SUPPORTING YOUR YOUNG PERSON BEFORE AND DURING THEIR TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is organised around four key themes to help you support your young person at every stage of their university journey:

Prepare, Connect, Notice, and Respond

Each section is designed to be read on its own, so feel free to dip in and out as your needs change.

You don't need to read this from cover to cover in one sitting. Use the sections most relevant to where you and your young person are right now and return to others as their journey unfolds. Worksheets are included throughout to help you have meaningful conversations together.

Please remember: this guide is here to support conversations between you and your young person. It is not a substitute for professional advice. If you have serious concerns about their Well-being or safety, please encourage them to contact their university support services or a healthcare professional.

Prepare - practical steps before they leave home.
Connect - staying close without taking over.
Notice - recognising changes in how they seem.
Respond - what to do if things feel difficult.

Keep this guide handy to revisit as your young person's university journey unfolds.

BEFORE THEY GO: PREPARE, DON'T PANIC

Talking about well-being early alongside practical skills like managing money and cooking gives your young person the best foundation. Before they leave, take time together to identify key contacts and services at their university. Knowing where to turn makes all the difference.

Save key contacts in their phone and keep a copy at home.
Preparation is not about expecting things to go wrong, it's about building the confidence to cope if they do. The more familiar these pathways feel, the easier it is to reach out when needed.

Make a note of the following:

Personal tutor - this is usually the first point of academic contact

Well-being and mental health services on campus

Disability or neurodiversity support team

GP registration and out-of-hours arrangements

Medication access and repeat prescription plan

Financial support and accommodation services

KNOW YOUR YOUNG PERSON

Every young person is different.
The most important thing isn't a checklist, it's noticing changes from their usual self.
You know your child best and that knowledge matters more than any list.

Signs they may be struggling:
— Becoming unusually quiet or withdrawn
— Losing interest in hobbies or things they loved
— Seeming overwhelmed, tearful or irritable
— Negative talk about themselves or the future
— Changes in sleep, eating or daily routine

When they're doing well you'll likely notice:
— Chatting openly
— Staying connected with friends
— Keeping up with routines
— Showing enthusiasm for their course or social life.

Focus on shifts from their normal and not a single bad day, but a pattern of change over time.

Social adjustment and finding belonging.
Routine changes and self-management.
Academic pressure and new expectations.
Financial and practical independence.

WHEN A YOUNG PERSON HAS NOT STRUGGLED BEFORE

Many young people arrive at university having coped well throughout school. That's something to celebrate and also to prepare for. New pressures can emerge that feel unfamiliar and overwhelming, even for our most resilient young people.

Difficulty at university does not mean failure. It means a young person is navigating something genuinely new. Preparing them now means building the confidence to reach out, seek help, and keep going even when things feel hard for the first time.

ANXIETY, NEURODIVERGENCE AND ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Many young people arrive at university with anxiety, additional needs or are neurodivergent, whether they are diagnosed or not.
Needing support does not reduce independence.
With the right scaffolding in place, your young person can thrive on their own terms.

For anxiety, help them identify early warning signs before they leave : changes in sleep, appetite, or mood.
Agree on simple coping strategies together: breathing techniques, grounding exercises, or knowing when to step away.
Encourage them to access university well-being services early, not only in crisis.

Register with disability or neurodiversity support before term starts.
Ask about reasonable adjustments: extensions, quiet spaces, note-taking support.
Help them understand their own needs so they can self-advocate.
Encourage consistent routine as structure can reduce overwhelm.

Needing support does not reduce independence — it enables it.

STAYING CONNECTED WITHOUT MONITORING

Staying close to your young person doesn't mean knowing everything.
Balancing genuine care with respect for their growing independence is one of the most loving things a parent can do during this transition.

It's natural to worry when you can't see how your young person is doing day to day. Many parents fear missing something important, a bad day, a low mood, or a moment when their child really needed them. These fears come from love, not overprotection.

What matters most is noticing patterns, not individual moments. One missed call, a quiet week, or a short reply doesn't signal crisis. Look for sustained changes from their usual self, that’s when it's worth a gentle, caring check-in.

— Agree a regular, relaxed rhythm of contact before they leave.
— Avoid interpreting silence as distress, look out for patterns.
— One missed call is not a red flag; repeated unavailability may be.
— Let them lead on frequency, adjust together over time.
— Your presence can be felt without monitoring every detail.

Listen beyond the words.
Notice tone and energy.
Create space, not pressure.
You don't need all the answers.

LISTEN TO HOW THEY TALK & NOT JUST WHAT THEY SAY

What your young person says matters but so does how they say it. A flat tone, short replies, or unusual silence can tell you more than words alone. Creating a safe, gentle space for honest conversation is one of the most powerful things you can do.

Try these gentle phrases:
"You sound a bit flat today, is everything okay?"
"No pressure to talk, but I'm here if you need me."
"I noticed you seemed quiet, I am just checking in."

