

Handling Homesickness: Strategies for Success

Transcript

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Good Afternoon and welcome to our Hawkeye Parents & Families Webinar Series. My name is Danielle Martinez and I work in Academic Support & Retention and will be the moderator for today's webinar. These monthly webinars are designed to integrate parents & family members as stakeholders in your students' education and provide you with up to date information that may apply to your student's transition to the University of Iowa. We understand you are an important part of your students' support system and they may continue to seek your advice and guidance on many issues ranging from roommate concerns, grades, or health resources or what to do in their courses. Therefore, we want you to be an informed resource for your student.

We hope that these webinars provide a platform for us to consistently engage with you by providing a proactive, open forum for questions, concerns, and dialogue. Today's webinar is **Handling Homesickness: Strategies for Success** Hosted by: Academic Support & Retention and University Counseling Service. We are fortunate today to have Doctor Paula Keaton as our presenter. Paula serves as the Director of Clinical Services at University Counseling Service. And as a licensed psychologist, Paula is committed to social justice and leadership and some of her specialty areas include relationship and family concerns, and self-esteem concerns. Some of you may remember Paula from her amazing session during summer orientation, entitled, Letting Go. I know that it's my favorite session every year at orientation. Today Paula will address strategies for success for your student when dealing with issues of homesickness.

As a reminder, each webinar is recorded and then posted on the Academic Support & Retention website so it can be accessed at a later date or viewed by individuals who were not able to attend the live webinar. Therefore, during the presentations, your mic functions will be muted. Later we will have a Question & Answer portion, where you can use the raise hand function or type in your question into the question box on the side. So without further ado, we will take it away with Paula.

Program

Handling Homesickness: Strategies for Success

Paula: Thank you, Danielle. As she said, we are going to be talking about homesickness today. And not only about homesickness, but how it impacts your student and their success. And I do want to point out, my voice is coming in and out a little bit from allergies, it's not your speaker, it's my voice and I may be clearing my voice a little bit every once in a while. I'm in my office there in my picture at the University Counseling Service, and we'll have an opportunity to talk about those services in a little bit.

So I have a few goals that I'd like to lay out for us today. The first one is to gain a clear understanding of what homesickness is and what homesickness isn't. I think we all make some assumptions about that but really learning to recognize that homesickness looks different for each person. Secondly, hopefully we can get some further understanding about the impact that homesickness can have on student success, and we will be talking it here specifically at the University of Iowa. Third, hopefully we can identify some ways in which you can best support your homesick student, I'm of the belief system that creativity is going to be your best friend in this

because I want to recognize that you do know your students best. We are here to support them but we know that you've been in that role up to this point where you've kind of handed them off to the University of Iowa. And lastly, I hope that you will be able to learn about resources here on campus, particularly University Counseling Service. That is what I'm going to be best versed in as we talk about these things.

So, the first question. What is homesickness? Homesickness is the uneasiness, discomfort, distress, and/or impairment someone experiences due to being away from one's familiar and safe environment. You'll see those four highlighted words and that is how we are going to break down this first part of the webinar. We're going to talk about uneasiness and what that looks like. Discomfort and what that looks like. Distress and what that looks like, and lastly, impairment. I do see homesickness on a continuum of sorts. Recognizing that everybody gets a little bit homesick, especially if we think about homesickness as an uncomfortable emotion one is experiencing when they are away from what is familiar and safe. For example, I know for myself, if I am on a long vacation, even though I'm on vacation and having an amazing time, I might get a little bit homesick. I might miss my dog, I might miss my house, but that is kind of in that uneasiness rail. I know that is kind of a weird example but I want you to know that homesickness can be really, really, really broad. Homesickness is not so much about one thing, it's not about missing your stuff like your comfy bed or your comfortable pillow or that amazing tv that you may have on the wall at home. And it's not singularly just about people, it's often not just about you as parents, it's not just about maybe the girlfriend or boyfriend or partner that the student is away from. It's not just about pets, although that is often a target that will get students really emotional, if they talk about their pets back home. It's not just about maybe the amazing meals you make for your student when they're home. It's a combination of all of these things. It comes down to this familiarity and notion and this notion of perceived safety. When students are feeling homesick, it is this lack of knowledge of what the environment is and how to work within it. So let's break it down into these four areas.

