

Overcoming homesickness and adjusting to university life: Tips for International students and other new comers

Disclaimer: These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice

What is homesickness?

Entering university is often seen as an exciting time. However, it can also be a challenging time for students who may have moved away from their social support base and are learning to adapt to a new environment. Feeling homesick can involve a sense of loneliness, sadness, confusion, fear, and preoccupation with thoughts about home. It can also be similar to a grief reaction as students become separated from family and close friends and feel a sense of loss of people, of places, and of familiar routines. These reactions may contribute to greater difficulty in adjusting to the new environment. If students are from another country, they may experience difficulties adjusting to the new climate, unfamiliar setting, accommodation, transportation, safety issues, and the unfamiliar types of food. The Australian culture may be very different from what you are used to and it can be challenging to learn about the different values and beliefs. Some students may also encounter racial discrimination and difficulties adjusting to the new cultural norms. Financial concerns may also add to the stress of adjustment as many costs can be involved at the start of the university career. A further difficulty for some students can be that of language as for many, English is not a first language. Not only do students have to adjust to the learning environment where lectures and assignments need to be in English, but they also have to use English to socialise and make new friends which can be a daunting experience.

How can you tell if you are homesick or having difficulty adjusting?

Those who experience homesickness may feel down, stressed about many things, isolated, and have intense feelings of longing for home. They may not enjoy the university experience as much as they thought they would and they may want to return home which appears more wonderful from a distance. Some research has found that about 35% of new students experience homesickness and between 5% and 15% find this experience frightening. Some of these may then go on to become depressed. Patterns may vary from student to student with some students finding that they are anxious before they arrive but that they can settle in well. Other students may be looking forward to the experience before they arrive but then they find that after a while here they begin to feel more and more homesick as they begin to miss their family and friends more and more particularly around significant dates such as birthdays. However, the most common experience is that the first few days or weeks are the most difficult.

Factors that can affect the degree to which students become homesick include:

- Distance from home
- A sense of anticlimax at finally arriving at university after working towards it for so long
- Whether the student him/herself made the decision to come to this university
- Disappointment due to expectations of university life not being met
- Feeling overwhelmed by work overload and lack of control over it
- Strong contrast in lifestyle between home and Australia

How homesickness or adjustment difficulties can affect your life

Homesickness or adjustment problems can affect many areas of your life including your mood, your studies and your relationships. For example, you may feel depressed, lonely, stressed about learning your way around the university and your new environment. You may find it harder to concentrate on your studies and lose motivation in your course. You may also find that you are getting sick more often than usual. Things that you used to be able to manage easily suddenly seem harder as self-esteem and confidence drop and you may become more anxious about social interactions and making new friends.

Treatment options

It can be helpful to talk to someone. If you don't know many people here, you could talk to a tutor, supervisor or see a counsellor at the **University Counselling Services** (Building 109, Tel: 9266 7850). Seeing a counsellor can provide you with an independent and confidential place to discuss issues of concern. Sometimes there are difficulties that are hard to talk about with other people and you may not be able to talk to family members easily. Professional help at these times can help solve problems and prevent future ones from developing. The Counselling Service is a free and confidential service where you can get help with academic support, personal counselling, and assistance with policies and procedures that you may not be familiar with in the University system. The University Counselling Service is a multi-cultural organisation whose staff are used to cross-cultural issues and the difficulties linked to being away from home. Web site: <http://counselling.curtin.edu.au//index.html>

Tips for self-help

- It is helpful to keep in regular contact with the people at home by phone and email. Plan for times when you can return home for a break or holiday possibly early in the year you begin studies. If it's possible, ask family members to visit you from time to time and spend time showing them around.
- Allow yourself time to settle in and learn your way around and become involved in university life. Don't rush into any major decisions straight away about returning home or staying here. Try not to keep looking back but look forward to the new experiences that lie ahead. If relevant, think about other times when you may have been away from home and what helped you get through on those occasions.
- Keep in mind that other students will be having similar experiences even though you may assume that they are doing fine. It's not possible to read their minds and they can't read yours.
- It's OK to feel sad and homesick and it's also OK to learn to enjoy your new lifestyle even though your family and friends are absent.
- Research has suggested that having a strong social support base can act like a buffer against feelings of homesickness. Thus, adjustment can be helped by making new friends at university.
- Be active in engaging with the life and culture in Australia and try some of the typical tourist activities. Send home some photos so that family and friends can get an understanding of your new life.
- If you are an International student, it can also be helpful to have frequent contact with other students from your own country which can give more of a sense of belonging. Also develop friendships and social networks with other international students who may be facing similar challenges as you are.
- Have realistic expectations of yourself and of the life at university. Try to achieve a balance between study and leisure so that you are spending adequate time on course work and not falling behind as well as allowing time to socialise and relax. Try to do some fun things such as renting a funny DVD or listening to some lively music.

- If you are experiencing study difficulties, find out about possible sources of study skills support such as the Student Learning Support Centre or the courses available at the Curtin Business School. You may also want to talk to your tutors or lecturers for additional guidance.
- Remember that it is important to care for your physical needs also and eat well and healthily, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. Physical activity can also improve your mood. Be safe in experimenting with alcohol and other drugs because you are away from your usual social supports and you may put yourself more at risk.
- Investigate any clubs or groups that share common interests at university because shared activities can be a helpful way to make new friends and contacts. At the beginning of the year, many students are joining clubs on campus and so there are likely to be many new people in the groups.
- Another factor that has been found to help overcome homesickness is trying to make your accommodation feel more like home. So have things in your room that help make it homely, comfortable and familiar.
- It can be useful also to think of the new experience as the beginning of your adult life which could be an energizing process.
- If after a while you are uncertain about the course you are doing, seek advice about alternatives and talk to course advisors or the careers' advisors in Building 599.
- Break up the university semester into smaller chunks by getting a calendar or planner so that you can mark off the times for your first visit home, the next holidays, when assignments are due etc
- Know about your options in case the situation doesn't improve and find out about the census dates for withdrawal without incurring debt etc. Learn about university policies and procedures regarding withdrawal, deferrals, changing courses etc.
- If you are an International student, find out where the International Student Office is and how you can make an appointment to speak to the International Student Advisor.
- Try to keep busy by finding out about activities that you may be able to participate in. Even if your heart's not in the new activities, keep trying to be involved and telling yourself that things will improve.
- If you are an International student, find out what activities are available for you from the Guild, from the International Student group, and from Building 599 where outings and tours are organised for you to find out about Western Australia and where opportunities for improving conversational skills in English are offered.
- Get into a routine so that your new life can begin to feel normal.
- Write down all the positive things about being away from home – for example, having more freedom, etc. Remind yourself of all the reasons why you chose to study here and think about the ways in which your studies will enhance your future career prospects.

We hope that these suggestions are helpful to you. There are many things you can do to help yourself, but don't hesitate to seek help from others such as the University Counselling Service if things become overwhelming for you. Remember that homesickness is a common experience for many people and it can be overcome!

Further information and resources

Useful books and online resources:

Student Study Guide: A manual for international students by Goldwasser, A.

[Authentic happiness](#) is a useful site which focuses on strengths and positive emotions.

[Beyondblue](#) is an Australian based web-site which provides information on anxiety and depression.

[The Moodgym Training Program](#) helps you to understand different emotions and how to develop good coping skills.

[Reach Out!](#) is a website directed at young people and it has information about getting help. It focuses on various issues and discusses how other young people cope with them. [Unabridged Student Counselling Virtual Pamphlet Collection](#) has many useful brochures specifically about student concerns which are available online.

Urgent help:

Call Crisis care (24 hour telephone counselling service) on (08) 9223 1111.