

What to do when you're at uni for the holidays

HANDBOOK
FOR STUDENTS



WELCOME

Christmas may have special significance to you as a religious or cultural occasion, a time you usually spend with family and community. If you don't celebrate Christmas, the holidays may be a time when you simply enjoy relaxing with family and friends. Either way, we know that being at university for the holidays probably wasn't how you expected to spend this time - and it almost certainly isn't where you want to be at the moment!

Christmas is going to be different this year - but that doesn't mean it has to be terrible. With an open mind and the right tools, it's possible to make a Christmas at uni work for you. This handbook will help you get started.

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Where to start?



As soon as you find out that you are spending Christmas at uni, there are things you can do to help yourself feel better and more in control. Don't wait to get started!

Acknowledge how you're feeling

We all want to put on a brave face for our families and our friends when we get disappointing news. We might not even want to admit to ourselves how we're really feeling. If you're upset, angry, disappointed, frustrated or distraught, it's okay to acknowledge that, to feel it, and to get it out in the open.

Find out what you can do, as well as what you can't

Will you have to self-isolate? Or will you be able to socialise with other students - if so, who? Where will this be allowed? Will you still be able to use the canteen, the gym and the library? It's really important to know what you are allowed to do - as well as what you're not.

Find out what activities are going on

Your university might be organising events in person or online for students who are still on campus, and other events might be being organised by students, clubs or groups. Find out what's going on so that you know what your options are. You could think about organising something yourself if you can't find what you're looking for!

Talk to other people on campus

Even if you don't know them that well, chances are there will be others in the same situation as you. Reach out through your course network, neighbours in halls and your social network to find out who else will be around during Christmas. You might be able to go for walks together, plan in activities and eat meals together, or at least check in with each other over the holiday.

Talk to the people you'd usually spend the holidays with

This is really important, and it might make sense to make this the first thing that you do. Talk to your loved ones and let them know how you're feeling. Ask for their thoughts on how you can stay in contact over the holidays, whether it's by phone or video call, and whether you talk every day, every other day, or every few days. You can also talk about ways to share some of your usual Christmas traditions together, if that's something you would usually do. Make sure you're clear about what you need from your family during this time to help you feel okay. Bear in mind that they will also be feeling your loss and may make similarly ask you to check in on a regular basis!

Start making a plan

Now that you've started to gather a few ideas, start writing down the things you feel you might want to do or get involved with. You don't have to commit to anything at this stage, but it's important to have some ideas. We've included some handy planners at the back of this guide which you can use to work how you want to use your time.





Do it your way

How to make the holiday season work for you, even if you're away from home

- Whatever your circumstances, you'll feel more able to enjoy the holidays if you can find ways to feel in control, and to make it work for you.
- Will you be completely on your own (for example, if you are self-isolating)? Will that be for all of the holiday season, or just for some of it? Will you have the option of spending time with other students? It's important to know this as soon as you can. You can find up to date information on what's allowed and what isn't at gov.uk/coronavirus, and by checking your university's guidelines.
- Remember that you don't have to do what everyone else is doing - even if you can. The most important thing is that YOU decide what is most likely to help you feel safe, happy, healthy and connected - and stick to it.



If you're alone...

01

Make a rough plan for each day. This doesn't have to be perfect, and it's fine to change it - but it's important to have structure. Try to wake up at the same time, and stick to regular meal times.

02

As part of your plan, schedule regular time to talk to family, friends and other loved ones. This will give you something to look forward to. Treat these the same as in-person meetings!

03

Decorate! It's easy to get fun, affordable decorations online. It doesn't matter if no-one else sees them - you are just as important as anyone, and if it cheers you up then it's worth it.

04

Make beautiful meals - particularly on days you would usually celebrate, such as Christmas Eve / Day. Do your research, and get ingredients in ahead of time. Make classics, or try something new!

05

Have fun with friends and family virtually. Try virtual quizzes, singalongs, karaoke, games, escape rooms, and team building activities. Watch videos together, or even just look at cat memes!

