

Benefits, financial support and debt advice

This information resource looks at the benefits you might be entitled to if you have a mental illness, or care for someone who does. It provides information on the different kinds of benefits, disability, and being in debt. It also includes advice and guidance for mental health professionals on how they can support their patients.

About our information

We publish information to help people understand more about mental health and mental illness, and the kind of care they are entitled to.

Our information isn't a substitute for personalised medical advice from a doctor or other qualified healthcare professional. We encourage you to speak to a medical professional if you need more information or support. Please read our disclaimer: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/disclaimer-regarding-our-mental-health-information

What are benefits?

Benefits (also called Social Security, State Benefits or Welfare Benefits) are money paid by the government to people who:

- are on a lower income
- have health conditions that mean they have to work less or can't work at all
- take care of other people, such as children or other relatives who struggle to care for themselves.

Benefits are money that you don't have to pay back.

What benefits am I entitled to?

Which benefits you are entitled to will depend on your unique situation, including:

- How any conditions you have affect you
- Whether you are in employment or not
- How much you earn if you are in employment
- If you have savings, and how much you have (www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/how-savings-affect-means-tested-benefits/)

- If you have children (www.gov.uk/child-benefit)
- If you live alone or with others
- If you have a partner
- How old you are
- If you are a carer or someone cares for you (www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/support-and-benefits-for-carers/benefits-for-carers/)

The most important thing to think about when applying for benefits, is how your mental illness affects your daily life. This is because two people might have the same diagnosis, and have very different experiences.

Example

Here are three people who have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

Person A has a job, lives on their own and finds that their mental health remains quite stable.

Person B isn't able to work or live on their own. They have very unstable mental health, and need lots of support from other people to take care of themselves.

Person C is somewhere in the middle. Their mental health is sometimes stable and sometimes not, and they need help from other people at different times.

The people in this example will be entitled to different kinds of benefits and different amounts of support.

What if I also have a physical health condition?

Some people will have both mental and physical health conditions. It's important to think about how any conditions you have affect your daily life, and how they interact with your mental health.

Some people find that their physical health has more of an impact on them than their mental health, or vice versa. When you are applying for benefits it's important to mention all the ways that your health affects your ability to live independently.

What if I have a learning disability?

People with learning disabilities or autism, and the people who care for them, can apply for certain benefits. As with any condition, this will depend on how it affects you or the person you care for, and lots of other factors.

How can I work out the benefits I am entitled to?

Before applying for benefits, use a benefits calculator to work out what you might be entitled to. You might be eligible for more than one type of benefit.

Here are three different benefits calculators that you can use to help you:

- Turn2Us – benefits-calculator.turn2us.org.uk
- Entitled To - www.entitledto.co.uk/benefits-calculator
- Policy in Practice - www.betteroffcalculator.co.uk

Even using a benefits calculator, working out what you are entitled to and how to apply can be difficult. You may want to ask for guidance from a professional.

Many mental health charities have welfare and benefits advisors who can offer personalised advice. You can also speak to Citizen's Advice: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us. In Northern Ireland, independent advice services are delivered by Advice NI: www.adviceni.net. You might also want to speak to other local advice agencies for more personalised advice on claiming benefits.

What kinds of benefits might I be entitled to if I have a mental illness?

Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

PIP is a benefit that helps with extra living costs you have because of your mental or physical condition. You can apply for PIP if you have a disability or health condition that affects you doing certain everyday tasks. You can find out more about disability further on in this information.

You can get PIP even if you're working, have savings or are getting most other benefits.

PIP looks at:

- Daily living – if you need help with everyday tasks
- Mobility – if you need help getting around

If you have a mental illness, you might find it hard to take care of yourself, socialise or leave the house without help. In that case you might be eligible for PIP.

PIP has replaced an older benefit called Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people aged 16 years or older. DLA is still available for those under 16 years (find out more below). Adults who are still on DLA will be moved onto PIP.

