



Guide for Our Loved Ones

A resource made by estranged and care experienced students to help our loved ones understand and support us

Foreword by the author

Tina Bhartwas, an All of Us* changemaker, came up with the idea of creating an accessible guide that estranged and care experienced students could share with loved ones. The idea is that this guide will take some of the load of us having to explain our background/experiences from scratch and give our loved ones the tools to help them be better at supporting and understanding us.

The guide includes contributions from estranged and care experienced students across the UK: with a range of backgrounds, experiences and ages. The Unite Foundation supported its creation financially and through provision of creative and editorial resources. Although the guide centres around students, it is a helpful resource for the loved ones of any estranged or care experienced people.

*All of Us: the community for all estranged and care experienced students across the UK, [join us here](#).



Tina

“The idea for this guide came from a bad experience I had with a loved one around my 21st Birthday and feeling isolated during the Christmas period which followed. I asked around about a resource to help me help those close to me understand the trauma and difficult feelings I experience around special occasions and the holiday period and found that there wasn’t one. This sparked the beginning of this resource for loved ones who want to understand and support their care-experienced or estranged loved one better!”

Reading tip

We recommend you use this guide to help educate yourself so you can better understand estrangement or care experience. It can also be used as a tool to start conversations. Please consider your own welfare when using the guide; we touch on sensitive topics and this resource is meant to help you both, not be a stick to beat yourself with!

Be kind to yourself.

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Definitions

We live in a society that places a high value on family, but what about people who have difficult relationships with their family, or have lost or broken contact with parents and/or other family members or who have been removed from the care of their families?

Estranged:

means that a person doesn't have support from their parents (biological, step or adoptive) due to a breakdown in their relationship. Students in this position often have no contact at all with their family, have removed themselves from a dysfunctional situation or have been disowned.

Care experienced:

means a person has spent time living with foster carers under local authority care, in residential care (e.g. a children's home), looked after at home under a supervision order, or in kinship care (looked after by relatives or friends). This includes those who are adopted.

Did you know

There are over [16,000 students](#) from an estranged or care experienced background in Higher Education in the UK. Many are both; [1 in 5](#) estranged students have also been in foster care. Frustratingly, local authorities have no statutory responsibility to look after estranged students' welfare or provide accommodation outside of term-time, like they do for care leavers. This can put estranged students at greater risk of financial difficulty, homelessness and social isolation ([OfS Estranged Student briefing](#)).

Why do some students
experience
estrangement?

There are many reasons why people become estranged, which can include: being a victim of domestic abuse or neglect by family members, having experienced / been threatened with 'honour'-based violence or forced marriage, being rejected for being LGBTQ+ or because of life choices which family disagree with. For example, being disowned for pursuing education against family wishes.

Estrangement and care experience are often stigmatised and misunderstood. Many students with these backgrounds feel unable to speak openly to their loved ones, other students and their college / uni about their situations for fear of rejection or judgement.

It is important to remember that whilst there may be similarities, each individual person has their own unique set of circumstances which has led to them becoming estranged or in care.



Estrangement can happen at any point in someone's life

“A friend of mine was not estranged when I met him in my first year of university but unfortunately became estranged during his studies. This was tough because he was having to keep up with studies but also had to learn how to live on his own without family support for the first time”.

Day to day life at
university or college

This section helps explain some of the additional pressures estranged and care experienced students in your life might be under. Evidence shows that students who are care experienced or estranged from their family struggle to access *and* then also remain in Higher Education.

A Stand Alone study showed that 41% of estranged students had considered withdrawing from their course or suspending their studies due to money pressures, stress and mental health struggles. 14% of them did have to drop-out due to these factors, a rate which is three times higher than the average student! According to data from the OfS, a similar trend exists for care experienced students.

Some worries are shared by the general student population, but some are specific and come about as a result of being estranged or care-experienced.

