oco.ie](http://oco.ie)
- Bodywhys is the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland that offers online and face-to-face support - [bodywhys.ie](http://bodywhys.ie) - 1890 200 444

# Chapter Summary

- ✓ If you are thinking of moving away from home, be sure to make a plan first.
- ✓ Prepare a budget so you know how much you can afford to spend on rent and bills.
- ✓ Consider travelling and working abroad and taking a gap year if you're not ready for college or work. Keep safe on your travels by getting travel and health insurance.
- ✓ Stay healthy when you leave home by following a balanced and nutritious diet.
- ✓ Exercise is beneficial for more than just your physical health, it can increase your energy levels, improve your sleep, and help to reduce stress.
- ✓ It's important to know your rights and to stand up for yourself if you think those rights are being ignored.

# About spunout

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**spunout is Ireland's award winning youth information website created by young people, for young people. spunout provides information to more than 160,000 active readers each month. Established in 2005, spunout's vision is to help create an Ireland where young people are empowered with the information they need to live their best lives.**

We do this by providing young people throughout Ireland with information, tools, resources and opportunities to enable them to make informed decisions and be a positive force in their own lives and in their communities.

Our information is trustworthy thanks to our professional content producers who write all of our factsheets and consult with relevant subject matter experts and youth proofreaders to ensure we provide relevant, factual and up-to-date information to our readers.

spunout is unique, in that when we say we are youth led, we mean it. We are guided in everything we do by the spunout Youth Action Panel, a group of 150 young people from all around Ireland who provide leadership and direction to our organisation. The Action Panel advises the spunout team in how to respond to the real information needs of young people, and give feedback on everything from content production to campaign design and branding.

We also have a community of over 200 content contributors who share their lived experiences with their peers through video, written articles, podcasts and more in our Voices section so that other young people can feel less alone in what they are going through. If you're interested in volunteering with spunout, please visit [spunout.ie/volunteer](http://spunout.ie/volunteer).

If anyone has been impacted by any of the topics discussed and would like to talk to someone about it, spunout provides a free, anonymous 24/7 text service, providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support during a mental health or personal challenge, and connecting people to resources that will help them into the future. Text SPUNOUT to 50808 to begin.

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Finally, thank you to all of the readers, youth workers, teachers, parents, and HSE & TUSLA staff for sharing the spunout Survival Guide to Life far and wide. To date over 50,000 copies of the book have been distributed nationwide, we are so grateful for all of your support.



# spunout

spunout is Ireland's youth information website, led by young people, for young people. spunout provides accessible, fact-checked, and non-judgemental information, tools, resources and opportunities to enable young people throughout Ireland to make informed decisions and be a positive force in their own lives and in their communities.

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