06

Revel in the freedom of not having to go anywhere or do anything. Curl up with a book under a giant blanket, sleep in, Netflix binge for hours, or even just finish your latest project.

07

If you are sick, get lots of rest and don't push yourself. Make sure someone knows you are ill, and ask them to check in on you throughout. Ask for help if you need someone to get food or supplies in for you, and / or order everything online.



If you're with others

01

Decide if that's actually where you want to be! It's easy to think you have to follow the crowd - but you might prefer to have a quiet one, or mix it up a bit. Even if you're under pressure to socialise, remember that you don't have to if you don't want to.

02

Why not celebrate all of your different Christmas traditions at once? Whether it's stockings, games or leaving something out for Santa, you could make it a super-Christmas by doing absolutely everything that everyone would usually do at home. You'll learn something about your friends as well!

03

You could do the same for Christmas meals as well. Ask everyone to bring a dish that they would traditionally cook - or make a long list and decide together what you want to make.

04

Have fun! Decorate your space together, play board games and card games, have long chats late into the night, play music and dance!

05

Check in with each other, and on anyone you know who is self-isolating on campus. There might be particular times that are more difficult for some people when they're most missing their friends and family. Keep an eye on people, and they will do the same for you.



A person with long dark hair, wearing a dark jacket, is sitting on a rooftop. They are looking out over a city skyline with many buildings under a hazy sky. The person is positioned in the lower center of the frame, looking towards the right.

The Psychology of Being Alone

Why does being alone at Christmas mean so much to us? Does being alone mean being lonely? How can we take control of our alone-ness? In this short essay, the CEO and co-founder of the Living Well Alone Project unpacks the impact of Covid on our sense of belonging and connection, and offers some useful tips on managing alone-ness.

WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness is, at its core, a set of mismatched expectations. The most commonly used definition is that of US social psychologists Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau who propose that loneliness is an unpleasant state that results from ‘a discrepancy between the quality and quantity of relationships we perceive we have and the quality and quantity of relationships we want to have.’

In other words, loneliness is both an aversive (unpleasant, to be avoided) and a subjective experience. The correlation between loneliness and alone-ness (or the state of being physically alone) is weak. It is possible to feel lonely in a crowd if the quality of the relationships one has are not matched by one’s expectations of how those relationships should feel, or the benefits that they should bring to us.

Loneliness is, at its core, a set of mismatched expectations



It's equally possible to spend much of the time completely alone, and yet experience loneliness rarely, if at all. This happens where someone simply has a more limited need for connections and / or has mutually beneficial, fulfilling relationships to begin with.

WHY IS THIS YEAR SO DIFFICULT?

Loneliness is linked to connection. Where our networks change suddenly (or at least, our ability to access them), then we are more likely to experience loneliness. That's why this Christmas feels so difficult – many of us have been cut off at short notice from the people we care about, meaning there's suddenly a huge discrepancy between the quality and quantity of the social connection we want, and that which we actually have.

Covid-19 is impacting us in deeper ways as well. Maslow's hierarchy of need (A.H. Maslow, A Theory of Human Motivation, 1943) tells us what we need in order to feel safe, nourished and fulfilled. By impacting our sense of safety - the very foundation of this hierarchy - the

Covid-19 crisis has dealt a heavy blow to the building blocks upon which our sense of belonging, self-esteem and ability to realise our potential are based. This is impacting at individual, community and societal level. We don't know yet what the longer term implications of this shared, global trauma will be.

LONELINESS VS ALONENESS

You may be feeling some or all of this. The good news is that the experience of loneliness isn't inevitable just because you're alone – and you have a lot more control over this than you might imagine.

At the Living Well Alone Project, we talk to thousands of people who live alone – and our work has shown us that there are hundreds of different ways to experience being by yourself, not all of which are unpleasant. If you're by yourself and you don't want to be, then sadness, restlessness, anger and reflectiveness are all common. These aren't nice feelings, but they

aren't loneliness, and can be handled in different ways. Boredom is also often mistaken for loneliness – it could well be that the discomfort you are feeling simply means you need to give yourself something to do!