Let's talk about uneasiness to begin with. As I mentioned, most folks experience some level of uneasiness in new environments and that could be going to a new work place that could be coming to the University of Iowa for the first time. It might mean moving into a new neighborhood. It's a really, really common experience, this notion of uneasiness. And most college students, they do experience some level of homesickness and I do mean most college students, even those students who are super independent. They do experience some amount of longing for that which is familiar. And that which is familiar is often you, your home, the environment, and as I said, a combination of a lot of things. With this notion of uneasiness, we are talking about mild homesickness. It's really a very typical reaction to period of rapid change and adjustment like beginning college. You know one day they're at home with you, they know their routine and they have all this familiarity, and then the next they're here riding on campus with 5,000 other new folks into a community of 30,000 plus, you know big buildings, a big environment. For some of you in smaller towns, the student's residence hall maybe has more people than their entire hometown. This is a big change for many students and they struggle with getting their minds wrapped around it. Conversely, you may be in a more urban environment where you come to Iowa City and the University of Iowa and it feels like small town, USA. It feels like everybody knows your business. So it really is a matter of perspective, and it's change and adjustment, it doesn't matter if it's from big to small, small to big or somewhere in between. With uneasiness about homesickness being so common, it does transform into easiness or comfort when a student makes friends or when a student finds a routine. When a student discovers what his or her or their new normal might be. It does require some effort by the students but the environment is built to make that effort kind of easy especially if they're in a residence hall. So again, this notion of uneasiness about homesickness, it is so typical and so many students are experiencing it.

So that next step is discomfort. And discomfort really is one step further along on the homesickness continuum. This is when notions of worry, nervousness, and mild sadness are beginning to creep in. It's not at a super troublesome level at this point, and maybe your student is getting cranky or maybe a little over reactive to things you might say. You know I think people at this level of homesickness, they get a little snappy and discounting. And maybe what was helpful before isn't helpful now, but you know it's starting to move along the continuum. Within this too, the calls home to you may increase and become more emotional. And again, maybe you might find that your student is experiencing again, maybe a small social slight, maybe they didn't get invited to go down to dinner with the roommate, but it feels like a very, very big violation. Things can shift in terms of perspective. For folks at this level of homesickness, in this notion of discomfort, for the students who are a little more self-aware, we use the phrase psychological mindedness. They're able to reflect and look at themselves. These are the folks that are likely to reach out for some kind of support or help and that might be the counseling service, but probably unlikely. More or less, they're going to talk to their roommates, folks they've met in clubs or in class, they're might to talk to their RA, and often at this level, merely talking about it, really reduces the heat on the discomfort that goes along with this stage. So again, similar to the first one, the notion of discomfort, it can transform into comfort when a student makes friends, finds a routine and discovers what their new normal might be. And we're going to talk about how these transformations might happen a little bit later in the webinar.

The next step on this notion of continuum is this notion of distress in response to homesickness. A homesick student begins experiencing distress when they're struggling to adjust to their new life experience at college. And I'm not talking about being just a little bit uncomfortable, it's that some bigger process is happening for them. Folks at this stage are starting to experience more persistent anxiousness, more persistent depression, they may have high or low emotionality and what I mean by that is that their emotions may be kind of all over the place and lots of expressiveness and they may start to shut down, and they give you one word answers. Even though they're calling you in distress, they're giving you very little information, so if that be anywhere along that line of emotionality. And they also may begin to have academic or social withdrawal. They might be feeling anxious so then they skip a class, and then they feel bad about skipping class, and when they realize they skip class, they missed an opportunity to make friends. So things can start to snowball in a way. So these are some of the things to look out for in your students. And students are starting to feel alone. It doesn't mean that they are alone, but they have a sense of aloneness. Maybe they're not able to find enough comfort to talk to somebody willingly about what is going on for them. We often see these students at the counseling service when you as a parent or caregiver or maybe a staff member refers them to us. So this often happens that maybe an RA or someone in residence education notices that your student is looking down and they will check in with them and the student may share a little bit and then will be provided resources. And University Counseling Service is one of those resources. And still this distress transforms into "well-being" when a student makes friends, finds a routine, gets help, and discovers the new normal. We see a lot of student as the counseling center that are kind of in this phase of homesickness. They're feeling unable to generate new ideas to make connections or they're starting to get very fixated on the notion that home is good and school is bad. And for me that is one of the indicators that they might really need some external help when they start articulating that. They're starting to get on the extremes and starting a lot of black and white thinking. And again remember, we are going to talk about some things that you can do to help students through this in just a little bit.

