

# Surviving Homesickness

## TIPS FOR MANAGING HOMESICKNESS

### **Why do I feel this way?**

One of the major changes in a person's life involves the transition from home to university. It's a transition filled with excitement, expectation, and adventure. It can also be marked by homesickness, which can sometimes make people feel quite miserable. It is important to remember that homesickness is a normal process which many students go through. It is a time of letting go. When we move to a new place, even if it is by our own choice, there are adjustments to be made. These adjustments are necessary ones, but may seem difficult at first. Some students may adapt quickly to their new environment. However, for other students the transition may take longer and sometimes emerges as homesickness where there is a preoccupation with home-focused thoughts. There is a yearning for and grieving over the loss of what is familiar and secure: most often it is about the loss of people – family and friends – but it is also about the loss of places and routines. Two important tasks faced by students as part of their adjustment process include:

- Leaving familiar things, people and places.
- Adapting to new things, people and places.

Homesickness is not unusual. Being at university presents new ways of living your life. As you try to cope with new routines and a new environment you may experience homesickness in some form or other. That is because the familiar and known has been displaced by the new. Homesickness is about adjusting to new relationships. Most, if not all, of your known and comfortable relationships are back at home. In this new place there can be a struggle to become accepted.

### **What is this experience like?**

Homesickness can include...

- Being miserable without knowing why.
- Feeling like a prisoner in your own room.
- Being unable to get into a reassuring routine.
- Not liking meals at the dining hall because the atmosphere doesn't feel right.
- Wondering what people at home are doing; feeling as if you are missing out.
- Wanting to go home straight after you have arrived.
- Not liking coming back after the holidays.
- Being conscious you are doing things out of character.
- Thinking you are the only person on campus with homesick feelings.
- Being unable to settle anything.
- Crying for no reason.
- Getting anxious or upset about little things that used to not bother you.
- Finding the values of people around you strange and vaguely threatening.
- Getting fed up with new food, new smells, new scenery, and wanting the familiar.

*Is this how it is for you?*

## **What is homesickness?**

Maybe the only homesickness you knew about prior to coming to university was being sick of home. Suddenly – or not so suddenly – here you are feeling blue or anxious. This wasn't how it was meant to be! It might be hard to admit, with everyone else seeming to be so together, and having a good time, but you are feeling homesick. How uncool you may think!

You're not alone. Behind some of the smiles you see are other people feeling homesick too. Research suggests that nearly 70% of university students feel homesick at some time or other, and in a recent American study two-thirds of the students reported that it lasted more than one week; while for 18% homesickness lasted for more than eight weeks.

Those who experience homesickness might notice an increase in depressed feelings, anxiety, obsessive thought and minor physical ailments. Homesickness can often be distinguished from depression in this way – in depression sufferers experience difficult emotions at both university and home, whereas in homesickness university can feel uncomfortable and difficult while home may feel the best place to be.

Students experiences with homesickness can vary considerable. Some students are fine initially, and then find themselves feeling homesick later in the academic year i.e. after returning from breaks or at the start of their second year. However, it is commonly the first few days or weeks after arriving at university that new student find the most difficult. Students are not immune just because they have successfully experienced leaving home before. Vulnerability to feeling homesick is affected by both external and internal factors. For example,

- The distance from home.
- A sense of anticlimax at finally arriving at university after working towards it for so long.
- Whether you or somebody else was responsible for the decision to come to university.
- Unhappiness due to the expectations of university not being met.
- “Job strain” – i.e. work overload and low control over it.
- Contrast in lifestyles.
- Discouraging, self critical &/or self doubting thinking/inner dialogue.

Students who are homesick often feel they have no control over their environment, and they may feel isolated or not committed to the university or their place in it. Remember help is not far away: you don't have to do it on your own.

## **A special word to international students**

Welcome to all of the students from overseas. If you have travelled a long way to study in Australia, adjusting to major changes in your life may be extra difficult for you. Our language may be unfamiliar; our ways of talking about things may not be the same as you are used to. You may have to deal with strange food, a different climate, and unfamiliar landscape. Home is so far away; arranging to go home for a weekend is not a possibility for you. We have an idea of what it may be like for you, and are here to help. Be patient with us if our attempts to help seem odd in terms of your culture. The experience of moving into another culture is sometimes described as

'culture shock'. The International Student Adviser and the International Office are here specifically to help you. We hope that ultimately your stay at CSU will be rewarding and enjoyable. Please remember the Student Services staff are here to help you.

### **So what can be done to manage homesickness?**

Here are some suggestions that other students have found helpful in managing their homesickness.

