Homesickness

What is homesickness?

Many of us will feel homesick at some time in our lives and it can be overwhelming.

Beginning life at university can generate both excitement and anxiety. For some, this apprehension is quickly overcome as they adapt to a new environment; for others the transition takes longer. It can sometimes emerge as homesickness when there is a preoccupation with home-focused thoughts. There is longing for and grieving for what was familiar and secure. It can be about the loss of people, pets, places and routines, culture or the secure feeling of familiarity that home represents.

If you experience homesickness you might notice an increase in low moods, anxiety, obsessive thoughts and minor physical ailments.

Some students will start by being mildly depressed and anxious several weeks before leaving home, in anticipation of the impending change. Others will be fine initially and then, to their surprise, find themselves feeling homesick later in the academic year, perhaps after the Christmas break, or at the start of their second academic year.
You may not be immune just because you have successfully experienced leaving home before. Vulnerability to feeling homesick can be affected by:

- the distance from home
- a sense of anti-climax at finally arriving at university after working towards it for so long
- whether you or someone else was responsible for the decision to come to university
- unhappiness due to expectations of university not being met
- workload and adjustment to Cambridge requirements
- whether family members at home are well and happy
- finding Cambridge to be a very different lifestyle.

If you are homesick you may feel you have no control over your environment. You may not yet feel connected to the university or feel you have found your place in it.

**Transition to university**

There are two tasks involved in starting at university:

(1) leaving familiar things, people and places

(2) adapting to new things, people and places.

We all have different levels of tolerance to change and have learned different ways of coping with new situations. But what can make transition so hard? In unfamiliar surroundings our habitual methods of coping and working are challenged.
Tasks which we would normally have taken in our stride can suddenly seem a huge challenge, or impossible. Our self-esteem and confidence can drop.

**What might help?**

- Talk to someone. If you haven’t yet made friends here, you could try a tutor, supervisor, college ‘parents’, partner if you have one, college welfare officer, chaplain, nurse or counsellor.
- Keep in good contact with the people you have left behind but also give yourself time within the university to begin to get involved here. Try not to let looking back actually hinder settling in.
- Encourage friends or family to come and see you in your new setting.
- Remember that many other people will be sharing similar feelings, although they may look as if they are doing fine.
- You are allowed to feel sad and homesick. You are also allowed to enjoy yourself - it isn’t being disloyal to those you miss.
- Be realistic about what to expect from student life and from yourself. Establish a balance.
- Remember to get enough sleep and food. They are emotionally as well as physically important parts of self-care, both emotionally and physically.
- Try to make contacts and friends through shared activities such as sport or other interests. There are so many clubs and societies within the university and city. At the start of
the academic year many new people will be joining - you are unlikely to be the only new person.

• 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.

• Check out that you do really want to be at this university, in this college, studying this subject now. Most people come through times of homesickness and go on to do well and enjoy their time at university. But for others it may be right to leave and take another direction. Students who do leave mostly find another course or university with which they are happy, sometimes after taking a year out. If you are thinking along these lines, it could be useful to take expert advice about academic, career and financial implications. Your tutor is the first port of call for these issues.

• If you stop being able to do normal social and academic things, seek professional help either from your GP or the Counselling Service. Don’t wait until the problems have grown impossibly large.

We hope that some of these suggestions will prove useful. There are many things you can do to help yourself, but don’t hesitate in seeking out the help of others. Homesickness is not unusual - and it can shift with time and effort.