And lastly, students with extreme homesickness, it does lead to a notion of impairment. And I know impairment can kind of be a scary word. Impairment does not imply that it is permanent impairment. It just really means that there are some blocks in their lives where they're not able to move forward on their own. A student who has become impaired due to homesickness is likely experiencing diagnosable depression or anxiety, and I know diagnosable can be a scary word, but when we're able to pull together that information and maybe land on a diagnosis, it really helps us as clinicians be the most helpful to the student in front of us. Folks at this stage are likely shutting down emotionally or they're feeling highly agitated. Some hopelessness and some helplessness might slip in, and you know I say this very carefully and I hope you can observe this, sometimes students at this phase the hopelessness and the helplessness gets to the level where they may have a suicidal thought. With the word impairment, that's what we're talking about, where they're losing touch with how to live their life. Some thoughts of self-harm might come in and this really is an indicator to us that they need help. And at this phase too, they might be considering whether college is the right fit for them at this time. That doesn't mean they can't be a college student, it just means that they're starting to question or consider whether the timing is right them and the challenges that they may have. For these folks as I mentioned, some forms of mental health services are typically warranted for students whose homesickness has led to impairment, and as long as they remain a student at the University of Iowa, this is really where we come in as a counseling service to really engage with the students to help them work through this really difficult stage, how to manage their emotions and healthier ways, how to strategize ways for self-soothing and self-care and often with students at this stage, we're working with the partnership of Student Health and Wellness, the psychiatrist there, medication may be helpful to some of these students. It may not be helpful to other students as well, we don't assume any particular path for students who are at this stage of homesickness. I think it's important to note that students at this stage can recover and can become successful students, however the path and timing of recovery will be specific to each individual. I've worked with students who maybe have needed to withdraw, go home, regroup and then they come back and they have an amazing college experience. Some of these folks they struggle the first year with depression and anxiety and adjustment, but you know what, they're still being the student, they're still engaged and they're working through it despite some of the challenges. And again, we want to look at goodness of fit, we are highly invested in students here at the University of Iowa and having students be successful here but we also want to recognize that sometimes on occasion this is not the perfect fit for some students, and we want to help them figure out the path that is going to lead them to their greatest, and not only academic, but personal success. Another one of the things I want to mention, some of the things that you can look out for, for your students, is some students at this level are starting to have some pretty significant sleep disruption, maybe their minds are racing, it's hard for them to get rest, and we know that students, or anybody who is sleep deprived, they struggle with good decision making, they struggle with memory, so checking in with your students about sleep is a really important thing. And similarly, some students especially if they are anxious, they get stomach aches, it's hard to eat, so checking in with them about what they're eating, when they're eating and helping strategize with them nutritious foods that aren't going to upset their stomach and some students will resort to some sort of substance abuse at this stage, and honestly that really does take them down a path that will prove to be more difficult because we know that substances only mute the difficult emotions, it doesn't really do anything to make them go away, and actually it adds on to more difficulties. And for you, you might be receiving more frantic and desperate calls from your student. We're going to talk a little bit about how to respond to those here.

So, in general, I know this is kind of implied, but I thought I'd it out here. So why are we talking about this? Well, it impacts students' success and it impacts their sense of well-being. Homesick students often struggle with

