

## 'Should I dump my girlfriend before uni?'

*Nineteen-year-old Anoushka Dougherty finished school earlier this year and spent the summer months thinking about her next big step - leaving home in Kent and heading to university in Manchester. One of the major questions her friends were grappling with, she noticed, was what to do about their existing boyfriends and girlfriends. To dump, or not to dump?*

*BBC Magazine*

### **JULY 2019**

It's the summer before the start of university, results are around the corner and the time of home-cooked meals and laundry that appears to do itself is finally ending. But despite the fact that we should be fussing over budgeting and acquiring culinary skills beyond the realms of pasta and Pot Noodle, one of the most stressful decisions surrounding uni for a lot of people is whether or not to remain in their secondary-school relationships.

Speaking to my friends, I've found that some are opting to keep relationships going despite the pressures of distance while others are finishing things before the start of term.

And then there's a third group who have decided to go to the same city as their partners so that they can study - and stay - together.

I'm curious about those who are planning to keep their existing partners. Will their relationships survive, or will the romantic possibilities in their new environments be too exciting to turn down?

Luke will soon be leaving Kent to start a degree in geography at Southampton.

Although uni is a welcome change, the worry over what will become of him and his girlfriend, who will be studying three hours away, is intensifying. They've been together for a few months and Luke credits the relationship with helping him stay sane

through his exams and overcome his struggles with anxiety.

Although he's aware of the potential difficulties to come, Luke doesn't want to break off the relationship prematurely. Instead, he hopes that regular visits, social media and a lot of commitment will help keep it going. He knows there won't be the same level of intimacy between them and says he's worried that temptation at uni may become an issue.

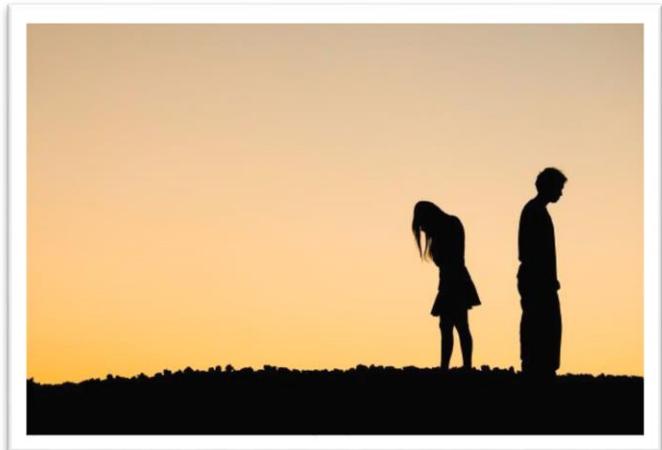


photo: wk1003mike / Shutterstock.com

"Trust is maybe the one thing that I am worried about going forward. I trust my girlfriend 100%, unequivocally," he says. "But we're going to both be in large cities making new friends every single day. The chances of either one of us finding someone that we perhaps like more, get on with more, find more attractive, are quite high. "With flatmates, say, you'll be spending every day with them, rather than the five hours at a

weekend you'll get with your partner. There could be problems."

Even so, he thinks that maybe he and his girlfriend can make it work.

Although the separation will be hard, he reflects, it could help test the relationship and allow them both to see if it is really worth pursuing further.

"If you go to uni and it all works out, then you know then you've got some solid foundations to work on and a relationship that could last for life. If you get past the first two years or so then you'll know that the relationship is going to work - and if you don't, then that's a good indication that it was never going to work."

Our friend Tom thinks this may be misguided. University changes people, he says, so he urges Luke to end things before term starts. He's influenced by his older brother, who went to university single and fell in love there. And he notes that at university, you get to pick from a much larger pool of people.

"There will be loads of opportunities there and so much more chance of meeting the right person," he says.

Relationship therapist Dee Holmes, who works for the counselling service, Relate, tells me these different views are shaped in part by how people respond to new challenges.

