

## **Missing Home**

*(From Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D., Philips Exeter Academy & YMCA Camp Belknap)*

Up to three months before leaving home, kids can anticipate their feelings. Nearly every kid has thoughts of home while they're away, and so does everyone else, but it is not paralyzing or preoccupying for them. Some kids most miss parents, some pets, some food, and some siblings. Most kids view camp as fun, full of friends, activities, and memories that last a lifetime. For other kids, camp looks bleaker. They're worried about things. The experience of missing home is unique to each person. Every camper is different, and experiences being away from home differently. The good news is, there are ways we can help them manage their emotions.

### **Definition**

Missing home is the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home. It is characterized by acute longing and preoccupying thoughts of home and attachment objects.

### **Symptoms**

Depression, anxiety, withdrawn behavior (some missing home kids are withdrawn—not all withdrawn kids are) missing home, physical discomfort, acting-out behaviors. Campers who are missing home are more likely than others to show up at the health center, though they may not make the connection between their ailment and missing home. Plenty of kids who are missing home don't go to the nurse. Stomach aches and headaches are the two most common physical symptoms caused by missing home.

### **Results of Studies**

95% of campers have at least some feelings of missing home on at least one day. It's normal. Almost everyone misses home, and there is nothing wrong with campers for missing it. Especially with older kids, it can be reassuring to hear that many campers and staff are missing home.

Counselors are typically unaware of general missing home-ness. It is much easier to pick up on severe cases. Young campers without experience at camp tend to miss home and vocalize that feeling the most.

### **Causes**

The following causes may increase the likelihood of a camper missing home.

#### **Experience**

- Little previous separation experience, no previous experience at this or any camp, or young age.

#### **Personality**

- Insecure attachment: a stable belief in the reliability of the caregiver is essential. In other words, will someone take care of me if I feel bad? If we don't believe people will respond reliably and positively to us, we have insecure attachment. The campers need to believe in their surrogate parents (the camp staff).
- Low perceived emotional control: feeling helpless leads to feeling depressed; perceiving that they have no control over emotions leads to missing home.
- Anxious or depressed feelings prior to coming to camp.

#### **Family**

- Low perceived decision control. Many campers did not choose camp for themselves. Campers may never have participated in camp activities before and wouldn't choose to themselves.
- Parents who express doubt or anxiety about camp or send an ambivalent message sets campers up for missing home.
- Unresolved negative life events. Campers attend camp during many different stages and unforeseen circumstances that may affect their camp experience.

## **Attitude**

- Campers who go into the week expecting to miss home will.
- Campers' expectations may be low because of what they have seen on TV, because friends aren't going there, or they are concerned about their counselors.

## **How to Help a Camper Who is Missing Home**

For campers who are severely missing home, often this feeling disappears near the end of camp. Why is this? Not because of a change in the camp environment, but because campers change the way they perceive their separation. If we could move that same perception to earlier in the week, missing home may not pose as big of a challenge. For many campers, helping them adjust to camp life is the ticket to their success at camp.

## **Prevention**

- In the first few days, don't assume your campers have any prior knowledge of camp. A good orientation can help quell nerves.
- Answer all their questions about the week, never use the phrase "you'll find out when it happens".
- Post a weekly schedule in your cabin where everyone can see it.
- Using the term "missing home" rather than "homesickness" makes it more inclusive and less scary. Every camper (and staff!) misses home to a different degree.
- Train yourself to recognize it, to assess campers' coping skills, and to teach good coping skills.
- Create a positive first impression on opening day by having a few games prepared and an activity to fill the down time while waiting for campers to arrive.
- Minimize stress on Day 1 by making sure all campers have necessities, know what's happening next, and are included in cabin activities.
- Enhance campers' control of life at camp by giving them autonomy and choices where you can.
- Keep campers active. Down-time is stress time. Active campers who know the schedule for the day stay engaged.
- Continue to check in with your campers throughout the week. Be perceptive of changes in their attitude, especially around Sassa or bedtime.

## **Intervention**

Ask your camper this question, "Tell me all the things you are thinking and doing to make things better." (this is their METHOD.) We all have ways to think and things to do to cope. If campers come up with effective methods, you can add to them. If they are ineffective redirect them. If "nothing will help," help them think or do other things.

## **What Works: Doing**

- Talk to the camper about themselves. Ask about their interests, school, friends, hobbies, etc. This is an incredibly successful strategy. It also strengthens your relationship with the camper.
- Do something fun to forget about missing home. Distractions work.
- Offer the camper an opportunity to lead a game or pick the next song to sing.
- Do something to feel closer to home. Write a letter or look at a family picture.
- Go see someone who can talk with you to help you feel better.
- Pair up with someone the same age, but who's been to camp before who made it through missing home.
- Draw a calendar and cross off days finished then begin to explain what they'll be doing the rest of the days.

## **What works: Thinking**

- Think about the good side of things to feel better
- Think about the events further in the week that they are excited for.

- Think about the weekend plans they have with their family and what they are excited to tell them about camp.
- Think about loved ones to figure out what they would say to help.

**What does not work**

- Doing nothing.
- Wishful thinking.
- Doing something angry or mean to get sent home.
- Trying to get sent home.

**Follow up the question**

“What do you hope might happen when you... (do/think things). (This is their GOAL.) You might also ask, “Have you tried anything that hasn’t worked?” Give kids every single possible way to manage. Their job is to figure out which way helps them the most. Set up a time to check in and find out what helped them the most.

**In-camp support**

Try the above plan in its entirety to help campers who are missing home. Inform your Unit Leader that camper is missing home regardless of if you need further support. If you are still having difficulty in helping a camper who is missing home, ask your Unit Leader to help. At no time should you mention that a phone is available, or that campers are able to phone home. If together you are unable to resolve the issue, ask the Camp Director or Camper Support Specialist for support.