these things that are related to college. They struggle with adjusting to the rigors of college both in the classroom and out of the classroom. If someone is feeling depressed and/or anxious and then they are encountering difficult material that they've never had to deal with before, those can really interact and impact even the way they perceive their capacity to be. Some students are more prepared for difficult course material than others. For students who are encountering difficult course material and feeling overwhelmed, there are lots of resources especially through academic retention and support services, especially if it is Gen. Chem. I and such. There's a lot of help for students feeling overwhelmed with the demands. Homesick students also struggle with making friends and feeling like they fit in, and although that is not directly related to academics, I want to point out, that folks who feel like they're part of a community, they feel like they're fitting in, they do better academically, they do better physically, they do better emotionally and all of those things will contribute to academic success. Homesick students often struggle with staying on campus on the weekends. If they are yearning for home and going home all the time, and then pointing out how they don't have friends and they don't feel connected to the university, which is usually an equation that leads to more distress. For those of you who have been to my "Letting Go" talks, you know that this is one of my big points that I land on; it's important for students to stay on campus and increase their opportunity for connection and engagement. Again, we know that engaged students do better across the board. And what we're going to talk about, the going home thing here in a couple minutes, is that homesick students often struggle with procrastination and disorganization, and I guess I'd throw in there too, problems with focus and attention, and that is connected with depression and anxiety as well. Often we can really help students figure out ways to manage procrastination, disorganization and perfectionism which can often get in the way of concrete products to hand in. And lastly, homesick students really struggle with self-doubt about their capacity to succeed, and that kind of goes in hand with anxiety and depression and feeling like they're not at home.

So what can you all do to help your students? I have a list of twelve things/suggestions and as Danielle pointed out, this presentation will be available to you, so you can go back and review these things at your leisure. So one of the first things you can do is to acknowledge their homesickness. A lot of students that I have talked to will say that their parents say "Oh no, no you don't need to feel that, look at these amazing opportunities." Well, students, if they're feeling homesick, they're feeling homesick and to kind of validate that that I their limp experience, and to let them vent a little bit with you. And one of the things that students have told me is the most helpful thing they can get from their parents is when one of you share that you have been through something similar and that you have successfully gotten through it. It helps them feel normal, if there is such things as feeling normal. I think that is a really important thing to share if they has been part of your experience. And I want you to remember that increased independence is a goal for your student. You can give them support, but you have to keep in mind that they're the ones that must take the steps towards adjustment. If you can help them figure out ways to calm themselves down, or you can strategize with them on how to get connected, that's going to some of the best things that you can do for them, but you can't take the steps for them. And those of you who have been in my "Letting Go" talk, I feel strongly that parents should not speak on behalf of their students especially by calling instructors and such, but please do help them do that on their own. It is going to increase their confidence and it is going to increase their adjustment. Let them know that you believe in them. They're struggling with believing in themselves. So reminded them of their successes and how they have gotten through difficult times. You know, you get to be their number one fan, and I think that they really, really appreciate that. You can also help them by identifying small, achievable goals that will lead towards their adjustment to college. Many students will say, "I just want to feel completely comfortable here." Well we know that things don't go from bad to good in mere seconds. They are going to be small steps along the way.

That might mean looking with them at the organizations available on campus, and helping them pick out one, and encouraging them to write a single email to the leader. So small things that are going to help them get connected. Maybe that means encouraging them to go to a study session, just one time. They don't have to commit for the whole semester, but to help them identify opportunities that can kind of contradict what they are believing about their environment and if it's negative. You can encourage them to talk to others who have successfully managed this transition. Maybe you have older kids in your family system that's made it through it. Maybe it's a beloved Aunt or Uncle who can share with them how they've made it through. It's just kind of to build some hopefulness. Maybe it's the next door neighbor who has made it through. Whoever they trust, and would accept some input from. Now this one is a hard one for parents: help them stay connected with both of their homes. Yes, there is a sense of home with you, but they're creating a new sense of home here in Iowa City and at the University of Iowa. And I think that attachment and good feelings, those are things that divide and multiply, not that they are taking anything away from their home with you, it's just like a flame. It can be equally bright in both places.

