

## **Overcoming homesickness and adjusting to university life: Tips for International students and other newcomers to Charles Darwin University**

(**Disclaimer:** These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice.

N.B – adapted and used with acknowledgement of, and thanks to, Curtin University Counselling Service, ref: <http://counselling.curtin.edu.au//index.html>).

### **What is homesickness?**

Whilst entering university is usually viewed as an exciting time, it can also be particularly challenging, especially for students who have moved away from their social support base and are learning to adapt to a new environment. Such feelings of homesickness commonly involve a sense of loneliness, sadness, confusion, fear, and a pre-occupation with thoughts about home. Such responses are similar to grief reactions whereby students become separated from family and close friends and feel a sense of loss of people, places and familiar routines. These reactions may contribute to greater difficulty in adjusting to one's new environment.

International students in particular, may experience difficulties adjusting to a new climate, unfamiliar setting, accommodation, transportation, safety issues and the unfamiliar types of food. The Australian culture can appear very different from what you are used to and thus involve significant personal challenges when confronting different value and belief systems. Unfortunately, some students may also encounter racial discrimination and other such difficulties in the process of adjusting to new cultural norms.

Financial concerns may also add to the stress of adjustment as many unplanned expenses can arise, particularly at the start of the university career. A further difficulty for some students can be that of language and 'communication,' especially if English is not one's primary language. Not only do students have to adjust to the learning environment where lectures and assignments are presented in English, but they also have to use English to socialise and make new friends, all of which can be a daunting experience.

### **How can you tell if you are homesick or having other difficulties adjusting?**

Those who experience homesickness may feel 'down,' stressed and confused about many things, feel isolated, and have intense feelings of longing for home. A student may not enjoy the university experience as much as they thought they would and they may have a strong urge to return home, a prospect that initially can appear more attractive from a distance.

Research has found that about 35% of new students experience homesickness and between 5% and 15% find this experience frightening, a proportion of who then subsequently become clinically depressed. Patterns will vary from student to student. Some students find that they feel anxious before they arrive at university

but that they subsequently settle in well. Other students may be looking forward to the experience before they arrive but then they find that after a while they begin to feel increasingly homesick as they begin to miss their family and friends, particularly around significant dates such as birthdays. Most commonly, it is the first few days or weeks experience of university life that are the most difficult.

Factors that can, however, affect the degree to which students become homesick include:

- Distance from home;
- A sense of anticlimax at finally arriving at university after working towards it for so long;
- Whether the student self-determines the decision to come to this university;
- Disappointment due to expectations of university life not being met;
- Feeling overwhelmed by work overload and lack of control over it;
- Strong contrast in lifestyle between home and Australia.

### **How homesickness or adjustment difficulties may affect your life.**

Homesickness or adjustment problems can affect many areas of your life including your mood, your studies and your relationships. For example, you may feel depressed, lonely, stressed about learning your way around the university and your new environment. You may find it harder to concentrate on your studies and to maintain motivation in your course. You may also find that you are getting sick more often than usual. Things that you used to be able to manage easily can seem harder as self-esteem and confidence lessen and you find yourself becoming more anxious when engaging in social interactions and seeking to make new friends.

### **Self-care options.**

It can often be helpful to talk to someone when feeling uncertain about 'things,' especially in a new living situation such as CDU. If experiencing academic progress issues with your studies, for example, it is strongly recommended that you initially discuss them with the academic staff member involved in your program of study.

It is not unusual to discover that sometimes there are difficulties that appear hard to talk about with other people, including family members. You may therefore consider it helpful to meet with the CDU student counsellor, Tony Cole, located in

**Support and Equity Services** (Blue Building, offices 1.111, Tel: 08 8946 6288 and email: [tony.cole@cdu.edu.au](mailto:tony.cole@cdu.edu.au)). Counselling is a free and confidential service that provides an independent and confidential setting to discuss any personal issues of concern. Professional help at these times can help solve problems and prevent future ones from developing.

