

# Preparing a teenager for university

## psychological support



WPA

## How you can help your teenage prepare psychologically for university

Is there a teenager in your household heading to university later this year? For many, this will be their first time living away from home – and parents and carers are going to want to help them get ready.

Beyond the obvious though (like kitting them out with pots and pans and hoping at least some of their student loan is spent on groceries), you might be thinking about how you can help them prepare psychologically and support their mental wellbeing at university.

This is going to be a great time of their lives. It's about going into it with a positive outlook and realising there will be challenges – but setting it up so they are ready to problem-solve, rather than be overwhelmed by things. It's a time of big changes with many new things to navigate and it's usual for students to experience “exciting” and “challenging” moments, so it can sometimes feel like a bit of a bumpy ride.

Agree a communication plan about when and how they'll be keeping in touch and what feels right for everybody involved is a great idea. It can be a “very fine balance” between being supportive and knowing how intrusive to be (especially when ‘empty nest syndrome’ hits) and you will want to think about how you're changing the communication with them so that it's age-appropriate as they become adults.

Discussing it together means you can keep connections up and have those regular check-ins in a way that suits your family and your young person's needs. For some it might be a WhatsApp group, it might be a weekly phone call, or a monthly visit, perhaps FaceTime with the family pets.

If they do reach out and tell you they're having a hard time, the most important thing is to give them space to talk about it and to listen. Listening sounds very easy, but if you think your child is distressed, it can be very hard to just listen and not jump to conclusions. So you really want to be curious, non-judgemental and set up that line of communication. It is important to reassure them that those heightened emotions [especially around exam times and during the first term] can be usual. But if that then carries on and is carrying on longer than usual when they're feeling stressed or anxious, then encourage them to look at the wider support that's available and how they can access that, and perhaps think about checking in more often as well.

They can find out about wellbeing services at their university at open days and welcome events – but you might want to help them look it up in advance. Are there specific services for autistic students, those with dyslexia and social anxiety, for example? Encourage them to register with a GP in good time too. They can also find resources online and access free counselling and helplines through organisations like Student Minds ([studentminds.org.uk](http://studentminds.org.uk)).

They'll likely be facing a lot of firsts – and while learning and finding solutions and coping strategies is part of life, a bit of practice and prep can go a long way. Sitting down to discuss hypothetical events together will really help. For example, what would happen if they had no money for food, or to do something exciting that the other students are doing – would they get a part time job, would they contact you? How would they cope if they weren't making the friends they wanted to make? It's usual in the first term to make lots of friends that you later find you don't actually have a lot in common with, and then you make a new set of friends. It's about raising awareness of these sorts of situations, so you're supporting problem-solving before they get there.

Other important topics are things like what they'll do if they're offered more alcohol than they're used to, or drugs, as well safe sex and consent. A lot of the time, it's about opening those channels of safe and non-judgemental communication and reassuring them they can seek support at any point and say no to anything they're not comfortable with.

Think about practical stuff too. Have a few conversations about what might be helpful. What do they need to feel more comfortable in new accommodation? If they're moving to a completely new area, would it be helpful to visit and get to know the area a bit beforehand? Do they need support with things like budgeting or cooking, planning a basic pantry or practising some meals?

**Helping your young person get prepared, listening to them and being there when they need you will make the difference.**



*This document has been reproduced with the kind permission of the third party who provides the WPA Mental Health Pathway. Written by Dr Gabrielle Pendlebury, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist (Onebright Director of Psychiatry Services).*