Travel and Mental Health

Travel can be enjoyable, but it can also be stressful. While travel can offer a temporary escape or vacation from your life, it doesn’t necessarily solve your problems. Your mental and physical health prior to, and during, a trip determines how well you will cope with travel stress.

Lack of familiar support systems, unexpected situations, and language barriers can intensify stress.

Travel forces you to give up your sense of control; it challenges perceptions and can reveal personal limitations.

Even if you don’t have a prior history of mental illness, travel stress, mood changes, anxiety and other mental health concerns can unexpectedly affect you and potentially disrupt your trip. Studies show that psychiatric emergencies are a leading cause for air evacuations along with injuries and cardiovascular disease.

Consider your own mental and physical health when traveling abroad for a period of time, in particular when working abroad or applying to a study abroad program. Discuss any existing medical or mental health issues with your family and health providers to minimize potential problems.

If you have a history of mental health issues, talk to your care provider to discuss if the type of travel you are planning is appropriate for you. Consider the support system you’ll have in place while abroad.

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, students will find it difficult — and sometimes impossible — to find treatment for mental health conditions. If currently receiving mental health services — including prescription medication — find out if those services and/or medication are available at your destination.

Recognize the warning signs and ask for help:

- Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- Guilt, sadness, crying
- Irritability, lack of concentration
- Sleep problems: insomnia, fatigue, lethargy, oversleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activity
- Excessive worry
- Racing thoughts

Culture Shock

The most common type of travel stress, and can be overwhelming. It is the temporary psychological stress that occurs when you are overwhelmed by a new culture and do not know how to adapt to the new environment. Factors contributing to culture shock include:

- Not speaking the language
- Not understanding local customs or appropriate behavior
- Disliking food, accommodations, or lifestyle
- Being a visible minority
- Witnessing or experiencing situations very different from your own life
Symptoms of culture shock can include:
- A sense of insecurity and inadequacy
- Homesickness, isolation, loneliness
- Sadness, confusion, anxiety, frustration or depression

To prepare for culture shock:
- Be an informed traveler: research host culture, values, dress code
- Learn the language or at least basic words and phrases
- Be open minded and patient
- Talk to friends and family for support

Reverse Culture Shock
This occurs when a returning traveler has problems re-adapting to life back home. Students may have trouble reconnecting with friends and family or difficulty sharing their travel experience. Some people feel a sense of guilt or disappointment for living in a privileged consumer-oriented society.

Traveling with Medications
- Keep medications in their original container in your carry-on luggage
- Keep enough of a supply for your entire trip; take into account possible travel delays.
- Traveling with narcotics, psychotropic medications and injectable medications/ needles may cause problems at border crossings in some countries, such as Japan and United Arab Emirates.
- Be aware that many countries permit taking only a 30-day supply of certain medicines and require carrying a prescription or doctor’s letter.
- Ensure that the letter is clearly labelled (preferably translated in the language understood at your destination) with your full passport name, doctor’s name, generic and brand name, and exact dosage. This will facilitate border crossing and help the attending physician abroad.
- If currently receiving mental health services — including prescription medication — find out if those services and/or medication are available at your destination.
- Check the INCB website (International Narcotics Control Board) for more information: https://www.incb.org/incb/en/travellers/index.html.

Alcohol and Drugs Abroad
Drug use while abroad (even “soft” drugs, like marijuana) has been associated with acute psychosis in young people. Alcohol can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Questions for Self-Reflection
Self-reflection can be associated with resilience, improved awareness and help with planning your trip abroad.
1. What are your mental health risks as you travel abroad?
2. How does high stress generally affect you physically and mentally?
3. How do you typically react to major life transitions?
4. What would you do if you experienced a mental health crisis such as high anxiety or depression while abroad?
5. What will be your support system while you are abroad?
6. Who would you reach out to if you experienced high anxiety, depression or a traumatic experience while abroad?
7. Do you have an exit plan if the experience becomes too overwhelming for you?

The Body is the Container of the Mind
The mind cannot be healthy if the body is not; take care of your physical health to take care of your mental health
- Make sure you are getting enough sleep
- Be prepared for jet lag
- Be aware of the demands of your program
- Eat as healthy as you can (given your food and water precautions)
- Stay well hydrated
- Address your medical needs
- Keep your physical and environmental stressors as low as possible

Updated June 2020