#### **Survival Tips**

- Admit, accept and acknowledge that you are homesick. Much of what you know and can rely on is back at home. Homesickness is a natural response to this sense of loss.
- Set up your room with something familiar from home. Bring familiar items from home, photos, plants, even stuffed animals help to give you a sense of continuity and can ease the shock of a new environment. Make your room your own! Create an environment that's comfortable and familiar.
- Familiarise yourself with your new surroundings. Walk around. You will feel more in control if you know where buildings, classes and services are.
- Make an effort to talk to someone new. Making friends is a big step to alleviating homesickness.
- Try leaving your door open sometimes when you are sitting in your room; someone might pass by and say 'hello'.
- Get involved in activities on campus that will build up good memories for you.
- Give yourself time to adjust: you don't have to get everything right straight away. Nor do you have to rush into making major decisions about staying or leaving.
- Be realistic about what to expect from student life and from yourself. Establish a balance between work and leisure: you are NOT expected to study ALL the time – you would soon burn out. On the other hand, if you don't put in enough time on study, you can very quickly get behind, which only adds to the stress!
- If study is proving too difficult, you can improve your study and organisational skills so that you gain satisfaction from what you achieve. The Learning Skills Centre at Student Services can help in this area.
- Talk to someone else about how you feel – any new student will probably feel much the same as you do. Don't assume that they are doing fine! (You can't read their minds – just as they can't read yours!).
- If you feel the need, talk to the Student Counsellor about your feelings – they will listen objectively and be there for you
- If you live on campus, talk to your Residential Advisor. If you live in one of the Colleges, make use of all the support structures they have there.
- If you live on or off campus, make use of all the university's support available at Student Services.
- Respond to the invitations of others to places or events where you will meet more people.
- If you have been involved in any religious or other national or international group at home, see if there is a local group near the university.

- It is hard to let go of home, but keeping in touch with family and friends too often during the first few weeks may only prolong the feelings of homesickness.
- Of course if you have too, keep in touch with people back home, but put a limit on telephoning. Email them about of your activities and new experiences. Let them know you'd like to hear from them, too.
- Recognise that this is a grief and loss experience, but also about learning to adjust to all that's new or different. Have a good cry; it can often make you feel better when you're really feeling down.
- Write down or remind yourself of why you made the decision to come to university in the first place – what made this an attractive option, what got you thinking this was the place for you, etc.
- Jot down your thoughts, experiences and dreams in a journal. It will help you recognise if things are improving or not and help you try to make some sense out of the different pieces.
- Make a list of the new opportunities being away from home can provide, (e.g. freedom, etc). What are some other positive things about being away from home?
- Make a conscious effort to notice better times – times when homesickness is even a little less strong. What's different at those times? Does this give you some clues about what you're already doing to make things better for yourself?
- Check your expectations. Are they realistic? We'd all like to be popular, well-dressed, well-organised, and well-adjusted. Well, we're not. Setting a goal of perfection is the most predictable way of creating trouble for yourself. Laugh at your mistakes. You're learning.
- If you sometimes find it hard work to overcome homesickness, think about what will make this hard work worthwhile in the long term –e.g. how this will take you on to the next phase of your life, better employment prospects, etc. If you're having trouble thinking about this, ask others who support your decision to come to university about why it's worthwhile in their opinion.
- Daydream about a positive future – in as much detail as you can.
- Imagining your family moving in with you can often help get things into perspective.
- Be kind to yourself – it is OK to miss home and perfectly normal. After all, you have spent most of your life there until now, so tears can be cleansing.
- Remember to get enough food and sleep! These affect us emotionally as well as physically.
- Regular physical exercise helps flush out unwanted stress chemicals and promotes health body chemistry.
- Remember the old adage “all things in moderation” – especially if you're tempted to make yourself feel better by using sex, alcohol or other drugs. These can make things much worse.
- Break up the semesters into smaller parts by getting a year planner or calendar so that you can mark off the days until your first weekend home, next holidays, first assignment due date, etc. This helps the time go faster.
- Know your options in case the situation doesn't improve. This includes HECS dates and Academic Regulations.

- Plan a date to go home and make arrangements. This often helps to stop impulsive returns and keeps you focused on your goals in staying.
- Keep busy – check out the gym or the clubs on campus for activities you might like.
- Pick and choose the campus events to participate in – you don't have to go to them all, but it is helpful to go to one or two. Sports games and movie nights are good because you generally don't have to make chitchat.
- Establish some kind of routine so that uni life takes on a sense of normalcy.
- Go to lectures - you never know, you might make some new friends.
- Do something about homesickness. Don't wait for it to go away by itself. Buried problems often emerge later disguised as headaches, fatigue, illness, or lack of motivation.
- If you stop being able to do normal social and academic things, seek professional help from either a doctor or the student counselling service. Don't wait until the problems have grown impossibly large.

### **What if none of this stuff works?**

If you find that you are still having trouble adjusting, or continue to feel homesick after a reasonable amount of time (4-6weeks), you may need to talk to someone. Your Residential Adviser may be a good starting point. If you think you need something more, contact the Student Counsellor at the Division of Student Services, we can offer practical resources for this and other problems. Homesickness is not unusual – and it can be conquered!

### **Some useful websites to visit:**

Division of Student Services Home Page

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv>

Student Counselling Services

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/counsell>

Learning Skills Centre

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning>

International Student Assistance

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/internat/>

CSU Handbook (Academic Regulations)

<http://www.csu.edu.au/handbook>

Student Community Coordinator

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/chaplain>

The Division of Student Services would like to acknowledge the following reference sources for their permission to use their copyrighted material in this document.

#### **References:**

Australian National University, 2005, University Counselling Centre.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/counsel>

University of Cambridge, 2005, Counselling Service.

<http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>

University of New England, 2005, Chaplaincy Centre.

<http://www.une.edu.au/campus/chaplaincy/uniting/student>

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, 2005, Counselling Services.

<http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/homesick>