

Coping with University Life Through a **Family Health Crisis**



Hope Support Services

www.hopesupport.org.uk

**SUPPORTING
YOUNG PEOPLE
THROUGH A
FAMILY HEALTH
CRISIS**



Leaving somebody ill at home is hard

Leaving home to become a university or college student is a big and important transition in anyone's life.

When you have a family member who is physically or mentally ill or who lives with a disability, the chances are you are used to caring for them and maybe worrying about them too.

And those factors might make the decision to go to university feel even more complicated.

This pack is full of advice from a couple of young people from Hope Support Services - the UK charity for young people going through a family health crisis. They offer tips and advice for other students in similar situations.

Hope offers an online community and one-to-one support for young people and students up to the age of 25 when a family member has a life-threatening illness.

Naomi was already at university when her mum was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Mel left home to start college while her dad had a life-threatening illness.



Making the decision to leave home

Illness and disability are often surrounded with 'unknowns'. Leaving home or returning to university can feel difficult when there are a lot of unknown factors.

It can be impossible to know how long an illness will last, how much worse things might get, how quickly it might progress and of course, whether someone is going to live or die.

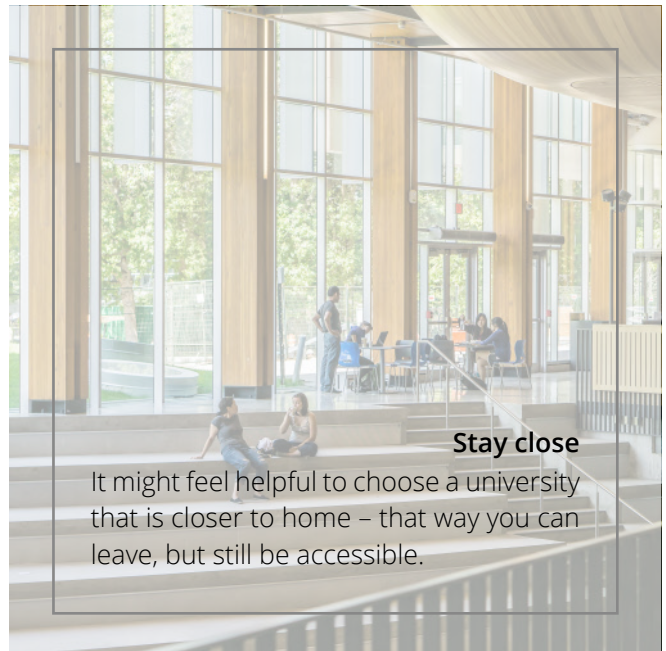
Whatever is happening at home, remember:

It is OK to grow up and lead your own life

Putting life 'on hold' may not be the best option when you don't know how an illness will progress

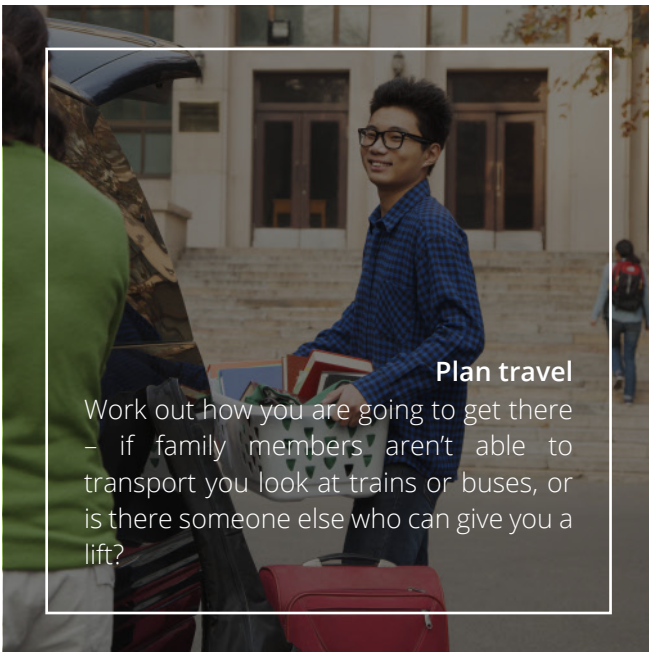
It is natural to feel worried

Things to consider if leaving home is a difficult decision



Stay close

It might feel helpful to choose a university that is closer to home – that way you can leave, but still be accessible.



