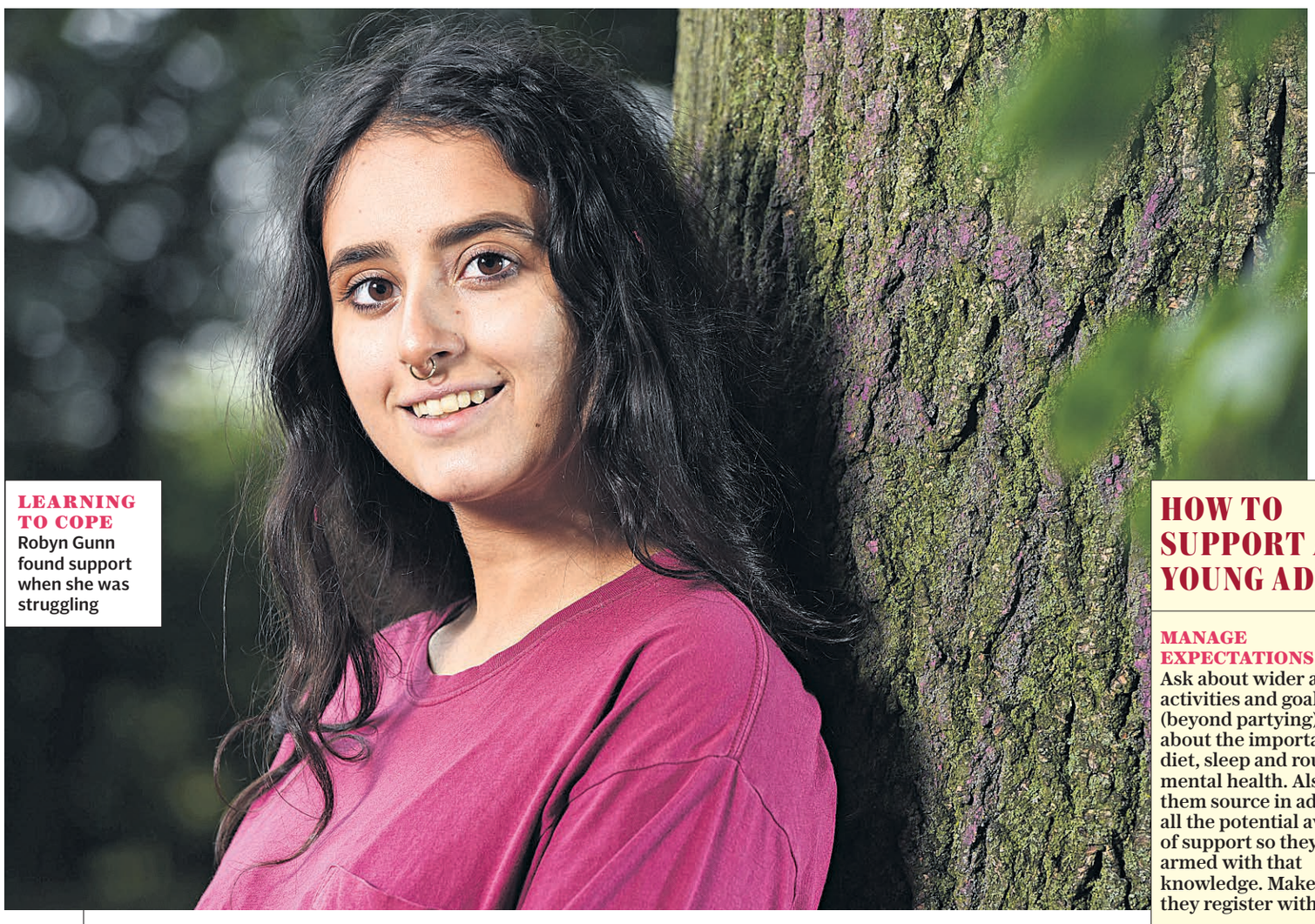

LEARNING TO COPE
Robyn Gunn found support when she was struggling

ASADOUR GUZELIAN

‘I was known as a party girl, but I was sad all the time’

Student Robyn Gunn tells ***Anna Moore*** *how she sought help when she found the start of university challenging*

Robyn Gunn had high hopes when she arrived at Leeds to begin her English and philosophy degree. “It was the course I wanted to do at my dream uni and I was full of enthusiasm,” she says.

But her start was rocky. The accommodation was one problem – a student flat of six people with little in common. “Two had mental health issues and had dropped out by Christmas,” says Gunn. “There was a triathlete who didn’t understand why you might not want to get up at 4am to go on a bike ride, and a really nice guy who had a girlfriend and was never there. I didn’t go out once in freshers’ week, because there was no one to go with. I’d had this vision of big shared kitchens and everyone being super sociable. Instead, I was in my room eating a ready meal.”

Meeting people on her course was also harder than expected. “Doing a joint honours, being split between departments, means the people on your first module probably won’t be on your next. I also found the work a struggle – being expected to read one or two books a week per module. I was sitting in seminars feeling out of my depth.”

Like many new students, Gunn tried to silence this swirling unease through hard partying. “On one level, I thought going out a lot would help me make new friends,” says Gunn. “But alcohol is a depressant – and when everything happens with a drink in your hand, it’s much harder to make a genuine connection.” Within months, Gunn was behind on her course work, at the end of her overdraft, anxious and unhappy.

“My bedroom was filthy, I was sleep-deprived, eating rubbish, known as ‘the party girl’ but sad all the time, just about surviving.” Who did she tell? “No one. Your first year of uni is probably the time when you don’t have that solid group of friends to turn to – and my parents had no idea. I never phoned home, and when they called, I was always busy. They thought I was fine and didn’t want to be pestering parents.”

Gunn’s experience is not uncommon – one in five students is diagnosed with a mental health ailment. Parents who’ve just taken their young adults to university will not have welcomed recent headlines about the patchy mental health provision in place for some students. Research released last month showed some universities have three-month waiting lists for counselling.

Ollie Kasper-Hope, head of engagement at the mental health charity Student Minds, says it’s impossible to know whether the rise in the number of students seeking help reflects an increase in mental illness or simply a growing awareness and decline in stigma, which enables more students to come forward. “What we do know is that the median age of higher education students is a critical time anyway,” he says. “The majority of depression cases will have onset by the age of 24.

“On top of that, the transition can be massive,” Kasper-Hope continues. “You’re going from a typical 18-year-old living at home to joining a huge, diverse student body, making friends, building communities, living by yourself, budgeting, cooking, adapting to self-directed learning. It’s important to understand how big an impact that can have.”

Janey Downshire, parenting coach at Teenagers Translated, believes the gap between expectation and reality can cause problems. “Before they go, students hear a lot of, ‘Oh my God, it’ll be amazing!’,” she says. “Actually, it can be hard work, and when you’re struggling, the old routines and rituals that might have sustained you could be gone. You’re not doing sport any more, or eating regular meals, or resting or sleeping. All that will promote difficult feelings.”

Laura Watchman, who studies in Aberdeen, found this loss of structure a challenge in her first year when she was already feeling disoriented and homesick. “It’s your first time away and you have complete freedom,” she says. “There’s ‘fresher pressure’ to party and drink. You can go to town in the middle of the day. Time management was an issue for me.”

As a parent, miles away and out the loop, what can you do to support your young adult? “Yes, your role has changed, but you can still help,” says Downshire. “Talk to them about what they’re hoping to achieve, help them think about the bigger picture, not just partying. Talk about the fact that, if they’re not enjoying something, if they feel lonely or homesick, that’s normal. It’s also helpful to have conversations about the importance of sleep and diet and routine to mental health.”

When they’re away, set up a time to chat, a quiet slot maybe once a week that’s good for them – they might not keep to it, but at least it’s there. Suggest in advance that coming home once a term to chill might be a good idea if they need to. “Ask questions – not nosy questions – ask how other people are doing, what they are doing, and if your gut is telling you something is up, don’t just ignore it. Log the fact that you’ve noticed. ‘Would you like to get extra help?’ ‘What could you do to make things better for yourself?’”

It was only when Gunn returned to Leeds for her second year that she left her parents a note telling them she was struggling. “They were devastated,” she says. “They’re amazing people and phoned me straight away and said they were coming to Leeds. We had a lovely weekend, we went to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and did a lot of talking.”

Later, Gunn completed an online request for counselling at her university – and had her first appointment in less than a week. She has phoned Nightline – a listening and support service from fellow students – and accessed pastoral support services that helped her arrange extension deadlines when she was falling behind. Most importantly, as Gunn built firm friendships and opened up, she found the support she needed in her own community. “It’s knowing who the people are that will make you feel better and having trusted friends,” she says.

> ‘I have an incredible life now – yet I was so close to dropping out: I could have missed all of it’

When it comes to accessing help, there are a range of options, says Kasper-Hope. “It’s highly likely there’ll be peer support groups – including ones by Student Minds – there’s welfare services, peer-to-peer and it’s important to register with a GP as well.”

Watchman also accessed counselling through her university in her first year, but found her new GP to be the most helpful. “The counselling gave me a safe space to talk,” she says. “My GP prescribed antidepressants, which really helped.”

Gunn is now in her final year at Leeds, juggling her degree with three jobs in event management. She still has bad days, but she manages them. “I have an incredible life and wonderful friends, yet I was so close to dropping out, I could have missed all of it,” she says. “To any first year struggling, I can’t say this enough: talk to someone – whether it’s a parent, friend or counsellor. It’s a weight off your shoulders.”

studentminds.org.uk

HOW TO SUPPORT A YOUNG ADULT

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS
Ask about wider aims, activities and goals (beyond partying). Talk about the importance of diet, sleep and routine to mental health. Also help them source in advance all the potential avenues of support so they arrive armed with that knowledge. Make sure they register with a GP.

KEEP COMMUNICATING
Arrange a weekly slot to call – without pestering them if they say they’re busy. Send the odd text so they know you’re in their thoughts. Be excited about where they are and arrange to visit so they can share their new world. Suggest that they might like to come home at least once during each term.

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS
“What do you think of the workload?” “How is your flatmate doing?” Trust your intuition and, if you feel something is wrong, voice that feeling.

DON’T TRY TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS
Help them find solutions. It might be getting out of bed earlier and heading to the library, finding one activity or club that doesn’t involve drinking or accessing mental health support.

Parenting
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