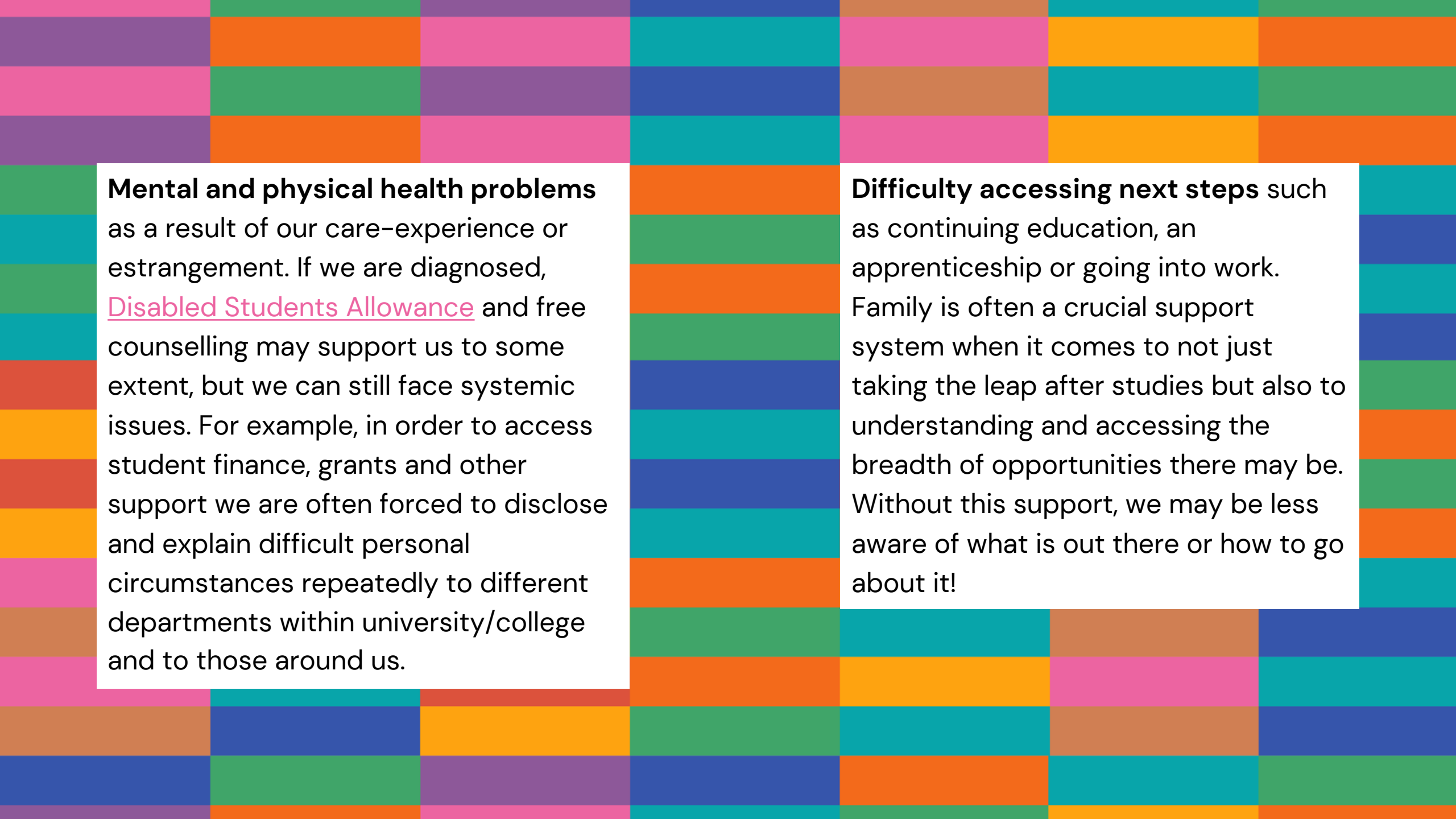
In particular:

Financial barriers

Like many students, we have to work to afford Higher Education. We don't have the fall back of family support. Much emphasis is placed on the student experience but with the financial pressures we face, it is often difficult to maintain that more conventional 'student experience' that is always talked about.

Struggling to secure and retain safe accommodation

Many halls on campus and student accommodation providers only offer term-time contracts as they expect students to 'go home' during holidays. We don't have that option. So private renting is often our only realistic housing option to ensure that we have somewhere to live year-round. Here we are often confronted with the issue of needing a rent guarantor or being asked to make a significant and in most cases unaffordable payment up front.



Mental and physical health problems as a result of our care–experience or estrangement. If we are diagnosed, [Disabled Students Allowance](#) and free counselling may support us to some extent, but we can still face systemic issues. For example, in order to access student finance, grants and other support we are often forced to disclose and explain difficult personal circumstances repeatedly to different departments within university/college and to those around us.

Difficulty accessing next steps such as continuing education, an apprenticeship or going into work. Family is often a crucial support system when it comes to not just taking the leap after studies but also to understanding and accessing the breadth of opportunities there may be. Without this support, we may be less aware of what is out there or how to go about it!

You can be a supportive ally in our lives by recognising these pressures. We're not asking you to solve them or feel bad for us, but being educated on what we might be going through helps us feel seen.

Holiday periods and term breaks

When it comes to holiday periods and term breaks (such as reading weeks), estranged and care experienced students can feel shame and embarrassment felt as they see all their friends 'going home' or talking about plans with family. This can lead to loneliness and isolation during these periods.