The CDU Counselling Service is part of *Support and Equity Services* providing a range of student centred advice, assistance and support as outlined on the following website: [www.cdu.edu.au/ses/studentcounselling.html](http://www.cdu.edu.au/ses/studentcounselling.html)

### **Tips for Self-Help.**

- It is helpful to keep in regular contact with the people at home by telephone and email. Plan for times when you can return home for a break or holiday possibly early in the year you begin studies. If it's possible, ask family members to visit you from time to time and spend time showing them around;
- Allow yourself time to settle in and learn your way around and become involved in university life. Don't rush into any major decisions straight away about returning home or staying here. Try not to keep looking back but look forward to the new experiences that lie ahead. If relevant, think about other times when you may have been away from home and what helped you get through on those occasions;
- Keep in mind that other students will be having similar experiences even though you may assume that they are doing fine. It's not possible to read their minds and they can't read yours;
- It's OK to feel sad and homesick and it's also OK to learn to enjoy your new lifestyle even though your family and friends are absent;
- Research has suggested that having a strong social support base can act like a buffer against feelings of homesickness. Thus, adjustment can be helped by making new friends at university;
- Be active in engaging with the life and culture in Australia and try some of the typical tourist activities. Send home some photos so that family and friends can get an understanding of your new life;
- As an International student, it can also be helpful to maintain frequent contact with other students from your home country and thus re-inforce a sense of belonging. Developing wider friendships and social networks with other international students who may be facing similar challenges as yourself can be mutually supporting;
- Have realistic expectations of yourself and of life at university. Try to maintain a balance between study and leisure so that you are spending adequate time undertaking your course work and not falling behind, as well as pursuing some 'fun' time to socialise and relax;
- If you are experiencing study difficulties, contact your tutor or lecturer promptly and seek their immediate advice and guidance. You should also consider contacting the CDU Academic Language and Learning Support

staff member, as follows: [ruth.warwick@cdu.edu.au](mailto:ruth.warwick@cdu.edu.au) tel: 08 8946 6557, located in Building Orange 4, level 2. Room 15;

- Remember that it is important to care for your physical needs also and eat well and healthily, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. Physical activity can also improve your mood. Be safe in experimenting with alcohol and other drugs because you are away from your usual social supports and you may put yourself more at risk;
- Investigate any clubs or groups that share common interests at university because shared activities can be a helpful way to make new friends and contacts. At the beginning of the year, many students are joining clubs on campus and so there are likely to be many new people in the groups;
- Another factor that has been found to help overcome homesickness is trying to make your accommodation feel more like home. So have things in your room that help make it homely, comfortable and familiar.
- It can be useful also to think of the new experience as the beginning of your adult life which could be an energizing process;
- If after a while you are uncertain about the course you are doing, seek advice about alternatives and talk to course academic staff Theme Leaders or the CDU Careers' Adviser;
- Arrange the university semester into smaller chunks and utilise a calendar or planner so that you can mark off the times for your first visit home, the next holidays, when assignments are due, etc;
- Familiarise yourself about your study options and university processes such as CDU census dates for course or subject changes or withdrawal without incurring fee-debt obligations, etc;
- Try to keep busy and involved in university and community-based activities that you may be able to participate in;
- As an International student, contact Vibeke Foss, Student Facilitator (International) on tel: 08 8946 6288 to find out what activities such as outings and tours are available, as well as opportunities arranged for improving conversational skills in English;
- Organise a routine so that your new life can begin to feel normal;
- Write down all the positive things about being away from home – for example, having more freedom; meeting new friends; learning new skills and acquiring knowledge of new cultures and so on;
- Remind yourself of all the reasons why you chose to study at CDU and think about the ways in which your studies will enhance your future career prospects;

We hope that these suggestions are helpful to you. Whilst there are many things you can do to help yourself, remember, do not hesitate to seek help from others such as the Student Counsellor, if at times your personal circumstances appear particularly challenging.

**Remember**, homesickness is a *common experience for many people and it can be overcome!*

## **Further Information and Resources**

### **Crisis support:**

- CDU Security – 8946 7777;
- Ambulance/Fire/Police – 000;
- Beyondblue depression support/information – tel: 1300 22 4636 and website: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx>
- Crisis Line (24 hour telephone counselling service) -1800 019 116 or 08 8981 9227;
- Lifeline – 13 11 14;
- Top End Mental Health Service (Emergency Assessment Team) – 08 8999 4988;
- Royal Darwin Hospital – 08 8922 8888;
- SANE for mental health support – tel: 1800 18 7263 and website: <http://www.sane.org/>
- Sexual Assault Referral Centre (24 hour call) – 08 8922 7156;
- Youth Services, NT - [http://www.nt.gov.au/health/youth\\_affairs/home.shtml](http://www.nt.gov.au/health/youth_affairs/home.shtml)

### **Other:**

- Anglicare Financial Counselling Service – 08 8985 0000
- Centrelink (Youth and Students Line) – 132 490;
- Centrelink (Abstudy Enquiries) – 132 317;
- Centrelink (Appointments) – 131 021;
- Darwin Community Legal Centre – 1800 000 473;
- NT Anti Discrimination Commission – 1800 813 846;
- NT Legal Aid Commission – 08 8999 3000.