

## Real-life story - Sarah Billington

Sarah needed support when she was unwell while at university.



Sarah Billington Midwifery student

**Employer or university** University of Greenwich

**Salary range** Unknown

### What happened?

Over the Christmas period of my first year I became unwell and for several months I had a number of different health issues. This meant I was unable to fully cope with the course and had to cut short one of my placements. It was a difficult choice but I felt I had to be open and honest with the university and request some time off from the course.

I had been juggling an existing hospital job with my university course and in hindsight I feel perhaps the stress of doing too much may have contributed to my health problems. My advice to others would be, to be very careful about over committing and to strike a sensible work-life balance.

### What support did you receive?

There were a number of lecturers who were able to respond to my phone calls and emails within a short space of time. I felt there was always someone to talk to. I also had extra visits by my university tutor while on placement.

When I returned to a hospital-based placement that I hadn't completed, I didn't have to do night shifts. I knew I had to put my health first and I wanted to keep a regular routine. I was also allowed to re-sit an anatomy and physiology exam, which I failed because I hadn't been able to revise adequately. I also needed

to re-write an essay because I had missed a number of lectures.

In all, I lost 250 placement hours but I will be able to make these up gradually as I continue through the course.

I was given the option to repeat my first year at a later date. I was also offered extensions to the time allowed for exams. I didn't take up either of these because with the support I received I felt able to continue back on my course after a period away. I successfully completed all my first year competencies and passed my first year.

My situation was dealt with very sensitively and I felt able to dictate the amount of support I needed. I was able to keep going with placements as long as I was open about what I felt able to do, to ensure patient safety was never compromised. I was very aware of not putting my own health at risk or that of my patients.

Most importantly, be honest and up-front from the beginning.

## **What are your tips for students who feel they may need support?**

Most importantly, be honest and up-front from the beginning, whether this is when you apply for a course or if difficulties arise while you are on the course. Be it health issues, a relationship breaking down, childcare issues or a disability, hiding it and hoping for the best won't help. Your health and well-being should always come first, so, if you are struggling, tell someone.

Be realistic about what you can or can't do, but don't make this decision alone. Your first port of call should be your university. If they are unsure they may refer you to occupational health to be assessed or reassessed. In some cases this may mean you can no longer continue with the career you want to do, but in others you may be surprised at the flexibility of the course to accommodate your needs or the adaptations that can be put in place in the workplace.

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