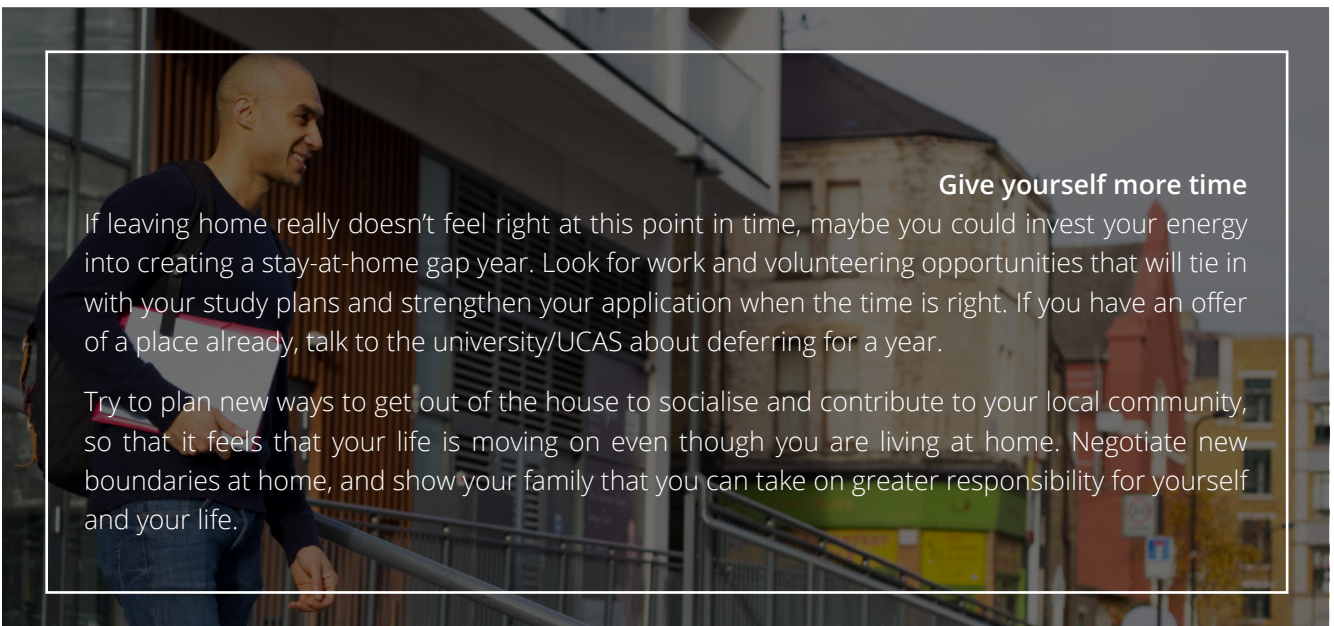
Plan travel

Work out how you are going to get there – if family members aren't able to transport you look at trains or buses, or is there someone else who can give you a lift?



Send stuff on ahead

Don't worry about not being able to take all your stuff on public transport – you could send some things ahead with a courier; plan to buy bits when you get there; borrow from your flatmates (it's a great way to get to know them - and chances are you want to take far more stuff than you will actually need).



Give yourself more time

If leaving home really doesn't feel right at this point in time, maybe you could invest your energy into creating a stay-at-home gap year. Look for work and volunteering opportunities that will tie in with your study plans and strengthen your application when the time is right. If you have an offer of a place already, talk to the university/UCAS about deferring for a year.

Try to plan new ways to get out of the house to socialise and contribute to your local community, so that it feels that your life is moving on even though you are living at home. Negotiate new boundaries at home, and show your family that you can take on greater responsibility for yourself and your life.



Living away from home when someone is ill

Being away from home puts distance between you and your family. This may feel like a good thing; you may feel relieved. Or you may feel guilty, left out and isolated from whatever is happening at home.

Finding that balance between independence and connection can be a challenge. Sometimes your family may choose 'not to worry you' with things that are happening at home because they don't want to distract you from your studies; other times you may get fed up with the constant updates about appointments, treatment options and medications.

You may jump every time the phone rings or feel you need to be in touch numerous times a day. As the weeks and months pass you will find ways of managing this change, and this chapter contains some ideas.

**Negotiate
and plan
with your
family**

**Communicate
with your
university**

**Take care
of yourself**

Negotiate and plan with your family

Discuss with your family how much information you would like to have shared with you and how you are going to communicate – how often and by what means.

Agree set times for phone calls so that every incoming call doesn't make you feel jittery – this also means that you can make social arrangements, leave your phone on silent for a while or even take an afternoon nap without worrying you will miss a call.

Use technology – choose Skype rather than phone so that you can see that everything is fine rather than rely on them telling you so.

