



Dealing with Homesickness

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Navigating the Waves: A Comprehensive Guide to Dealing with Homesickness

A practical guide for expats in Brussels, from your friends at ExpatsatHome.be

Welcome to Brussels! This city of cobblestone streets, vibrant markets, and international flair is now your home. Moving to a new country is one of the most exciting adventures you can undertake, but it's also one of the most challenging. Amidst the thrill of discovery, you might encounter a powerful, unexpected emotion: homesickness.

It might creep up on you during a quiet Sunday afternoon, or hit you suddenly after a video call with family. It's a heavy, deeply personal feeling of loss for the familiar—the people, the places, the culture, and even the simple daily routines you left behind.

Please know this: **homesickness is a completely normal and valid part of the expat journey.** It is not a sign that you've made a mistake. It's a sign that you are human, adjusting to a monumental life change. This guide is designed to be your companion through these feelings. We'll explore what homesickness is, provide you with practical tools and strategies to manage it, and show you where to find support when you need it. You are not alone in this.

Understanding Homesickness: What, Why, and When

What is Homesickness, Really?

Homesickness is more than just missing people. It's a form of grief for the life you once knew. When you move abroad, you lose the automatic comfort of familiarity. Simple tasks, like grocery shopping or taking public transport, suddenly require significant mental energy. This constant state of high alert can be exhausting and can amplify feelings of isolation and loss.

It's a longing for:

- **Your Support System:** Friends and family who know you best.
- **Familiarity:** Knowing your way around, understanding cultural nuances without thinking.
- **Routine:** The simple, unconscious patterns of your day.
- **Identity:** The version of yourself that existed effortlessly in your home environment.

The Ebb and Flow: It Comes in Waves

Homesickness is rarely a constant state. You can have a fantastic week, feeling adventurous and settled, and then a song, a smell, or a snippet of conversation can trigger an intense wave of longing for home. This is normal. The goal is not to eliminate these feelings entirely, but to learn how to navigate the waves without letting them pull you under.

⚠ **Important: When is it More Than Just Homesickness?**

Feeling sad after a call home or missing a family tradition is normal. However, you should pay closer attention if your feelings of homesickness become persistent and debilitating. If you experience the following for several weeks, it may be time to seek professional support:

- Constant feelings of sadness, anxiety, or hopelessness.
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed.
- Significant changes in your sleep patterns or appetite.
- Withdrawing from social contact and avoiding leaving your home.
- Inability to focus on work or daily tasks.

Remember, seeking help is a sign of strength and self-awareness.

Practical Coping Strategies: Your Anchor in Brussels

Managing homesickness is an active process. Here are concrete strategies, grounded in psychology and the lived experience of fellow expats, to help you find your footing.

Build Your Anchor: The Power of Routine

When everything feels new and unpredictable, a routine provides structure, stability, and a sense of control. It reduces decision fatigue and creates a comforting rhythm for your days.

How to do it:

- **Start Small:** Wake up and go to bed around the same time each day.
- **Create Morning Rituals:** Don't just rush out the door. Take 15 minutes to enjoy a coffee, stretch, or read a chapter of a book.
- **Establish “Your Spots”:** Make the vastness of Brussels feel smaller and more personal. Find:
 - **Your** bakery for a morning *pistolet* or *pain au chocolat*.
 - **Your** favourite bench in Parc de Bruxelles or Parc du Cinquantaenaire.
 - **Your** local market for fresh produce (the market at Place Flagey is a classic!).
 - **Your** cozy café for reading or working.
- **Schedule Your Week:** Block out time for exercise, hobbies, and social activities, just as you would for a work meeting.

💡 **Tip: Action Step:** This week, identify one new “spot” in your neighbourhood. Go there twice. Notice how the second visit already feels more familiar than the first.

Stay Connected, Stay Present: A Delicate Balance

Maintaining ties to home is crucial for your emotional wellbeing. However, there's a fine line between healthy connection and living vicariously through what you're missing.

How to do it:

- **Schedule Calls:** Be intentional. Plan weekly video calls with close family and friends. This turns connection into a reliable, anticipated event rather than a constant, low-level distraction.
- **Be Mindful of Social Media:** Constant scrolling through photos of events and gatherings back home can fuel “FOMO” (Fear Of Missing Out) and keep you mentally tethered to your old life.
 - Set time limits for social media apps.
 - Unfollow or mute accounts that consistently make you feel sad or left out.
 - When you feel lonely, resist the urge to scroll. Instead, call a friend (new or old), go for a walk, or engage in a hobby.

Create a “Home within a Home”: Finding Comfort

Your living space is your sanctuary. Make it feel safe, personal, and restorative. This involves bringing the old and embracing the new.

How to do it:

- **Unpack Immediately:** Don't live out of suitcases. Putting your things away is a powerful psychological step towards settling in.
- **Bring Meaningful Items:** Pack small, meaningful objects: photos, a favourite mug, a familiar-smelling candle, a cozy blanket, your favourite books. Seeing these items on your shelves is a daily dose of comfort.
- **Find New Comforts in Brussels:** You are not replacing your old home; you are adding a new layer of comfort to your life. Discover:
 - The perfect Belgian hot chocolate (try Laurent Gerbaud or Pierre Marcolini).
 - A cozy English-language bookstore (like Waterstones or Filigranes).
 - The scent of fresh waffles from a street vendor.

Build Your Brussels Tribe: Finding Community

Loneliness is the primary fuel for homesickness. Building a new support network is arguably the most important step you can take. It takes time and effort, but it is essential.

Where to Find Your People in Brussels

Building a community takes proactive effort. Here are some excellent starting points:

- **Meetup.com:** Find groups for almost any hobby imaginable, from hiking and board games to language practice and coding.
- **Internations.org:** A global community for expats with regular events and groups in Brussels.
- **Facebook Groups:** Search for groups like “Expats in Brussels” or groups for your specific nationality (e.g., “Americans in Brussels”). They are invaluable for practical advice and social connections.
- **Language Exchanges:** Look for “tandem” or language exchange events at local bars or cultural centers to practice French/Dutch and meet locals.
- **Volunteer:** Join Serve the City Brussels or another local non-profit to meet like-minded people while contributing to your new community.

journaling_prompts: Your Private Space to Process

Journaling is a powerful, private tool for understanding and navigating your feelings. It helps you untangle the thoughts in your head, acknowledge what you miss without judgment, and actively look for the good in your new life. Use these prompts as a starting point.

Prompts for Acknowledging What You Miss

- What three specific things (a person, a place, a feeling) from home do I miss the most right now, and what do they represent to me?
- Describe a favorite memory from home that has been on your mind. What sights, sounds, and smells do you remember?
- If I could have one meal from home right now, what would it be, and who would I share it with? Write about that experience.
- What part of my old routine do I long for the most today?

Prompts for Grounding Yourself in the Present

- What is one small, beautiful, or interesting thing I noticed in Brussels today? (e.g., a piece of architecture, a friendly interaction, the taste of my coffee).
- Describe a positive or funny moment from this week, no matter how small.
- What is something new I've learned about Belgian culture or my new city recently?
- Write a letter of gratitude to yourself for being brave enough to make this move.

Prompts for Looking Forward

- What is one thing I'm curious about or excited to explore in Belgium in the next month?
- What new routine could I create this week that would bring me a sense of comfort or joy?
- Who is one person (a colleague, a neighbor, a new acquaintance) I could reach out to for a coffee this week?
- What is one personal goal I can work towards now that I'm living here?

mental_health_resources: Seeking Professional Support

Sometimes, practical strategies aren't enough to lift the weight of homesickness, culture shock, and loneliness. Seeking professional help from a therapist is not a sign of failure; **it is a proactive, courageous step towards protecting your wellbeing.**


Therapists who specialize in expat issues understand the unique challenges you face. They can provide a safe space to talk and equip you with evidence-based tools, like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), to help you reframe negative thought patterns and build resilience. Brussels has a wealth of English-speaking mental health professionals.

Directories & Platforms to Find a Therapist

- **Expat Therapist Brussels:** A dedicated network of experienced, English-speaking psychologists, therapists, and coaches who specialize in working with the international community.
- **Therapist Brussels / Therapist Belgium:** Online directories featuring profiles of English-speaking professionals, allowing you to search by specialization and location.
- **Psychologist Belgium:** A comprehensive list of registered, English-speaking psychologists across Brussels and other Belgian cities.
- **Expat Therapy 4U:** A platform to search for and book appointments (in-person or online) with therapists who focus on expat clients.
- **Psychology Today:** A well-known international directory with a robust search function for finding therapists in Brussels, with filters for language, insurance, and specialty.

Specific Practices & Centers

- **Psygroup:** An international practice in Etterbeek with a team of English-speaking clinical psychologists. They are all registered with the Belgian Commission of Psychologists.
- **Brussels Mental Health Center:** A multidisciplinary team including psychiatrists and psychotherapists who offer services like psychotherapy and EMDR in English.

 **Tip: Preparing for Your First Session:** It's normal to be nervous. Before your first appointment, it can be helpful to jot down a few points about what you're feeling and what you'd like to achieve through therapy. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is simply to start the conversation.

Your Homesickness First-Aid Kit

When a wave of homesickness hits, it's helpful to have a go-to list of actions you can take immediately. Create your own "first-aid kit" and use this checklist for inspiration.

- ☐ Scheduled a video call with a loved one.
- ☐ Put on a playlist of uplifting or comforting music.
- ☐ Went for a 20-minute walk outside, focusing on my surroundings.
- ☐ Cooked a simple, comforting meal from my home country.
- ☐ Spent 15 minutes journaling using one of the prompts.
- ☐ Reached out to one local friend or acquaintance to make a plan.
- ☐ Visited "my spot" (café, park bench, etc.).
- ☐ Did something creative for 30 minutes (drew, wrote, played an instrument).

Helpful Vocabulary: Expressing Your Feelings

Learning a few key phrases in French or Dutch can help you feel more connected and empowered to express yourself.

English	French	Dutch
I feel homesick.	J'ai le mal du pays.	Ik heb heimwee.
I'm feeling a bit lonely.	Je me sens un peu seul(e).	Ik voel me een beetje eenzaam.
I miss my family/friends.	Ma famille/mes amis me manquent.	Ik mis mijn familie/vrienden.
I'm having a tough day.	Je passe une journée difficile.	Ik heb een moeilijke dag.
Could we get a coffee sometime?	On pourrait prendre un café un de ces jours ?	Zullen we een keer koffie drinken?

A Final Word of Encouragement

Moving to a new country is one of the bravest things you can do. Please, be kind to yourself throughout this process. There will be tough days. There will be moments you question your decision. Every expat has felt this way at some point.

You are not alone. Allow yourself to feel the sadness of what you've left behind, but also, allow yourself to feel the joy in the small discoveries you make every day in your new home. This journey is not a straight line; it's messy, complicated, and beautiful.

You are resilient. You can do this. And we're here to help.

Welcome home to Brussels.