

An open letter to those wishing to become allies to estranged students

I would like to take this opportunity during Estranged Student Solidarity Week to highlight ways you can act as allies to estranged students like me.

Estranged Student Solidarity Week is close to the Christmas holidays. That is intentional. There is no other time of year when assumptions about happy families are so strong. The first way you can start being an ally to estranged students is to start challenging those assumptions.

By now Christmas has probably begun to dominate conversations and is on our televisions, in cinemas and in shops. That's understandable, given that Christmas is a happy time for many. It means going "home" to houses filled with loving families, food and the exchanging of gifts. Christmas trees, lights and cards along the mantelpiece. And for students it also means getting some home comforts after the stressful exam period.

But as an estranged student, Christmas stands as a stark reminder for the family that I have lost in the past few years and is merely a 24-hour period to survive. I am very fortunate that I am able to spend Christmas with my grandfather, even if we do not choose to celebrate the holiday. This is already a very difficult time of year, and these assumptions about families only increase the pain felt by those who have experienced estrangement.

It is so important to recognise that many estranged students will spend Christmas alone. We can't always share your excitement because none of your happy experiences relate to us.

Many estranged students face challenges with their mental health and the festive season is particularly difficult for us to deal with because there is such a stark contrast between other students' lives and ours. Now more than ever people assume we come from a happy family like they do and start asking us questions. Or they expect us to join in on conversations about the holidays. When this happens, estranged students have two options: we can tell the truth and ruin the happy Christmas atmosphere and make others uncomfortable, or we can make something up to save awkwardness, which just perpetuates our feelings of sadness. These conversations are extremely uncomfortable but are inevitable upon the return to university in the new year.

Be an ally to us by challenging not only your assumptions about the festive period, but also paying close attention to your language when you speak to us, and indeed to people in general. Don't assume everyone has the same experience as you. Questions about the festive period can cause an estranged student to feel ashamed of their situation. For me, it was a day to survive for another year. For you, it was a week or more of fun.

Loneliness during the festive period is something that is often thought only to affect older people but Christmas in the past few years has very much amplified my feelings of isolation. Especially in a time where everyone posts everything on social media, including the happiness experienced on Christmas day surrounded by loving family members. Seeing the level of enjoyment and contentment from others spending times with beloved family members is incredibly difficult and often leaves me feeling like a bitter scrooge.

If you know any estranged students, then bear in mind that reaching out to make sincere contact with them during the festive season could mean a lot, even though it would only take a few seconds of your time.

For universities hoping to support their estranged students during this time of the year, offering advice and support options experiencing difficulties around Christmas would be beneficial for most, whether this comes in the form of a short email or hosting dedicated meetings for estranged students to come together.

Christmas as an estranged student is incredibly difficult but there are so many other situations that we have to face that I would like you to be aware of. Many of the issues which affect estranged students are things that are taken for granted by so many, which has very much increased my frustrations about my situation.

One of the most difficult situations I have been placed in during my experience as an estranged student was the near-impossible task of securing a guarantor. The worst of this experience happened as I was looking for somewhere to live for my third year of university. My flatmate and I began to apply for various flats until we were successful in starting the application process for the flat that I currently live in now. Despite being very much capable of paying the rent each month, a major stumbling block for this process was providing a guarantor, with the stress of this heightening, even more, when a time restraint of less than a week was placed.

Having worked so hard to defeat every odd stacked against me in my pursuit of higher education, my lack of a guarantor threatened to ruin all of this for me. I had previously spent the two years prior to this staying in student accommodation, this had begun to have an extremely isolating effect on me and was incredibly detrimental to my mental health.

I experienced a level of stigma for remaining in student accommodation for my second year, with many assumptions made that this was because I didn't have anyone to share a flat with. This was extremely upsetting given the sole reason I could not get a flat was because of my lack of a guarantor. Assumptions like these have on many occasions created feelings of shame surrounding my estrangement.

Having lived at a total of 6 different addresses since I was 16, at the age of 19, I always craved for somewhere that I could genuinely call home that I didn't have to worry about moving out of after 8 months.

The University of Glasgow now has a guarantor scheme, which unfortunately was not in place in time to support me through my difficulties with accommodation but will be able to help so many others to prevent them from having to go through the emotional turmoil that I had to endure. This is a crucial method that Universities can support their estranged students to access their own flats and to feel more included in the student experience of moving in with friends. While knowing that student accommodation would always be available to me if I needed it was somewhat reassuring, I wanted nothing more than to have a home for my own where I could decorate the walls without fears of having the pictures removed during inspections.

You can be an ally to estranged students by encouraging your university to have a guarantor scheme in place. You might not need it but we do. Being an ally means recognising your privilege and fighting for vulnerable groups.

Accommodation difficulties unfortunately cover more than just guarantors. I also really struggled - on all of the occasions that I moved home in the last few years – to find someone to help me move my things. This exacerbated the stress I was already feeling about moving home. This is something to be mindful of when thinking about ways to support estranged students as many will be reliant on the kindness of friends to help them move. This is usually something that a parent would be able to help out with without a second thought.

It is also imperative for institutions to recognise that estranged students are not a homogenous group, and each have their own individual stories to which their estrangement came about. For this reason, they will also vary widely in terms of needs. It is also crucial to understand that many estranged students will not actively seek help. This was something that I really struggled with throughout my school years as I felt incredibly voiceless about my situation given the complex nature of it. When it came to applying to university, I forced myself to contact the institutions I wanted to apply for to ensure I would be adequately supported as I recognised that higher education was not something I could achieve alone. However, had I been in a different mood that day, or less comfortable sharing my story with strangers over an email. If I had not done this, I would have missed out on a complete support network both financially and emotionally. I have received an amazing level of support from Dr Daniel Keenan at The University of Glasgow, which has entirely transformed by my experience as an estranged student in so many ways.

Reach out to students during crucial points of the year such as Christmas which brings about many confusing emotions for those who have experienced estrangement. But also reach out at other key times such as exams or during busy deadline times during the semester. Sometimes support doesn't have to be materialistic or always bring about a perfect solution to a problem. But instead it is merely the comfort of knowing there is someone an email away if you need them. While Christmas ignites the conversation around estrangement, the reality of this is that every day is a struggle in its own right. The stigma surrounding lack of family support is not seasonal and crops up at times where you expect it the least. But instead, this should be something which should be destigmatised and spoken about throughout the year.

This is why I have used Estranged Student Solidarity Week to get my message out to you all whilst you are paying attention. But estranged students are here 52 weeks of the year. I hope that your solidarity will be too.

How to be an ally:

- 1. Don't make assumptions or judgements about family.**
- 2. Think of when you reach out to your family for support or to share your good news and then remember that estranged students don't have that. Can you be that person for your fellow estranged students sometimes?**

3. **Recognise your privilege – you may not need a guarantor scheme, but can you help us campaign for them at every university?**
4. **Help us break the stigma of family breakdown by allowing us to talk about it without the fear of awkwardness.**
5. **Share this open letter!**

Thank you for your solidarity,

Sam