

Managing your relationships while you study

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, we've got a really great session lined up for you today, this evening. I have Meg John Barker with me, from the social sciences faculty, and we're going to be talking about managing your relationships while you study.

Interesting topic, Meg John. So tell us, why is this something that you think so many students will relate to?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Well, I think that people will notice what a difference it makes once they start studying. Obviously, they've got this new thing in their relationships, whether that's their partner relationships and their family and their friends, and it does often involve a shift. And I think what I really want to talk about this evening is how you can kind of predict some of those changes and navigate them, rather than them just kind of hitting you and having to deal with what happens. Because it does involve a change in the relationship when you've got this extra element in there.

KAREN FOLEY: Perfect. So you're going to hope to give our audience a handsome advice about how to deal with--

OK, so what are some of the common issues, then, that you think that people might expect. And do-- if you're in the chat box, as well, if you are doing the live and interactive, let us know if there any things that you've got-- any tips and advice. It's a very caring and sharing community out there, which is wonderful to see.

So we'd like to know what you think as well. What have you found, Meg John, about some of the most common issues?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Well, obviously, if the person studying hasn't kind of stopped doing anything else, so it's studying on top of already the work they're already doing, whether that's outside the home or inside the home or both, then you've obviously got one person in that relationship or that family or that friendship network with more stress than they had before. So that's kind of an obvious one.

But there's other ways in which it can create a certain imbalance, I guess, in the relationship, in the sense that one person is now needing a lot more time on their own, maybe, than they were before, especially if it was a relationship where they spent a lot of time together before, then that's a change.

And you also get that change in like somebody's having all these new ideas coming in, maybe making lots of new friends. And again, if the other person or people aren't having that, then it can begin to feel a bit like, "Oh, yeah, that person's going through something very different to what I'm going through."

KAREN FOLEY: That's like Rachel, who's saying that she wished she'd seen this two years ago, because she was-- she says that she was shocked at how she was having to spend less-- well, she had less time to be able to spend with her boyfriend.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, exactly.

KAREN FOLEY: And Ellen is actually trying to persuade her family and friends that she needs some peace and quiet to do some work. So, yeah, it's all about honesty as well, isn't it?

[LAUGHTER]

MEG JOHN BARKER: Very important. Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think you might have mentioned already that Enduring Love study that's been going on at the Open University.

KAREN FOLEY: He was just showing us a clip from that.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Right.

KAREN FOLEY: When you were coming in.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Excellent. Well, that sets it up nicely. So with that study, I'm actually writing with Jacqui Gabb who did that study. We're writing a self-help book based on it. So it's basically about people in long-term relationships, and it's focused on partners, but actually a lot of the same stuff applies to family members or to friends as well. But one thing we found with that is that predictable change is often much easier to navigate than an unpredictable one.

So it kind of goes to what you're saying about people trying to convince people. I mean, in a way that's a good thing, if people are thinking in advance, OK, what kind of change is this going to be and how can I prepare the people in my life for it? So that when the change occurs, it's not going to hit them out of the blue, oh, this has happened, this has happened.

KAREN FOLEY: So predictability's an important part of that and identifying things. So how can we help our learners out there, who may be starting to study, or getting set up for a new academic year?

MEG JOHN BARKER: I mean, I think talking to the students, as people are doing on the chat and Twitter and things is a really good idea. So, actually to get an idea from other people about what kind of change is it, you know. What you're going to need in terms of time. You know, getting a realistic sense of how it's going to impact your life, and that you can talk with the people in your life about, so they have some idea.

And things like knowing in advance the student calendars. OK, when are the deadlines going to be? When am I going to be needing more time? But there's the predictable bit. And then at the other hand, there's also the bit you can't predict. So like, especially right at the beginning of your studies, it's going to be a bit of figuring out as you go along in terms of what time of day do you work best, for example. Or how do you manage when the deadlines-- are you a kind of doing it the night before person, or do you like to do a bit--

And you gradually figure out what works for you. I think it's sort of matter of trying to tell everybody about the predictable parts of it, and also everyone trying to be a bit flexible whilst you're figuring out how you're going to navigate it best. Because you might start by saying, OK, I'm going to always do my OU work in the mornings and then find out that just doesn't work for you, and you're a much better person to do it in the evenings.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: It's a good time to go to the social media desk, and find out about some of the circumstances that our audience are experiencing studying in.