We have a few more to go through here, I want to encourage them to get to know their environment and get involved. Getting a campus map and just walking around and figuring out what's where can help someone figure out a little more control of their environment, that it doesn't feel so unfamiliar or foreign to them. Remind them about good self-care, getting nutritious food, that they're sleeping, that they're exercising, that they are either limited or not using any kind of substances that is going to get in the way of them getting to a healthier place. Help them strategize how to spend as much time connected with old friends as they do with new friends. Sometimes homesick students get fixated and idealized that friendships that have led them up to this point, and they pour so much energy into those friendships, that they forget to make connections in their current environment. And again, I think there is an issue of time, if they're spending an hour Face Timing a friend back home, encourage them to spend an hour of face to face time with an acquaintance or new friend here on campus. Set a date for visits with you, I think it's important to curtail impulsive home visits because those often increase homesickness, rather than decrease. I think that if you're student is struggling, talk to them about when would be a good time to visit, whether that's family weekend that is coming up at the end of this month, or maybe coming in for a football game, or just coming in to take them to dinner. But to have something on the calendar so that can instill hope in them. And you visiting them on campus is probably even more valuable than them coming home to you. It's going to help them validate that this is a good environment, that this is a safe environment. And it's going to maybe relieve some of your own insecurities about what's happening in their world here. If you are able to demonstrate confidence, I think your students will pick up on that as well. Part of this is also giving them time to adjust, and I know I think we are at the end of Week 6, which means that we are more than 1/3 of the way through this semester, and some students are just now starting to feel homesick. Some of them have been struggling with it all 6 weeks. Some of them maybe have worked through it and they're feeling really, really well adjusted and content here, but each person is going to have their own timeline that this happens on, and I don't think that this means that one person is more mentally healthy than the next one, but we each do things at our own unique paces. And then with this last one, if homesickness persists, or really is interfering with academic or social connection, that's when recommending that you come visit us is going to be really, really important. Unfortunately, we sometimes see students that are so far into their homesickness, that it has become depression, or it has become anxiety, and that just takes a lot more time and effort to work through that. If you are the care-giver of the student, if they can start addressing these things when it's at a low to moderate range, it just lends itself to a smoother process. So I want you to really be paying attention to how their adjusting, and to encourage them to get help as needed.

And that help might be talking to their RA or joining an organization. Help can come in many, many different formats. It doesn't just mean that they need counseling.

So if they do need counseling, I'm going to give you some information about this, and then we are going to open it up to any questions. University Counseling Service, we have a number of services, consultation, group/individual counseling, and case management. All of these services are free and confidential. If your student is 18 years or older, we look at their records just like we would look at your own medical records. If a student chooses to sign a release, of course we can share with you whether or not they are receiving service, but it really is up to them, whether or not that want to release that information. At the counseling service, we see approximately 2000 students per year for a wide range of concerns, from really mild homesickness, to time management up to more serious mental health concerns, serious depression, serious anxiety, eating disorders; we work with students across the whole range. We have twelve doctoral level psychologists on staff, one case manager, and multiple doctoral trainees in our agency. And that is how we are able to see as many students as we do. Our trainees really are the most helpful, and our students really do appreciate sometimes working with someone who is a little closer to their own age. We are happy to consult with YOU about your concerns for your student, but please remember that students must make their own appointments if they are going to come to UCS. I probably talk to a couple parents a week, strategizing with them about how to help them help their student get help. We are located in the Westlawn Building on the west side of the river. Again, it is the same building as Student Health and Wellness, although we are separate agencies. The Red Line, the Blue Line, the Pentacrest—most of the buses go right past our building and we have a stop right in front of our building. For more information about us, please visit our webpage (<https://counseling.studentlife.uiowa.edu/>) and follow us on Facebook and Twitter to keep updated on what mental health issues might be on campus right now. There is a wealth of information on that page and of course all of our contact information is on there.

So, in short, homesickness can be a wide range of experiences and just like each of you has a unique experience with your student, I know that some of you may have unique or specific questions for me that I would be happy to address and I think Danielle is going to help facilitate this process.

(Q&A with participants)

Danielle: Absolutely. So just a few reminders, thank you so much Paula for sort of the great information on the continuum of homesickness, information on UCS and your twelve steps on how parents can support students who are experiencing home sickness. Just a reminder, we have a lot of folks on the webinar, so Paula is unable to answer specific things about your student's experience, but able to answer more general questions that may be helpful in guiding your student. If you have a question, please type it into the question box, and then we will read the question out loud so all the participants can hear and then Paula can answer. If we are unable to get to your question during the webinar, we will follow up with you via email to make sure that we have answered your question. So we will go ahead and get started, we will start to see if any questions start coming in.

Looks like we have one. Can UCS make connections with counselors back home, so care can be continued over breaks?

Paula: Yes, we are more than happy to do so, and part of that process is your student requesting that of us, it's a really common practice for mental health clinicians to consult with one another when we share clients, whether we are transferring clients back home, or for some students, they're transferring care here, having

been seeing a therapist. The student would need to ask us about that so we can get kind of all the information correct, and get a release of information signed.