Set up an emergency contact system – this could be one person that you text when an emergency happens who will then let everyone else (friends, tutors, people who can help) know for you.

Communicate with your university

Tell your university what is going on at home – ask them what support is available; pastoral care, counselling support, university based support groups etc.

Talk to your tutors – if you are distracted or struggling let them know; ask about extensions to deadlines; mitigating circumstances or even a leave of absence if things at home are really difficult.

Tell tutors if you need to keep your phone on during lectures and explain why.

Arrange to sit near the door so that you can leave quickly and quietly if a phone call comes in.



Take care of yourself

Create new support networks

Let your new friends know what is going on in your life; some of them might feel awkward and not know what to say, but others will be able to empathise and offer support and a listening ear.

Explain that you may not always feel like joining in but you'd love it if people would continue to invite you to things anyway.

Find out if there are any local support groups such as Young Carers that you may be able to support you.

Explore online support – Student Minds and Hope Support Services are two fantastic organisations, and there are many more.

Take time out – if you have scheduled in phone calls with home, that means you can turn your phone off for an hour or two; take a walk; sleep; exercise; sing; dance or do whatever it is that unwinds and de-stresses you.

Ask for help and share your worries – ask your friends, ask your tutors, the university, your counsellor, or a family friend. Don't be afraid to ask for advice or to ask someone if they have time to listen.

Dealing with responsibilities

With an ill family member you may have taken on extra responsibilities at home, you may help out with younger brothers and sisters; with chores or by organising appointments and support.

It might feel impossible to leave home because of these responsibilities, so here are some ideas to find a way forward.





Talk with your family about what is worrying you

Discuss the things you usually help out with and identify who will pick up those responsibilities when you move away.

If you are the last child to leave home or an only child, you might find it easier to talk to your wider family, neighbours and family friends.

Make sure your family talk with any professionals who regularly support and visit your home, such as nurses; carers; community transport; mental health workers; social workers; anyone who comes to help out regularly.

Make sure that they know that your family are facing this change and want to make plans so that it goes smoothly.

There may still be ways you can help out

If you feel that you still want to help out, think about the kinds of things you can still do to help out with from a distance; online shopping orders; regular supportive phone calls.

Find new ways to support your family besides doing practical tasks.

For example, learn new skills and develop your independence; share the good bits of your new life with them; or send home a funny postcard every now and again.

Even little things can make a huge difference.



Home visits

Whether you are away for a whole term or a couple of weeks, going home for a visit can be great. However, things might feel different.

When you visit home, you might feel like a different person and yet everyone else is just the same. This is something that is experienced by many young people as they leave home. It may be weird, annoying or frustrating, but it is normal.

You may not be able to pick up where you left off – roles and dynamics at home may have shifted or changed in order to fill the space that you left.

Here are some tips to get the most out of your time at home:

Remember that families naturally change as time passes; it is normal for children to grow up and leave home, to develop their independence and life skills.

Focus on seeing your family, rather than seeing the changes.

Discuss and plan how you will spend your time together before you get home, that way everyone knows what to expect.

Try not to spend your whole time at home doing chores and tasks; suggest a treat or celebration as you have been away for a while.

Take time out to catch up with friends if they are around as well.



Keep an eye on the positives

You have left home, made a start on that uni course that you have been working towards over the past few years and you are surviving – maybe even thriving. That is all worth celebrating!

So remember to:

Enjoy the benefits of leaving home:

It develops your independence

It puts some distance between you and the things that used to really grate on you at home

It teaches you how to take care of yourself

And hopefully, the course you are studying will engage and inspire you!

Notice the good stuff as it is happening:

Your confidence may grow

You are meeting new people

You are following your dreams

You are managing your own money and bank account

You are working towards your career and adult life path

You are finding your wings

You are doing what 'normal' young people do every year

Celebrate the wins:

A new friend who really gets you

Meeting that deadline

Learning new stuff

Feeling independent and 'grown up'

Learning to cook a half decent meal

Finding your favourite food on offer at the supermarket

Having a great night out

Having a great night in!

Final words of advice from Naomi and Mel



I would say, sit down and talk to your family about your worries.

Make sure they completely understand how you feel and what you want to be included in once you're away.

Your mental health and wellbeing should always, *always* come before grades.

Be yourself; don't forget who you are, and that no matter what, you are succeeding.



Hope can help you - get in touch with us

**SUPPORTING
YOUNG PEOPLE
THROUGH A
FAMILY HEALTH
CRISIS**



/HopeSupport 
@Hope_Support 
@HopeSupport 
hopesupport.org.uk 

Hope Support Services