HJ: So those are great conversations on here. And, as always, sometimes when we having loads of great chat, it goes quite fast. So that's a little pin on the top right, so if you remember to do that. But remember, you can also join us on Twitter using the hashtag #studenthopelife15 and sending stuff with email.

So if there's a question of a really good thought that we haven't got to, send it in the email and we'd be more than happy-- we'd love to respond to you. studenthub@student.open.ac.uk. But Helen's picked up on some really great comments coming in from the chat as well.

HELEN: Yeah, yeah. Fantastic chat. Yes, it's great to see everybody engaging in this way. I mean, Liza says she's got her husband trained. He knows that the bedroom where she studies is out of bounds from two to six on weekdays, except at four when she gets a cup of tea brought to her. [LAUGHTER] But she does say she has one issue with him, in that he brags about her TMA results. So, I don't think that's an issue, but there you are.

And also, Oliver was saying that he thinks he's going to be quite busy for the next six years, because he's a husband, father of three, and he's a sous chef at a leading events catering business and he's also a PPE student. So, yeah, so he's got a lot of challenges ahead of him for the next six years.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. So lots of-- I mean, I guess that's one of the common things about OU students, is that they're often juggling things. And yet, they're told very explicitly how many hours of study they're going to do. They have a study planner. But yet, we all know that that's not quite how it always goes. So, what advice can you give, Meg John, about managing those sorts of expectations and thinking about how you fit that study into those circumstances and how you manage those expectations?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah. I mean, again, I think it's about really finding out what works for you. And it's about time and space, particularly, isn't it? So what times of day, or what times of the week, work best. And that's a negotiation, because you're going to have other people in your life you have to navigate that with, perhaps even other people in the home you're going to navigate that with. So it's about thinking how is this home set up?

And again, we looked at it quite a lot in the Enduring Love project. Jacqui and Janet, who did the project, had people doing these emotion maps of their houses. And like, they had to put little emoticons on the kind of floor kind of their house for a week, showing where different

emotions occurred. Like, where were the hot spots that conflicts were brought up, where were the calm times.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: But actually, you could try mapping out your house a bit in terms of, OK, where am I going to do studying? Where am I not? For some people, it really helps to do studying in a very separate bit than what they do, for example, crashing up on the TV or sleeping. Whereas for other people, they can just curtain off a bit of the bedroom or a bit of the living room and do it there. Different, different people. Some people like to study while the family are doing-- they're all in the same room, maybe doing things along, parallel, alongside each other.

Others really like a separate space, even going outside the home and doing it in a shed or going down to a local cafe and doing it. So it's what works for you is the important thing. What works for somebody else is not necessarily going to work best for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Some of our audience are saying that they're having issues with some of their partners feeling left out, and I guess it's when that studying maybe isn't part of that sort of family or that sort of life. What's your advice in terms of communicating needs then, in terms of how people are getting that space? And you're saying, you know, you need to figure out what works for you.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Exactly. I mean, one thing we found, or they found in the Enduring Love study, was that people in relationships of all kinds, but partner relationships was in this case, they really need "us time" and "me time." So it's about having both of those things. So it's also, with the OU study, about thinking, "Well, which is that?"

So I guess not many people are probably in a relationship where they're both doing the same course, so as they could really make the OU study kind of "us time." But it might be, for some people, they like a bit of overlap. They like to get their family involved in what they're doing, like telling them about what they're learning or even having them read over TMAs or what have you.

But other people want to keep it really separate. Like, that's my "me time." And again, communicating that up front, ideally, rather than it just kind of-- You know, it's when expectations are challenged, I suppose, that it's often quite stressful. You know, if somebody thought, "Great! My partner's going to study with the OU. I'm going to get really involved, you know. I'm going to be--" What was it, bragging about the TMAs, as somebody said. And then that's not what that person wants.

