Recent reports indicate a dramatic increase in the number of nursing students using university counselling services. The combined pressures of a nursing course and social and financial demands can lead to emotional and mental distress. Here's how to optimise your mental well-being.

Avoid the comparison trap
» As a nursing student you have a list of competencies to achieve and professional attributes to aspire to, but it is important to become your own practitioner.
» Try to become aware of how and when you judge yourself against others, and of the language you use: would you speak to a colleague or friend in this way? How can you adopt a friendlier tone with yourself?
» Remember to acknowledge when you do things well, and make a note in your reflective learning log of positive feedback you receive. Use this to boost your confidence when you notice self-critical thoughts.
» If you constantly compare yourself to others – in the classroom, on clinical placement or even online – you move your attention away from learning and place increased pressure on yourself.

Know yourself
» You are learning how to care for others, but to complete your course you also need to learn self-care and emotional resilience. This means finding ways to ground yourself, so you feel able to deal with whatever comes your way.
» Try to identify what helps you overcome setbacks such as a poor grade or a stressful shift. Do you need to talk things over or do you prefer to hit the gym? Develop strategies that suit you.
» If you are prone to ruminating over negative thoughts, learn to challenge these with more constructive ones. Some people find it helpful to keep a thought/mood diary, and there are resources online, such as Living Life to the Full (www.lltf.com) and Get Self Help (www.getselfhelp.co.uk).
» Make time for hobbies. Everyone needs time to unwind and relax, so balance your hard work with some fun time.
» Value friends and family, whether that’s a wide social circle or just a few close friends. Share your emotions.

Be honest
Sometimes you may need extra support. Often the first and bravest step is admitting that you need help. Initially speak to someone who you trust – this could be a friend or colleague, your tutor or a GP. The main thing is that you share how you are feeling and make a plan to get the support you need.

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