



# HEALTH *and* Wellness Guidelines *for* International Students

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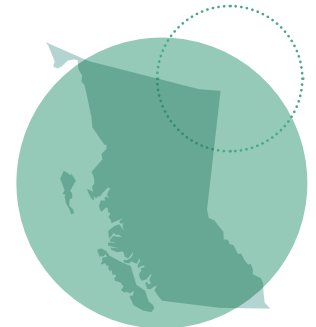


UNDERSTANDING  
HOMESICKNESS AND  
ACCULTURATION  
STRESS



# Understanding Homesickness and Acculturation Stress

Studying in British Columbia can enrich international students' lives and provide opportunities to expand their horizons. Supporting students through the challenges of acculturation stress and homesickness can help them make the most of the opportunity.



## Homesickness vs. Acculturation

Homesickness is the distress caused by separating from home, family, and friends. Acculturation stress, sometimes known as culture shock, is the stress caused by adapting to a new culture and environment. While not everyone gets homesick, everyone who is adapting to a new culture has some level of acculturation stress.

Although they are separate concerns, homesickness and acculturation stress are closely linked. Being

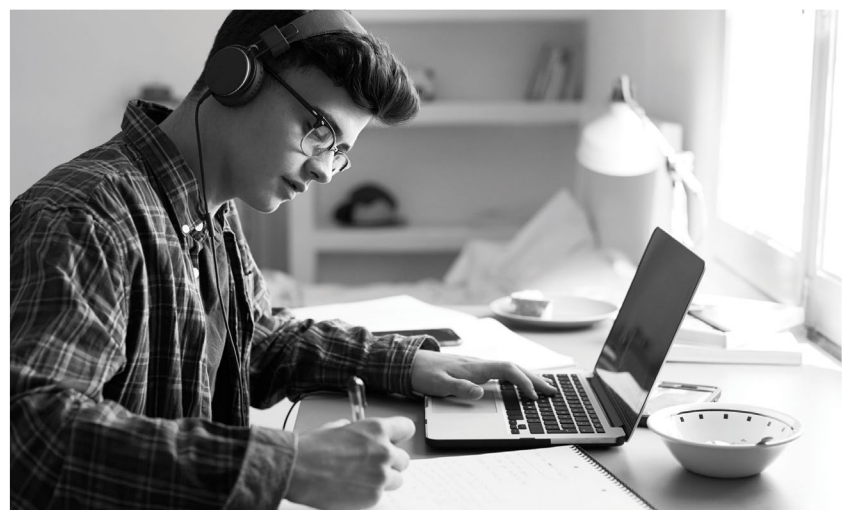
homesick can make it more difficult to adjust to a new environment and manage daily life which in turn, can trigger acculturation stress.

Homesickness and acculturation stress are most intense when students first arrive. For many students, homesickness tapers off in a few weeks. In contrast, acculturation stress can continue for months and in some cases, years as students face the day-to-day challenges of living in a different culture.



### USING THIS RESOURCE

*The document is meant to provide greater insight into homesickness and acculturation stress, as identified in academic research. It is meant to complement and extend your own experience in working with international students.*



## Homesickness

Before coming to B.C., most international students have a sense of belonging with their family, friends, and community. Moving to a new culture with unfamiliar people and different customs can make them feel they don't belong, and homesickness can set in.



### "U" OR "W" CURVE

*For years the acculturation process was seen as a "U" or "W" curve, with an initial honeymoon period followed by a dip in mood as the student becomes frustrated with their new environment, and then recovery as they adjust.*

*More recent research has found that acculturation stress is at its highest point when students arrive. Therefore, it's essential to start building connections with students before they arrive, and have supports in place for them when they arrive.*

## Acculturation Stress

Going to school in a different country is a major life transition, particularly for secondary students who are undergoing many developmental changes at the same time. International students face many challenges: a new school and teaching methods, living away from home, new food, climate, cultural norms, and often language – as well as the need to develop a new support system and friendships. Even the students who are most excited about the experience feel the stress of so many changes.



