

Leaving the nest

Going to university is something to look forward to, but it can be stressful if the change is not managed adequately.

You did it! After all the hard work and effort you put into getting to university the time has finally arrived! There is a lot to be excited about - it's a new place, with new people and new challenges. However, as with all change and with any adventure, in order to move forward there are always some things you have to leave behind ...

... the folks

This may well be the first time you are leaving home and it's likely that there is a part of you that's dying to finally have the freedom and autonomy to do what you want, when you want and where you want. However, you are also leaving the security of what you know, the comfort of your home and the familiarity of your surroundings. There is nothing wrong with feeling a little overwhelmed. Change can feel like a scary place.

In all the excitement, it is also easy to forget how the folks are feeling. It is a big transition for them as well. Whether they joke about it, 'finally we get the spare room we've always wanted', or lay on the emotional bit, 'I don't know how we are going to manage without you', it is possible that they are also going to find it a bit strange when you leave. Do keep in touch with them as it may give them some peace of mind.

... the friends

University enables you to meet a variety of different people from all walks of life and this will only help to expand your network of friends, rather than reduce it. Although you may be anxious about losing touch with your friends, it is likely that they feel the same way as well. So don't forget to take their mobile numbers, email addresses and new contact details to keep in touch.

... the partners

Leaving behind a loved one is hard, especially if they are not going to university. It's common to hide your excitement or to keep plans about nights out from your partners out of a sense of guilt.

It is never wise to make assumptions and an open and honest discussion with your partner about how your relationship may change whilst at university will be far more beneficial. Many couples find that university does not necessarily cause a break-up in relationships, especially if your partner is included in your future plans.

It is not unusual for students to be in a relationship when they join university. But whether a relationship lasts the course of university depends on the strength of your relationship, how you both handle the change and the emphasis you place on being together.

Starting university after completing your gap year

If you have just completed your gap year, leaving home may not cause as many anxieties for you, especially if you went travelling or stayed away from home during that period of time.

However, some gap-year students find it difficult to re-adjust to student life after their year out, feeling they have less in common with the other first-year students. Whether this is because you have been working in an office environment over the past year, or backpacking across Europe, it may feel like you have been experiencing a life that other students may not be able to relate to.

Although it is good to share your experiences and there is nothing wrong about being excited about your gap year, it is important to remember that not all first-year students have been in a similar position to yourself and may not share

your enthusiasm, so try to limit the number of times you mention your year out, at least until you get to know your friends a bit better! Some gap-year students also find that settling back after a year of not reading or even touching textbooks, can also cause them stress!

Be prepared for the shock of putting pen to paper again! You may find it useful to get into a studying routine fairly early on. This will reduce the stress and anxiety when the assignments begin to come in, as you will be more prepared to deal with them.

Feeling homesick?

So you have been at university for a while now. The excitement of the freedom and independence might be wearing off a little. Are you fed up washing your own clothes and cleaning up after yourself? Are you missing home-cooked food? Your friends? Or have you just run out of money?

It is quite natural to miss home and adjusting to a new way of living does not happen overnight. It will take time and probably a few trips home to feel more settled. Here are a few tips to help you along the way:

- Ensure that you have a regular method of contacting home which won't dip into your finances (possibly arrange a call card or a pay-as-you-go mobile phone which is used just to call home).
- Plan meetings. Arrange dates and times for meeting up with family and friends back home. This will help you to make sure that everyone is free to meet when you go back and gives you a date to look forward to.
- Learn a few of your favourite home-cooked recipes to make them during term time.
- Keep yourself busy. Initially, you may find it a bit of an effort to make friends and to join clubs and societies, yet it is very important to do so. Too much time on your hands can lead you to feel isolated and lonely.
- If you are feeling very homesick, it's worth making a trip back home. Many students find that they go home a bit more frequently in their first few terms than they do for the

rest of their university years. However, if you find that you feel even worse after you make a trip home, you may benefit from making a conscious effort to stay at university and settle into a routine before going home again.

- Make your room feel like your own. Your room is probably very bare when you move in so decorate it in your own style. Display your favourite memorabilia and put up some posters and photos to make the room feel more personable to you. (Check the rules of your accommodation before putting things up on the walls.)

If you're finding it increasingly difficult to adapt to your new surroundings and are becoming depressed, you are not alone! This anxiety is not uncommon for many new students at university. However, if the symptoms of depression appear to be getting worse (such as complete fatigue, losing weight, tearfulness or feelings of hopelessness) and you do not feel you are able to cope, it is advisable to contact your local GP or your student counsellor.

Changes in relationship dynamics

In some instances students find that they feel homesick because they are worried or concerned about friends and family back home. This leads to feelings of guilt or anxiety when at university. Whether you are worried about your partner being unable to cope with you being at university or your family falling apart when you leave, it is important to tackle the problem rather than feeling the unwarranted guilt.



This feature is an extract from *Coping with Stress at University* by Stephen Palmer and Angela Puri, Sage Publications 2006. This 'survival guide to university is available from our [online shop at www.careerscope.info](http://www.careerscope.info)