

## **Earlscliffe (Sussex Summer Schools Ltd)**

### **HOMESICKNESS POLICY**

#### **What is homesickness?**

##### **Information for staff**

Most people will have felt homesick at some time in their lives but it is easy to forget just how overwhelming it can be.

Beginning life at boarding school naturally generates both excitement and anxiety about the move, academic work and meeting new people. For some, this apprehension is quickly overcome as they adapt to a new environment; for others the transition takes longer and sometimes emerges as homesickness where there is a preoccupation with home-focused thoughts. There is a yearning for and grieving over the loss of what is familiar and secure: most often it is about the loss of people – family and friends – but it is also about the loss of places and routines.

Those who experience homesickness might notice an increase in depressed feelings, anxiety, obsessive thoughts and minor physical ailments.

Homesickness can often be distinguished from depression in this way – in depression; sufferers find both boarding school and home awful, whereas in homesickness school can feel awful while home may be seen in rose-tinted hues.

Research on homesickness shows that about 35% of new pupils experience some homesickness, and that between 5% and 15% describe the experience as frightening.

Some will start by being mildly depressed and anxious several weeks before leaving home, in anticipation of the impending change. Others will be fine initially, and then to their surprise find themselves feeling homesick later in the academic year, perhaps after the Christmas break, or even at the start of their second academic year. But commonly it is the first few days or weeks after arriving at boarding school which are the most difficult.

Students will not be immune just because they have successfully experienced leaving home before. Vulnerability to feeling homesick is affected by:

The distance from home

A sense of anticlimax at finally arriving at boarding school after looking forward to it for some time.

Whether they were included in the decision to come to boarding school.

Unhappiness due to expectations of boarding school not being as anticipated.

“Work strain” – i.e. work overload and low control over it.

Contrast in lifestyle.

Those who are homesick often feel they have no control over their environment and that they are not identified with it or committed to the school or their place in it.

## **Transition to Boarding School**

There are two tasks involved in starting at boarding school:

- i. Leaving familiar things, people and places
- ii. Adapting to new things, people and places.

Individuals have different levels of tolerance to change and have learned different ways of coping with new situations. But what can make transition so hard? In a familiar place people generally feel accepted and secure, and are therefore able to function and meet challenges successfully. Away from the familiar, they are without their usual sources of support, and in unfamiliar surroundings their tried and tested methods of coping and working are challenged; “failure” looms large and self esteem and confidence drops. Tasks that would normally have been taken in one’s stride, can suddenly seem quite a challenge, or even feel impossible.

Staff therefore need to focus on these areas of vulnerability and offer support to students who are having problems adjusting.

## **Coping with Homesickness**

### **Information for parents and students**

Many coming to boarding school, and maybe leaving home for the first time, feel homesick. Even those who didn’t ever expect to be hit by homesickness can suddenly find themselves missing the familiarity of home and friends, and don’t know quite how to cope with the resulting emotions. This is entirely normal and passes, usually in the first term, and often within the first few weeks.

It is really important to realise that you are not the only one who may be feeling homesick and that it doesn’t in any way mean you are inadequate. Suddenly, instead of being a central person in a small unit with plenty of peripheral activities and friends, you may feel as though you have become an anonymous member of a large community where you know no-one. Understandably you may feel shaken and lonely and you long for the secure and the familiar. Sometimes the emotions feel completely overwhelming.

Parents: You can help your children overcome this transitional period by doing the following:

Start training/preparing your child for boarding well in advance – allow him/her to stay overnight, then for a few nights or even a week with friends, encourage him/her to experience institutional life by going away to an activities or summer camp for a few weeks.

Send a card, letter or gift to the boarding house in advance, so that there is something for your child to open on arrival at school.

Don’t telephone for at least the first week. It is often the sound of your voice that causes tears!

E-mail and write regularly. Students love to receive post.

## **What Might Help?**

### **Advice for older students**

Talk to someone. If you haven't yet made friends here, then try your House staff, Group Tutor, your teachers or anyone else with whom you feel comfortable. Keep in good contact with people you have left behind; arrange a time to go back to see them (if possible) but also give yourself time within school to begin to get involved here. Don't let looking back actually hinder moving forward.

Remember that many other people may be sharing similar feelings, although you may assume that they are doing fine! (You can't read their minds – just as they can't read yours!)

You are allowed to feel sad and homesick! You are also allowed to enjoy yourself – it isn't being disloyal to those you miss!

Be realistic about what to expect from school life and from yourself. Establish a balance between work and leisure: you are NOT expected to work ALL the time you would soon burn out. On the other hand, if you don't put in enough time on work, you can very quickly get behind, which only adds to the stresses!

If work is proving too difficult, can you improve your study skills or your organisation of time and work so that you gain satisfaction from what you do? Your Group Tutor can help in this area.

Remember to get enough food and sleep! These affect us emotionally as well as physically.

Make friends through shared activities such as sport or other interests. There are many activities within the school, that you are very likely to find something that suits your particular interests. At the start of the academic year many new people will be joining – you are unlikely to be the only new person.

Give yourself time to adjust: you don't have to get everything right straight away.

If you stop being able to do normal social and academic things, seek help! Don't wait until the problems have grown impossibly large!

### **Advice for younger students**

Most importantly: acknowledge your feelings and accept them. Believe that they will pass. They almost always do.

Decide whether the best policy for you is to have frequent contact with home (because contact makes you feel better), or little contact (because contact makes you feel worse).

Think carefully about whether or not to go home at weekends (if this is possible). Some students find it helps to ease the transition; others find the constant readjustment makes them feel worse.

Make a real effort to join clubs/activities and to make at least one or two friends. This might feel very difficult, but the more you feel part of school life, the less homesick you will feel.

Try to get into the House routine as soon as possible. The fuller your days are, the less time you will have to feel homesick or lonely.

Volunteer to help with something, there are opportunities for community service, helpers and many ways of helping out in the House.