

# Homesickness at University: is there a cure?

- It is among the most common experiences for students. Coping is a matter of settling in and keeping busy
- 'You watch everybody come together into new groups of friends and might feel you don't fit in.'

Abby Young-Powell

Wed 19 Dec 2018

- James Mahoney, 19, who has just started university in Glasgow, says his homesickness was triggered by a bad date. He didn't get on with the person, who he'd met online, and he was suddenly reminded of the people closest to him back home. He returned to his flat and his mind began to race with thoughts of his native Northern Ireland. *"I was trying to sleep but kept thinking about my best friend and my family,"* he says. *"For some reason I also started to think about past Christmas get togethers."*
- Mahoney (not his real name) knew homesickness would strike at some point. *"In Northern Ireland my neighbours are literally cows, so it's intimidating being here. It's overwhelming."*
- Homesickness is common among students: research from the Student Housing Company found that as many as three quarters suffer from it. It can strike during freshers' week, a Christmas spent in student halls, or on returning from holidays. Students may feel sad, anxious, emotional and tearful, says Lawrence Pearman, from the student services department at the University of Southampton.
- Homesickness can be described as a "minigrief", according to a 2015 review of scientific literature. We tend to take the feeling lightly, but it has not always been that way. In the 17th century it was known as "nostalgia", which combines the Greek words for "homecoming" and "pain" and was considered a noble

and serious condition. It even reportedly killed 74 soldiers in the American Civil war.

- But feelings of homesickness do not have to be dramatic – and aren't always directly related to home. According to Harriet Harris, who works at the chaplaincy centre at the University of Edinburgh, you may simply feel "emotionally wobbly" and not know why.
- Pressure for first-year students to meet new people can exacerbate the feelings of isolation. "You watch everybody come together into new groups of friends and might feel you don't fit in," says Katie Pruszyński, who works in research support at the University of Sheffield.
- For Lucy Cooksley, 18, who has just started her first year at Falmouth University, homesickness normally hits her when she wakes up. "It was hard feeling this way and having to go out during freshers' week to make friends," she says.
- Such feelings can reflect other, more serious psychological difficulties, says Barbara Jennings, a senior lecturer at Norwich Medical School. Mahoney says feelings of homesickness are exacerbated because he also suffers from anxiety.
- International students may also struggle. Stella Matsouka, 20, who is from Greece and is studying at the University of Essex, says homesickness makes her feel claustrophobic. She also misses Greek culture. "*I was surprised by how polite people are here,*" she says. "*Sometimes I wish I could just swear at someone at the traffic lights.*"
- Rachel Leticia Cahyono, 18, from Indonesia and studying at Swinburne University in Melbourne, says her homesickness did not strike until she had been in Australia for a few months. She started to miss family and home-cooked food such as fried rice and clear chicken soup. "*I can't quite make it the way I want,*" she says.

- But if you are feeling homesick, there are solutions. Pearman says one of the first things to do is to talk to people. *"It could be student support, friends, or family,"* he suggests. *"Anywhere you can exchange stories and coping strategies."*
- *"We miss people and that's completely normal,"* Cate Campbell, a BACP registered psychologist, says. *"For example, people often talk about the lack of noise in a new house."* Campbell says reminiscing about home will *"probably release some feel-good endorphins"*. You should also re-frame the experience. *"You have to think of life as happening in chunks,"* she says. *"You've had one chunk. That is a great chunk. Now you're experiencing a new one."*
- It is easy to imagine you are the only person struggling. Cooksley says that when she plucked up the courage to tell her housemates about her homesickness, she realised they all felt the same.
- Pearman also recommends you make your room your own by bringing *"photos from home, a particular poster, favourite pillows or a bed set"*, and get involved by going to meet-ups and events. *"Look after yourself and do things you enjoy like reading, exercise, eat regular meals and sleep well,"* he says. It may also be good to put off going home for a short time while you settle in, Pearman adds.
- When Matsouka gets homesick she reminds herself why she is away from home in the first place. *"I was really excited to come to the UK and it's where I can prosper,"* she says.
- Aim to reach a point where you feel you can "internalise" home, Harris says. *"If you can do that then you start to feel at home in yourself and there's a sense in which you can go anywhere."* And it is important not to be too hard on yourself about feeling homesick. *"Don't speak harshly to yourself about the fact you're feeling this. The whole process of moving away from home to somewhere completely new, with all the uncertainty that comes along with that, is a sign of your resourcefulness."*

- Mahoney said his feelings were a reminder of how much he has to return to. “It made me think that I have a home and people that I can’t wait to see,” he says. He is getting to know his new housemates and finds that “*just having company around me is really helpful*”. But he will not go on any more dates until he is settled in, he says.

**Source:** <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/dec/19/homesickness-at-university-is-there-a-cure>