STUDYING IN THE UK (INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND HOMESICKNESS)

Studying in a different country can be a great opportunity for personal growth and is also a major transition that may present difficulties as well.

You possibly feel very excited about coming here and may not be prepared for how stressful adjusting to a new culture can be. You are probably coping with a new language, people you do not know, strange food, new money, a different approach to education and a climate that may seem very weird! You may also not only be fulfilling your own dreams and expectations, but those of people left behind at home.

You have possibly been here long enough to have experienced some areas of difficulty and we hope that this leaflet will be helpful in understanding what you may be experiencing and in finding ways of making the most of your stay here by participating in the life of the university and the city.

There will be many British students who have left home for the first time who have experienced homesickness. (See leaflet “Settling into University & Homesickness”) You may not only have left home for the first time, but also your country and culture.

Our cultures consist of a set of rules that are generally so widely accepted that they need no explanation. Basic issues of living such as food, shelter, family organisation, law and order, the way we celebrate and relate to others are contained in these rules which make sense of the world around us and give us security. Our culture is part of who we are and from which we find friends with whom we feel most comfortable and know what is expected of us. This helps to build our confidence and sustain us.

Stepping into a different culture can be very challenging where the rules are different, taken for granted and not explained. This can result in feelings of uncertainty and loss of confidence.

Feelings you may experience

Visitors often experience a honeymoon period where everything seems wonderful and exciting and you feel that your choice has been very wise.

This may be followed by an experience of “culture shock” when you may feel bewildered and frustrated, lonely, homesick and lost.

You may feel disappointed and let down because the expectations you had of being here have not been met.

It can be exhausting communicating and studying in English if it is not your first language.

You may have desired more independence but now feel there is too much freedom and not enough direction and guidance.

You may feel upset by things that would not usually bother you and even after you have started to adjust something relatively minor can make you wish to give up and go home.

You may feel low in spirits and overwhelmed and also not entitled to these feelings: sometimes these feelings present as being run down and tired all the time. People often find they are more prone to minor illnesses such as colds, headaches or upset stomachs.

It is possible that you will experience prejudice and assumptions about your culture that make you upset and angry. If you have been unfortunate enough to have been treated badly or you have worries about your family at home these will probably increase the challenges that you are dealing with.

When the time comes to leave you will be anticipating your return: this can result in a kind of reverse culture shock and a feeling of loss for the things that you have come to value in Britain.
What Might Help

Accept that your feelings are normal and natural responses to the great transition you are dealing with.

Be kind to yourself and realize that forming new relationships takes time.

Try to find time for solutions that have been helpful for you in difficult situations in the past.

Remember that others will also be experiencing the feelings that you are finding so difficult at the moment and talking to others can be helpful and ease the loneliness. Even British students for whom the culture is so familiar may share some of your feelings if they are away from home for the first time.

Adjusting to a new culture

Familiarise yourself with British culture by reading newspapers, watching TV and talking to others.

Ask questions when you don’t understand something and don’t be afraid to ask for help. Most people are happy to be helpful.

Meeting up and spending time with others from your own culture can help you to reduce your feelings of isolation. You can cook familiar food together and talk about home, but do try to keep a balance; you will adjust more quickly if you find people and activities that you enjoy that make you feel part of the life of the university and city.

Be open to the differences you encounter and try to enjoy the rich variety of social and cultural experiences that the UK can offer.

Contact with your family and friends back home can help you to settle and arranging special times for phone calls can help cut down bills.

If things don’t seem to be improving and depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation persist, take them seriously and make an appointment to see a Counsellor or your GP or spiritual guide.

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

This leaflet was very largely compiled by the Counselling Service at the University of Oxford.