We talk a lot in the Enduring Love project about meta-communication, which is this whole, like, how do people like to communicate different things. So it's this idea called love languages, which is all about how people like to have love expressed in different ways. So it might be that one person really likes to hear someone saying, "I love you," whereas another person it's someone doing the dishes is what shows that they love them, whether it's an action or words or something else.

And it's sort of a little bit the same with this. It's about figuring that out upfront, in terms of how do you like the person to engage with your OU studies, the people around you. Do you

what them bragging about the TMA results, or do you want them to just kind of leave you to it? Trying to communicate that, really, rather than assuming mean people will know.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: A lot of the problems in communication relationships, when people assume, "Oh, that person will want things the same as I would want them."

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, that's the one to really check yourself with and actually find out, well, what does that person want.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Now I know from my own experience, it's often like often that downtime, that study time, is seen as "my fun time," so then you end up going back into that family life taking that fun that somebody else may have had relaxing. I mean, Alexander has a really good tip. She has time when they're not studying.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: So she sort of has time out of that sort of study plan, so that there is that going on.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, because actually-- again with the "me time" and "us time," again, a partner might think, "Oh, your OU study time, that's your me time," and for that person it might be, well, my OU time is work. And I still need some time on my own, as well as that, to relax and look after myself.

For other people, the OU study may feel like a form of self care. Similarly, like for some people, if one of them's doing their OU studies and the other's playing a computer game alongside each other, that might feel like something to do, they're doing together. For other people, that might seem separate. They might say, no, but we still need to be doing other things together, as well as that. So it's that kind of thing.

KAREN FOLEY: Everybody gets this point. And I'd like to see what some of the things that have been coming through the social media chat, because this is one thing that's really resonated with a lot of people.

HELEN: Yes, definitely. There's lots of conversations going on. Enka has a couple of really great tips. She said it helps if you put your study schedule somewhere on the fridge, let's say, somewhere obvious, so that everybody in the family can see when you need "me time". And she also suggests having a steady free day every week. And that way, you can also have some sort of social life and recharge your batteries. And Katlin said that she finds it hard to get that me time. She has to actually physically separate herself-- go to library, or go to the park or the cafe to actually study. So, yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: That's a great example of different things working for different people. Definitely, you might find you're the kind of person who it really does help to go to a separate place. And again, it's figuring out what works for you and then trying to

communicate that to everybody else. I loved the idea of the study plan on the fridge. That's great.

KAREN FOLEY: I guess it defines that time and space.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: And really is able-- because, one of the things, I mean, we can all say communicating needs. But it's how we communicate that. And I guess, how one values that in terms of right to that space, that time. I mean, I'm constantly one of these people who always underestimates, and say I need half an hour when I know full well I need an hour. What advice would you give our audience about how to, I guess, be realistic? You've talked about managing expectations, and about a lot of the difficulty being when there is a difference between those two things.

MEG JOHN BARKER: That is important, because, yeah, it's easy to pick up on what you think somebody wants you to say and say that, and then actually they get more irritated, because like you say, you need half an hour, and actually it's an hour. So I do think probably having a realistic perspective, if you can, and actually being open.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, I can't.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Well, you need to work on that.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, but having those kind of conversations up front about how are you going to know what I need. And also, like thinking, OK, if this time's going to get taken away from "us time"-- it's the managing the change, really, I think.

So, OK, maybe these people used-- in a particular family or a particular partnership-- used to do a lot of sport together, and there's no time for that because of the OU study. Well, what else is it going to be? How are they going to fit it in, knowing that they need some kind of "us time."

And we heard from people on the Enduring Love project who, at times like that, they started doing some of the more pleasurable chores together, because that's something they did. They'd cook together, or something. That would give them that.

And we also found with Enduring Love that often it wasn't the big things that mattered. So it's also more about making sure the small things don't slip, and it was really interesting in that somebody mentioned the cup of tea, being brought a cup of tea, because that was the big finding in Enduring Love, was how important bringing people a cup of tea was, that sort of everyday kindness.