"I think for some people starting university brings a lot of excitement and they can shed all that's gone before. For them, it's a new start. And yet for others, it's quite important to have the security that they've got at the moment."

She adds that while social media may make it easier to stay in relationships, it can also put a strain on them. This is particularly the case if one person becomes isolated and suspicious.

"If you're spending every night in your room on a Skype call with your girlfriend or boyfriend miles away, then actually you are going to be probably making that loneliness and insecurity greater. Especially if they're

having fun with flatmates and going out, while you're left wondering what's going on."

One way round this might be to go to university in the same city as your partner - which is exactly what Thea and Lola have chosen to do.

They're starting at Leeds Uni and their boyfriends will be at Leeds Beckett, right next door.

Thea, who has been with her boyfriend, Jack, for two years, says it's a perfect solution.

"You have that sense of support while you're in the same place, but you have the separation which you kind of need, so you can find your feet and do your own thing," she says.

She notes, though, that neither her parents or Lola's are fully on board with the decision. They seem to fear that their daughters will be cut off from the full uni experience.

"I think they're quite sceptical about it because if your child's going to university you don't want to be paying £9,000 a year for them to be hanging out with their boyfriend, or staying in bed together. They say that university is the best time of your life and they don't want their kid to waste it being with their boyfriend or girlfriend."

When it comes to advice on practical steps to make long-distance relationships work there are blog posts on how often to call, how to build up trust and deal with difficult situations. One is written by travel-blogger Absolutely Lucy, who stayed with her boyfriend from home all the way through uni, only to drift apart once they settled into the world of work. As students, they dedicated certain weekends to couple time and sent thoughtful texts and even flowers to help keep the relationship going. They both made an effort and Lucy thinks this was the key.

"Temptation is the biggest question of all about having a boyfriend at university. There is a lot of temptation, if you like sweaty blokes wearing too much aftershave daring mates to

down pints without being sick! Some might feel left out of all the drunken snogging and sleeping around that comes with freshers' [week], but you're not really missing anything! It's possible to go to university and not sleep with everyone. It's possible to go on a night out and go home with your girls and a greasy burger!"

Katie Broadbent has also written a survival guide for students separated from their partners, which includes sharing problems with close friends and keeping as busy as possible while apart.

She'd been with her boyfriend, Sam, for two years before they started at different universities and they're still together now that they've graduated. It was hard, but worth the effort, she says.

"I know that many of my friends and family were doubtful about whether we'd stay together, but our relationship is stronger than ever.

"We've both matured a lot and been through so much. Now we're looking forward to the future together. I believe that if you really are committed to your partner, you will always find a way to make things work."

## **SEPTEMBER 2019**

In Leeds, freshers' week is already over.

Thea says she has hardly seen her boyfriend over the last few days because they agreed to use the time to make new friends.

Lola tells me she wonders whether spending more time together away from home and their school friends might mean she and her boyfriend clash more, but she's philosophical about it.

"I'd be surprised if we were still together in a year - pleasantly surprised, but I just don't think we will be. I don't think it's going to be anything sad, or like some emotional break-up," she says.

And Thea also recognises there is no guarantee that her "perfect solution" will work.

"If you do split up and you're both in the same city, or both at university, it is gonna be harder. But it's always hard if you split up with someone, isn't it? It's never really going to be that easy.

"And if you've spent time making an effort with new people, then you're going to be dealing with splitting up with friends around you. You'll be forced to socialise with people rather than lie in your bed all day playing sad songs!"

But two of my friends, Luke and Tom, have both made 180-degree turns. What a difference two months makes.

Tom, whose advice was to split up before going to university, is now thinking it's worth giving it a try with his girlfriend, Jenny.

Luke, on the other hand, who wanted to make his relationship work, has just been told by his girlfriend that she's changed her mind. He's been dumped.

But amazingly, he doesn't seem too disappointed.

"She said it would be hard. Even though it would've been a struggle I was prepared to do it. But now she's ended it and I think that's left me more excited to start uni," he says. "It means I can go without having to worry about anything at all!"