

## Longing together

Homesickness is a crushing feeling for those who have left their home. They miss their families, food culture, and nature. Fortunately, there are many ways to alleviate homesickness.

Authors:

Binar Mustafa

Manju Pathak Kandel

Joonas Mustonen

Nikolai Potapov

Nepalese **Muma Sapkota** places a bag of soil and various kinds of seeds in her cart. She's planting pickling cucumbers, gourds, green beans, berries, flowers, cilantro, mint, and lettuce in jars in her living room in a two-bedroom flat in Pikku-Huopalahti.

At the end of the spring, she will plant the seedlings on the balcony and on her ten-square-metre garden patch nearby.

Then she waits.

Fresh vegetables needed for traditional Nepalese dishes are almost impossible to find in Finland. Back home in Nepal, Muma Sapkota and her family had lush farmlands full of vegetables, flowers, and fruits.

What Sapkota misses the most from her home country is fresh vegetables. Right now, the family's meals are made mainly out of dried soy beans.

### Homesickness means adapting to new things

"Moving abroad is a big change even if it happens voluntarily of one's own accord," says Psychologist **Anna Vuorjoki**. According to her, adapting to a new situation requires you to go through many feelings. One of them is homesickness.

"As you move out of a country, you leave many meaningful things behind. Missing things from your home country is completely normal. Many kinds of feelings are natural, and you just need to accept them and give them space."

Homesickness and grief may feel unbearable. If that happens, Vuorjoki says it's healthy to try to regulate the feeling of homesickness.

"In an ideal situation, you try to move your thoughts away from the homesickness and regulate your feelings so that it slowly becomes possible to process them without unbearable pain. However, if, after several years, the grief and homesickness still feel so crushing that you cannot complete your daily chores, seek professional help."

Vuorjoki says that you do not need to get rid of homesickness completely, but try not to let it control your whole life. According to Vuorjoki, problems arise when you try to deny your feelings.

It's not always a choice to move to a country; sometimes, it's necessary.

"If you had to flee and you can no longer return to your previous home, it will likely increase the burden of the immigration crisis," Vuorjoki says.

“At that point, it’s not just about grief and homesickness. There are also traumatic experiences that can create anger, anxiety, and fear,” Vuorjoki explains.

### **Attitude is key**

Syrian **Mania Alkhatib** cannot return to her home Syria as the country has been at constant war for ten years.

When the war began, Alkhatib sat in her office at the City of Espoo and cried. Her sister and other relatives were still in Syria, “in the middle of a genocide”.

Alkhatib moved to Finland to get married in 2001. She had never left Syria before. Mania Alkhatib has strong feelings of homesickness.

Familiar situations stir memories of the views in her former hometown Shahba.

“I have memories of Syria every day. For example, as I am drinking a cup of coffee on my balcony or when I am doing the dishes, I travel back to Syria in my mind. Then I realise that I am in Finland.”

Since Alkhatib moved to Finland, she has visited her home region twice. Because of the war, she has had to be discreet about her visits, and she has not been able to stay in the country for long.

As functioning ways to alleviate her home sickness, Mania Alkhatib lists meetings with other Syrians living in Finland as well as social media which allows her to keep in touch with her family in Syria.

“Sometimes I see photos of my sister’s children, especially her nine-year-old daughter who writes so beautifully to me, and I just want to hug her. But that’s not possible.”

Despite the long distance, Alkhatib has a simple way to alleviate her homesickness: live in the present, not the past.

### **Longing together**

**Anna-Maija de Arruda Camara** has studied homesickness felt by immigrants during her studies at the University of Helsinki and in her Master’s thesis. She does not think homesickness is an unambiguous phenomenon or concept: your place of residence and home are two different things. Your place of residence is the physical place you live in. Home is created by various personal senses, feelings, and memories.

Home is thus always related to feelings that satisfy a human’s basic needs; in particular, feelings of safety, human warmth, and a sense of community.

The Nepalese community alleviates its homesickness by dressing up in traditional Nepalese outfits and dancing to, playing, and singing Nepalese music. The Finnish-Nepalese Society and Non-Resident Nepali Association Finland organise an annual cultural celebration for Nepalese people living in Finland.

Many years, they have had a chanter all the way from Nepal. Food is also an essential part of the cultural celebration and alleviating homesickness. Chair of the Finnish-Nepalese Society **Nabin Bhattaraj** says that they usually have 300–500 guests at the celebration.

