SETTLING INTO UNIVERSITY & COPING WITH HOMESICKNESS

Starting your university career can be 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 friends or relatives who have been at university – others will be discovering it all from scratch. There is an enormous amount of information to take in and remember. The pace can become hectic at times, with lots on offer socially as well as academically. Here are some tips to help you through the initial weeks of the autumn term:

1. **PACE YOURSELF!** Build in some time every day just to chill out. 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!** 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, 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 ease socially, or say or do something silly. Learn whatever lesson there is 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, having 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, e.g. not walking home alone at 3am (drunk or not), or having unprotected sex.

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 gossip when you need to be somewhere else. Explain what you want clearly and calmly and give people a chance to change before getting annoyed. Ask fellow students or the Hall Warden for support if you feel someone is behaving badly towards 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, partner or friends from home or University. Alternatively 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 the student-run telephone helpline Niteline 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 the right balance between academic work and free time will help you make the most of the opportunities available to you. It’s counter productive to spend all your time studying and also extremely stressful if you leave meeting your deadlines and studying until the last minute.

COPING WITH HOMESICKNESS

Many students leaving home for the first time feel homesick. Even those who didn’t expect to be hit by homesickness can suddenly find themselves missing the familiarity of home and friends and don’t know how to deal with the resulting emotions. This is entirely normal and usually passes, usually in the first few weeks or first term, though in some cases it may persist for longer.

It’s important to realise that you are not the only one feeling homesick and it doesn’t mean that there is something wrong with you. Suddenly, having been a central person surrounded by familiar people and activities, you have become an anonymous member of a large community where you perhaps know no one. Understandably you can feel shaken, disorientated and lonely. If you have come from abroad, you may have “culture shock” to deal with as well. (See leaflet titled “Homesickness & International Students”)

What can you do to help yourself?

• Most importantly acknowledge your feelings and accept them. They almost always pass. Try to establish a routine, by keeping busy and doing things that you usually enjoy, giving you things to talk about when you speak to your family.

• Notice whether infrequent or limited contact makes you feel better or worse. Think carefully about spending weekends at home; some students find that it helps to ease the transition; others find that the constant readjustment makes them feel worse.

• Make an effort to join societies especially those offering activities that you know you enjoy as you are likely to meet students with whom you have a lot in common. This may feel difficult but is worthwhile because the more you feel a part of university life, the less you will be affected by homesickness.

• Volunteer to help with something. The Student Association Advice Centre can provide you with numerous opportunities to get involved. Apart from meeting likeminded people you will have something useful on your CV.
• Remember that the Student Support Services and particularly the Student Association keep a lot of useful information and exist to help you make the most of your time at University. The Student Association also employs students and a part time job (there or elsewhere) is another way of making contacts.
• Sometimes it helps to share feelings of homesickness. Chat to your friends and flatmates about whether they are having bouts of it and how they cope. It can be helpful to realise that you are not alone.
• If you feel overwhelmed by your feelings, making an appointment with one of the counsellors at The Counselling Service will give you the opportunity to express your feelings and support yourself over the worst period.

A full list of both internal and external support resources can be found on our website www.abdn.ac.uk/counselling/links

The leaflet was very largely compiled by the Counselling Service at Nottingham Trent University.