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Homesickness a natural part of college life

This can be an overwhelming time for new freshmen on campus. This week they will be settling into their dorm rooms, trying to find their new classes and learning to share space with thousands of people they've never met.

Experts say that most college freshmen experience some level of homesickness. The level of homesickness varies widely, from simply missing Mom's lasagna to a deeper sense of loneliness that, for a few students, results in the late-night phone call and a plea to come home.

Dr. Stephen Mayhew, director of university counseling services at Pittsburg State University, said homesickness is a natural part of being in a new environment.

"There is a tendency to look at homesickness as a disease and get negative about it," Mayhew said. "But it is not a disease. It is a very normal thing and can be dealt with."

Mayhew said that while it is generally not possible to prevent or stop some level of homesickness, "you can manage it."

The doctor's advice for new freshmen is to jump into campus life. He suggests getting involved in campus activities and going to campus events. Students who do that are sure to meet others with whom they will share interests.

Sooner is better than later, Mayhew said.

"It is generally accepted that the first six weeks are make-or-break weeks for students," Mayhew said. During that time, students make friends and establish relationships with others and with the campus.

Parents need to listen to their students and let them know they understand their fears and anxieties. They should encourage their children to get involved and immerse themselves in the life of the campus.

Most student life advisers recommend that parents resist the temptation to swoop in and "rescue" their homesick children. Connie Malle, director of university housing, said parents with concerns may contact the university housing office to speak with the hall director or resident assistant in their student's residence hall.

The university is doing its part to make sure students get involved early. They began with Gorilla Warm-Ups on Sunday and throughout the coming weeks, the RAs in the dorms will be working to make sure students are adjusting to their new environment and getting involved in activities with other students. Additionally, the faculty who teach the Freshman Experience classes will make an extra effort to get to know each new freshman and to be a resource for those with questions or problems.

The cafeteria lasagna may never be quite as good as Mom's, but with a lot of support from the university, each new freshman can manage the homesickness he or she might experience and begin a new and exciting chapter in their lives.

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