

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 Coordinator 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 Coordinator 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 exercise. Keep active. Go explore.
- ❖ 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 <https://ucc.nd.edu/self-help/eating-concerns/> and mirror-mirror.org

and for depression:

- ❖ TAO Self Help: Leave Your Blues Behind <https://ucc.nd.edu/self-help/tao-self-help/>
- ❖ Read the book *Feeling Good - The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns or allaboutdepression.com/ and <https://ucc.nd.edu/self-help/depression-suicide/>

English Speaking Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Doctors Abroad

In an emergency <https://international.nd.edu/travel-safety/in-an-emergency/>
English speaking professionals are listed through
GeoBlue International Health Insurance: +1 610-254-8771 (collect calls accepted)