Summer

This is the longest holiday period and a big one for a lot of people! As student loans are only really meant to cover term time it is often the summer period which is the hardest financially for estranged and care experienced students. We also need to make sure that we have somewhere secure to live over summer as most of us can't 'go home'.

Winter

Many students find the winter period with the darker evenings and colder weather difficult, and the winter holiday leading up to January exams can be a real challenge. For us, this can be felt even more so.

Whilst as adults, our mental health is not someone else's responsibility, it can mean the world to have understanding partners and friends.

These are crucial times to make your care experienced or estranged loved one feel accepted, supported and loved. Your university / college may even have student socials during the holidays for students staying behind, let your loved ones know.

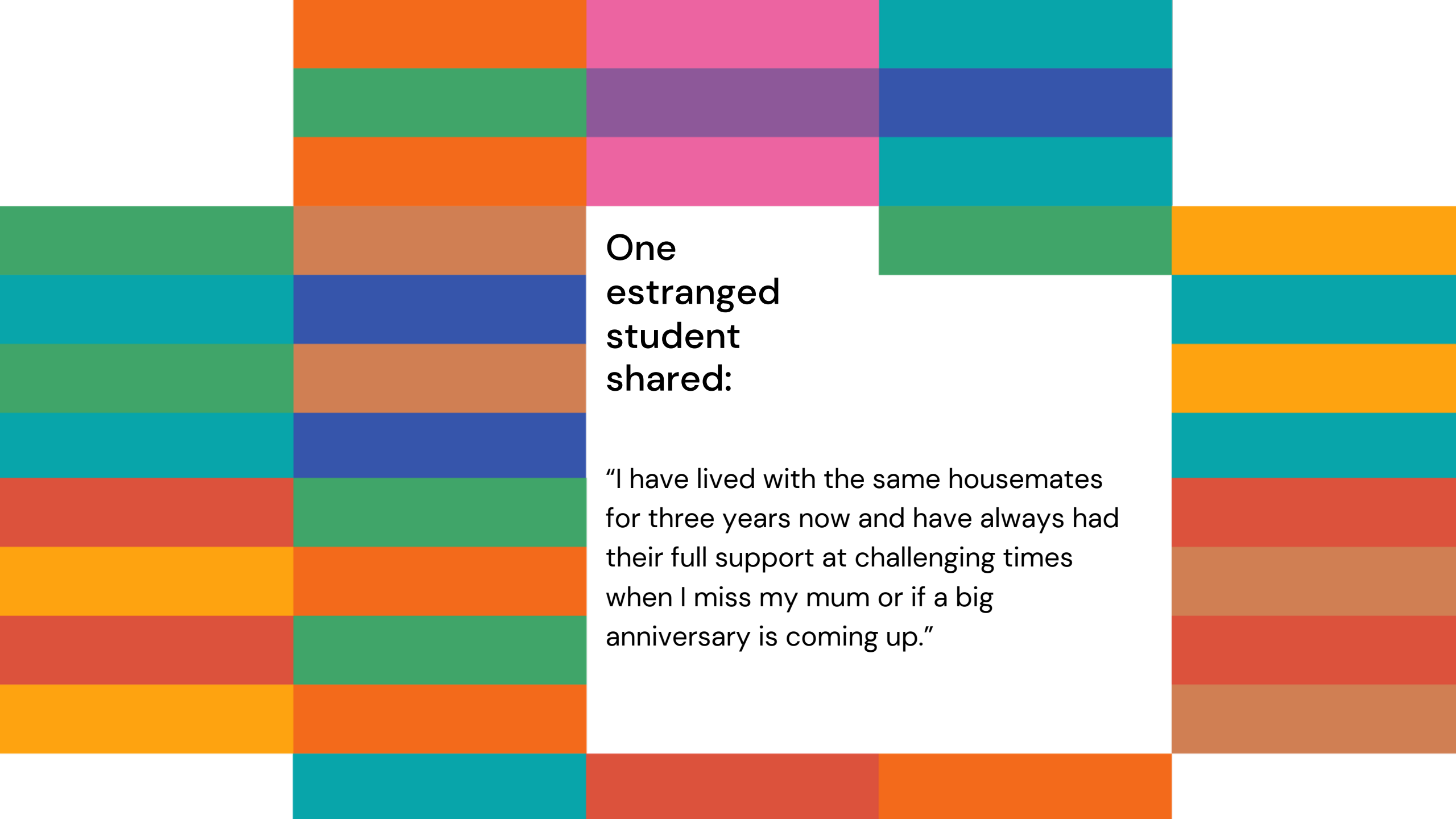
Special occasions and
important life events

Often people become estranged or end up in care after a big life event such as a death in the family, a change in relationships or a religious festival (such as a bad Christmas). They may have prominent negative memories of these events.

