Going Abroad: Culture Shock, Depression, and Eating Issues

Symptoms of “Culture Shock”
- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- Lack of energy
- Fatigue
- Change in eating and sleeping
- Loss of interest in activities
- Difficulty concentrating

Symptoms of Depression
- Anxiety, sadness, depression
- Lack of energy, headaches
- Anger, confusion, despair
- Change in eating and sleeping
- Loss of interest in activities
- Frustration and loneliness

Culture shock is the anxiety and sadness that arises when a person experiences changes in their environment, family and peer support while assimilating into a new culture. The adjustment phase is NORMAL and occurs for a short period of time.

Depression is a psychological disorder that produces substantial changes in mood, thinking, and behavior. Warning signs of depression that need immediate intervention: depression for a prolonged period of time (longer than typical period of culture shock), inability to function (not going to class, isolating self), self-destructive or violent thoughts or behavior, alcohol or substance abuse.

Signs of an Eating Problem:
- Dramatic weight loss
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat
- Obsessed with calories, fat content, or exercise
- Food restriction
- Isolation and fear of being around others while eating
- Hiding food
- Preoccupied with thoughts of food and weight
- Mood swings, depression, fatigue
- Perfectionism (wanting the perfect body, grades, etc.)
- Purging behaviors (vomiting, diuretics, laxatives)
- Taking diet pills and/or trying various fad diets

If You have been Depressed / had an Eating Problem in the Past - Before You Go:
- Consult with your counselor / physician / nutritionist. If you currently have symptoms, assess your readiness to go, weighing the country’s availability of or, most likely, lack of treatment resources. If you decide to go, make a plan.
- Refill medications. (bring letter from physician for restricted medications, leave in original labeled bottles, take ample supply for entire trip, take month’s supply in carry on bag)
- Make a list of the strategies you have used in the past to cope
- Speak to the Program Director to let her/him know about your “warning signs.” How will others know you are struggling?
- Bring self help books / website links about resiliency, depression / eating disorders
- Talk to those close to you and establish means for contacting each other (Skype, email)
- Talk with other students who have been abroad. Learn what kinds of struggles you may encounter.
- Predict what may “trigger” your depression / eating problems and ways to prevent your usual response.

If you have a Friend who becomes Depressed / has an Eating Problem
Tell your friend that you are deeply concerned. Make a list of specific behaviors that are causing you to be concerned (for depression: frequent crying, isolating, talk of suicide... for eating problems: vomiting, restricting food, isolating herself, lack of energy). Describe her/his current behavior without diagnosing or labeling. Ask if your friend is thinking about harming him/herself (you won’t put the idea into her head, really!). Approach your friend in a gentle way. Recommend that your friend seek assistance from the Director of your program.
If You Begin to Feel Depressed or Develop an Eating Problem:

- Structure your day. Set daily goals and stick to them.
- Get plenty of rest & sleep, but don’t overdo it.
- Eat balanced meals.
- Avoid alcohol (alcohol is a depressant)
- Be with people. Seek out support and validation of friends and family via email and Skype
- Try some deep breathing exercises
- Listen to relaxing music. Nurture yourself.
- Take a bath to relax
- Challenge any negative self talk or messages that you may be giving yourself.
- Give yourself positive affirmations. Change the negative messages into positive ones that are uplifting.
- If you have a quote or a prayer that gives you strength when you read it, recite it to yourself when you are feeling down
- Keep a journal.
- Make a list of positive coping strategies.
- Acknowledge your feelings, and experience them a little at a time. Go ahead and cry. Find a safe way to express anger.
- Give yourself time to feel better. Change doesn’t happen overnight. There will be highs and lows, but allow yourself the time you need.
- Contact your Program Director immediately if you have serious concerns about your mood or your eating

Other ideas for an eating problem:

- Keep a food log. Keep track of the thoughts and feelings that occur when you think about food or eat.
- Plan meals ahead of time.
- Make dinner dates.
- Go for a walk or leave the environment that is tempting you to binge/restrict or causing you stress.
- Identify the “triggers” that initiate restricting/bingeing/over-exercising
- Read mirror-mirror.org

And for depression:

- Read the book Feeling Good - The New Mood Therapy by David Burns or allaboutdepression.com/

English Speaking Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Doctors Abroad

English speaking professionals are listed through HTH Worldwide +1 610-254-8771 (you may call collect) https://www.hthstudents.com/ Note that expenses for emergency services, inpatient and outpatient mental health services are all covered under the category of medical expenses through your HTH insurance.

Eating Disorders International Referrals: edreferral.com/ (cross reference with the HTH list)

Handout by Wendy Settle, Ph.D., Staff Psychologist, University of Notre Dame, updated from a handout prepared by Susan Albers, Ph.D. (Notre Dame, 2001). She is now with the Cleveland Clinic and the author of the books Eating Mindfully and Mindful Eating 101 (recommended!)