Danielle: We have a question around if students feel an increase in homesickness during Thanksgiving and Winter Break time.

Paula: Some students do. Especially around Thanksgiving break, that fall break, is an entire week and so they get back into that routine at home, and they get back into that familiarity. And for some students, it makes it difficult for them to come back to the university, but at the same time, sometimes student who have been struggling with it, they just need that week to chill and to sleep and have you make their favorite meal, and fuss over them a little bit. It kind of gives them the boost they need a little bit to finish the semester off successfully. I think that winter break, given the length, I think it is a good opportunity to have some real heart to heart conversations with your student about fit and what is going to be best for them. I think we have a really retention of students who come back from fall semester into spring semester. So yeah it can kind of be the very thing they need to help them get through the end of the semester or sometimes it can impact them in a way that sets them back. But I think it's more of the first.

Danielle: We have a question around how to handle frantic text messages, and so thinking about communication plans, like what would be helpful when you get those frantic phone calls and texts?

Paula: Personally, I love text messaging, but usually that's more like "let's meet at 5 o'clock" or "are you coming over later?" I think that text messages that contain a lot of emotional content can get really spun out of control. So my recommendation is, if you are getting frantic text messages that you actually get on the phone and talk. SO that way it is a smoother exchange, you can be a little more planful, you can be a little more supportive. And as if any of you have attended the "Letting Go" talk, hopefully prior to any of this, you all would have come up with a reasonable communication plan, and maybe that means revisiting that communication plan. And it might be if you're super upset, please give me a call or let's use a text message to arrange a time to talk as opposed to using the text message as a time to talk.

Danielle: We have a parent who is from the East Coast, and talking about that traveling here to visit or the student traveling home is not really possible except for those longer breaks, and so sort of how do you manage those longer periods? Like so far it seems like the student is doing okay, but you know, knowing that they won't be there for parent's weekend and that until winter break is kind of a long time.

Paula: Hopefully, you all are talking about that right now, and talking about how your student anticipates how they are going to feel when you're not able to make it for parents weekend, when a lot of their friends are, and you know having that not be a surprise is a really important piece. I think that the electronic communication can be sometimes overused, but can sometimes be underutilized as well. You know there is the beauty of Skype or FaceTime, is that there are opportunities for you to see their environment and kind of help them understand what life is like here. And that might mean that they take you a campus tour FaceTime. And I know that sounds a little silly, but it really does help them engage and explain to you what their world is like. I think communication over the phone, Skype, FaceTime, can be super valuable if you are further away than like a 6 hour drive or so. But again, it is to keep talking about it, not let it slip off the radar, that there really is a physical distance between the two of you.

Danielle: So there is a question about the perception of social media. So that students are seeing that their friends at other colleges are having a great time at their colleges on social media, and so that makes the students feel isolated. How do you help the student, as a parent, navigate that?

Paula: That is a really interesting question. I think that the way people portray themselves on social media, tend to be way more positive than what their life experience is, or sometimes way more negative than what their life experience is. I can, with confidence, say that there is a certain level of homesickness that everybody wrestles with, and your student is never alone in that. They may need to speak up about it so they can discover that they are not alone. But to really look at social media with a little bit of a skeptic eye, things are not always as they perceive. There is pretty good research out there that we don't fully express what is going on in our lives on social media, so have a little bit of a skeptic eye about that. And then again, it's that one way viewing of that kind of information that can really create some distortion that if your student is feeling like they are the only one and they really are getting all the information from social media, maybe that is the time that they pick up the phone and make a call to talk to their friend about real life and what is happening within that relationship that is already hopefully safe.

Danielle: Well that is all the time we have today, thank you so much to our presenter, Dr. Paula Keaton, and thank you all for joining us today. All webinars will be posted online at uc.uiowa.edu/family-resources. If you were unable to get a question answered during the webinar, we will follow up with you via email. Additional questions can always be sent to our office, uc-retention@uiowa.edu for a response from a university staff member. Please join us next month, for high school to college: Mental Health and Student Disability Resources on Friday, November 6th, from Noon-1 p.m. And that will be hosted by Academic Support and Retention, Student Disability Services, and the Office of the Dean of Students. Thanks very much for joining us today, On Iowa, Go Hawks.