Find out more about PIP here: www.gov.uk/pip

Adult Disability Payment (ADP)

PIP is only available to people living in England and Wales. If you live in Scotland, you will need to apply for Adult Disability Payment (ADP) instead:

www.mygov.scot/adult-disability-payment

What benefits am I entitled to if I can't work?

If you can't work because you have a mental illness that makes it hard for you to do so, there are other benefits you can apply for.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit is a benefit that aims to help you with living costs. You might be eligible for Universal Credit if you're on a low income, out of work or you cannot work.

If you are receiving some other benefits, Universal Credit might replace those benefits.

You can find out more about Universal Credit here: www.gov.uk/universal-credit

You can also contact the Help to Claim service for support on claiming Universal Credit: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/contact-us/help-to-claim

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

You can apply for ESA if you have a disability or health condition that affects how much you can work

ESA gives you:

- money to help with living costs if you're unable to work
- support to get back into work if you're able to

You can apply if you're employed, self-employed or unemployed.

Find out more about ESA here: www.gov.uk/employment-support-allowance

What other benefits might I be entitled to?

Council Tax Reduction

If you are on benefits or a low income, you might be eligible for a council tax reduction. This will depend on where you live, your individual circumstances, income, and if you have children or other adults living with you.

Find out more about Council Tax Reduction here: www.gov.uk/apply-council-tax-reduction

In Northern Ireland, Council Tax is called 'rates'. You can find out more about rates and 'rate relief' here: www.nidirect.gov.uk/rates-help

Council Tax exemption

Some people with mental illness or learning disabilities don't have to pay council tax.

You can find out more about whether you or someone you know is exempt from paying Council Tax here: www.gov.uk/council-tax/who-has-to-pay. Or by contacting your local council.

Housing Benefit

You might be able to claim Housing Benefits if:

- You are unemployed, on a low income or claiming benefits
 - **and** have reached State Pension age
 - **or** are in supported, sheltered or temporary housing.

If you do not fit these criteria, you will need to claim Universal Credit instead.

You can find out more about Housing Benefit here: www.gov.uk/housing-benefit

Winter Fuel Payment

If you were born before 28 June 1960, you could get a Winter Fuel Payment to help with your heating bills.

You should be eligible for this payment if you:

- receive a State Pension
- receive certain other benefits

If you are eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment you should get it automatically, but you might need to apply for it.

Find out more about whether you are eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment and how to apply here: www.gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment

Attendance Allowance

Attendance Allowance helps with extra costs if you have a disability or health condition severe enough that you need someone to help look after you.

You might be eligible for Attendance Allowance if all of the following things apply to you:

- You have reached State Pension age
- You have a disability or health condition
- That disability or health condition is severe enough that you need help caring for yourself

Attendance Allowance is paid weekly at a lower rate and a higher rate. Which rate you receive will depend on the level of help you need. It is not means tested so your income and savings won't affect whether or not you get it. However, you cannot claim Attendance Allowance if you are already receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

This benefit is called Pension Age Disability Payment in some parts of Scotland: www.mygov.scot/pension-age-disability-payment

Find out more about Attendance Allowance: www.gov.uk/attendance-allowance

Discretionary Support in Northern Ireland

Discretionary Support is a form of financial support available to people living in Northern Ireland. You can apply for discretionary support in exceptional circumstances to help you with:

- short-term living expenses or
- buying household items.

Depending on your circumstances, you might be offered an interest-free loan, or a grant you don't have to pay back.

Find out more about Discretionary Support and the eligibility requirements here: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/discretionary-support

Finding out about other forms of support

There are other forms of support available to people living with a mental illness and those who care for them. To find out what's available in your area, speak to:

- your local Citizens Advice: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/contact-us/search-for-your-local-citizens-advice
- a charity
- or find an advocate to help explore options with you: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/advocacy/finding-an-advocate

What benefits are people under 16 entitled to?

Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

If your child or a child you are caring for is under 16 and has a disability, you may be entitled to Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

This benefit used to be available to adults as well, but for people over 16 DLA has been replaced with PIP.

DLA is to help with the extra costs associated with looking after a child who is under 16 and needs much more care than a child of the same age who doesn't have a disability.

You can find out more about DLA here: www.gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children

In **Scotland**, this is called Child Disability Payment: www.mygov.scot/child-disability-payment

In **Northern Ireland** the rules are different for claiming DLA: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/disability-living-allowance-children

What benefits am I entitled to if I'm a carer?

A carer is someone who regularly spends time caring for someone without being paid.

As well as Universal Credit, carers can be entitled to:

- Carer's Allowance: www.gov.uk/carers-allowance - You could get £69.70 a week if you care for someone at least 35 hours a week and they get certain benefits. You will need to earn no more than £132 a week to qualify for Carer's Allowance. You do not have to be related to, or live with, the person you care for.
- Carer's Credit: www.gov.uk/carers-credit – This is a type of national insurance credit that helps to make sure you can still access a basic state pension and other benefits if you're not working. You could get Carer's Credit if you're caring for someone for at least 20 hours a week.

Carers are also entitled to a carer's assessment: www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/support-and-benefits-for-carers/carer-assessments. You can contact the adult social services in your local council and ask for a carer's assessment.

Find out more about the benefits you're entitled to if you're a carer here: www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/help-for-carers

What happens if I go into hospital?

If you go into hospital, certain benefits payments may be stopped after a period of time.

If you receive benefits and go into hospital or there is a risk that you might, it is important to check whether you need to inform the DWP. If you don't do this and continue to receive certain benefits while you are in hospital, **you might be required to pay them back.**

A family member or friend might be able to do this while you are in hospital if you aren't able to.

The charity Disability Rights UK provides detailed information on how different benefits might be affected if you go into hospital:

www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/benefits-hospital

Personal Independence Payment

Your PIP payments may be stopped if you are in hospital for more than 28 days, unless:

- you are under 18
- you are paying for your stay in a private hospital

You should tell the DWP if you go into hospital. If you don't and you are there for over 28 days and continue to be paid PIP, you may be required to pay it back.

Once you are out of hospital, you should tell the DWP so that they can start paying your PIP again.

The same rules apply for if you are in prison or custody for more than 28 days.

Find out more about PIP and hospital stays on the Citizens Advice website:

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/pip/pip-changes-and-reviews/changes-that-affect-pip/

When else might my benefits be stopped?

There are some other circumstances where your benefits might be affected or stopped. For example, if your condition changes or if you move abroad. If you are unsure, you can find out more about different benefits and how they might be affected on the Citizens Advice website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Mental illness and disability

Are mental illnesses disabilities?

A disability is a physical or mental illness that makes it harder for someone to do certain activities, or interact with the world around them.

Not everyone who has a mental illness will always be considered disabled. Many people with a mental illness go from being 'well' to 'unwell' at different times. This is rarely predictable.

When a mental illness makes it very hard for you to take care of yourself or interact with others, it is considered a disability. This means you are entitled to support and protection under the law.

Not everyone likes the term disability, or feels like it applies to them. However, it is important that we use the term disability here, as it can help people to understand the benefits they are entitled to and their legal rights.

When is a mental illness a disability?

Under the Equality Act 2010, a mental illness is considered a disability if it has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your 'normal day-to-day activity'.

- 'Substantial' is hard to define, but means more than usual and to a degree that affects your life significantly.
- 'Long term' means if your condition lasts, or is likely to last, 12 months or more
- 'Normal day-to-day activity' is defined as something you do regularly in a normal day. For example, using a computer, working set times or interacting with people.

You can find out more about this here: www.gov.uk/when-mental-health-condition-becomes-disability

Drug or alcohol dependence and disability

Being dependent on drugs or alcohol is not considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

However, if someone is dependent on drugs or alcohol **and** has a mental or physical health condition that has a substantial and long-term effect on them, this would be considered a disability. For example, someone who is dependent on alcohol and has depression that has a substantial and long-term effect on their life.

Further information on benefits and mental health

When applying for benefits, your mental health team can help provide clinical evidence. The College provides guidance to help mental health professionals supply high quality evidence. Find out more about this in the 'information for professionals' section of this resource.

