

Studying

For many people schizophrenia will entail a long period out of work, sometimes several years and for those who are quite young when the illness first strikes they may never have worked. When their crisis is behind them and they begin to think about how to take their lives forward again the prospect of getting into a full time job will be quite daunting.

A long period of assault by persecutory delusions and hallucinations may have wrecked their self esteem and sense of their own capabilities and that allied with the long absence from the workplace and the stigma arising from a diagnosis of schizophrenia may make getting into work seem like one of the most difficult things they have ever done. And they would be right: for someone living with schizophrenia getting into work may be an enormous challenge and should not be underestimated.

However, many people find that returning to study is a useful transition between living on benefits and the world of work and provides a way of re-discovering their sense of value in themselves. However, remember that before starting any studying it is important to speak to the Jobcentre first as there are rules around how much studying you can do if you are claiming benefits.

Studying has a number of benefits:

- It can enable you to pick up where you left off if your studies were previously interrupted by an episode of ill health.
- It can help you to re-build your self esteem and self worth.
- It can help you to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge.
- It can help you to better assess your skills and abilities before choosing a career path.
- It can help equip you with transferable skills such as in IT that will benefit you in any job you choose.
- It can give you back some structure to your day and help you to re-learn basic skills such as time management and reliability.
- It can give you useful vocational skills that will be helpful in your new job
- It will help you make new friends.
- You can get a reference from your tutor at the end of the course which will help you with your job searching.



Many people with schizophrenia find that studying is a useful way back to employment (Photo: michaeljung on Shutterstock)

Of course studying need not be simply a way back into the workplace but can be beneficial and worthwhile

for its own sake even if it does not in the end lead to a job.

College and University

There are a number of options for studying in the UK. If you were at school at the onset of your illness then you may find that later you can return to your old course. However you may need to sign on at your local further education (FE) college to complete your GCSEs or A levels.

If you are at university then you may be able to go back to your old college or you may find the college environment too stressful and opt to continue learning by distance learning through the Open University.

Be aware that there are strict rules around studying when you are claiming certain benefits and that before starting any form of study you should discuss it with the staff at your Jobcentre to find out about the impact that studying will have on your benefits. If you have come into contact with the criminal justice system while you have been ill this may well have to be disclosed to the college and if applying for university it will be asked about on your UCAS application form so in this case you may opt for distance learning instead.



Access courses provide a way into university without A Levels (Photo: Goodluz on Shutterstock)

At further education college you can finish off your GCSEs if they were interrupted by your illness, study for A levels or undertake a vocational course to prepare you for a specific job such as an apprenticeship in construction or engineering skills. If you are thinking of going on to university and find the prospect of two years studying for A levels a bit daunting then many FE colleges now offer access courses which enable students to gain a university-ready qualification without the need to take A levels.

If you are thinking of going to university you will need to apply through the normal UCAS application route. Apart from having the right qualifications to meet the offers made by the colleges you are applying to, one obstacle that you will face here is the Personal Statement part of the application form which may present you with problems if you have been out of work or study for a long period. Here you may like to refer to “a period of ill health” as being the reason for your absence from the workplace but there is no need to disclose your diagnosis of schizophrenia on your UCAS form. Your diagnosis may have relevance to certain types of university course such as in health and social care but it is an issue that is best discussed with the individual college later at the interview stage.

Your personal statement needs to put the best possible spin on all of your personal qualities and, attributes and experience and here any work that you have done in voluntary work or interesting hobbies

and activities will be especially useful.

If you are having difficulty sourcing the right course for your career plan then the National Careers Service website has a useful course finder page.

Distance Learning

If you do not feel able to study at college perhaps because you have problems with sleep or because you find the college environment too stressful then you may like to think about studying by distance learning. The principal distance learning institution in the UK at university level is the Open University (OU) which offers both undergraduate and post graduate courses. An undergraduate (first degree) course with the OU typically takes about six years of study if you study for around 16 hours a week however some courses can be done in as little as three years if you study full time.



Working from home by distance learning may be better for people with schizophrenia if they find college too stressful (Photo: ArtFamily on Shutterstock)

The great advantage of studying by distance learning is that you can fit your study time in around your family and other commitments and fit it in when you feel most able to do the work. For instance if you are suffering from an inverted body clock and like to stay up all night and sleep during the day then you can study when everyone else is in bed.

If you were previously studying at university but your studies were interrupted by your schizophrenia then your previous study period may count towards an OU qualification.

If you are thinking of studying for A levels or GCSEs by distance learning there are several distance learning schools which specialise in these courses such as the UK Open College. A number of UK universities and FE colleges also offer distance learning courses and they are too many to mention here but a look on the internet will give you more information about this sector.