## Effects of Homesickness and Acculturation Stress

Acculturation stress and homesickness can have a profound effect on an international student's experience in B.C.; making it one of mental health struggles and loneliness rather than one of growth and fulfillment. Homesickness can have an immediate and negative impact on a student's ability to fit in and navigate their new environment. In more serious cases, it can undermine their physical and mental well-being and can lead to serious mental health issues such as anxiety or depression.

### SCHOOL DISTRICT REFLECTIONS

*School districts have noted that homesickness and acculturation stress are often significantly less for students going to school in B.C. for a year or less, as compared to those who are coming for all of secondary school.*



## Symptoms

Homesickness and acculturation stress share many of the same symptoms. Homesickness symptoms can range from mild to severe, and often diminish after a few weeks or months. The symptoms of acculturation stress can last for months to years if not addressed. Both homesickness and acculturation stress tend to be most intense in the first weeks after arrival and can be re-triggered at holidays or if a family member is unwell.

	HOMESICKNESS	ACCULTURATION STRESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, fatigue, increased infections, gastrointestinal issues, headaches, and dizziness.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistent ruminating about home and negative thoughts about the new environment.</li> </ul>	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apathy, lethargy, little interest in the new environment.</li> </ul>	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling uncomfortable and anxious.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling lonely.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stress symptoms, such as difficulty concentrating and making decisions, or feeling overwhelmed or frustrated.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symptoms of anxiety, such as worrying or being easily irritated, or not going to class.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Depressive symptoms, such as being self-critical, spending less time with friends, or putting less effort into school.</li> </ul>	✓	✓

## Risk and Protective Factors

A student's experience with acculturation stress and homesickness is affected by a number of factors, some of which are described in the following table.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS	HOMESICKNESS	ACCULTURATION STRESS
<p><b>INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students who feel their life is controlled by others, need validation from others or have neurotic tendencies, such as experiencing anxiety, sadness, and nervous tension, are more likely to suffer from homesickness. In contrast, students who feel they can control their lives and see changes as challenges suffer less.</li> </ul>	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Those with anxiety, sadness and nervous tension are likely to experience greater acculturation stress. However, international students who are more open to their new environment experience it less and are better able to adjust to their new surroundings.</li> </ul>		✓
<p><b>AGE AND GENDER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Younger and less mature international students can experience an increased intensity and duration of homesickness and have higher levels of acculturation stress and depression than older ones.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Female international students have been found to be more depressed and anxious than males.</li> </ul>		✓
<p><b>ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with limited English are at a disadvantage academically and socially. Having limited English language skills hinders their ability to adapt to their new environment, interact with local students and make friends. It has also been found to increase stress, loneliness and homesickness.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<p><b>RELATIONSHIPS IN HOME COUNTRY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are more likely to be homesick if their parents are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Strict, require obedience and have high expectations</li> <li>→ Overly permissive and have few or inconsistent boundaries</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	✓	
<p><b>SUPPORT NETWORKS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social support positively affects homesickness, and reduces the negative impact of acculturation stress, as it provides international students with a sense of control and the ability to cope in their new environment. Students can receive support from a variety of sources – their family, local and distant friends, teachers, program staff, and their homestay family. Students who feel they have good social support are less likely to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, and are better able to adjust. Without social support, a student's acculturation stress continues, along with its negative effect on their well-being.</li> </ul>	✓	✓

## [ RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS CONT'D ]

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS	HOMESICKNESS	ACCULTURATION STRESS
<p><b>FRIENDS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successfully making new connections and friendships reduces acculturation stress. By developing relationships with local people, students learn about the cultural norms and expectations, which supports their cross-cultural adjustment. A lack of local connections and friends can contribute to stress, loneliness, isolation, and homesickness.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<p><b>CULTURAL DISTANCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students from cultures dissimilar to Canada's can experience greater acculturation stress. For example, students from Asian cultures, where family needs are prioritized over individual needs, generally experience greater stress and isolation than those from a Western European country.</li> </ul>		✓
<p><b>FEELING UNWELCOME</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling unwelcome in their new school or community because of differences in language, customs, religion, or appearance can negatively affect international students' well-being and their ability to adapt to their new environment. This can increase the duration and/or intensity of homesickness.</li> </ul>	✓	✓
<p><b>DISTANCE FROM HOME</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When students are very far from home, time-zone differences can make it difficult to stay in touch which can contribute to homesickness.</li> </ul>	✓	
<p><b>PREVIOUS TRAVEL</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acculturation stress is significantly lower for students who have traveled outside of their home country before moving to a new country for their education.</li> </ul>		✓