More commonly, being alone can actually give way to more positive emotions. We know that people who have lived alone for some time very much enjoy the freedoms that come with being by yourself – whether that's sleeping in late, eating whatever you want to eat, or running to your own timetable. Being alone can give you time for contemplation and rest, away from the busy-ness of everyday life. It can be a time of self-discovery, a time to learn about who you are and what you need, without being influenced by anybody else. A lot of people – especially those who are more introverted – say that they feel a real sense of relief at having time completely to themselves.

HOW TO BE ALONE

So if you have never been alone before, don't assume that you will automatically be lonely. You may, or you may not, but you won't know until you get there.

Try leaning in to what's actually going on for you – you might be surprised. However you feel, make sure you write it all down, talk it out with someone, or work through it in some other way.

It's worth remembering the principle that we rarely feel disappointed because of what's happened – only when our expectations aren't met. How could you reset your expectations about what should happen this year, in order to give yourself something to look forward to?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Don't forget that our feelings follow our thoughts, and we can often change the way we feel simply by shifting to thinking about something different. Mindfulness practice is an incredibly powerful tool when you are by yourself. You can start simply by trying to observe what's around you in detail – colours, sounds, textures – without judgement, bringing your focus back whenever you feel yourself getting distracted. In the next section we've included ten other science-backed techniques you can use to start to feel better almost immediately. Just try a few, and pick the ones that work best for you.

Finally, if you are struggling then it's really important to seek help fast. You can contact your university support services, your GP, local mental health services, or one of a number of charities that offer support such as the Samaritans or Mind.

Hannah Carmichael

Hannah Carmichael
CEO and Co-founder
The Living Well Alone Project

'It's easy to stand in the crowd, but it takes courage to stand alone.'

Mahatma Gandhi





10 science-backed ways to feel better *right now*

It's inevitable that you might feel a bit stressed and anxious at the moment - these ten powerful approaches can help. Try a few, and find out what works best for you

01

SWITCH OFF

Our brains can't tell the difference between real threats and perceived ones, which means our bodies are often flooded with fight-or-flight stress hormones even when we're just watching Netflix. This can leave us feeling wired, anxious, angry and on edge. Try switching off from the news, TV, films, online games and notifications on social media for a couple of hours at a time, and notice how quickly your mood and your sleep patterns improve.

02 GET OUTSIDE (...and exercise)

Being in nature is more than a nice to have – it's crucial for your physical, mental and emotional health, and will help lift your mood, reduce your blood pressure, lower your heart rate, reduce muscle tension, and limit the production of stress hormones. If you can build in a walk, a run, cycle or some other form of exercise, then it will do wonders for your mood and overall health too.

03 TRY SOME SIMPLE STRETCHES

Stretching has proven health benefits when practiced regularly. Some gentle yoga will relieve tension, slow the breathing, and improve circulation. Look online to find some simple poses, and find ones that you can comfortably hold for 3 – 4 minutes each, focusing on your breathing throughout.

04 BREATHE DEEPLY

Ever noticed how shallow your breathing becomes when you feel tense and anxious? Deep breathing increases the supply of oxygen to your brain and stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes a state of calmness. Try closing your eyes and taking five deep, full breaths into your abdomen, and notice how you quickly you start to relax.

05 HAVE A SHOWER

Hot water warms up and relaxes your muscles, relieving tension. Both the heat and the massaging effect of the water improve circulation, which helps break down lactic acid, and can reduce pain. And the steam will clear out your sinuses, so you can breathe more easily!

06 IMMERSE YOURSELF

- When you're working on a task that is immersive, then you are forced to disconnect from the things that are causing you to stress out
- You also activate the parts of your brain responsible for logic and reason, which puts you into problem solving mode
- You also regain a sense of control - which feels good in a world where everything is shifting around us
- You could try art or craftwork, brainteasers and logic puzzles, jigsaws, model building, recipes, learning a language, or even a maths problem!

07 WRITE IT DOWN...and add five things you're grateful for

- Writing can help you clarify your thoughts and feelings, and can help you identify the things that cause sadness and anxiety, as well as the things that make you happy
- Writing accesses the left side of the brain, which is analytical and rational, meaning you can process your thoughts logically. This has a calming effect and can stop the release of stress hormones.
- Writing also reassures your anxious mind that although you are putting your thoughts to one side, have not forgotten about them.
- Over time, writing down five things every day that you are grateful for will literally rewire your brain so you see the world more positively.

08 WATCH YOUR DIET

Certain foods and drinks can affect your mood, including making you feel more anxious. We all know that caffeine is a stimulant and can make you feel jittery – if you usually start your day with coffee, try switching to decaf, or replacing one cup at a time with breakfast tea, green tea, or a couple of squares of dark chocolate. Foods that are high in sugar and fat can also make you feel anxious and tired. Eating protein-rich food such as chicken, fish, soy, nuts can stabilise your blood sugar, and complex carbohydrates like whole-grain breads and pastas, brown rice, beans and lentils, and fruits and vegetables, cause your brain to release serotonin, which triggers relaxation and happiness. Don't forget that alcohol is a depressant and can make you feel on edge, as well as affecting your sleep patterns. While it might be tempting to drink while you're alone, it's probably best avoided or at least kept in moderation.

09 LAUGH AND LOOK AT BABY ANIMALS

Laughter has almost limitless benefits for health and wellbeing, including releasing serotonin (the 'happy' hormone). Pets can also be a source of serotonin release, and you can achieve similarly positive effects just by looking at pictures of baby animals. Not only will this improve your concentration, it will also make you feel happier, safer, calmer, more content, more in control, and more grateful.

10 HELP SOMEONE ELSE

Generosity and happiness are linked - when you're focused on meeting someone else's needs, you're literally too busy to be anxious! You'll also lower your blood pressure, reduce stress and anxiety, and release endorphins which make you feel happier, improving your mental health, confidence and self – esteem.

It's okay to...

Feel the way you're feeling

Acknowledge this isn't the Christmas you wanted

Talk to your family and friends as often as you need to

Do it your way

Ask for help

Take time for yourself



always be kind



IT'S ALWAYS GOOD TO BE KIND

01

No matter how you're feeling, there's probably someone somewhere who is feeling worse than you! How could you draw on your own experience to help someone else out this Christmas?

02

People might seem okay even if they're struggling - so it's worth giving them the benefit of the doubt. Anger, dismissiveness and being unusually quiet can all be signs that someone is struggling to cope.

03

What would it mean to treat other people the way that you would want to be treated over the holidays? What could do to make Christmas as nice as possible for everyone else?

04

One way to help others is to include them in your activities - particularly people you can see are by themselves. You'll feel good, and so will they - and you might even make a new friend!

05

Even just checking in to say hello - in person, or remotely - will help others feel as though someone cares about them.

WHO ARE WE?



We are a small social enterprise set up in 2017 to fill the gap in information and advice for people living by themselves and asking the question 'how do I do this?' We share advice, tell stories, build online communities, and work with organisations who care about this as much as we do.

We promote a more positive and realistic perception of solo living. Our aim is to transform society's perceptions of what it means to live alone, celebrating the independence and resilience of those who do, and empowering those living solo to live confident, authentic, healthy, connected, inspired lives – no matter their starting point.

Activity Planner

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

SUNDAY

Meal Planner

WEEK
OF: _____

	BREAKFAST	LUNCH	DINNER	SNACKS
SUN				
MON				
TUE				
WED				
THU				
FRI				
SAT				



WORKOUT SCHEDULE

MONDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

TUESDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

WEDNESDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

THURSDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

FRIDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

SATURDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:

SUNDAY

TYPE OF EXERCISE

TOTAL TIME:

CALORIES BURNED:



Goal Planner

GOAL:

ACTION STEPS:

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NOTES:

