

Rising College Students: Make a Plan to Combat Homesickness Before You Leave Home

by Stacy Holguin

The transition to college is a big step, it is loaded with all kinds of “firsts.” It could be your first time living away from your family, figuring out your own schedule, making new friends, trying new foods, or finding the store to buy your favorite hair product. It can also be a time of “missings.” You may be missing a partner or friend, your sister’s birthday, your favorite food, or your old routine.

These feelings are completely normal. According to the National Institute of Health (English et al., 2017) 70% of new students will experience homesickness to some degree. Post-Covid, researchers estimate that number could be 90% (Mullinix, 2022). Homesickness could last a few weeks or a few months, and it can recur especially after visiting home or during significant events. It may look like melancholy (the blahs), nothing seems interesting or exciting and you just don’t fit. For others, it might appear as poor behavior, “I’m going to try too much of everything just to find someplace to feel comfortable”, and for others it may appear as crying or sleeping. An excess of any of these things can be problematic, but most students who experience homesickness are really experiencing a disconnect between where they are and where they feel most comfortable. The resolution to this challenge is connection. The student needs to develop new connections to where they are, in college.

Connection is a natural human need and most young adults are not actually taught to recognize that need or how to make connections (Brown, 2017). College is not the first time you have had to intentionally make connections; it may just be the first time you have had to make connections unaided by a parent or teacher. You all made new connections when you started kindergarten, moved to a new school, joined a team, or started a job. These connections may have been in the form of new friends, finding your favorite spot on the class rug, or seeking comfort from a teacher. You now must put those prior experiences into action to build new connections in college. Colleges know this is tough sometimes, so they have put opportunities in place to help you. Here are some steps to take to help yourself wade through your homesickness and get connected at college.

- Start early – Join the online social groups for your college class and interact with other new students so you have some familiarity when you arrive on campus; attend orientation with the goal of meeting classmates; and, as soon as you know who your roommate will be, reach out to them over social media.
- Participate in welcome programs – colleges, academic departments, and residence halls design welcome events so new students can meet each other, meet older students, and meet staff and faculty.
- Widen your connections beyond your roommate – roommates can be great or not – you are lucky if you hit it off with your roommate(s) and find an instant friend. This is ideal, but it isn’t always likely. Sometimes roommates are just neutral, and you can get along, and sometimes they are a nightmare, and you drive each other crazy. See your RA for help if that is the case, but don’t feel like you are doomed if your roomie doesn’t become your BFF overnight. Instead, work to meet more people. You must meet lots of people to find a few you click with, you can:
 - Try out different clubs focused on subjects that interest you. There is often a club fair at the start of the semester to introduce you to opportunities or you can visit the student activities office to learn about different clubs and organizations on campus.

- Find the local branch of your church. Maintaining your spirituality is a great way to stay connected to something that is familiar to you during your transition. There are often a variety of faith-based organizations on campus.
- Volunteer. Dedicating time to helping others, even when you are not feeling fully yourself, is a great way to gain perspective on life, and make connections with people who have like values.
- Workout or join a team. Physical activity has the double benefit of putting you in proximity with other people who enjoy similar activities as you, such as weightlifting in the campus gym, running at the track, or swimming at the pool. It also increases your endorphins and improves your mood. Most campuses have three levels of sports teams: competition teams (NCAA), club sports (compete with other campuses), and intramural or rec teams (fun teams that compete on campus). You can find out about all of these at the campus recreation center.
- Get a job. Working, especially at an on-campus location, can have multiple social connection benefits. Working gives you a schedule you must follow, it allows you to meet people who have similar expectations, it also may provide a sense of accomplishment and direction.
- Join a study group. Academic accomplishment can help you solidify your identity as a college student and reaffirm your decision to go to college. A study group also connects you to like-minded people who are striving toward the same goal of completing this class or focusing on a specific major.

If you need guidance in taking any of these steps or you've taken some and still feel like you need help, there are several readily available people on a college campus whose goal is to help you. Search out:

- your resident assistant (student staff member) or resident director/area coordinator (professional staff) to discuss your concerns about connection or homesickness. These folks are trained to help you.
- student group/activities/club advisers to ask about clubs or activities that might interest you. If you don't see a club that interests you, they can also tell you how to start one on a new subject.
- campus counselors are available to help if you have tried some of these tips and you are not feeling more connected. If you are concerned about your feelings becoming self-destructive, see a mental health counselor. Every campus has student mental health professionals.
- emergency response staff are available if you ever feel that you want to harm yourself or others, contact 911 first. The dispatchers are trained to help you through the worst of times, and they know all about being a college student.

Most of all, remember that all college students start out as "new," everyone is in the same boat and even though it may look like others are doing fine and you are the only one feeling out of place, that is not the case. Give yourself the grace to acknowledge starting college is a big new adventure, some of it can be tough, and it can take time to adjust. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and aim yourself in the direction of finding connections on campus rather than ruminating on what you are missing at home.