## Strategies to Reduce Acculturation Stress and Homesickness

The **strategies** to address **acculturation stress** and **homesickness** are the **same**:



**BUILD STRONG  
SUPPORTS  
SYSTEMS**



**IMPROVE  
COPING  
SKILLS**



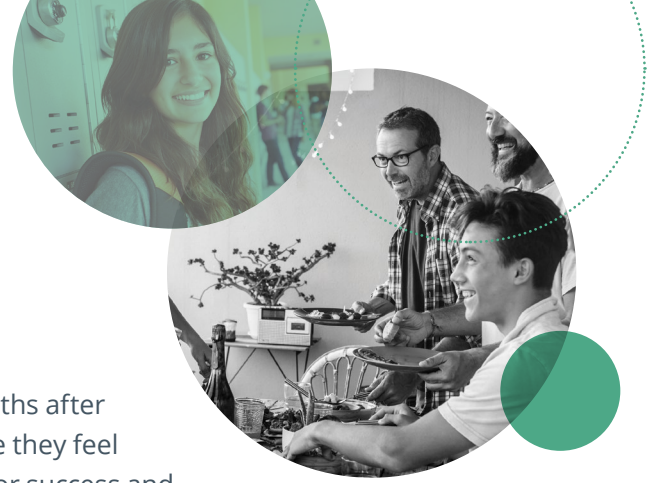
**MAINTAIN  
A HEALTHY  
LIFESTYLE**



**FOSTER  
SOCIAL  
CONNECTIONS**



**STRENGTHEN  
LANGUAGE  
SKILLS**



## Build Strong Supports Systems from the Start

Students are most vulnerable in the first few weeks and months after they arrive. Positive first impressions and experiences, where they feel welcomed, connected, and well supported can set them up for success and make it easier to manage acculturation stress and cope with homesickness.

Pre-arrival processes can help students feel more supported. They can encourage students to develop expectations about being away and strategies for staying in touch with family and friends. Through pre-arrival phone calls/ other communication with homestay families and other local contacts, students can start building their B.C. support network. Information about teaching approaches will help prepare them academically.

A well-designed orientation process that includes a focus on building connections will expand and deepen students' support systems. Introducing everyday mental well-being strategies as part of orientation will help normalize mental health conversations and build students' skills.

In the months after orientation, continuing to remind students of available supports will encourage them to reach out for help when they need it. Ensuring that staff members are doing regular well-being check-ins with each student will give insights into how they are coping and open the door to deeper conversations. You can find an example of a [check-in here](#).

## Strengthen Language Skills

Ensure supports are in place for development of language skills for students who are experiencing challenges with English. Improving their english language skills makes it easier to develop friendships with local students, feel a part of the school community, and helps them be successful at school. Limited english language skills are linked both to high levels of homesickness and poorer adaptations to the new environment.

## Continually Foster Connections

Social interactions can have a direct impact on homesickness. It is important to be particularly diligent about building connections in the first few months when students are most vulnerable. At orientation and other program events, include activities that foster relationships among students, and between students and program staff/other adults. Be intentional and ensure that each student has two or more adults (*program staff, school, homestay*) who they trust and are connected to. Peer interactions and friendships are particularly important in reducing both homesickness and acculturation stress. Social support from peers can change a student's perception of a stressor into something they can handle, which can reduce the feelings of homesickness.

Through interactions with local students, international students are better able to understand, navigate, and adjust to their new environment. However, it can be difficult for them to integrate into groups of local students. Encourage classroom teachers to foster connections by partnering international students with inclusive peers, establishing thoughtful seating plans, and facilitating opportunities for international students to get to know their Canadian peers. Encouraging international students to participate in extracurricular activities is another successful strategy. Friendships with other international students can lessen homesickness and make students feel more connected. Students from their home country can provide the comfort of familiar customs and language. With those from other countries, they share an understanding

of their everyday experience of living in a foreign culture. While relationships with other international students can help alleviate homesickness, they don't help the student adjust to their new environment in the same way that interactions with local students do.

