# not like the movies

We spend so much time stressing about getting into uni that no one talks about what happens next.

I had always been a big fan of school, I found nothing more exciting than telling others what I had learnt, written, or read. I couldn't wait for uni; I was going to be studying exactly what I wanted. And I was going to make friends who were like me and liked the things I liked. People told me these years were going to be the best years of my life.

**Movies told me about parties, self-discovery, and friendship, not about loneliness, identity crises, and fear.**

Simply, no one told me how hard it was going to be before it would be great. No one gave me my own personal check-list or 80s soundtrack to my first year at uni...

I moved five hours away from my small rural town into college. I made sure I had thought of everything. I had made endless lists, gone shopping multiple times, and planned out my first couple of weeks to the exact time. I didn't realise how nervous I was until I spent the entire night beforehand crying. By day two I had a panic attack while going to a college orientation event. Suddenly, I was a girl who didn't speak unless someone spoke to her first. Most nights I didn't make it to dinner in the dining hall, terrified of eating alone but even more terrified of eating with people I didn't know.

As the months went on, the worse I felt. I barely recognised myself and nowhere felt like home anymore. I felt like a stranger, a passer-by in both my home town and my new town. No amount of phone calls home or walks around the streets could fix how I was feeling.

Social media is a great way to feel connected to the world. But when it's the only connection you have, it begins to feel like a desperate necessity. By semester two I found myself abusing social media. Every day began to feel the same. I would wake up and stay in bed on my phone, submerged in other people's lives. Some days I didn't make it to my classes. I was in such a rut that even getting out of my pyjamas felt like too much for me. I saw posts from my high school friends of their uni mates and activities. I was happy for them but each post hurt and threw me deeper into my disappointment that I wasn't able to do the same. For a long time I felt like an outcast, like no one would ever want me. It started to feel like maybe I had peaked early in high school.

I went home a lot, comforted by school pick-ups with my younger siblings, TV with my parents, and cuddles with my dog. But going back home was often just as hard because I would run into people who wanted to hear my stories from uni. Did they really want to hear who was the latest villain the Scooby Doo gang unmasked, or the jokes from the sitcoms I was drowning in? It can be easy to fall into the trap of talking around the topic instead of just telling someone how you actually feel. I struggled for a lot longer than I needed to because I was too embarrassed to admit I wasn't OK.

Then one visit home in September, I ran into an old teacher of mine. She's bubbly, confident, and well-loved. When she asked how I was going, I took a deep breath and I admitted it wasn't going as well as I'd hoped. Instead of it being awkward, she kindly smiled and confided that she hadn't felt settled until the end of her second year. Things didn't change overnight, but it helped to know there was still hope for me too.

A girl invited me along to one of her netball games and the team accepted me straight away (a year later and I am still playing). I started making an effort to go to the dinner hall even if it meant reading a book on my phone while I ate. This led to a couple of kind boys quietly taking me under their wings, giving me a group to eat, study, and socialise with. I had a lecturer who made the effort to learn my name and made me feel noticed. It terrified me to open myself up after being closed up for so long, but it started to feel like the me I had lost was slowly coming back.

In the last weeks of my first year, a girl from class shared her quiz notes. It was scary but I invited her to meet for coffee. When she said yes I was excited (and relieved)! She is now my best friend. A year later, and I've made more friends who enjoy my company as much as I enjoy theirs. I finally made those friends I always thought I would, and they were worth the wait!

I'm now in the final weeks of my second year and I am a drastically different person. I've moved off college and am living with two of my best friends. I've made some friends who share inside jokes and call me when they think I'm having a bad day. I rediscovered my love of study and reading. I even recently went to the uni winter formal, an event that in the past I wouldn't have had the confidence to go to. Instead, I talked to so many people and danced all night. It was a physical reminder of how much I've grown, and what I can do when I believe in myself. It's cliché, but I think I had to settle a home within myself before I could have a physical one.

**It's more than OK to not be OK, but eventually it's all going to bottle up. Talking to people helps to empty the bottle.**

And I don't need a movie to tell me this, I've got something better.