Society-valued days such as Mother's Day and Father's Day can be tough.

Many of us have also had to spend 'special' occasions such as birthdays, weddings, big achievements and graduations alone or uncelebrated. These events can hold painful feelings and memories, which it is good to be mindful of.

Your loved one may feel very differently about special occasions to you due to their experiences. Have open conversations about it and approach any differences with kindness and compassion. Some students and their loved ones tackle this by creating new traditions of their own! Having a loved one be understanding during these special occasions or important life events can make a massive difference.



One
estranged
student
shared:

"I have lived with the same housemates for three years now and have always had their full support at challenging times when I miss my mum or if a big anniversary is coming up."

Tips for conversations about estrangement or care experience

As UK relationship charity [Relate](#) put it, 'it's no secret that communication is an important part of any relationship". Being curious about our experience is a good thing and it means a lot to us! Having healthy conversations about our backgrounds, dreams and aspirations in life can bring relationships closer together and make them stronger.

At the same time, opening up about these experiences can be really difficult. It is important to ask open-ended questions so that we can share what we feel comfortable sharing with you. We may want or need to omit something about our journey.

Prompts and questions to ask us:

What can I do to support you?

For example, over the summer holiday.

What are the important things to you?

e.g. holidays, special occasions etc.

How do your past experiences affect you?

How can I help you with this?

What does your support system look like?

If you want to read more about having healthy conversations about these very difficult experiences a good place to start is The [EaCES Handbook page](#) on healthy relationships, or visit [Relate UK](#).

Top tips from estranged and care experienced students

As a loved one you are a part of our support system, so (like with any friendship / relationship) it's important we feel we have a safe and non-judgemental space to open up to you.

Ensure your communication with us is clear and open.

Learn about healthy relationships yourself or together, and about attachment styles.

Boundary setting is vital for both of us, and is important in any relationship.

When it comes to triggering times of year such as special occasions, important life events and holiday periods, be led by your estranged or care-experienced loved one. Please listen to how we feel and what we want.

Don't try to fix us or our family situation, especially without consent, as forcing reconciliation can make the situation much worse and we may have no contact with a family member for our health and safety. It's better to accept us as we are.

Many of us worry about sharing our thoughts, feelings and experiences due to stigma and stereotypes which may lead to misunderstanding or rejection, please bare this in mind.



A care-
experienced
student said:

“Please don't treat us as 'broken' or
damaged, but also please don't treat us
as superhuman or heroes on a pedestal!”

Attachment styles

The Attachment Project is a good place to start to learn about attachment styles. They state that attachment styles develop early in life and often remain stable over time.

People who have had more disrupted childhoods are more likely to have less secure attachment styles, they might have to put intentional effort into resolving their attachment issues, in order to become more securely attached. There are four adult attachment styles:



Anxious

(also referred to as
Preoccupied)

Disorganised

(also referred to as
Fearful-Avoidant)

Avoidant

(also referred to as
Dismissive)

Secure

Getting to know yours and your loved one's attachment style can help when you're trying to connect in your relationship. It is completely normal to recognise features of different styles in your relationships with those you love. No attachment style makes you any less worthy of love or kindness.

Attachment styles can change over time with different partners and friendships. Any individual can form a secure bond with a friend / partner.

This is not a blame game or something to be ashamed of. Rather, knowing how you both attach is a tool to help understand yourself and those you love better, to help strengthen the bonds of your relationship.

Signposting & Support

For you – as an ally

- + Read the living experiences of other care experienced and estranged students | [Our Stories](#)
- + Experiencing university as an estranged student | [\(THE.com\)](#)
- + The impossible reality for students who were in care | [Metro News](#)
- + Care Experienced Support and Campaigning | [RECLAIM](#)
- + Top Tips for Students on supporting fellow students as an ally | [Stand Alone](#)
- + Read Buttle UK's Surviving Estrangement – [Estranged Young People Co-Produced Report](#)

For supporting those you love who are estranged or care experienced

- + General Signposting & Support
- + EaCES Handbook
- + Care Experience: Become, Who Cares? Scotland, Rees Foundation and CLASS Cymru
- + Adoptees: Adoptee Futures and UK Adult Adoptee Movement
- + Estrangement: Together Estranged and Stand Alone

Allies: Dates for the diary

- + Estranged Student Solidarity Week, end of November every year
- + Care Day, an annual celebration of those with care experience and takes place on the third Friday of February, every year



Thank you for taking the time to read this guide and for being a supportive part of our lives.

With special thanks to all the care experienced and estranged students who shared their anonymous thoughts and requests for this guide.

And to

- + The EaCES Network
- + Stand Alone
- + The All of Us Sounding Board
- + Rosie Blackett from The National House Project
- + Buttle UK

for your contribution.