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,

Despite the fact that many of your fellow first-years wouldn't admit it, homesickness is actually quite a common "ailment," especially when the shiny newness of college is starting to wear off and reality is setting in about your workload, exams, and other responsibilities. Depending on your situation, you may have been away from home for just long enough that it suddenly seems worthy of missing. Another thing your peers might not admit: they, too, feel like they're having trouble finding a social niche. It takes time to make good friends.

This is all to say that what you're feeling is completely natural. The thing is, though your struggles might be common ones, that doesn't mean they don't hurt. The fact that you've sent in the question shows that not only are you taking your own concerns seriously (which is a great skill, one you'll always find valuable), you're also poised and ready to do something about them.

It might help to start by thinking about what it is in particular that you miss about family, friends, and home. Perhaps it's the comfort of a familiar routine, sharing ideas with people that already know you well, or the way your pets greeted you every afternoon after school. Maybe having a roommate just doesn't allow you the privacy you'd like, or you're sick of having to buy your own pain reliever and cough drops each time you get a headache or a cold. Sometimes it's the little, familiar things and situations we could depend on that are the hardest to adjust to not having around anymore.

There are probably some ways to bring more of "home" into your college experience. Here are a few ideas:

- Set a reliable schedule for talking, video chatting, and/or e-mailing with your family and friends from back home. This will 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, home, pets, family, and friends. If you can't make it all the way there, ask the people you've left behind to send some. Post them around your room and be sure to share them with as many visitors as you can! This is also a great way to get to know people and let them get to know you. Talking about home and the things you miss might even allow you to hear about other people's worries when they are otherwise trying to act so "together."
- 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. Also, then you and your college acquaintances will know someone in common!
- Are there local specialties that you miss from home? Really delicious foods, unique smells, or something else? Maybe someone can send a care package packed with your favorites. There's also likely to be someplace in town that at least approximates some of what you miss? try hanging out there and starting your own tradition.
- Join a club or group that shares your interests and/or background. You'll likely make some new friends that, like you, have a passion for country music, know how to fry up winner latkes or pickle kim chee, or love to salsa dance. Together you can reminisce and also occupy yourself with new things that with time will become the things you miss about college when you're visiting home.

There may be some other things 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 sea at college. Also, there are so many new responsibilities: your course load is probably heavier, there's a lot of reading and work to do outside of class, you might be handling your own finances, preparing your own meals, and learning how to balance all of the commitments and activities you're involved with. It might help to start by figuring out what your priorities are and how to best schedule them into your busy days. Try to be realistic about how much time it actually takes to get certain things done, and figure out which are necessities, which are alright to leave for when you have more time, or what to let go of altogether. It might help to do this with the help of an academic advisor, trusted friend (even one from back home), or a counselor. For some pointers, read Procrastination [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archive.

Indeed, you're not at home and it'll never be exactly the same. In some ways, you'll need to come to terms with that and give yourself permission to grieve the things you've lost by coming to school. But there are also likely to be some things that you're glad to leave behind, and opportunities at college that never would have been possible "back at the ranch." Think back to another time when you've had to make a change or go through a transition. Sure, it was hard at first. But you got through it and probably made some new friends, learned some skills, and grew as a person as a result.

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