

SETTLING IN TO UNIVERSITY AND COPING WITH HOMESICKNESS

Starting your university career is an exciting time. A new chapter of your life has opened up! Many of you will have a good idea of what to expect from having seen friends or relatives embark on their courses – others will be discovering it all from scratch. There is an enormous amount of information to take in and remember, and the pace can become hectic at times, with loads on offer socially as well as attending lectures and getting to grips with facilities such as the libraries. Here are some tips to help you through the initial weeks of the autumn term:-

1. **PACE YOURSELF!** Build in some time every day to just chill out rather than bouncing from one event or gathering to the next constantly. It is important to get enough sleep but also to relax with music, TV, the paper, in a hot bath, whatever you like doing... this will give you time to reflect and assimilate all your new experiences. You may need to make decisions about your course, or who you are spending time with, or what else to get involved in – so give yourself a breather every day.
2. **EXPECT IT TO BE NERVE-WRACKING OCCASIONALLY!** And that's not because you are not doing it right... Remember everybody is finding their feet, however cool and confident they may appear to you. All around you are people of different nationalities and from different backgrounds (which can be fascinating) but the one thing everybody will have in common is not wanting to be rejected for just being them. If you are anxious about that – you are totally normal. And if you haven't found your lifetime friends in the first fortnight, you are not the only one!

When you have made a few friends and found enough networks to belong to, eventually you will feel settled and secure in this new city. Don't beat yourself up if you are not always at your ease socially, or say or do something silly. Learn whatever lesson is there for you then forget about it and move on. Maximise the chances of finding people you get on with by going to things that you know you will enjoy, even if all your flatmates won't go with you. Don't feel you have to keep in with the crowd at all costs – there's always another crowd. Being a brand new face to everybody has great advantages too... if you have longed to explore different interests or change your image or lifestyle before but not done so – why not do it now?!

3. **DON'T BE PRESSURISED INTO DOING ANYTHING YOU DON'T WANT TO** – whether that's spending more money than you've got,

using drugs, sex, or even just going out all the time if you're exhausted. Also it's important to avoid risky situations even if you are having a brilliant time, eg not walking home alone at 3.00am (drunk or not). And of course don't have unprotected sex (for details of where to get free condoms see the Student Support Services health pages).

4. **DON'T BOTTLE UP ANY PROBLEMS.** Tackle minor things the minute they come up, whether that's somebody always "borrowing" your milk or grabbing you for a gossip when you need to be somewhere. Explain what you want clearly and calmly and give people a chance to change before losing your rag. Ask fellow students or the Hall warden for support if you feel someone is behaving badly towards you. Also, if you are living in Halls, do talk to Residence Assistants in confidence on homesickness or any other issues that are bothering you. It's much harder to get your point across if you have ignored the problem for a few weeks first!

You may have worries to do with your family, your partner or friends from home or NTU. Or you may have a problem such as depression or panic attacks, or an eating disorder, or worries about your sexuality that you haven't sought help for before. The university chaplains and the Counselling Service, as well as personal tutors and Freshers Reps, are all here to help, so remember you are not alone. All these people will listen and keep what you say confidential, and point you in the right direction if you need further help.

5. **GET AS ORGANISED AS YOU CAN RIGHT FROM THE START!** University life demands a high level of self-organisation because you have so much freedom. Thinking about how you divide up your time and getting clear how many hours a week of academic work you need to put in will help you to make the most of your free time. It is never a good idea to study the whole time and not do anything for fun, you will miss out on so many wonderful opportunities... equally you do need to participate in your course because deadlines are getting set and exams await you. If you leave all your studying till the last minute you are setting yourself up for extremely stressful days and probably sleepless nights! Getting the right balance is the trick, and this will differ from person to person and course to course.

COPING WITH HOMESICKNESS

For many students, this is the first time you have been away from home for a sustained period, and you may find yourself badly missing family and friends. This is not because you are immature but simply because you are attached to those people and places. It stands to reason that the more they mean to you, the worse their absence will feel. The problem can be compounded for international students by so-called “culture shock” on top.

Homesickness often dissolves away naturally in the first few weeks of term as you invest your attention and energy in the new challenges of your course and social life. The university environment does become familiar pretty quickly and that tends to give a sense of calm and control. Your homesickness may hang around longer if you are struggling to find your niche, or if there are problems at home and you are worrying about that. Don't beat yourself up if you still feel homesick after a few weeks, and don't lose confidence that you can adjust to living independently from home. You can!

It's a good idea to put up photos and ring home or even pop home for a visit. You may want your family to come here and see your new base too. But you will know if daily phone calls or returning home every weekend are just keeping the wound open and stopping you re-orientating yourself into your university life. If so, it's not worth the misery. Try to reduce phone calls and visits over a few weeks and provide yourself with as many enjoyable distractions as you can. This is not forgetting your loved ones but simply allowing yourself to make new emotional investments here.

You may have difficult points but that is part of the huge transition process that you are in, and your mood will lift given a chance. Congratulate yourself for sticking with it! Try to get involved with things that you can talk about when you do ring home, things that your parents, siblings and friends can encourage you in and be proud of you for. They probably miss you too and are going through their own adjustment process. You can look forward to swapping notes on your progress in the vacation!

Websites

www.thestudentroom.co.uk - get advice, laugh, chat & debate with other students

www.ntu.ac.uk/student_services/index.html for Student Support Services