In her thesis, Anna-Maija de Arruda Camara writes that food has a strong symbolic and emotional significance. Food connects you to the place you consider to be your home and brings a sense of home to a strange situation. Keeping up with habits related to your culture and religion are also seen as resources.

Even very ordinary things and chores help with homesickness. Sometimes, you try to fill your day with various activities to feel too busy to think about your homesickness. Staying busy may help someone but make someone else feel worse.

**Sirwa Farik**, who moved to Finland from Iraq, believes that nearly all immigrants feel homesick. The things you miss are similar regardless of your nationality and age.

Most of all, immigrants miss the environment, food culture, studies, and hobbies left behind in their home country. However, what people miss the most is people and relatives.

Farik moved to Finland from Kirkuk, Iraq for over twenty years ago. She has worked with immigrants for more than 15 years at, among others, the Family Federation of Finland, Irakin naisten yhdistys INY ry, and the City of Vantaa Immigration Services. She was selected as Refugee Woman of the year in 2018.

According to Sirwa Farik, sharing memories and talking with others in a similar position alleviates feelings of homesickness.

“People can come from completely different countries and backgrounds. Yet, they understand each other,” Farik says.

According to Farik, appreciation towards your culture, such as religion, language, or food, may increase in the new home country. For some, it’s a way to bring your former home country as close as possible while also increasing the feeling of homesickness. “For others, highlighting your own culture is a method of alleviating the homesickness,” Farik says.

What’s common about homesickness is that you do not want to keep it to yourself. You want to share it with others.

### **Integration plays a key role in alleviating homesickness**

**Elena Medina** has nearly forgotten her homesickness in Finland. Medina cannot say for sure why that is, but she thinks that the short distance to her former home country Russia helps.

Before moving to Finland, she lived in the US where she studied chemistry. The United States felt like the land of opportunities, but you had to work a lot. Medina’s advisor was also an immigrant who worked hard. The same was expected of Medina.

“Often, she would call me at 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning to ask why I was still at home instead of working at the lab,” Medina explains.

The pressure at work and studies were combined with the feeling of homesickness. Medina says that on a scale of 1–10, her homesickness was approximately 8. And things did not become easier over time; instead, they became worse.

Medina did not feel like she could adapt to the American way of thinking. She did not have local friends who could have helped her adapt. However, she understood that Americans ask things just for the sake of asking.

“Someone would ask me something, and I remembered that we had already talked about it earlier. Then they would ask me again in a couple of days. They would ask just for the sake of asking, but not listen to what I said.”

Then, she found other foreign friends. Medina says that, just like in Finland, there are many Russians in the US. Most of the researchers Medina met had left Russia in the 1990s.

“Communication with Russians works even without words. Even when someone looks at you in an unfriendly way, at least you know what they mean. In the US, people are always smiling. However, it does not mean that they are happy. People seem open, but that’s just the outer layer. Behind the smile, there’s a wall,” Medina says.

When her scientific job at an American university was ending, Medina knew that she would not stay and work in the United States. She would return back home to Russia. However, it turned out that a Ph.D. in Chemistry completed in the US was not a valid degree in Russia. With the help of a Finnish chemistry professor, Medina ended up in her current home country Finland.

### **Homesickness may slow down integration**

Sirwa Farik thinks that feeling homesick may have a detrimental impact on integration.

“Some have benefited from the fact that there’s an increasing number of people speaking your language in Finland. You are more in touch with those speaking your language and who share the feeling of homesickness. For others, it’s a clear obstacle to integration and learning the Finnish language.”

Farik knows people who do not really know anyone who does not speak their language, including their employer. Even the news and tv shows they follow are from their home country.

“Immigrants are often thinking about their former home country. Many of them do not have any contact with the local people and, when you feel like a stranger, you miss your former home that you know so well.”

Even Solution-Focused Brief Therapist **Irina Baklykova** has noticed the decreasing contacts between immigrants and locals.

“We are social animals who need communication. Without communication, the risk of alienation increases. If the feeling of alienation increases, integration to your new home country becomes more difficult,” she says.

However, Baklykova has adapted well. She has not missed her former home Ukraine in a long time.

At the end of the summer, Muma Sapkota’s plants start to bear fruit.

The longer and warmer the summer, the more crops she gets to harvest. There are lettuce, flowers, and various herbs growing on the balcony. From her garden patch, she harvests potatoes, green beans, pickling cucumbers, and round gourds.

Sapkota shares some of the crops with her friends and neighbours. More importantly, she uses the crops she planted and harvested to help alleviate her homesickness.

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