So it's sort of actually looking at your relationship and how can we keep in those really little signs of everyday kindness, and also a particular, I think, for the person doing the studying, how can you keep showing how much you appreciate, like if somebody's making room for you to do that, if they're doing a bit more of the domestic chores now or whatever. Just like not taking it for granted, and showing that you really appreciate it-- that goes down very well.

And it's actually those little things of everyday kindness and appreciation that made people feel like, oh, I am loved, I am valued.

KAREN FOLEY: So there's a real nourishing aspect.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: But also, one of the things I know from the Enduring Love project is the importance of something else, the other.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Can you tell us about that?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, so basically they found that the partnerships that were working really well tended to have a third element in it. They called it a third element. So if you imagine a couple being like two legs of a stool, the third element's the third and it stabilises itself, to support the stool from falling over.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

MEG JOHN BARKER: So you might well think that-- and those third elements could be something separate, like for one person, or it could be something they were doing together. But, OU studies could very well be that third element for lots of people, actually be really stabilising for the relationship. The issue comes, I suppose, if the other person doesn't have something. Then it can feel really imbalanced.

So another thing to really think about going in, is, OK, if this big third element's going to come into this person's life, if somebody else doesn't have something like that, might they cultivate something? Might they get into a hobby or a leisure pursuit, might they spend a bit more time with friends? What's it going to be for them? Gardening more? So it could be anything. But it will feel quite tough, I think, for somebody if they suddenly see their partner having this big third element come in. They're so fascinated by their studies, they're getting loads of peer support, and they haven't got something like that.

And it's difficult to navigate, with everything else that's going on in people's lives, but maybe just something small to make that person feel like I've have got something to.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, I'd like to come back to that. But maybe, at home, if you've got some advice-- maybe you've noticed this happen. I guess, we can't just all sort of shove another hobby onto another person.

MEG JOHN BARKER: No.

KAREN FOLEY: But, you know, say, "Well, I've got something new to do now. Let's get you something to you." [LAUGHTER] So I'd be very interested to know, maybe, some of your ideas and advice and tips about maybe what's happened there. But how would you, in all seriousness, go about that sort of thing? Because it's like, I've got my box, I'll got all my new module materials, I've got my new friends, I'm on "Student Hub Live," dah dah dah dah--

How can you sort of, I guess, work with somebody, to sort of almost get them to have something else to make them happy or nourished?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Well, I think knowing it up front is a good thing. So, if you recognise in any kind of relationship that if something changes for one person, it's going to kind of filter down and the dynamic is going to change. So if you're-- again, if you're predicting, if you think, "OK, that's probably going to happen."

And then, I suppose, if you're the person who's doing the studying, you might just let the other person know, "Look, this seems to happen for a lot of people, that what can happen is that the other person or people feel a bit like, "Well, I don't have anything like that," and they're sort of lacking that third element. You know, opening up.

And that might involve a little bit of anxiety for the person studying, as well, because who knows what that person's going to pick. And it might mean that they actually need some more time separately, as well. And I think that being OK. I mean, a cultural thing we have that makes this very difficult is something called the relationship escalator. Have you heard of that?

KAREN FOLEY: No.

MEG JOHN BARKER: It's like this idea that your relationships are like an escalator particularly romantic relationships. They've got to get closer and closer over time, so how people might date, and then move in together, then get married, and spend more and more time together. And of course, somebody does something like an OU degree, actually it goes the other way. It's taking you down the relationship escalator. People can respond to that, thinking, oh no, this is a bad sign.

But actually, again, Enduring Love found, that at times in relationships, we need to level out on the escalator or go down or make changes, adapt. We talked to loads of people who had lived together and then decided to live apart, for example. That could work fine. What makes it difficult is all that cultural pressure. So everybody around you saying, oh no, you're going to break up, or this is a bad sign.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Not necessarily. But again, going into this change with that awareness is really vital, because otherwise people might experience it in a really scary way, thinking it's meaning that we're not spending as much time together, so that's a really bad sign. Actually, it could be a great sign, that this stabilising third element has come in.

KAREN FOLEY: I love this idea about the domestic chores, and sort of, I guess, re-conceptualising how we're spending that time and space and doing those things together. And often those might not be something that we would really appreciate doing with somebody.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So I think that's a sort of great idea.

MEG JOHN BARKER: People get clever, because people got so many things in their lives, it's not easy to build in the "me time" and the "us time." So it's appreciating those micro-moments-- whether it's being on your own with a cup of coffee, or watching Netflix of an evening with your partner before you collapse-- you're making something of those little spaces, rather than letting them just get taken for granted.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm very conscious we're talking about this in an additive sense. So we're sort of almost saying this is life, OU study, and maybe some of it has to go as well.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: What are also some ideas around that, about re-shifting some of that balance?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Well, it's a great idea to think about, if it's possible in your life to think about what's going to give. We can't just keep building in more and more stuff into life. And we need a bit of space around things for a bit of self care as well, I think. That seems to be something that comes up a lot-- having some time just to be present-- to the morning cup of coffee. You know, I'm really into mindfulness and that literature tells us just how important having a bit of time just alone, just to be spacious, is so--

So, yeah, how if you can shift anything away, in order to make space for the thing you're bringing in, that's an excellent plan. I just don't want to assume that that's possible for everyone, because it isn't always.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's go over to [INAUDIBLE] and see what's happening, because I think, again, this idea is really relevant for a lot of people.

HJ: Yeah, we're going on lots of different tips. And I think one of the big themes that have come out is about being honest about the challenges we face while studying, about the time it takes as well, and having-- trying to get others to understand it.

And Kevin had a really good idea. And he said he got his wife to sign up for a course, so she understands the time needed and the challenges faced while studying. So when he's studying now, she also studies beside him. And we've had husbands being signed up for courses-- perhaps not voluntarily-- but I think putting yourself in other people's shoes and trying to understand. Because it's not just the time-- it's the stress, it's the thought that goes into it, the mental space as well as physical space.

HELEN: Yes. There was a great point by Katlin saying that people in polyamorous relationships tend to say they need expert time management. So maybe we could sort of take some of the lessons learned from polyamorous relationships for OU study, which I thought was really interesting, and ties in a bit with your research.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah. Katlin thank you.

[LAUGHING]

That's amazing. I wasn't expecting to talk about polyamory.

KAREN FOLEY: Someone's been researching.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Let's do it! I actually just got back from a conference in Lisbon, in which I was keynoting on non-monogamous relationships. But I do agree.

If people aren't familiar, polyamory is when you have more than one partner. So again, the Enduring Love project, we had a few of these partnerships where there were, say, three people in the relationship, or two couples who had relationships with each other. And often when people hear about this for the first time, they think, well, what are the challenges of this? Well, it must be jealousy. It must be terribly hard not to get jealous. It's not that jealousy isn't an issue, but most people say time management. Time management is the really difficult thing.

And so there we have a group of people who have really learned their stuff on time management. So I think, exactly. We can learn something. And actually, I found it really helpful to start to think about not just humans in our lives as relationships, but other things in our lives.

So you could even see like your OU study as a relationship. And think about that's another relationship that you need to make time for, so how are you going to navigate the time with the different relationships, and also make sure that it's a really healthy relationship with your OU study, and how it impacts on the other relationships. So, yeah, I love that idea.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, if anyone is interested in doing more research on Meg John Barker, your book *Rewriting the Rules* is a great read. And all, again, about re-conceptualising some of those relationships that we view, I guess, in a societal norm, and how maybe that doesn't work for everyone. So that's another great one to pick up. But I wanted to talk a little bit about the stress and the problems, and how we communicate some of those things, and payoffs, and things like that as well.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Definitely.

KAREN FOLEY: What's your advice there?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, so communication in relationships is something I'm really interested in. Again, it comes out of the research of non-monogamous, where they say communication is the most vital thing. But I've also written the new psychology module we've got rolling out, DD210. And that's got a lot about communication and conflict. So, I think HJ already touched on the importance of empathy, so this idea of getting a partner to do some OU studies so they really know what it's like-- [LAUGHTER] Great if you can do it.

But how do we get empathy if we can't do that? Well, it is about listening. It's about making time to sit down and really listen to where the other person's coming from. It's incredibly difficult to do. So when relationships get into quite a conflictual places, it's really hard to hear the other person's experience, because you just kind of want to prove your point and you want to win and you want to get it back to how it used to be, or you want to change it because it's feeling so awful.

But when it comes down to it, what you really need to do is to be able to hear each other. A useful idea I've come across from relationship therapy is the idea of-- often when we go into

these big conversations, we're trying to solve the whole problem. And it's too big. It's really hard to get it all sorted in one conversation. But what, if we made the goal of the conversation to come away with a better understanding of where the person is coming from, interestingly often that forms a much better foundation in which you can sort of address, OK--

KAREN FOLEY: Now that's all very well and good in a therapeutic session, where you've got a wonderful clinician sitting there, saying, "Right now, let's think about this from someone else's point of view." But genuinely, how would you-- you know, cooking the dinner, I'm really stressed, I've got my TMA to complete. How would you-- what would you say to people-- how can they actively encourage that empathy?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, well, first, well don't have a conversation under those circumstances.

KAREN FOLEY: This is where I'm going wrong.

[LAUGHTER]

MEG JOHN BARKER: When we're stressed and angry, it's such a bad time to have those conversations. Everything feels black and white. I'm sure people have had that experience. Under those circumstances, it's like-- I mean, they've done the cognitive research that shows that we just-- we remember only the things that really annoy us about our partner under those circumstances and none of the good stuff.

We're really blinkered. So it's like, OK, let's make a time for this. Because often you get-- somebody will say, "If we don't talk about it now, it's just-- we're never going to talk about it." You say, OK, right, let's talk about this at the weekend, at such a time, if we're both in a good place for it. So you make a time when you're going to be a bit calmer.

And then, yeah, I think making at least five, 10 minutes for one person to talk and the other person to just focus on almost reflecting back, "This is why I think I hear you saying," checking in, making sure that it's right. Do all of that before you even get to trying to solve the issue. So trying, get the real understanding first. And I found a really helpful thing to do myself is to go away and actually write-- if it's an argument-- you write the whole thing, being really self-indulgent. You write the whole thing from your perspective, just how annoying they're being, everything, get it all out. Then try and write the same thing as if you were them, from their perspective.

And that just gives you that kind of chance to take that imaginative kind of leap, say, OK, this might be why they responded like that. Maybe there is a good reason, you know. If I was them, with their kind of set of values and priorities, actually.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm happy that always they're understanding, because sometimes, like, doing a TMA, getting feedback-- if you aren't in that system, if you aren't experiencing that sort of thing, it can be difficult for other people to truly identify. But yet, we all have things in other sorts of context, like feeling maybe disappointed, feeling stressed, feeling like we can't manage, feeling overwhelmed. How would you say people could maybe relate this, or contextualise it, so that somebody might have then the ability to empathise?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, that's a good idea. It's kind of making that point of-- maybe this for me is like that thing for you. And that could-- if you can come up with those kind of-- I guess having a conversation, again, ideally when it's not in a heated place about what makes each person feel stressed. And so every time their partner sees that person getting stressed about the TMA, they don't just think, "Oh, well, I would never get stressed about coursework." Instead, they think, so that for them is just like for me when something's happening in my sports team that gets me really stressed, or when the computer breaks down, or-- I don't know, whatever it is.

They can try and make that kind of-- I mean, it is all about empathy, and trying to get that foundation of empathy first. And then, when you do start to think, OK, how can we fix this, then trying to come with all the possible options, rather than just thinking, OK, either that person has to give up their OU studies or nothing. Or either have to break up or nothing. It's never helpful when you've only got those two options available. There's always more.

So I think getting a big piece of paper and writing all the different possibilities down, even ones that you'd never really do, or that seem a bit crazy, can be a really helpful thing at that point.

KAREN FOLEY: The chat room is really feeling this, and they're very, very supportive.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Good.

KAREN FOLEY: HJ and Helen.

HJ: Yeah, I mean, there's so much going on. A lot of people are talking about that personal experience, as well, how they find their relationships with studying and some of the challenges they face. Some people who are just starting are maybe a little bit worried about encountering some problems, and how they're going to handle it. And it's fantastic to see how there is a really lovely community here of people offering advice and support, and a lot of people are loving the advice part.

We have timetables on fridge, setting aside space, and it's really interesting to hear. And a lot of people are loving what you're saying, Meg John, and a lot of people are interested in looking on your book now.

[LAUGHTER]

That would be the next big thing.

MEG JOHN BARKER: It's available from all good book sellers.

KAREN FOLEY: We can put a link on the website.

HJ: But we're having a really fantastic chat.

HELEN: I'm actually finding it quite moving, to be honest. People really are being so supportive in the chat. If somebody says that they're new to the OU, any advice, people are just sort of diving in with all the advice. And, yeah, I'm loving the supportive atmosphere in the chat. And just to say, that if there's anything that we haven't addressed in the session or

any of the sessions, or if there are any remaining questions, then do just sends an email, studenthub@open.ac.uk.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful, thank you. And not to forget your blog as well, because that's a nice bite-size chunk. So if anyone wants to go away tonight and have a look, that's "Rewriting the Rules," isn't it?

MEG JOHN BARKER: Yeah, if either of you Google me or "Rewriting the Rules," it should come up. And yeah, I blog about all sorts of things on there, including relationships a lot, but also like films I've seen. There's a long blog about Inside Out and what we can learn about our emotions from Pixar movies.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, I'd be interested in that, because I thought that was-- I thought about that. Right, OK, so I'd like to sort of start wrapping up the session by thinking, I guess, more positively about things like payoffs. And when we've had these stressful situations that we've then managed to resolve, giving back a nourishing, I think, is one of the sort of key themes that sort of come through this caring and being kind to our significant others.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Hugely. I mean, if you can go in thinking, "How do I be kind to myself? And how do I be kind to the people in my life through this?" That's so important. And it's the little everyday things make a big difference, like leaving somebody a post-it note, dropping them a message in the middle of the day when you know they're having a stressful time, bringing the cup of tea, bringing breakfast in bed. Anything like that. People talked about also just little moments of laughing together, or dancing together.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MEG JOHN BARKER: Laughter and dancing came up quite a bit, so if you can make little moments for sort of frivolous things like that. Again, it does not to be very long. It can be just a spontaneous-- but, yeah, I think showing appreciation on all sides. And of course, it may well enrich the relationship and the other people around the person who are studying. It could be a really positive thing, as that person is learning.

Like if they do psychology, for example, you know, they're going to be learning about this. They're going to be learning about relationship conflicts. They're going to be able to bring that into their relationship, or the counselling stuff. But whatever they're learning, they can bring interesting ideas in and be telling their family and friends about them.

So everyone can kind of try and build that ethos of appreciation, I suppose. With relationships, it's always, you can kind of go down hill with kind of niggles and conflicts building on each other and getting worse and worse. But you can go the other way as well, which is just a little bit of kindness and appreciation and start to build, and it's kind of an upward trajectory.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, thank you so much for coming, Meg John Barker, and giving us all that advice. I know that after a fun-filled day of talking about Hobnob's cakes and various other biscuits, a lot of you are now going to watch the Great British Bake-Off.

We're going to sign off for a while. [LAUGHTER] I know.

MEG JOHN BARKER: I've got to get a train.

KAREN FOLEY: So, yeah, thank you very much for staying for so long. Do have some nice food and drink. I know a lot of you are feeling guilty about eating so much junk food today. But that's all from us for this evening. And we're back tomorrow at 11 o'clock, 11 AM, at the Student Hub Live. So we hope to see then. We'll leave the chat open for just a little while.

And also, we'd love to know what you think. So there's a survey tab on the website. It's very, very quick. Or you could put in the details and we can give you a phone call to talk about your experience. But it really does matter to us how you've experienced the events. So please, do take a moment to fill in that survey at some point for us. We really would appreciate it.

Don't forget to send us in your selfies, studenthub@open.ac.uk, or hash tag [#studenthublife15](https://twitter.com/studenthublife15).

We've got Q and A session tomorrow, so loads of opportunity to ask questions, and a jam-packed programme ending with a massive science demonstration. I can't wait. We'll see you tomorrow from 11.

[MUSIC PLAYING]