Further information

- **Benefits and mental health, Scope:** www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/benefits-and-mental-health – Information about claiming benefits if you have a mental health problem.
- **Claiming benefits when you have a mental health problem, Mind:** www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/money-and-mental-health/claiming-benefits – Information about filling out benefits forms and benefits assessments.
- **Mental health services in Northern Ireland, Minding Your Head:** www.mindingyourhead.info/services – The services listed on this website

offer advice and support to people in Northern Ireland on issues that can have an impact on your mental health.

How can I get help with debt?

It's not unusual to have challenges with money from time to time. However, if you are struggling with debt or are finding it hard to pay your bills, you might need professional support.

People face challenges with debt for all sorts of reasons, including their mental health. Experiencing a mental illness or poor mental health can mean that you:

- have a smaller income if you are unable to work
- forget or avoid paying bills
- spend more than you can afford

It's important to remember that the sooner you get help for debt the better. Here are a number of organisations and resources available to support you:

Organisations

- **Citizen's Advice** offers advice and support on a huge range of issues, including money and debt: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/debt-and-money
- **National Debtline** gives free and independent debt advice over the phone and online: www.nationaldebtline.org/ **Telephone:** 0808 808 4000
- **Mental health and money advice** is an online advice service by Mental Health UK that helps people to understand, manage and improve their financial and mental health: www.mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org

Information about money and mental health

- **Debt and Mental Health, Royal College of Psychiatrists:** www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/debt-and-mental-health – Our information on debt and mental health can give you some ideas on how to tackle the issues you're facing.
- **Money and mental health, Mind:** www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/money-and-mental-health – Find out more about the link between mental health and money, organising your finances, claiming benefits and more.
- **Mental Health and Debt guide, Money Saving Expert:** www.moneysavingexpert.com/credit-cards/mental-health-guide - This free booklet is for people with mental health problems and those caring for them. It covers how to handle debts, working with banks, free debt counselling, tips for people with bipolar disorder or depression, whether to declare a condition and more.

- **Debt and Mental health, Step Change:** www.stepchange.org/debt-and-mental-health-support – The debt charity Step Change offer information on managing your money and dealing with debt stress.
- **Money, benefits and mental health, Rethink Mental Illness:** www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/money-benefits-and-mental-health – Rethink Mental Illness have a Mental Health & Money Advice Service, and offer information on different benefits and financial support.

Information for mental health professionals

When you are working with someone with a mental illness, it's important to remember there are practical challenges that might be directly impacting their mental health.

It can be much harder to focus on medications, therapies or other things that are helpful for your mental health if you are in financial difficulty. Applying for benefits can be an incredibly draining process and is rarely straightforward. Many people appeal their benefits decision, and have to go to a tribunal court, causing them further stress.

Taking the whole person into consideration, and being supportive and understanding of the challenges of the benefits process, can have a positive impact on your patients.

Providing clinical evidence

Mental health professionals can be asked to provide supporting evidence when someone they care for is making a benefits claim. We have information about how to provide evidence in a helpful and effective way:

Personal independence payment (PIP)

PIP is a benefit that helps with extra living costs for people with disabilities or health conditions who experience challenges doing certain everyday tasks.

The College has produced guidance for clinicians on providing clinical evidence for PIP, including information on completing a letter of evidence and example letters: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/campaigning-for-better-mental-health-policy/other-policy-areas/social-inclusion/personal-independence-payment-providing-clinical-evidence

Work Capability Assessment (WCA) for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

ESA is a benefit paid to people who have an illness or disability that affects how much they can work. As someone's clinician, you might be asked to provide additional evidence to support the individual's claim for ESA. This request could

come from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), but is most likely to come from the individual you are treating.

At present there is no existing guidance on writing clinical reports for the WCA. Sometimes clinicians are sent the ESA113 form, which is not clearly laid out and difficult to complete. We recommend that you write your own reports using the outline we have developed: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/campaigning-for-better-mental-health-policy/other-policy-areas/social-inclusion/providing-clinical-evidence-for-the-work-capability-assessment

Credits

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