

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION



University of
Reading

Settling in to university life

Who gets homesick?

Many students struggle to manage the transition between home and university life. There is a mass of information to take in when you arrive, as well as the practical adjustments that need to be made – such as finding your way around, meeting lots of new people, establishing yourself in your new location.

It's an exciting time but the changes can also be daunting and 50-70% of all new university students in the UK get homesick during their first few weeks. Homesickness can affect anyone – male, female, younger or older – we all have attachments to our families, friendship groups and usual environments.

Why do I feel so homesick?

There are lots of different reasons for homesickness:

- Lack of familiarity When you're displaced it's normal to feel low from time to time, when everything's different and daily life requires a conscious effort on your part. Fortunately, if you allow yourself time to get used to the new place, the effort needed diminishes, and everything usually calms down so that you can feel more like yourself again.
- 'Stretched emotional bonds' It may feel as though you have 'lost' your parents or friends when you leave home for the first time. Although you know they're still there, they may feel very distant, and this may be the first time you've become aware of the background support you took for granted from them.

Typical thoughts revolve around sadness, loneliness, longing for familiar people and feelings of not fitting in or belonging here.

If you come from a very close family, left a boyfriend or girlfriend behind, haven't been away before, or were sent to university rather than having chosen to go, homesickness is quite likely.

How can I take action to help myself?

1. Make your mark on your new room. Make it feel like your own personal space, so you have a familiar place in the midst of all the difference. Decorate it with things from home: photos, posters... Bring your iPod or CD player and plenty of your kind of music.
2. Join in with activities that involve being with people. If you play chess or a sport, or attend church at home, find out how to continue this at university and have a go. Whatever your interest, joining in and transferring your enthusiasm across to your new environment will help you to provide a stability and continuity to your former life, at the same time as investing emotionally in your new life.
3. Spend time with a few potential friends, rather than a large number of acquaintances. Nurture the emerging friendships which can become emotional substitutes for the home bonds, by doing activities together: don't just sit in lectures; explore the town together and share significant experiences such as joining a society or trying out a new pursuit. This will also give you something interesting to talk to your family and friends back home about on the phone.
4. Try not to phone home too frequently nor go home, the first few weeks. This may feel painful but is part of the separation process. The inner conflict mentioned above ('Stretched' emotional bonds) will ease more quickly the less you reactivate it.

The loss we feel when someone has died involves accepting that they'll never return. But, when we move away we have chosen (or feel forced) to deal with a loss that we know is reversible, so there's a temptation to retreat from the challenge.

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This sets up an ongoing inner conflict. It may help to know that just as in grieving; there is a process which will work itself out if you allow it, progressing through:

- shock and numbness
- anger
- self-criticism
- longing and helplessness
- eventually to re-organisation and acceptance.

Anxiety

The transition from school to university life means suddenly you have increased responsibility for deciding when, what and how you will study, as well as who with.

As well as higher academic expectations there are other changes to adapt to, and just when you could do with extra support, you're fending for yourself. The demands can feel overwhelming. Self Esteem When you look around it may seem that everyone else is having a wonderful time. This makes for lower self-esteem.

Culture shock

If you are an international student, adapting to a new, perhaps totally unfamiliar culture can make the above issues even more difficult. There is specific help available from the International Students' Advisor who is based in the Carrington building.

What are the signs of homesickness?

Any of these physical symptoms are possible ...

- episodic or constant crying
- nausea
- sleep disturbance
- difficulty eating
- disrupted menstrual cycle
- absentmindedness
- unpredictable waves of emotion
- trembling
- feeling inexplicably too hot or too cold
- dizziness
- inability to concentrate or memorise
- severe headaches

Where can I find help?

Counsellors at the University Counselling Service are used to helping students work out their own strategies and solutions so that they feel able to manage, and in time – perhaps even quite quickly – actually enjoy university life. It's a good idea to book an appointment to see a counsellor if:

- being away leaves you feeling completely overwhelmed, rather than the feelings coming and going;
- you begin to think in a self-destructive way;
- your self-esteem is suffering;
- this is your usual reaction in new situations and you know it doesn't improve quickly.

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Email counselling@reading.ac.uk to book an appointment or telephone: **0118 378 4216**