Avoid rapid questions or problem-solving straight away. Let silence be okay.

Notice changes in enthusiasm, energy and warmth, these are often the earliest signals that something has shifted.

Asking the right questions can open doors that a simple "How are you?" keeps closed. When we ask with curiosity rather than worry, young people are far more likely to share what's really going on.

Avoid relying on "How are you?" alone — it's easy to answer with "Fine" and move on. Specific, open questions show you're genuinely interested and give your young person a natural way in to share more.

ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

"What's been the best part of your week and the hardest?"
"Is there anything about uni that's felt different to what you expected?"
"How are you finding the social side of things?"
"What does a typical day look like for you at the moment?"
"Is there anything you've been worrying about that you haven't mentioned?"

Different questions invite better conversations. You don't need to ask everything at once, pick one question, listen fully, and follow their lead.
The goal is connection, not interrogation.
Let silence be okay too.
Callout: "Better questions invite better conversations."

COMMUNICATION PLAN

Think about this plan together before university starts or when you next have an appropriate time to talk with your young person.
Agreeing on communication rhythms reduces anxiety for everyone and means you both know what to expect.

Tip: Write your agreed phrases in your own words, they'll feel more natural in the moment.

Revisit and update this plan as the year progresses. The goal is connection, not surveillance.

How shall we communicate?

Whats the best way to get in touch?
How often will we speak?
Best times to call?
If one of us is busy?

Agree on phrases you may use to be clear on how you feel, some ideas are:

I'm having a difficult day but don't need help
I need someone to check in on me
I need urgent help right now

WHAT TO DO IF THEY STOP ANSWERING

Agree this plan together before they leave - calmly and in advance, not in a moment of panic. Knowing the plan exists can bring reassurance to everyone.

1. Send a simple, warm message no pressure, just checking in.
2. Wait a reasonable amount of time before trying again.
3. Try calling and if no answer, leave a calm voicemail.
4. Contact university or accommodation support if silence is very unusual.
5. Use an emergency contact if there is an immediate safety concern.

One missed call is not a red flag, look for patterns and changes from their usual behaviour. Trust your knowledge of your young person, and remember: having a plan in place means you can act with confidence rather than fear.

RESPONDING WHEN THEY CALL IN CRISIS

When your young person calls in distress, it can feel overwhelming. These six steps will help you respond calmly and effectively - supporting them without pressure to fix everything at once.

STOP

Take a breath before responding - your calm helps them feel safe.

LISTEN

Let them speak without interrupting. You don't need to have answers yet.

VALIDATE

Acknowledge their feelings. "That sounds really hard" goes a long way.

Remember: You are their parent, not their therapist. Your role is to listen, support and help connect them to the right people not to have all the answers. That is more than enough.

Gently ask what has happened. "Can you tell me a bit more?". This helps you get a clearer picture without pressure. Avoid jumping to solutions before you fully understand what they need.

Help them identify who is around them, a friend, flatmate, or university support.
Calmly decide next steps together.
You don't need to fix everything immediately, being present is enough.

COMMON "WHAT IF?" QUESTIONS

It's natural to worry about the challenges your young person might face at university. Here are some of the most common parental concerns and how to respond with understanding before jumping to action.

What if they don't make friends?
Encourage connection without pressure. Friendships take time - remind them that many others feel the same way in the early weeks.
What if they hate their accommodation?
Listen first. Acknowledge how hard it is, then gently direct them to accommodation support services before making any decisions.

What if they fail an assignment?
Normalise setbacks. One poor result is not a crisis - help them find academic support and remind them that asking for help is a strength.
What if they want to come home?
Understand the reasons before deciding anything. Sometimes being heard is enough. Home is a safe option, not a failure.
Understanding always comes before action.

MAKING HOME A SAFE PLACE

Sometimes university life feels overwhelming. Remind your young person that home is always a safe place — not a last resort, but a foundation they can return to if they need to.

Knowing home is there often gives young people the courage to stay and seek support. A safe landing place builds confidence, not dependency.
You are still their anchor.

"If I really need to come home, I can."
Holding this truth gently and sharing it openly can make all the difference. Home is not the end of their journey. It is part of what makes the journey possible.

Home is a safe landing, not a failure.
Knowing home is an option can help them stay.
Returning home is not giving up.
Your presence matters, near or far.
Support looks different at every stage.

SUPPORTING INDEPENDENCE WITHOUT BECOMING THEIR UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR

It can be tempting to step in and solve problems for your young person but doing so can quietly undermine the very confidence they need to thrive. Your role is to support their skills, not to manage their university life on their behalf.

Common temptations include emailing their lecturers directly, chasing appointments on their behalf, organising their finances, or contacting accommodation staff without involving them. These actions come from love - but they send the message that you don't trust them to cope.

