Homesickness

Leaving home to attend university is a new adventure. You will experience excitement at the beginning, but when the novelty sinks in, feelings of homesickness and loneliness might sneak out.
Homesickness - a natural reaction

Moving away to university is a time of transition. There are lots of mixed emotions, such as excitement and anxiety about the move, academic work, and meeting new people. Studying abroad is something you may have looked forward to for a long time and it may have come as a surprise to you that you are feeling homesick. Missing family and friends back at home is a natural reaction that many people experience. It is a time of letting go and making new connections. You are not alone in this process.

When will it happen?

People experience homesickness differently. Some students may start feeling sad and anxious even before they leave home; others feel it very soon after the semester starts, and still others may be taken by surprise with a delayed onset of homesick thoughts and feelings. Most frequently, it starts in the first few days or weeks after arriving at a university. Homesickness can also emerge after Christmas, when you come back to school after the break and the newness of university life has worn off.
Generally, when people move to a new country, they tend to experience four stages of adjustment, and it is during the Cultural Shock Stage when people experience homesickness:

1. The Honeymoon Stage:
   - Everything seems exciting and new.
   - People feel energetic and enthusiastic.

2. The Cultural Shock Stage (Crisis Phase):
   - People become very aware of the differences in culture and conflicts in values between their home and the new culture.
   - People may feel disappointed, confused, anxious, angry and homesick.

3. The Recovery Stage (Adjustment Phase):
   - People begin to resolve the cultural conflicts, learn more about the new culture and cope better.

4. The Adaptation Stage:
   - People come to accept and appreciate the similarities and differences between their home culture and new one.

Source:
Symptoms of Homesickness

Your homesickness can involve a preoccupation with thinking about home; feelings of anxiety about separation from loved ones back home, yearning for and grieving over the loss of people, pets, possessions, favorite places, routines; and the realization that family life is going on without you. Feelings of isolation, feeling of being different from others, feeling depressed with low motivation to study or make friends can all be experienced as part of homesickness. The followings are common symptoms of homesickness:

- Yearning to go back home
- Sadness
- Frequent mood swings
- Easily agitated, less tolerant of others
- Constant feeling of loneliness
- Anxiety
- Sense of insecurity
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Lack of motivation
- Loss of confidence
- Minor physical ailments, feeling generally unwell
- Living in isolation
- Change of eating patterns
- Sleep problems

Homesickness and Depression

People who experience homesickness might notice an increase in depressed feelings, anxiety, obsessive thoughts and minor physical ailments. The difference between homesickness and depression is - in depression, people feel sad at both home and university; whereas in homesickness, people feel sad at university but their mood would instantly be lifted when they return home.
Ways to Help Yourself

You are allowed to feel sad and homesick! It is a normal process that many people experience. There is nothing to be ashamed of when you are really feeling down because of it. Give yourself time to adjust. Do not rush into making major decisions about staying or leaving. Here are a few suggestions that might help:

- **Get involved** - Participate in sports, campus events or volunteering. This will reduce your time to be homesick and get you chances to meet more new friends.

- **Explore the place** - Get to know your campus, surrounding community and points of interest in HK. Traveling around in an unknown place can be an exciting experience. Collect a book from which you can get information on interesting places in HK. You will feel more at ease to explore HK.

- **Meet new friends** - Be open to new friends, share your feelings with them. Eat meals or go to movies with others. Ask for help and share your feelings with your peers, you will find that you are not alone in this environment.

- **Find a new hobby** - To help take your mind off of home, get involved in a new hobby.

- **Maintain study & life balance** - Be realistic about what to expect from student life and from yourself. You are not expected to work ALL the time - you would soon burn out. Take good care of yourself and maintain healthy lifestyle. Eat, sleep and rest adequately, exercise regularly.

- **Alone but happy** - Enjoy your ME time. Being alone does not necessarily mean sad or isolation. Make a list of things you enjoy doing, such as jogging, yoga, reading books, playing with arts, crafts or music. Do something that you have always wanted to do.

- **Self-talk** - What we think or tell ourselves influences how we feel. Tell yourself “I’m fine” and “people here care about me” to boost yourself up with positive energy.

- **Seek help** - When your homesickness persists that affects you socially and academically, seek professional help. Don’t wait for lingering homesickness to go away by itself. Buried problems often emerge later disguised as headaches, fatigue, illness, or lack of motivation. You can consult your doctor or meet our Student Counselor for support.
Prevention
There are things you can do for better settling in.

- Bring with you items of emotional value
- Stay connected with family and friends
- Attend university orientation activities
- Plan for a trip to go home or encourage your parents and friends to visit you
- Get rehearsed - go for a short trip alone before you come to stay in Hong Kong for long period

Professional Help-seeking
The University provides professional counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out the profiles of our Student Counselors on our webpage and make an appointment with them online. Three weeks’ advance booking is allowed. Please be reassured that all sharing and discussion during counseling sessions will be strictly confidential.

Acknowledgment: Reference from University of Oregon Counseling & Testing Center and University of Cambridge Counseling Service

Counseling and Wellness Center
http://counsel.ust.hk  Room 5003 (via lift 3)
Email: counsel@ust.hk  Tel: (852) 2358 6696

24/7 HEARing: (852) 8208 2688
This is a 24-hour helpline that supports exclusively all HKUST students 7 days a week. The service is made available by our Counselors in collaboration with the Christian Family Service Center.