## Improve Coping Skills

International students can improve their ability to cope with homesickness and stress by engaging in social or physical activities, or by talking to a trusted peer or adult. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and other anxiety and stress management techniques have also been shown to be beneficial. *(See Additional Resources)* If available, and the student and their family are open to it, counseling can also be helpful.



## Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

Eating well, getting regular physical activity and enough sleep, and managing screen time can help students manage their stress and homesickness more effectively.



# Additional Resources

## → Educators, Program Staff, and Homestay Parents

These resources are focused on building the skills of the adults who support students.

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Kelty's Talking to Youth About Mental Health resource</a> provides tips for starting and responding to conversations about mental health.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tips for Adults</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Strong Minds Strong Kids website provides tips for <a href="#">adults who are helping teens manage their stress and classroom resources</a> for secondary schools (Free).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tips for adults</i></li> <li>• <i>Classroom resources</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media Smarts includes <a href="#">tips for managing video gaming</a> in your home and <a href="#">lesson plans on digital literacy</a>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Media &amp; digital literacy</i></li> <li>• <i>Managing gaming</i></li> <li>• <i>Classroom resources</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BCTF's <a href="#">Antiracism Teacher Resources</a> provides links to resources, including some with lesson plans, such as the <a href="#">Canadian Race Relations Foundation's Doing the Right Thing</a>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Antiracism</i></li> <li>• <i>Classroom resources</i></li> </ul>

## → Students

While these resources are focused on students, they are also great for adults with limited time. Consider using the resources WITH students, for example as discussion starters or part of ELL classroom materials, so you can gauge their understanding of the material, and open the door to deeper conversations.

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Mind Your Mind website</a> has mental health information, activities, and resources, including the games, <a href="#">Welcome to Canada</a>, where they learn about Canadian culture and <a href="#">The Good and Bad of Stress</a>. Includes specific resources for newcomers to Canada, with some in multiple languages (French, Punjabi, Arabic, Spanish). Most resources are suitable for those with limited English skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target newcomer youth</li> <li>• Multi-language</li> <li>• Canadian culture</li> <li>• Mental health, stress</li> <li>• <b><a href="#">Seasonal affective disorder</a></b></li> <li>• Gamification</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">The Foundry website</a> has reliable, youth-focused information. It includes basic <a href="#">healthy living information</a> for all students as well as <a href="#">mental health signs</a> and symptoms, self-assessments, and self-help strategies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade 5 -8 reading level</li> <li>• Mental health promotion for all</li> <li>• Self-help</li> <li>• Discussion starter</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HereToHelp's <a href="#">Plainer Language Series of booklets and audio clips</a> provide reliable information about mental health.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <a href="#">The Tips for Good Mental Health booklet</a> provides mental health promotion and prevention information, applicable to all students, and could serve as a discussion starter in orientation sessions.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade 4 reading level</li> <li>• Mental health promotion for all</li> <li>• Discussion starter</li> <li>• Self-help</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindfulness programs and apps, such as <a href="#">Breathr</a> from the Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre, provide simple guided mindfulness exercises to help manage stress. (Free)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• App</li> <li>• Mindfulness</li> <li>• Self-help</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive Behaviour Therapy apps such as <a href="#">MindShift™</a> from Anxiety Canada can help students develop more effective ways of thinking, and help them take steps to manage anxiety. (Free)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• App</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Self-help</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety Canada's <a href="#">Anxiety in Youth materials</a> include a <a href="#">video explaining anxiety</a> and self-help activities for students such as <a href="#">challenging negative thoughts</a> and <a href="#">building confidence</a>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade 8 reading level</li> <li>• Video</li> <li>• Self-help</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SickKids' About Kids Health website has <a href="#">mental health resources</a> and videos, including some that <a href="#">promote good sleep habits</a>, <a href="#">building resilience</a>, and <a href="#">thinking positive thoughts</a>. It also includes several guided meditation and mindfulness practices (<a href="#">audio</a>) that would be suitable for groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade 8 reading level</li> <li>• Video, audio</li> <li>• Mindfulness</li> </ul>

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UNDERSTANDING  
HOMESICKNESS AND ACCULTURATION STRESS



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA