



Staying Mentally Healthy While Abroad

Adjusting to a New Culture

As wonderful an opportunity as studying abroad is, it can also be a stressful experience. Navigating a different culture, meeting new people, and using a new language can be both mentally and physically exhausting. You may find that the intensity and excitement of study abroad, coupled with challenges such as homesickness, jetlag, and culture shock lead you to feel overwhelmed or depressed. The good news is – you are not alone!

Many people who travel abroad experience some degree of culture shock as they learn to adapt to their host culture. Culture shock describes the common feelings of anxiety, depression, and fatigue that sojourners experience when all familiar signs and symbols of social interaction are absent. Even the most open-minded and well-traveled people experience culture shock.

While people experience culture shock in different ways, here is a list of some common symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Homesickness
- Helplessness
- Boredom
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Confusion
- Self-doubt
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Unexplained weeping
- Paranoia
- Physical ailments
- Psychosomatic illness

Understanding the components of culture and the stages of cultural adjustment may help you better understand the intricacies of cultural transition and allow you to gain more significant meaning from the experience while it occurs.

You can find additional information online at:

- <http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture>
- http://www.worldwide.edu/travel_planner/culture_shock.html
- <http://www.studentsabroad.com/cultureshock.html>

What If What I Am Feeling Is Not Culture Shock?

Studies show that the incidence of reported cases of mental illness among college-age students has increased significantly in recent years. Unfortunately, mental and emotional conditions do not stay at home when you study abroad. Rather, the stressors of a new environment can amplify existing conditions. You may also find that you face additional challenges abroad, such as accessing your prescription medication or mental health facilities. Furthermore, culture shock, language barriers, and homesickness can deepen isolation or depression.

Create a Workable Plan

Before traveling, create a workable plan for managing your mental health while abroad. The availability and quality of mental health services differ widely from country to country. In many countries, you will find it difficult — and sometimes impossible — to find treatment for mental health conditions. With your health services provider or your school, put together a workable mental health plan before you go overseas.

- If you have a medical or psychological condition that may require treatment while you are abroad, discuss this ahead of time with your doctor. Study abroad is a great opportunity to try new things, but this is not the time to experiment with not taking your medicine or mixing alcohol with medicine.
- Research the social culture of your destination to learn about how mental illnesses are viewed. Attitudes toward mental health can greatly vary between countries.
- If currently receiving mental health services — including prescription medication — find out if those services and/or medication are available at your destination. Some countries may consider your medication to be illegal.
- Consider the support system you'll have in place while abroad. If possible, know ahead of time who you can consult with about your mental health once you are abroad.

Prescriptions: If you plan to bring prescription medicine, bring an extra quantity with you and pack it in your carry-on, just in case your checked luggage gets lost. Remember to keep your prescriptions in the original container and clearly labeled — you don't want to create the impression you're carrying drugs that haven't been prescribed to you. Bring a letter from your doctor listing your medications and explaining why you need them. Doing your research and having a letter can help prevent any misunderstandings along the way.

Additional Resources

Suicide Prevention

CrisisLink - 1(800) SUICIDE (784-2433)
National Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-TALK (8255)

Basic Facts about Mental Health

Healthy Minds: www.healthyminds.org
National Institute of Mental Health: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/FAST%20FACT7>

Managing your Stress

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/NMH05-0209R>

Women's Health

www.womenshealth.gov

Medical Disclaimer: The information and recommendations provided are for informational purposes only. If you believe that you are experiencing symptoms of an illness you should always consult a doctor before beginning any form or treatment.