

Mental Health and Overseas Travel

By: Dr. Bradford King, Director (Revised by Jennifer Young PsyD, Maria Pozo-Humphreys PhD and Elizabeth Reyes PhD)
USC Student Counseling Services (2012)

The challenges and rich opportunities from overseas travel and studies are both exciting and rewarding, which is why people are often shocked at the levels of stress that can be felt with such a positive life experience. Students may experience homesickness, culture shock, or underestimate the stress of change on their mental health. Planning ahead can help you maximize your experience while abroad.

Know thy self: What do you know about yourself during change and meeting new people? What do you know about yourself in times of transition, starting something new, or meeting new people. Consider your first year at college: what was more or less helpful in your transition? How can you use this information to help you adjust to your new situation? Contact other students in the program, or try to create a weekly meal together to have a sense of structure, support, and sharing. Be sure to bring pictures of family or loved ones, like a memory book, with encouraging notes, to decorate your room.

Understanding Culture Shock. The temporary loss of friends, family, language, and culture associated with overseas study may for some people cause sadness/ loneliness and foster isolation. Being separated from what is familiar and secure can be perceived as exciting, new and fun, but students may also experience loneliness, stress, and a longing for familiarity. These emotions are understandable, and a temporary reaction to being away from home. This is also referred to as culture shock. The honeymoon period that comes with the excitement of a new experience can be followed by a period of negative feelings prior to a successful adjustment.

There are many ways to manage these negative emotions. Try consciously and intentionally refocusing your attention away from the homesick feelings, and concentrate on what is new and positive in this experience. This is a well-known technique called “cognitive-restructuring.” It works! Whatever has worked for you in the past is usually a good bet, but here are some additional thoughts:

- This is the overseas program of study that you chose and is of personal interest to you...give yourself another push and more time to understand and embrace it.
- You may create a list before leaving of all the things you are looking forward to during your study abroad. When feeling down, review your list to remind yourself of your earlier excitement and goals.
- Explore and seek out new people in your classes or other local places.
- Take a curious stance to your new surroundings. It is easy to compare to your home, and be disappointed. Try to be curious about the cultural differences you encounter.
- Focus your energies on documenting your journey: journal, take pictures, use social media, etc. Write daily as much as you wish, but at least one page everyday. If you can, do it in the language of the country you are visiting.
- Shop with a purpose such as finding the gift that your friend or parent would really like, or shop to find an item that symbolizes the country or local area.
- Plan outings to specific places (e.g. museums, architecture sites, and other local places of interest).
- Start a collection or list of sightings (e.g. local birds, animals, insects, plants, shells, churches, burial grounds, pubs, shops, works of arts and crafts, people’s names, or whatever you can think of that’s fun).
- Seek out locals in host country who share in your hobbies (dancing, rock climbing, etc).
- Find out specific “must see or do” recommendations while in a particular town or country
- Stay in touch with the key people in your life by writing letters, texting, face book, Skype or e-mail. Be mindful however that if you are

spending a significant or too much of time communicating with folks back home, you may be avoiding your own successful adjustment to the new culture.

- The fantasies of you experience abroad at first may not match the reality of your circumstances. Give it time, adjust your thinking, consult with a friend be kind to yourself.

Maintaining Mental health. If you have been in therapy or benefit from medication, plan ahead to ensure a smooth transition while abroad.

- If you are currently taking psychotropic medication bring an adequate supply of your prescription with you, including a note from your physician documenting their legality.
- DO NOT discontinue taking prescribed psychotropic medications throughout the duration of your overseas stay without full consultation with your prescribing doctors.
- There is assistance is available for local English speaking mental health practitioners should you find yourself in need of their services.

While most students are excited at the prospect of visiting a new country, other students may be primarily motivated to escape their current stressors. You may have heard the quote from Jon Kabat Zinn “wherever you go there you are”. That is, changing geographic location seldom if ever works in terms of resolving basic personal problems. Mental health concerns does not preclude studying abroad, however, it does require honesty with yourself about what your needs are and then planning for them. The excitement of studying abroad will not distract you or cure clinical depression, an eating disorder, generalized anxiety, panic attacks, or other mental health difficulties. The goal of studying abroad is to explore a culture, not escape from the life you have.

People often feel good when first arriving to their host country, and it is not infrequent that students decide to take- themselves off their medication, only to relapse over a period of time. Students are encouraged to enjoy their positive feelings, but at the same time also encouraged to remain on the levels of medication

recommended by their prescribing MD. Discontinuing medication should always be under medical supervision in order to monitor any negative side effects or withdrawal. In fact, consult with your treating provider prior to leaving to ensure your dosage is stable.

In conclusion, remember that homesickness is temporary. You will be returning home soon enough, so do bring back valuable memories, experiences, and something you learned about the people, the culture, and yourself. Look outward to your environment to help you cope and thrive, and look inward to draw on your strengths and talents. Do not be afraid to ask for help, regardless if it seems others are adjusting just fine. Overseas travel and new cultural experiences can be a life changing and amazing experience. Take the above into account to ensure a positive journey!

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