Vocational Training

If you find the prospect of studying full time for a qualification just too difficult then don't despair as there are many worthwhile and well-paid occupations that are accessible via apprenticeships and do not need a university degree or even A levels. An apprenticeship is an employment scheme which involves training on the job. On an apprenticeship you will spend most of your day learning about the job at work but you will also spend between one and two days each week at college learning the theory behind the job.

Apprenticeships are available in all areas of the country and in a very wide range of trades from gardener to car mechanic and hairdresser. There is more about apprenticeships on the .Gov website <https://www.gov.uk/apprenticeships-guide> . Vocational training that is not linked to an apprenticeship is also available at most FE colleges.



A first aid at work course like those run by the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance will be valued by most employers (Photo: Andrey_Popov on Shutterstock)

If you are looking on education as a pathway into a full time job then there are three qualifications that many employers love and which will help to make you more employable. The first is a Health and Safety Executive approved three day First Aid at Work certificate. These are provided by organisations like the St John Ambulance and Red Cross and typically cost around £300. First aid courses are also run by some local FE colleges who may give reduced rates for people on certain benefits.

Next is a one day Fire Warden course which typically costs around £120 and is available from local commercial training providers.

Also to be recommended is the five day workplace health and safety course such as the Managing Safely course accredited by the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. These typically cost around £1,500 and can be found at local FE colleges or commercial training providers.

All three of these qualifications are valued by most employers as it enables them to have a member of staff trained in these skills without them having the expense of training them themselves. They are transferable skills which are applicable to almost any workplace and if you have them they will put you at a definite advantage over other candidates when looking for a job.

Basic Skills

If you have problems with literacy or numeracy (reading, writing and arithmetic) then it is important that you get help with that as soon as possible as it will be a serious drawback for you in the future. Most jobs, even manual jobs, now include an element of paperwork and it will be difficult to get onto an apprenticeship or any college course with poor literacy or numeracy. There are schemes in most areas to help with this. The Adult Literacy Trust website has some useful advice and the staff at your local library will also know about help available in your area.

IT skills are also needed in an increasing number of occupations now and if you do not have a basic knowledge of Word and Excel it may be a good idea to ask about courses in your area.

Support While Studying

Many FE colleges now have mental health support workers whose job it is to provide support to students who have mental health issues which may impact on their studying. If you are at college it is a good idea to find out who the support worker is and get in touch with them. Mental health support workers can intervene with your tutors if you find that you are beginning to struggle because of residual symptoms and ask them to make special provision for instance by extending deadlines on assignments.

Most universities also have dedicated mental health workers. The University Mental Health Advisors Network publishes a useful website with details on how to get in touch with one at your college. Your students Union will also be able to help.

Help with Costs

In general it is still possible to claim most out-of-work state benefits whilst studying provided that you comply with the rules around maximum hours of work etc. But it is vital that you discuss this with your Jobcentre advisor before starting on the course. If you need help with your college fees you may be able to get help from one of the charities that exist in the UK to support people in certain industries who need financial assistance.

If you are aged 24 years or older you may be able to get a loan to help cover the cost of your fees from the 24+Advanced Learning Loans Scheme <https://www.gov.uk/advanced-learning-loans/overview>

If you are studying at University or the Open University you will be able to get a loan to help with the course costs and you only have to start to re-pay the loan when you get back into full time work and your income exceeds £21,000 per year. At the OU there is also help available for people with disabilities that you may be able to plug into.

In addition to government help there are many charities that exist to help people who need financial support to get back into work. For instance if you or your parents have served in the armed forces you may be eligible for help from one of the forces charities such as the Royal British Legion. Similarly there are many charities that help people from particular industries or business sectors: the civil service has its own charity as does the construction industry and again if you or your parents have worked in one of these industries they may be able to help you.

It is impossible to list all of the benevolent charities in the UK so we suggest that you do a bit of research of your own to find a charity that may be able to help you. You can find out more about these options by searching on the internet or by asking at your local library but here are a few examples:

The Lighthouse Club helps people who have worked in building or construction and their families.

The Royal British Legion helps people who have served in the armed forces and their families.

The Electrical Industries Charity helps people who have worked in the electrical or energy industries and their families.

The Civil Service Charity helps civil servants and their families.

Newstraid helps people who have been involved in the newspaper trade (including working in newsagents) and their families.

The Benevolent helps people who have worked in the drinks trade and their families.

References

1. The content of this information sheet is based on the author's personal experience.

Further Reading

1. The UCAS Guide to Getting into University and College: Everything You Need to Know About the Entire Research and Application Process, UCAS.

2. Writing a UCAS Personal Statement in Seven Easy Steps: A Really Useful Guide to Creating a Successful Personal Statement, Julia Dolowicz.

3. Personal Statements: How to Write a UCAS Personal Statement , Paul Telfer.

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