Homesick and having trouble adjusting to college life

Dear Alice,

I'm having a tough time adjusting to college. I miss family, friends, and home. On top of that, I feel like I am failing socially. Any ideas to get me out of this funk?

Sincerely,
Home Sick

Answer

Dear Home Sick,

While some of your fellow students might not admit it, homesickness is actually quite common, especially when the shiny newness of college starts to wear off and reality sets in about your workload, exams, and other responsibilities. Another thing your peers aren't likely to admit: they, too, may feel like they're having trouble finding a social niche. But fear not! What you're feeling is completely natural. Once the newness of college wears off and the environment and people become more familiar, homesickness fades away for many people. Though your struggles might be common, it doesn't mean they don't hurt. Your question shows that you're taking your concerns seriously, and you're poised and ready to do something about them. So read on for some tips and tricks to help with homesickness and finding friendship on campus.

You may find it helpful to start by thinking about what you miss about home. Perhaps you miss the comfort of a familiar routine, chatting with people who already know you well, hugs from family and friends, or the way your pets greeted you every afternoon after school. Maybe you've shared a room with a sibling your whole life and now you're alone, or maybe you've had your own space and now you're sharing your room for the first time. Sometimes the hardest part of adjusting to a new place is the loss of the little moments and familiar situations that made home feel like home. Identifying what you're missing about home may help you figure out what you can try to help alleviate your homesickness.

Once you've identified what you're missing, you can try to bring more of “home” into your college experience. Some ideas to consider include:
• Set a reliable schedule for talking, texting, video chatting, and emailing with your family and friends back home. This can give you a chance to connect, share your new experiences as well as your doubts, and hear the news from home.

• Next time you’re back in your old neighborhood, take some pictures of your favorite spots, your home, pets, family, and friends. If you can’t make it all the way there, ask the folks at home to send you some. Hang them around your room and share them with your new college friends. This could start some conversations about life before college and help you get to know each other better.

• Invite a friend or family member from home to visit you at school. This may motivate you to focus on the things about college that you’re excited about and eager to share.

• Are you missing certain parts of home? Really delicious local foods, mementos or objects from your home, or something else? Maybe someone can send a care package filled with your favorites.

• Join a club or group that interests you. You’ll likely make some new friends that have similar interests. Together you can occupy yourself with new things that could, with time, become the parts of college you’ll miss when you’re visiting home.

• Chat with the folks in class, join a study group, or visit your neighbors and get to know them. You may end up meeting some people around you with whom you really connect.

There may be some other factors contributing to your homesickness as well. For example, lots of students go from feeling like the top dog in high school to being a small fish in a big pond at college. You may be juggling new academic challenges, such as a heavier course load, more reading, and more work to do outside of class. You may also have new personal responsibilities, such as handling your own finances, preparing your own meals, and learning how to balance all of your commitments and activities. You might find it helpful to start by figuring out what your priorities are and how to best schedule them into your busy days. If you find that you’re feeling really overwhelmed or the homesickness is not going away after trying some of these ideas, you might consider talking with a hall director, an advisor, a health promotion professional, or a mental health professional who could offer you some guidance.

At the end of the day, you’re not at home, and it’s fair to say that it isn’t going to be exactly the same. In some ways, you’ll need to come to terms with that and give yourself permission to grieve what you’ve lost by coming to school. But there are also likely to be some parts of home that you’re glad to leave behind and opportunities at college that never could have been possible if you stayed home. It may be hard at first but given some time and getting yourself out there, you may find yourself homesick for college when you return home.

Alice!
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