Instead, try responses that put them in the driving seat: "Let's work out together who you might contact about this" or "What do you think the next step is?" This keeps them empowered while reminding them you're alongside them.

Encourage self-management by asking:
"What have you tried so far?"
Help them identify the right university contact rather than contacting for them.
Celebrate small wins - navigating problems builds real confidence.
Let them make mistakes; recovery is part of learning.
Remember: support skills, build confidence, preserve independence.

Excitement and energy.
Exhaustion and overwhelm.
Homesickness and adjustment.
Social pressure and finding their place.

THE FIRST SIX WEEKS

The first six weeks of university are often a rollercoaster and that is completely normal. Your young person may feel excitement, exhaustion, homesickness, and social pressure all in the same week.

Settling in takes time and it is not a race.

Remind your young person: everyone around them is also finding their feet. "You are seeing everyone's highlights, not their whole experience." Be patient - with them, and with yourself.

Not every difficult moment requires action, but persistent changes from your young person's usual self are worth paying attention to. Trust your instincts. You know your child better than anyone.

Look at the whole picture, one bad week is normal. A pattern of change over time is the signal to act. Early support makes a real difference. You are not overreacting by caring.

WARNING SIGNS AND FINDING SUPPORT

Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they usually enjoy.
Consistently missing lectures, seminars, or deadlines.
Noticeable changes in sleep — too much or too little.
Increasing isolation or avoiding contact with home.
Escalating anxiety, low mood, or expressions of hopelessness.

If you notice several of these changes together, or a significant shift from their usual self, gently reach out. Encourage them to speak with their university well-being service or GP. You don't need to have all the answers - just opening the door matters.

PARENT WELL-BEING

Common feelings parents experience:
• Worry and anxiety about their safety
• Loneliness and loss of daily connection
• Loss of control or helplessness
• Sadness at this change in your relationship
• Pride mixed with uncertainty

Supporting your young person through university is a significant emotional journey for you too. The worry, loneliness, and anxiety you may feel are completely normal and they reflect just how much you care. You cannot monitor your way to safety, but you can prepare, connect and listen.

It is important to acknowledge your own feelings during this transition. Seeking support for yourself is not a weakness - it helps you stay strong and present for your young person when they need you most.

YOUR UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH PLAN

Consider this plan together before your young person leaves for university or when you have a convenient time to talk. Revisit and update it as their experience unfolds. Sharing it openly helps everyone feel prepared and connected.

SENSITIVELY ADD CHALLENGES OF MEDICATION WITHDRAWAL IF NOT PLANNED AHEAD AND ORDERED AND RUN OUT. NOT STORING MEDS. POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS IF STARTING MEDS

When I'm doing well, I usually...
Things that help me feel settled are...
My early warning signs are...
Things that make things harder are...
When I'm struggling, it helps when people...

University contact I can speak to: _____
GP details: _____
Contact person at home: _____
If I need help, I will: _____
If I stop responding, our agreed plan is: _____

"I'm proud of you and I'm here no matter what."
"You don't have to pretend everything is fine."
"If something feels hard, please tell me early."
"Home is always here for you."

A CONVERSATION TO HAVE BEFORE THEY LEAVE

You don't need a perfect script. Just an open heart and a willingness to be honest. These conversations help your young person feel supported, not pressured as they prepare to go.

Try to have this conversation in a calm, unhurried moment - not on moving-in day. Remind them that struggling doesn't mean failing and that reaching out early makes a real difference.
Keep it gentle, keep it open, and let them lead.

ONE-PAGE EMERGENCY & SUPPORT PLAN

Emergency Contacts: University well-being:

_____

GP/Out-of-Hours:

_____ _____

Emergency Services:

999

Samaritans

116 123 Samaritans

Signs That Need Urgent Action:
Uncontactable for an unusual period
Talk of self-harm or hopelessness
Sudden withdrawal from all contact.

Agreed Safety Steps:

1. Send a message.
2. Call.
3. Contact university/accommodation.
4. Use emergency contact.
5. Call 999 if immediate risk.

Parent Contact: Name:

_____

Number:

_____

Notes:

_____

Print and keep visible at home.

FINAL MESSAGE & THE OLLIE FOUNDATION

The OLLIE Foundation provides suicide prevention awareness talks and parent support resources. For more information, training, or to access further resources, please visit: www.theolliefoundation.org

Disclaimer: This guide is designed to support conversations and awareness. It is not a substitute for professional mental health advice. University support services vary — always check local provision.

"I believe you can do this. And if one day you can't, we'll work it out together."
Keep this guide handy to revisit as your young person's university journey unfolds. **You are not alone in this.**

You can't prevent every struggle but you can prepare for it.
Your young person knows support is available.
Parenting now means balancing being there and letting go.
Your role is changing, not disappearing.
You are still needed, just differently.

BEYOND THE GAME

THE OLLIE FOUNDATION
ONE LIFE LOST IS ENOUGH