

Long-term psychological study confirms time is the best medicine against homesickness

May 23 2018, by Barbara M. Peutz

Time heals homesickness – and quickly, according to a unique long-term study on international students. A propensity towards neuroticism and the desire to keep others happy are among the factors associated with the development of homesickness. However, the study also found that the level of homesickness among those currently studying abroad is generally low. The investigation was facilitated by a smartphone app that enabled students to participate in the study while they were still abroad.

Homesickness hurts. But on top of that, it can lead to health, cognitive and academic difficulties, reclusiveness and general mental health problems. In light of all these effects, it is remarkable that so little scientific research into the phenomenon has been carried out, especially in view of people's increased mobility and widespread uprooting in the 21st century. Researchers from Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences in Krems (KL Krems), the University of Cambridge (UK) and the University of Konstanz (DE) decided to look more closely at this topic, carrying out a unique, global long-term study of homesickness. For the first time, they managed to record the feelings of those affected during their stay abroad, thanks to a specially designed [smartphone app](#).

Study of homesickness at home

As Prof. Stefan Stieger of the Department of Psychology and Psychodynamics at KL Krems, one of the co-authors of the study, explained: "As it turned out, most of the previous studies were carried

out when the subjects had already returned home. As a result, the participants' statements were 'filtered' and influenced by their memories. Developing the app allowed us to eliminate this influence for the first time." This method also enabled the researchers to scientifically analyse the development of homesickness over a period of three months.

The findings, which were recently published in the journal *Environment and Behavior*, show that homesickness was at its strongest at the beginning of a stay abroad, but quickly subsided thereafter. The team noted that a propensity towards neuroticism played a significant part in promoting the development of homesickness. People with a tendency towards emotional instability had stronger feelings of homesickness than others – but the same goes for people who seem particularly agreeable because they try to keep everybody around them happy. "That seemed counterintuitive at first," Prof. Stieger pointed out. "But the relationship could perhaps be explained by the fact that people with such tendencies suffer as a result of being unable to sufficiently attend to the wishes and needs of friends and family at home."

First aid for homesickness

The study also pinpointed factors that help to reduce feelings of homesickness. These mainly included support from the host university during the settling-in period, previous stays in a foreign country, a willingness to travel abroad voluntarily, and a sense of identification with the host country. Although these influences were weak owing to the generally low intensity of homesickness, the findings confirmed those of other studies, the results of which were based on retrospective surveys, as mentioned above. Confirmation by this study with its improved design is an important supplement to past research.

Subjects were surveyed by means of a specially developed smartphone app. Over a period of three months, the participants were requested to

complete a homesickness questionnaire using the app. As a result, responses were collected during phases in which the subjects actually had feelings of [homesickness](#), and not weeks later. Just under 150 subjects aged between 18 and 29 volunteered to take part in the study.

Now published in an international journal, the investigation was made possible in part by its groundbreaking, app-based data collection method, which Prof. Stieger plans to use more extensively in his research in future. The study underlines KL Krems' innovative approaches to generating knowledge in key bridge disciplines such as biomedical engineering, psychology and psychodynamics. This also enhances the attractiveness of the university's research for partners all over the world.

More information: Friedrich M. Götz et al. The Emergence and Volatility of Homesickness in Exchange Students Abroad: A Smartphone-Based Longitudinal Study, *Environment and Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0013916518754610](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916518754610)

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