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Coping with a Family Health Crisis through University





What's Included

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Starting or returning to university is an important transition in anyone's life

When you have a family member who is physically or mentally ill, or who lives with a disability, you may be used to caring for them and may be worrying about them too. These factors might make the decision to start or continue university feel even more complicated.

This guide has been created by the University of London Worldwide's Student Health and Wellbeing team to offer tips and advice to students who may be studying with us while coping with a Family Health Crisis.

See [page 12](#) for information on accessing further support.





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Making the decision to start or continue university

Illness and disability are often
surrounded with 'unknowns'.



Starting or continuing university, whether online or at one of our Recognised Teaching Centres, 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 and how quickly it might progress.

Whatever the situation is, remember:

- It is okay and valid to experience difficult or changing emotions
 - Putting your life on hold may not always be the only option when you don't know how an illness may progress
 - It is natural to feel worried about the 'unknowns'
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Finding a balance while studying



Studying at university, with its additional commitments, may feel like putting distance between you and your family. This may feel like a good thing, you may feel relieved and distracted, or you may feel guilty because of what is happening to your loved one.

Finding the balance between studying and connection can be a challenge. Sometimes your family may choose 'not to worry you' with things that are happening because they do not want to distract you from your studies; other times they may be constantly sharing updates with you, in person or over the phone.

As time passes, you will find ways of managing this change.



When someone is experiencing illness

Plan with your family

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

Use technology – if you need to contact your family member and have the option to do so, choose video calls rather than voice calls so that you can see that everything is fine rather than rely on them telling you this is the case.

Agree set times for updates so that every conversation doesn't make you feel jittery. This way, you can make social arrangements, leave your phone on silent or rest without worrying.

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

Take care of yourself

Let your friends and colleagues you trust 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 socialising outside of your studies but you would love to be invited to events anyway.

Take time out – spend time outside of your home environment, try to turn your phone off or take a walk, or include some breaks; nap, exercise, sing, dance or do whatever it is that unwinds and de-stresses you.

Ask for help and share your worries – ask your friends, university staff or a family member. Ask someone if they have time to listen. Refer to page 12 for further support.



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Managing responsibilities

With an ill or disabled family member, you may have taken on extra responsibilities at home. You may have to help with younger family members, chores, financial support or by organising appointments. It might feel impossible to find time to study because of these responsibilities, but there are ways you can move forward.





Finding ways to move 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 while you are using your time to study. You might find it easier to talk to your wider family, neighbours and family friends for support. Refer to [page 12](#) for further support.

Help out your family in other ways

If you feel that you still want or need to take on responsibilities while you are studying, think about what you can do to help out whilst balancing this with your university commitments. By scheduling time around your studies, you can protect your boundaries while continuing to show care for your family member.

Contact the professionals

Ask your family to communicate with those who regularly support your family member, such as nurses, carers, community transport, mental health workers or social workers. Make sure they know that your family are facing this change and want to make plans so that it runs smoothly.

Find new ways to support your family

There may be other ways to help, besides doing the same tasks that you did before, if this is not possible anymore. For example, share any good news from your day with them over a focused meal, uninterrupted by your phone or studies. Even little things can make a huge difference.



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When you feel like things have changed



Things may feel a little different

Being able to spend time with someone who is ill while also studying at university can be meaningful. However, things might feel different. As time passes, when you spend time with them, you might feel like a different person and yet everything else around you feels the same.

This is something that is experienced by many people studying at university. It may feel odd, annoying or frustrating, but it is normal. You may not be able to pick up where you left off – roles, dynamics and caring responsibilities may have shifted or changed in order to adapt to you studying.



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Caring for family who are experiencing illness

- Remember that families naturally change; it is normal for people to have varying responsibilities and balance different priorities, like your studies or thinking about your future.
- Focus on seeing your loved ones, rather than seeing the changes, shift your perspective of the situation.
- Discuss and plan how you will spend your time together before you begin studying, that way everyone knows what to expect.
- Try to avoid spending your whole time at home doing chores and tasks; suggest a treat or celebration instead, something positive that you can bond over and make memories.
- Take time out to catch up with other people if possible, so you can allow yourself space to think about something other than illness.





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Remember the positives

You have joined university and are studying a programme that you have been working towards - there is so much to be proud of!



- You are studying for your future
 - You are spending time prioritising your self-growth
 - You are studying a programme that will engage and inspire you
 - Your confidence will grow
 - You can meet new people
 - You are managing your own time and schedule
 - You are working towards a new career or career change
 - You are learning; you may be able to use these skills to help support your family in the future
 - Help is always available. Refer to [page 12](#) for further support.
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Reach out

TalkCampus is an app-based peer support network for students to give and receive instant mental health support, available 24/7. If you need a safe and anonymous place to talk about anything at all, you will find support from people who truly understand.

As a student studying at one of our Recognised Teaching Centres, or online, you can use this service free of charge.

Sign up with your University of London email address to get started.

Additional Support

- Wellbeing Hub: resources to help care for your wellbeing during your studies
 - Self-Care Corner: self-care tips from your student community
 - Make an enquiry: ask about further guidance or support on your programme
 - Help and Support page: more information and how to get in touch with us
 - Findahelpline.com: global directory of local support services and crisis lines
 - Call your local emergency services if you feel in immediate risk of harm or danger
 - TalkCampus Crisis Line:
 - UK: 0800 031 8813
 - North America: 1 855-612-2962
 - Australia: 1 800 950 714
 - Other locations: 1 416-941-3559 from any internet calling app
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